



HAL
open science

**A Historical Examination of India's Fight against
Indentured Worker System, calling it New System of
Slavery, and forcing Colonial British Government to
abolish it**

Ajay Dubey

► **To cite this version:**

Ajay Dubey. A Historical Examination of India's Fight against Indentured Worker System, calling it New System of Slavery, and forcing Colonial British Government to abolish it. *Travaux & documents*, 2021, Différences et similitudes entre engagisme et esclavagisme dans les anciennes colonies de l'océan Indien, 56, pp.115-125. hal-03522944

HAL Id: hal-03522944

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-03522944v1>

Submitted on 12 Jan 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

A Historical Examination of India's Fight against Indentured Worker System, calling it New System of Slavery, and forcing Colonial British Government to abolish it

PROFESSOR AJAY DUBEY
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY

Indian Diaspora, in the last decade of the twentieth century increasingly began to acquire a distinct global identity. With historic Indian settlements around the world, and successive migrations in the last two centuries to various parts of the world, the Indian Diaspora acquired a global spread and identity. This diasporic population from Indian point of view has two segments. One is Non-Resident Indian (NRI) who are Indian passport holder and exclusively Indian Citizen, another which is known as PIO (People of Indian Origin), who went to different distance places in different capacities like indentured workers, merchants, free passengers, domestic slaves etc. This includes current high and super skilled migrants from India to western countries and North America and who left Indian citizenship and acquired local citizenship. However, the overwhelming major percentage of PIO population, consists of indentured workers, who migrated under various categories as the Girmitya, Kangani and the Maistry. This article attempts to provide an analysis and understanding about Indian responses exclusively to migration of 'Indentured Labour' from India since 1834 when first indenture ship was sent to Mauritius. It inquires into the evolution of India's policy and its tension within, towards its Indentured Diaspora from initial phase to contemporary time. This paper makes an attempt to bring different historical developments together from 19th century to present in migration and emergence of Indentured diaspora and how India's approach to its diaspora evolved over time and how the past tensions and experiences in India's interaction with its diasporas are visible even in contemporary responses of India to its indentured diaspora.

Abolition of slavery and need for replacement workers at farms

British society was sensitised to the question of slavery quite early. Although the humanitarian motive was the driving force of the Anti- Slavery Society, the move to abolish slavery was also supported by British economic and political forces. The advance of capitalism in Europe has been considered by some historians as one of the reasons for the abolition of slavery. The Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed by the British Parliament on March 25, 1807. The act imposed a fine of £10 for every slave found aboard a British ship. After the 1807

act, slaves were still held, though not sold, within the British Empire. In the 1820s, the abolitionist movement again became active, this time campaigning against the institution of slavery itself. On August 23, 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act outlawed slavery in the British colonies. The French Empire abolished slavery in 1848. The Dutch, who were the last Europeans to abolish slavery, freed their slaves on July 1, 1863.

Need for workers in farmlands in new territories

The lack of slave labour which the colonial masters had installed on the tropical plantations (producing sugar, coffee, bananas, tea, rubber, palm oil etc.) created a crisis and soon an international migration of indentured labourers was organised to replace the forceful importation of slave labour. Thus, the “indentured labor” arose in direct response to the abolition of slavery which had created chronic labor shortage in the colonies of Great Britain and other colonial countries from the 1830s onwards. Ironically what was conceived as a progressive step toward free labor came to be viewed by some historians as a new form of bondage and a thinly disguised continuation of new form of slavery. The inter-continental indentured labor trade had arisen to remedy the labor shortages caused by slave emancipation, but its endurance and growth were governed by much broader changes.

Colonies under subjugation available for enforcing indentured labour

The nineteenth century was known as age of capitalism. Immanuel Wallerstein described 1730 to 1840 as “the second era of great expansion of the capitalist world economy”. Capital was not simply liquid assets, since factories, fields, ships, and even labor itself (especially when enslaved or indentured) can be considered capital. Rather capitalism refers to the integrated system of production, transportation, and markets that drew the world together as never before and with such immense implications for the laboring masses of the world.

Great Britain/ England had extensive colonies across the world. Being the ruler of colonies meant the access to all the assets of a colony at its disposal, which include manpower also. East India Company (EIC) emerged as a political power in India after the battle of Palasey in 1757. British occupation, the subsequent consolidation and expansion of British colonialism in India brought untold miseries to Indian people. Systematic plunder which resulted in destruction of Indian economy had long term implications. EIC’s policies like expansion of empire, introduction of cash crops, new land tenure system (Permanent Settlement, Mahalwari, Ryotwari), led to decadence of handicrafts and other indigenous industries (cotton) and devastated local economy. The systematic and gradual

destruction of traditionally interlinked economy eventually culminated in over-burdened agriculture. Scarcity of sources of livelihood left surplus workforce available within country.

Poverty and famine in colonies

Agriculture, coupled with handicrafts industries, was the backbone of Indian economy. The policies followed under colonial rule proved destructive to agriculture. First was introduction of cash crops like cotton, sugarcane, indigo, tea, coffee and tobacco. The peasants were compelled to grow cash crops only. Introduction of exploitative land tenure systems across the sub-continent added miseries to peasant section. Addition to this, annexation of Indian princely states led to liquidation of their armies resulted in unemployment. All these circumstances led to acute poverty in the sub-continent. Since 1757 to 1856, India suffered from six major man made avoidable famines, leading to great loss of human life. All these factors collectively contributed to miseries and poverty of the people.

Demographic Factor

One fundamental cause of this rising labor movement was growth of population. The population of the Madras Presidency alone tripled. Rising densities put great pressure on rural resources, lowering living standards for those at the bottom of the social order and adding to the severity of periodic famines to which India had long been prone. Along with massive starvation locally (which did little to slow the overall rise in population), such famines produced large numbers of refugees, whose numbers can be correlated to peak departures from Madras and Calcutta in the second half of the century.

Pull and push factors of Indentured Migration

The abolition of slavery, increasing demand for cheap labour on plantations, subjugation of a country like India—a constant source of manual labour due to its population—were the pull factors. While the internal (miserable) conditions like destruction of economy, over-burdened agriculture, and demographic growth were the push factors which induced people to migrate or take up indentured jobs. Beside them one of the push factor was oppressive, discriminatory and rigid caste system. There was no escape from this. People of lower caste suffered very badly and there was no possibility of social mobility locally. The migration to distanced unknown areas provided both an escape and chances of social/caste mobility which happened under indentured migration.

Recruitment of Indentured Labour from India

Contract design

Indenture was a signed contract to work for a given employer for five years, performing the tasks assigned to him/her. During this period, the labourer received a basic pay, accommodation, food rations and medical facilities. At the end of the five years, he/she was free to re-indenture or to work elsewhere in the colony. At the end of ten year, depending on the contract, he or she was entitled to a free or partly paid return passage to India or to be given a piece of crown land in lieu of the fare.

The methods of recruitment of Indian labourers were deceitful and callous. Licensed recruiters who were assisted by a network of unlicensed recruiters enlisted the villagers. They painted a very rosy picture about the sugar plantations. The prospective recruits were told that the only work they would have to do in the far away colonies would be *ChaleyCheeny*, turn around the sugar. They were never told about the length of the journey or the living conditions and harsh treatment in the plantations. There were several cases of abuses, kidnapping, deceit and forceful detention of the labourers.

For Indians, who were fleeing from the villages, the contract labour offered seemed a good way of escaping the poverty, colonial and caste humiliation, and torture of the British occupation. At times of calamity they even flocked to the recruitment depots in the hope that the work offered would help to improve their circumstances.

Recruitment process

At the base of the process was the Indian recruiter or *Arkatia*. He used to hand over his recruits to the licensed official recruiters. These official recruiters were to make sure that fit, informed, and willing labors were recruited to serve overseas. The inland recruiter screened the candidates for health defects, had their understanding and agreement to the terms of the contract certified by a registering officer (usually amagistrate), and sent those who made it through the process on to departure ports at Calcutta or Madras. There they were reexamined by a medical officer for fitness and questioned again about their agreement to the terms of the indenture contract before they could sign the contract and be shipped abroad.

Shipment of Indians to different colonies

From 1834 to 1870 while approximately 351,400 Indians immigrated to Mauritius only about 42,500 were shipped to Trinidad, 79,000 in British Guiana and 15,000 in Jamaica. In 1906 while Natal and Fiji had a total of 146,000 persons

of Indian residing there, Mauritius had about 264,000, there were only approximately 103,000 persons of Indian nationality in Trinidad, 127,000 in British Guiana and 13,000 in Jamaica.

Indentured Labour: Responses of Colonial Government, Indian National Movement and India leaders

In the initial stage, that is the period approximately 1885 to 1905, the Indian National Congress (hereafter referred to as the Congress) declared its loyalty to the British Crown and its overall demands did not extend further than the desire for a reduction in taxation and military expenditure, a need to assist Indian industries; to expand the foundation of the representative bodies and to raise the number of Indians in the privileged administrative offices. At this stage nationalism developed as a reaction only to certain aspects of British rule in India, aspects which were in the interests of the higher classes, English-educated Indians rather than Indians all over India.

Certain economic aspects of British rule were criticized as the basis of India's poverty and the cause of economic stagnation. Publications such as *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* by Dadabhai Naoroji (1876) and the two volumes of *Economic History of India* by R.C. Dutt (1901 and 1903) which attempted to show the extent to which British rule was draining the resources of India, gave stimulus to this aspect of Indian nationalism.

As a Congress Gharana historian

[...] with the lapse of time and as a result of increasing political activity and consciousness doubts began to arise about the value and material content of such benefits, though the positive aspects of the legal, constitutional and other non-material consequences of British impact were recognized and acknowledged by a section of the Indian national leadership.

The changing nature of Indian nationalism is especially visible with respect to the situation of Indian emigration and specifically the Indian indentured laborers and the way in which Indian emigration issue was adopted and included in the Indian nationalist discourse.

The response of Indian nationalist movement to the Indian emigration and the Indian indentureship system can be distinguished into three phases.

Pre-1900

In the period up to the end of the nineteenth century the Indian nationalist sentiments had not yet evolved to the stage of mass mobilization or agitation against Indian emigration as indentured worker. In fact, Indian emigration gene-

rally did not occupy high place of importance in the Indian nationalist discourse and the Indian indentureship system was referred to only sparingly.

While the concerns and issues of these phases often overlapped, there were some distinctions in the way in which the Indian nationalists adopted Indian emigration and the indentureship system. The main references made to Indians abroad were related to Indians in South Africa. This was mainly due to the work of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in South Africa. Gandhi was concerned about Indians who were discriminated there on the basis of race. Gandhi himself had been a victim of racial discrimination in South Africa and had already begun his agitation for changes in the system, as it existed there. However, Gandhi started off his campaign against the indentureship system as a liberal rather than as a nationalist and his campaigning was centered on the fight against discrimination rather than on any political aspiration at this point of time.

In South Africa, Gandhi's work gave special attention to the inequality that Indians were faced with in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. His protests were focused on the laws, which prevented Indians from obtaining employment other than in the menial tasks, and the poll tax of £3 for entry into Transvaal. He sought the aid of the Congress in bringing the indentured labour problem to the notice of the Government of India and even when he attempted to do this initially he was only permitted a limited time to speak about it.

In 1890, Mahadev Govind Ranade, gave a lecture on Indian emigration to foreign territories in general at an Industrial Conference in Poona. According to Hugh Tinker¹, Ranade said that,

the modernization of India could not yet be achieved by the expansion of trade and industry—which he saw as the long term solution; instead, inland and overland emigration ... can alone afford the sorely needed present relief.

In 1892, Ranade again mentioned Indian emigration when he presented a paper entitled “Indian Foreign Emigration”² at another Industrial Conference in Poona. In this presentation he gave, “a Summary of the History and Progress of Indian Foreign Emigration” and noted the, “practical utility of this great movement and its close relations to the Social, Economic and Political development of the country”. Ranade also noted that,

the rise in numbers of population could not only be solved, for the time being, by migration to the thinly populated parts of India and overseas; though industrialization was the eventual alternative.

¹ Hugh Tinker, *The banyan Tree : Overseas Emigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, London, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 279.

² *Ibid.*

Ranade's views suggest that Indian emigration was probably not considered a topic of discussion, as Indian nationalists did not see the negative aspects of the system at this time. It was in fact seen as one way of alleviating the problems associated with an increasing population, namely the pressure for land, space and employment opportunities. In addition to this, the indentureship system was seen as another form of contract labour and hence as a system with measures in place to protect the Indian immigrants. At this stage the stipulations of the contract itself were not questioned and the dehumanizing conditions of this system were not emphasized. The emigration of Indians to South Africa occupies much space in the Indian nationalist discourse because of the work of Gandhi in South Africa who was mainly responsible for communicating to India and to Gokhale and Naoroji in particular, about the conditions of Indians there. The direct reference to Indians in the British West Indies was not evident in the Indian nationalist discourse possibly because of the distance factor as well. This meant that many Indian nationalists simply were unacquainted with the circumstances of Indian immigrants in the West Indies.

Also, up to 1900 only three major reports on emigration had been completed. John Geoghegan conducted an investigation in 1873, which was recorded as a "Note on emigration from India." The second was by Major D.W.D. Comins in 1893. These reports painted a favorable picture of emigration in general. Third, from the inception of the system of indentured labour, the local Governments of Madras and Bengal –the ports from where the emigrants departed, kept annual reports on the emigration of Indians. However, these also painted a positive picture of the system. Given the framework in which the system was introduced, that is, as a replacement to African slave labour which had existed up to 1834 and the fact that the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society and other humanitarian groups in Britain were closely monitoring the system.

First decade of the 20th Century

The period 1900 to 1910 can be referred to as the "formative phase" for Indian emigration in the Indian nationalist discourse. It was at this stage that Indian emigration entered the Indian nationalist discourse in a more distinct manner and the Indian indentureship system became a point of high interest though the racial discrimination of Indians in South Africa continued to dominate the nationalist discourse.

It is important to note that Indian emigration and the indentureship system was assessed and mentioned as one small entity in the political aspirations of the Indian nationalists. During this phase the concept of swaraj –a movement towards self-governing status within the British Empire was dominating the discourse of national movement. Indian nationalists were agitating for the same rights and privileges of British citizens on the basis that Indians were British subjects and therefore they should not be discriminated in any part of the British Empire.

The Sanderson Committee presented the information in 1909 in the form of a report. This Committee had been appointed to consider the general question of emigration from India to the Crown Colonies, the particular colonies in which Indian immigration may be usefully encouraged and the general advantages to be reaped by India itself and by each particular Colony. The report noted that in Trinidad, Ceylon, British Guiana, Jamaica and Seychelles, the system was working to the advantage of the Indians and the respective colony. It did not recommend the re-introduction of the system to the Windward Islands where emigration had been stopped. It questioned whether or not the system should be ended in the Straits Settlement and the Federated Malay States. The report did not recommend the continuation of the system in Mauritius. It further noted that it was necessary to make changes in the system so that it to operate to the benefit all in Uganda, British East Africa and Fiji. However, this committee gave its blessings to the system of Indian indentured labour and to emigration in general.

In the first place, as the report of the Sanderson Committee provided information regarding the situation of Indians in far off places like the British West Indies. Secondly, by this time the India Office was conscious of the fact that Indian nationalists and other groups were monitoring the conditions of Indians abroad (probably because of the work of Gandhi in South Africa) and hence the intention was to publish this Report to “allay the rising opposition to oversea emigration which is beginning to manifest itself in India...”

By the end of this phase, one can also see the emigration of Indians becoming a hot political topic. At a public meetings presided over by Indian nationalist Annie Besant in Benares in 1910, a resolution was passed protesting the treatment of Indians in South Africa.

Third Phase: 1910-1920

It was during 1911 to 1915 that Indian emigration and the Indian indentureship system was openly and vigorously opposed by Indian nationalist demanding its abolition which materialised in a variety of ways and for a number of reasons. Firstly, it was at this stage that the demand for swaraj was fully consolidated and its advocacy reinforced. At the same time the Indian nationalists were evaluating the position of India in relation to the self-governing Dominions and the status of India itself as a Crown Colony. It was felt that policies in India were solely geared towards the interests of the British Imperial Government at the expense of the Indian people. Indian nationalists also had problems dealing with what they perceived as the inability of Indians to travel freely within the British Empire. It was felt that Indians were discriminated against on the basis of colour, for example the plight of Indians in South Africa.

India occupied a subordinate status in the British Empire and it was reflected in the category given to Indian emigrants abroad, free or indentured. Anne Besant, noted that,

India, the granary of the world, is unable to maintain her surplus population and thousands of her children like her raw materials, are sent away to other countries for employment for the bare necessities of life. The immigrants, so absolutely necessary for the development of the resources of South Africa, Australia and Canada, are treated there as helots and India is regarded to-day throughout the civilized world as the recruiting ground for coolies necessary for manual labour. I do not hesitate to denounce this degrading system as the last relic of slavery within the British Empire.

The resolution moved in the Imperial Legislative Council in 1912, by G K Gokhale says

[...] 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, whether for employment at home or in any British Colony.

India is the only country, which supplies indentured labour at the present moment. Why should India be marked out for this degradation? The conscience of our people unfortunately asleep too long, is now waking up to the enormity of this question, and I have no doubt that it will not rest till it has asserted itself.

He further noted that one of his objections to the system of indentured labour was that

[...] it is degrading to the people of India from a national point of view... Wherever the system exists, there the Indians are only known as coolies, no matter what their position may be.

With intensified demands and prospects of Swaraj, Indian nationalists were now uneasy about the status of Indians all over the British Empire and Indian emigration was included in their demand as a matter of priority. By the end of 1914, the Congress reiterated the point that emigration was detrimental to the self-respect of Indians in the colonies and to India as a whole and passed a resolution which advocated for its abolition as early as possible, the system being a form of slavery which socially and politically, debases the labourers and is seriously detrimental to the economic and moral interest of the country.

During 1910-1915, the emphasis was placed on Indian emigration and specifically the indentureship system as indicative of the negative aspects of British rule in India. The unease about the issues like indentured labour and immigration were heard in Imperial Legislative Council where Gokhale raised the

question of Indentured recruitment, and that a call was made to abolish the emigration of Indian indentured labour –again by Gokhale in the Imperial Legislative Council.

For the first time, emigration was weighed through economic angles. It was felt that economically the system of indentured labour was fully geared towards the promotion of British imperialist interests at the expense of India. Nationalists saw Indian labour on British West Indian plantations as necessary in maintaining low wages since it provided competition for the labour of the free African population. Hence, by permitting the system of indentured labour to continue, the Indians were also condoning British imperialism.

At the same time India was facing inadequate supply of labour in organised industries, though few. This issue had brought to surface as early as 1905, in the India and Ceylon Chambers of Commerce had held a conference at which they passed a resolution asking for a Government Committee to investigate the inadequacy of labour for organized industries and noted that the difficulty had become more acute every year. It fanned the economic nationalism stressing that British rule was the main cause of the intensification of poverty in India and the impoverished population may have sought emigration as an option in order to survive.

Another aspect of indenture labour was the inhuman treatment to labours.

In 1913, an investigation was conducted by James Mc Neill and Lala Chimmanlal. It was published as the “Report to the Government of India on the conditions of the Indian immigrants in four British Colonies and Surinam.” Mc Neill had no idea about the indenture while Chimmanlal on the other hand was specially chosen by the Government of India as the “Indian delegate” considering his experience as the manager of some tea plantations in the North East and therefore had some idea of conditions and terms of labour on plantations. Their report outlined a favorable impression of the indentureship system in these colonies.

During this period, nationalist visited other colonies. Their interactions with counterparts gave them more insights on the conditions of indentured labour. This coupled with rise of press, led to dissemination of information much faster from colonies to India and within India itself.

Another feature was gender aspect of indentured labour which was brought into focus. The imperial government was criticized on the grounds that it could not protect the female indentured workers in colonies. The case of Kunti –a female indentured labourer in Fiji who was accosted by an overseer and punished for not responding to his advances- received widespread coverage.

After 1915, the agitation against indentureship and emigration was intensified at every level. Karen Ray also noted that by March 1917

almost every group had rallied around the anti-indenture banner: Muslims and Hindus, Brahmins and non-Brahmins, Bishops and

Theosophists, Swarajists and Moderates, “the best” and the not-so-good Indians, Marwaris and villagers. Each group for whatever reason wanted indenture to end: most groups were eager to take the credit for ending it. The situation became critical for colonial government.

Emigration had stopped during the inter-war years for practical purposes, that is, the unavailability of ships to transport Indians and the danger involved in travelling especially as far as the British West. It gave impression like it has been abolished. However, with the opening of Panama Canal in 1915, emigration was re-commenced to British Guiana, which revived the agitation against it.

Another investigation “Report on Indian Labour Emigration to Ceylon and Malaya” (1917) by N.E. Majoribanks and Ahmad Tambi Marakkaya provided additional information for the Indian nationalists to use this in their agitation.

It was during this period that the Congress progressively intensified its stance against the emigration of Indians and of the thirtieth session of the Indian National Congress in 1914³ it re-affirmed a resolution passed at the previous session and urged for the abolition of indentured labour as soon as possible. In 1916, it urged that Indian emigration should be immediately stopped and that recruitment of such a form of labour be prohibited during the ensuing years. By 1917 the Congress noted that,

nothing short of complete abolition of indentured labour, whether described as such or otherwise, can effectively meet the evils which have been admitted by all concerned to have done irreparable harm to the labourers.

In 1917 Gandhi threatened to call for a Satyagraha if the indentured emigration system was not abolished by the end of March of that year. The years 1915 to 1917 were not only the years when the emigration issue dominated the Indian national movement, but they were also the last two years of the indentureship system itself –recruitment of persons for labour under the system was abolished on 20, March 1917.

³ Annual Session of Indian National Congress (INC) in 1914: 29th Congress of INC.