

## Unit 5

# Indian Emigration During Colonial Rule

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### Learning Objectives

After reading this unit you should be able to:

- understand the historical context of emigration from India;
- place indentured labour in the context of the colonial interest of the British Empire;
- analyse the indentured system of labour; and
- get an overview of emigration of Indian labour during colonial times.

## 5.1 Introduction

In the previous unit we talked about migration patterns in general, where we gave you a brief background to the context of migration during colonial times. In this unit we will discuss migration during the colonial period in detail.

As mentioned earlier, the migration of Indians during ancient times was sporadic and did not result in Indian settlements abroad, but during the British colonial period there was migration on a large scale, which resulted in Indian diasporic communities wherever the British had their colonies. In this unit, we will discuss the specific historical context of this migration. We will be talking about the indentured labour system, and how this system evolved out of the specific needs of the industrial agricultural pattern during colonial expansionist times. We will also be talking about exploitative nature of this system as well as its social consequences. In trying to understand the nature of migration we will be examining the socio-economic conditions of people who were forced to migrate out of necessity.

## 5.2 Historical Context of Indian Emigration

In order to understand the characteristic feature of the emigration of Indians during colonial rule, it is essential to know the context in which it was engineered. It may be stated at the outset that this emigration was on a large scale and very different from the earlier ones. At the time the British and other Europeans entered India as traders, India was politically fragmented,

its economy was in a shambles, its science and technology were stagnating and the social and cultural life of its people indicated decay and inward looking. However, it could easily claim a glorious existence in the not too distant past. It could boast of excellence in a variety of fields such as agriculture, engineering, architecture, philosophy, literature, dance, drama, music etc. Its people in the past had traveled to south-east Asia, Central Asia, Sri Lanka, China and Japan as scholars, priests, teachers carrying the message of the Buddha of peace and understanding, and to raise the spiritual consciousness of the people. Indians had also gone abroad to countries like Burma, Indonesia, Malaya, Singapore and to many countries in East Africa as traders. In ancient times, the Indians had trade links with the people in the African continent. These trade links were spread from Gujarat in the north to Kanyakumari in the south. But the scenario was quite different in India when the British and other Europeans entered the Indian sub-continent.

There were a number of reasons for this decay. It is not possible to go into them here. Suffice it to say that economic stagnation and political instability were the main factors, which were further accentuated by the entry of European interests in India. There was intense competition among the Europeans to locate resources in different parts of the world to enlarge the scope and production of their home industries. The industrial revolution had set in. During this period, they not only discovered new areas of resources in different parts of the world but also began to colonise them. The intense tussle for power among the European nations in India encouraged local aspirants to seek the support of one or the other European power. In the process they not only weakened themselves but there was virtual chaos. Agricultural production suffered badly resulting in immense problems to the peasants, artisans, small traders as well as merchants. Eventually with deceit and some tactful power game, the British East India Company gained ascendancy and began to control the various parts of the country.

They began to export raw material from India like cotton, spices, indigo to strengthen industries in England. This accelerated growth of the British economy and technology but inflicted untold miseries and hardship on the people of India, particularly peasants. Village industries such as spinning of cotton, weaving of clothes and various village crafts suffered immensely. The economic situation in the countryside being bad became still worse because of the export of foodgrains, mainly rice and wheat, to England. The export of foodgrains to England rose sharply from £ 3.8 million in 1858 and to £ 9.3 million worth in 1901. One of the central factors which significantly stunted the growth of rural economies was the change of the traditional landlord-tenant relationship. This was directly brought about by the so-called permanent land settlement in the Bengal region. By this the British turned the landlords into persons responsible for extracting rent from peasants in their jurisdiction. They fixed amounts of cash as rent regardless of the land's production in the year. This requirement put enormous pressure on peasants. An increasing number of people could not pay rent and therefore had to be evicted. Already in 1973 'notices of eviction were being issued at the rate of 60,000 annually'.

In order to keep the growing cash-and-rent economy alive, lands belonging to families for generations had to be sub-divided and sub-let. This obviously further reduced the economic viability of the plots.

Added to this, if there was a drought or excessive rains agricultural production

suffered and often food supply would become critical. This resulted in famines. There were major famines in 1804, 1837, 1861 and 1908 apart from many minor ones in north India. There were approximately 400,000 famine deaths during 1825-1850, it was five million in 1850-1875 which rose to fifteen million during the following 25 years. Broadly, during the first phase of the British control over India, there was large-scale poverty, unemployment and displacement of the peasantry from their roots prompting them to emigrate. Besides, the oppressive regime of the colonial government particularly after the first war of independence (1857), invoking new legislations which took away the rights of people to land and forests and bringing a new set of rules for administration were equally responsible for increasing the agony of the people.

No doubt, Indians had migrated in the past and they did during the colonial rule too but with the fond hope that will return to their 'home'. Home was where their ancestors, the extended members of the family lived, which were also associated with numerous celebrations of festivals and life-cycle rituals.

#### Reflection and Action 5.1

What were the specific circumstances, which forced the poor peasantry to migrate as indentured labour?

### 5.3 Abolition of Slavery

While the 'home' context was trying to push the Indian peasantry to emigrate, there were many factors pulling them to migrate to the tropical colonies of the European powers. This was induced by the imperialist economy, and within that, substantially by a single commodity that is sugar. By the nineteenth century, imperialist governments vied with each other for control over territories which could produce sugar so that the maximum benefit could be derived in European market. In Europe the demand for sugar was rising. For instance, in 1820 in Britain the per capita sugar consumption was 16.8 pounds per annum. It became 34.8 pounds in 1860 and by 1880 it was 61.8 pounds. In order to promote sugar production in their colonies the British government gave several incentives to their planters so that they could compete with the sugar producing colonies of other European countries. For these reasons, cane production has been called 'industrial agriculture'. The indigenous population in these colonies was either too thin and dispersed or traumatized or they were not found fit to serve the interests of 'industrial agriculture'. For this the labour force was imported from the old world, particularly Africa and the institution of slavery was developed with all its cruel and extremely harsh features. In the beginning tropical products were luxury products consumed by the affluent in Europe. Then as the Industrial Revolution advanced in England and Western Europe, and purchasing capacities of the people increased, tropical items such as sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa became items of mass consumption generating enormous revenue which promoted increase in production. As production expanded, in a labour intensive operation it became necessary to find the necessary workforce. The demand for labour exceeded far beyond what slaves could provide. Moreover, on account of the conditions of work, the harshness of those who supervised the work, lack of proper nutrition and living facilities, mortality among the slaves was very high.

## 5.4 Politics of Humanitarian Consideration

The condition of the slaves pricked the conscience of some people in Europe and they began to demand the abolition of the system of slavery. The issue was sensitive and nobody could openly defend the system of slavery. For the government in power in England, continuation of slavery was a matter of embarrassment but the harsh reality was that tropical colonies were generating much wealth for the nation through slave labour as well as access to many scarce resources. It was not only in the interest of planters that slavery should continue but it was also in the interest of the nation. Thus, in spite of vested interest in the continuation of the slavery, the government had to ban the inhuman practice the slave trade in 1802, though slavery was allowed to continue. In other words, open trade that is, sale and purchase of human beings, were banned. Yet, the sinister aspects associated with it continued till 1834 when the system of slavery was abolished by the British government, later by the French in 1848 and the Dutch in 1863. It is obvious that in spite of the pressure exerted by the abolition of slavery, the governments in power were dragging their feet. They were dragging their feet because they were concerned about production through 'industrial agriculture'. Even at that stage a compromise formula was devised to protect the interests of the planters. According to this formula after the legal termination of slavery in 1834, the planters were to continue to command full rights on the labour of ex-slaves for twelve years, in the form of apprenticeship. The anti-slavery lobby felt this arrangement would prolong the reality of slavery. As a result of this pressure, the period of apprenticeship was reduced to seven years and finally all forms of apprenticeship were terminated in 1838. Thus, it took approximately 32 years for the British government to abolish slavery after abolishing the slave trade. Even after abolishing slavery, the condition of the ex-slaves had not significantly changed. They had hardly any alternative but to go back to their ex-masters for work for their survival. They did not even have a place for shelter in the islands unless they worked for their old masters. Today it may sound very strange but the fact was that it was not the slaves but the slave owners who were paid compensation for freeing their slaves. The slaves were left to fend for themselves or go back to their masters and work for them. Whatever be the humanitarian considerations the emancipators may have had, they were also a part of the system which directly derived benefits from the system of slavery. Their agitation, however, showed the softer underbelly of the socio-political system of the day.

Liberation of the slaves accentuated the demand for cheap labour in the colonies. The question was how to get cheap labour. The ex-slaves were not interested to work on the plantations. They had begun to demand higher wages and also better facilities. Encouraging labour to come from other countries like America, Europe, China and a few others did not work well for a variety of reasons such as high cost of recruitment, transport and inability of the workforce to thrive in a tropical climate. Meanwhile the British had consolidated their hold on India. As indicated earlier, the traditional Indian economy was in a shambles. Plenty of workers were available and locally enough work was not available, and there was large-scale poverty.

## 5.5 Evolution of Indenture Labour Scheme

The abolition of slavery resulted in a great demand for cheap labour from elsewhere. Already more than 25,000 Indians had been supplied to Mauritius

by a private firm in Kolkata. A planter from the West Indies came to know about this and established contact with that firm in Kolkata. The reply of that firm is interesting 'we are not aware that any greater difficulty would present itself in sending men to the West Indies (than to Mauritius), the natives being perfectly ignorant of the place they go to or the length of the voyage they are undertaking'. The letter continues 'The Dhangars are always spoken of as more akin to the monkey than to the man. They have no religion, no education, and in their present state, no wants beyond eating, drinking and sleeping; and to procure which they are willing to labour. Thus, in spite of the slow communication system of that period, arrangements to supply labourers to the planters were made soon. The planters further instructed the Kolkata firm that if the hill-women were prepared to undertake field-work, they might form forty or fifty per cent of the total, but if not, then one female to nine or ten males for cooking and washing is enough'.

The above statements clearly indicate that while the planters were desperate to get cheap labour, the private firms were not less eager to oblige. By sending the human cargo they were easily able to make profits. They had least regard for the human values and wanted to make full use of the ignorance of the poor people of the country.

#### **Box 5.1: The Plight of Indentured Labour**

While it is entirely reasonable to expect that a small fraction of the indentured emigrants left 'voluntarily', however one is to construe so absurd a notion considering the extraordinary economic hardships afflicting the vast majority of Indians, and with no other thought than that of escaping the wretchedness of their lives, most others left under duress, as victims of a system of deception and subterfuge. Agents who promised them relief from the misery of their lives and substantial pecuniary gain lured peasants to the city; and indubitably many were kidnapped or otherwise tricked. These "girmityas" (a corruption of the word 'agreement') were initially bound to serve five years, it being understood that the planters would pay for their passage, and at the end of this term the indentured laborers were to receive their freedom. If they wished to do so, they could return to India at the expense of their employer, or they could settle in their new homeland, and gain the rights accorded to free men, or at least such rights as colored people could expect. The Europeans almost never adhered to these agreements. From Calcutta and Madras Indian men, and a much smaller number of women, especially in the first few decades of indentured migration, were herded into "coolie" ships, confined to the lower deck, the women subject to the lustful advances of the European crew. Sometimes condemned to eat, sleep, and sit amidst their own waste, the indentureds were just as often without anything but the most elementary form of medical care. Many did not survive the long and brutal "middle passage"; the bodies of the dead were, quite unceremoniously, thrown overboard.

(Source: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Diaspora/freed.html>)

In the beginning the labourers recruited were from the tribal belt of Chota Nagpur. It may be worthwhile to ask as to why in the beginning, the tribals from Chotanagpur were sent. Tinker's estimate is that during the 1840s and 1850s, Dhangars formed a sizeable proportion of those taken overseas under indenture; roughly 'two fifths to one-half of the emigrants were Dhangars'.

## 5.6 Sources of Cheap Labour

The Chotanagpur region had a number of communities like Munda, Oraon and Santhal. By no stretch of imagination they could be called wild. They had a rich culture of their own and within the larger Indian society they had full autonomy. Hitherto, they had not experienced any penetration of the outside administration. But these populations were held in low esteem by the colonists and their cohorts. In order to quickly move men and material the British were laying down rails and roads, in the process exposing the tribes who hitherto had enjoyed relative peace in their areas of habitation. Not only that they were being progressively driven out of their unquestioned claims over the forest, its produce and land. The colonists began to subdue them and bring them under overall colonial administration. Obviously, the tribes of that region began to resent new forest laws and the new system of administration. There was also penetration of missionary activities in the area which was also being opposed. In the meanwhile pressure for dispatching labour was increasing. It may be surmised that if the labour was sent from the backwaters of Bihar it may not come to general notice and in the process some troublemakers among the tribes could also be dispatched.

However, from the 1850s the proportion of tribes began to dwindle and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they were not systematically recruited for the sugar colonies. The reasons may be briefly summarized as below:

1. Mortality rate among them was high, both when they were transported and while in the tropical colonies. In British Guiana almost one fourth of their population perished in the course of five years. The mortality of indentured labourers was a big loss to the planters.
2. The tribals were used to autonomy and freedom. They loved music and dance. In their homeland they worked to enhance the joys of life and were not used to drudgery.
3. Demand for their labour also started coming from eastern India where tea had begun to be cultivated from 1860 onwards. They preferred to go there rather than to far off colonies.
4. The scheme of indenture was becoming successful and therefore the authorities began to throw their net wide for recruitment. They moved into the Indo-Gangetic belt where the peasants with rich experience in agriculture resided.
5. The peasants from these areas transformed the economy of the colonies in later years.

As the first dispatch of labourers to the West Indies proved successful, there was more demand for labour from other planters in the West Indies. Soon the colonial authorities took note of the operations and in 1838 a general scheme of immigration was passed by the then administration.

## 5.7 Streamlining and Abuse of the System

As the new system of immigration began to operate, the wider public came to know the actual circumstances of the labourers. Agitation against the emigration of labourers got started both in Britain as well as in India. The 1830s was a period of intensive social and political stock-taking in India. A range of issues were being debated in which kidnapping of labourers for taking them to Mauritius was also focused. There were reports that the labourers taken to Mauritius and also to the West Indies were ill treated.

Mortality of labourers during their stay in the depot at Kolkata and in the subsequent voyage was high owing to epidemics and ill-treatment. It was never below 4% during transshipment. Even after enquiry and setting up of a bureaucratic machinery, mortality was high. In 1852 of 313 persons sent 20 died on the way. In 1858 in a ship called Salsette 120 passengers died out of 324. There was no security for labourers. As a result of agitation, a full enquiry into the sending of labourers from India to various colonies was instituted in 1838. In the meanwhile emigration of all labourers to the colonies was suspended. The enquiry was conducted from August 1838 to 1839. The full report of the enquiry was published in March 1839. The enquiry indicated how badly the recruiters, their agents, the people who were in charge of the depots and also the authorities treated the labourers. At every level labourers were exploited and also beaten. At one stage the members of the enquiry committee took the matter before a magistrate. The magistrate advised the committee not to take the matter any further. He observed 'they (labourers) were unworthy of sympathy. They have got their liberty and that is all they are entitled to'.

#### **Box 5.2: The Destinations of Indian Labour Emigration**

Indian labor emigration under the indenture system first started in 1834 to Mauritius, Uganda and Nigeria. Later the laborers emigrated to Guyana (1838), New Zealand (1840), Hong Kong (1841), Trinidad and Tobago (1845), Malayd (1845), Martinique and Guadeloupe (1854). Grenada, St. Lucia and St. Vincent (1856), Natal (1860), St. Kitts (1861), Japan and Surinam (1872), Jamaica (1873), Fiji (1879), Burma (1885), Canada (1904) and Thailand (1910). Under the indenture system some 1.5 million persons migrated overseas (Clarke 1990).

Emigration to Sri Lanka, Burma and Malaya presents a marked contrast to migration to the West Indies. All the emigrants to Sri Lanka and Malaya were from the South and headmen known as the 'Kangani' recruited the migrants. The Indians worked on the tea, coffee and rubber plantations. During the period 1852 and 1937 1.5 million Indians went to Ceylon, 2 million to Malaya, and 2.5 million to Burma. After 1920 the Kangani emigration (totaling around 6 million) gradually gave way to individual or unrecruited, free migration due to fall in demand for Indian labor.

Emigration to East Africa, Natal, Mauritius, Burma, Malay and Fiji during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries presents a third pattern: the free emigration of traders, skilled artisans, bankers, petty contractors, clerks, professionals and entrepreneurs. Though initially indentured laborers from India were brought to East Africa to build the Mombassa railway, most of the present Indian population of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania arrived after the railway had been constructed which stimulated opportunities for trade and industry (Bhat, 1998:2-3).

Although emigration of all labourers was prohibited, some smuggling of labourers continued particularly to Mauritius, Ceylon, etc. In the meantime colonial authorities were busy in finding a way so that they were able to recruit labourers for the various colonies and at the same time they were not accused of promoting slavery through the backdoor. Thus a scheme of contract labourers that was popularly called the indentured labour scheme began to take shape. In 1842 the colonial authorities permitted emigration of labourers to Mauritius from Kolkata, Chennai and Mumbai, under certain

conditions such as that the labourers would be under contract for five years. At the end of the five years they would be entitled for free return passage. The first shipload of labourers under this scheme was allowed to proceed in January 1943.

The colonial authorities found the scheme justifiable. In the meanwhile, the planters had tried other sources for cheap labour which were not found successful. All eyes were now fixed on India. By this time, politically the Indian sub-continent had come in the full grip of the colonial authorities. In 1844 the Indian government passed the Act which legalized emigration to Jamaica, Trinidad and other parts of the West Indies.

The various provisions of this act were revised from time to time. The essential feature of the indentured labour scheme was that it was contractual. The assumption was that the labourer of his free will had entered into a contract with his employer for a certain period of time. After the fulfillment of his contract, the labourer was entitled for free passage back home. During the period the labourer had to fulfill his obligation of work but at the same time was entitled for free lodging, wages, medical attention, etc. This contract was signed before a magistrate.

In the eyes of the law it was a contract between two parties, of which one was a poor labourer and the other was his employer in a colony. This whole process was mediated by the colonial authorities. In other words the contract was between two totally unequal partners. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that the contract was just a smokescreen to provide cheap labour from India to the planters spread out in different parts of the colonial world. The colonial power in India was helping the planters to get cheap labour. This scheme proved to be a boon for the planters. Sugar production began to increase significantly. The flow of labourers from India was now assured for a long time, for India had become a colony of the British Empire.

There is no doubt that the scheme of sending labour abroad to work on plantations was started with some hesitation but in course of time a bureaucratic machinery was set up to send labourers to the colonies. According to Tinker, 525,482 Indians emigrated under indenture to French and British sugar plantations. In spite of the fact that there were so many officials looking after the emigration of labour there was much abuse in the system.

First the licensed recruiter had many unlicensed recruiters called *arktias*. These were basically unscrupulous persons. Because of their unethical practices they dared not go to the villages. They trapped their preys at fairs, pilgrim centers, towns and other places of congregation. They were in look out for the people who for some reason had wandered away from their homes. The *arkatia* gave them some sweet talk, some food and allowed some indulgence. Soon they were transferred to the licensed recruiter and the *arkatias* earned their commission. From here on the *arkatias* themselves would not know what had happened to their prey. The licensed recruiter transferred them to a depot where they were briefed, medically examined and their travel papers were made ready. They were kept there till the ship by which they were to travel arrived.

The majority of the emigrants were simple, poor village folk, totally ignorant where they were going, what work they were going to do and who would be their employer. Most of these people were recruited by deception. The



various committees appointed by the government of India found that invariably the recruiters made 'fraudulent statements' to the recruits.

### Reflection and Action 5.2

Do you think the indentured labour system was short of slavery?  
Explain?

## 5.8 Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Identity

Anybody conversant with the Indian social situation will know that irrespective of caste hierarchy and economic situation, the Indians are very much rooted to their home and environment. There is a network of relationships in which rights, duties and obligations of every individual are built in. These rights and obligations are re-emphasized and renewed during life-cycle rituals and innumerable festivals observed by the Indians generation after generation. As a member of a tribe, caste and village each person has a social position and role to play. The system of caste is highly decentralized. It has a built-in autonomy within a larger system which in fact is one of the main reasons for the system to have survived for such a long time. For a person from a village it is hard to imagine existence outside the caste, tribe or community. In brief a person's culture, economic and religious universe are well defined. Therefore, it is not easy for the Indians to emigrate. If at all, they may like to go for a short period leaving their family in the home village.

Thus when the labourers were taken away from their villages and put at the depot they were already devastated persons. But once they got into the ship there was a severe blow to them as a social being – they lost their castes or membership to a community and along with that all the associated little traditions. Their experience of the long voyage of the sea, if at all they survived, made them very hardened persons. Imagine an innocent villager who had hardly stepped out of his village remaining on ship for two to three months often facing rough seas and also very harsh treatment from the ship crew. In every voyage there was some mortality but often it could become high. Seeing a compatriot die in distress and, without performing any rites his mortal remains simply tossed out of the ship would have made a serious dent on the psyche of survivors. Those who survived became *Jehazi bhai* (ship brothers) for the rest of their lives.

In spite of so much hardship, on landing the Indians transformed the plantation economy. Production began to increase. The planters therefore were eager to retain the indentured labour beyond the period of contract. In 1851 in Trinidad they offered £10 to those who would stay back in the colony and forfeit their free return passage. Later in 1861 they offered a land grant of 10 acres if they decided to stay back and continue to work in the plantation. Once again they revised it to 5 acres of land plus £ 5 for the labourers and if he stayed along with his wife another £ 5 was given to them. In other words the planters had found the Indian workers very useful for their plantation and therefore were willing to give them incentives. They also helped them to buy land at cheap rates as long as they were willing to work in the plantation as free labourers.

The Indians knew the value of land. They had rich experience of agriculture. The system of land ownership in India had become highly distorted during the colonial rule. So once the land ownership was offered to the emigrant

Indians they seized the opportunity. They began to settle around the areas where they were given land and also continued to work in the plantation. Those places became the nuclei of Indian villages. They began to grow paddy, vegetables and several other products. Thus not only did they transform the economy wherever they lived in the Caribbean but also a community of the Indians was formed. In course of time they became vibrant and established their own identity.

## 5.9 Conclusion

We have briefly touched the many aspects of migration during colonial times. The specific historical conditions which led to the impoverishment of the peasantry is something that we are sure you have read as a history student but probably did not realize that there was massive migration of impoverished peasantry and artisans around that time to British colonies and plantations. These are some of the oldest Indian diasporic communities who survived and formed communities and though maintaining their distinctiveness have become part of the culture and landscapes they have migrated to. We will be reading more about such issues as identity, community consciousness, as we proceed along our course towards Book II. As we mentioned in Unit 4 and as well as this unit, the migration during colonial period was essentially of two types—the indentured labour system and the kangani/maistry system. Though subsequently we also find that there were passage émigrés who were essentially business communities who went to mostly East Africa to set up small businesses.

## 5.10 Further Reading

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