

SURVIVAL OF INDIAN LABOUR DIASPORA DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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In recent times diasporic history has secured a unique place in the history of India. And largely it is uninterested and forgotten history, which encompasses narratives of displacement, migration, the cross-fertilization of ideas, and the emergency of new cultural trends and practices, is increasingly being viewed as an important and innate part of the story of late modernity and humanity's drift towards globalization, transnational economic and cultural exchanges, and hybridity forms of political, cultural, and social identity. Migration and diaspora raise question of structural and historical distinction between the socio-cultural pluralism of societies like India and the ones overseas where Indian populations migrated and settled, and answers in it terms of dialectically related civilizations and settlements societies. A cultural analysis, using the both comparative and theoretical approach of socio-cultural anthropology, leads to the posting of a *field of forces paradigm to orientate and position empirical instances of Indian diaspora globally*. Three major issues affecting the overseas Indian communities are explored, viz., difference and transition, hybridism and realization, and policies of multiculturalism. The conclusion underlines factors such as locationality of the analyst, the general pacifist orientation of diaspora communities, and slippage between the imaginary and imagined in relation to India that characterize Indian diaspora and its influence on historical study. The folk term 'diaspora' which was till recently used to connote the plight of Jewish people dispersed in various nations, became fashionable and acquired a wide usage until the recent years (Laxmi Narayan 2001, 1). Since 1970s the term *diaspora* is increasingly used to denote almost every group living far away from its ancestral or former homeland. John Armstrong applied the term *...to any ethnic collectively which lacks a territorial base within a given polity* (Laxmi Narayan 2001, 1). The broad application of *diaspora* became common to later any nation people. It is in this way this paper made an attempt to trace the trends of Indian diaspora and their persisting problems and existence as an objective to discuss this paper.

Trends of Indian Diaspora:

In recent years there has been a growing awareness that the disciplinary boundaries traditional area studies often do as much too vague the contemporary world as they do to illuminate it. In a world where Indians, Pakistanis and Koreans might work in Persian gulf or Silicon valley, where North Americans run cafes in Katmandu, where Nigerian immigrants live in the US, the UK, and Persian Gulf, where Dearborn, Michigan is home to thousands of Yemenis, and all of these people live in a world awash with transnational flows of culture and trade, making sense out of one part of the world without reference to others seems increasingly idealistic. As a result, people who teach and do research on contemporary world have been at the forefront of rethinking the geographical or spatial units of analysis they use. Historians have been slower to

move away from old analytical frame work because, at first glance anyway, the boundaries used in area studies seemed to make sense in the past, even if they have short comings in the present.

The improved access to speed and effectiveness of transport, communications and information systems has enabled a strengthening of trans-national kinship, religious, economic and political networks, leading to powerful globalizing alliances, as well as troubling polarizations. The politico-religious diasporas of South Asia (Hindu, Islamic and Sikh), are among others which are exerting increasing influence on world political stage and at times disrupting and threatening, and at times colluding with national and nationalist politics, especially since the mid 1990s. With economic liberalization (1991 onwards) India has entered the global market and mobile, global Indians have been able to explore their connections in the Indian diaspora.

Indian diaspora now variously estimated between 12 to 20 million (depending on who you read); in comparatively mature having experienced centuries of migrations from the industrial laborers of today. It is also well connected due to historically formed access of trade, cultural traffic, travel and tourism. The dynamics of diaspora are often powerfully sneaked by economic imperatives. Both the Indian and British governments, not to mention their German, American and Canadian counterparts, are now wooing the Indian diaspora, especially the growing number of affluent, educated, upwardly mobile Indian professionals for money and votes.

Origin of Indian Diaspora:

Though Indians had been venturing out to neighboring Asian countries since as early as 1st century C.E (Bhaskar 2006 & <http://indiandiaspora.nic.indiasporapdf/part1-exe.pdf>). But the origin of modern Indian diaspora primarily has roots in the penal colony system of the late 18th century and the indentured labour or *Kangani* system of the early 19th century (Bhaskar 2006). *Indenture* refers to the labour contract and was used for the migration to the Caribbean, Mauritius and Fiji while migrating to Malaysia of local headmen, known as *kangani* which was derived from the Tamil language *Kankani* for observer. While the former involved the use of convicts as laborers in British South East Asia, the latter was started by the then British Primer Gladstone to supplant the needs of plantation owners after black slavery was abolished in 1833-34 in the British Caribbean, the colonial powers devised a new strategy called the indentured-system to get the uninterrupted supply of cheap labor from the colonized countries. Ashcroft writes, *This involved transporting, under indenture agreements, large populations of poor agricultural labourers from ... areas such as India and china, to area where they were needed to service plantations. The practice of slavery and indenture thus resulted in world-wide colonial diasporas* (Bill et al. 1998, 58; <http://gidhs.org/articles.html>).

Indeed, the labour shortages threatened to reduce plantation owners to bankruptcy, it became expedient to import labour, largely from Gangetic plains and present-day Tamil Nadu and Andhra. Thus, the system is commonly referred to as the *kangani* system for Sri Lanka and Malaya, and the *maistry* system for Burma. India, Malaya and Sri Lanka played a key role in this system by licensing the recruiters and partly by subsidizing transportation to the plantations. In Malaya, *kangani* migration took place in addition to the indentured labour system and mostly replaced it from 1900 onwards. Indian workers in these three locations had close ties to India, partly because of the relatively short travel distance than other overseas Indians host countries. Especially in Sri Lanka, however, the host society prevented any settling or mingling with the

local Sinhalese. Compared to indentured laborers, the lives of *kangani* migrants were less regulated and provided the comfort of having moved with their families and village contacts. On the labour-supply side of the equation, poverty among the South Asian peasantry accounted for the chief cause to leave the subcontinent.

Since, 1834 onwards, Britain started to export Indian indentured workers to Mauritius, Uganda, Ceylon, and Nigeria. Dutch and French adopted the British pattern. Later on over one lakh fifty thousand laborers emigrated to over a number of fifteen countries, such as Guyana (1838), New Zealand (1840), Hong Kong (1841), Trinidad and Tobago(1845), Martinique and Guadeloupe (1854), Grenada, St. Lucia and St. Vincent (1856), Natal (South Africa), and Malaya (1860), St Kitts (1861), Japan (1872), Surinam (18773), Jamaica (1873), Fiji (1879), Burma (1885), Canada (1904), and Thailand (1910). By the end of the 19th century, Indian laborers were found in every part of South-East Asia, particularly those with British traders (Kadekar 2009, 4 and <http://gidhs.org/articles.html>).

Colonial Migration Movements:

Workers for plantations in Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, and Mauritius were mainly recruited in the present-day states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In Guyana and East Africa, laborers originated mainly from the Punjab and Gujarat. Given the proximity of Tamil Nadu to French possessions in India, the bulk of workers in most French colonies, such as Guadeloupe, Martinique, and La Reunion, as well as the majority of indenture laborers in Natal (South Africa) were Tamils and Telugus. This labor embarkation was happened from Madras port. The exodus of Tamils from South India to the Straits Settlements is reported to have started before the beginning of the 19th century (Appanna Naidu 2006, 197 and www.telugudiaspora.com). Early phase of the plantation industry in Ceylon had started in between 1836 to 1847. With it the demand for labor thus grew from year to year, particularly after 1840 when the crop picked during the harvest season increased rapidly each year labor problems were exacerbated at first by government reluctance to support the immigration of laborers from India. Before 1836, the Government of Ceylon and the newly founded newspapers in Colombo paid close attention to coffee exports and the declining of Caribbean coffee industry, but they remind ambivalent towards the establishment of plantation in Ceylon. The change in attitude came about from the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and consequent reduction of the coffee supply from the former slave colonies, increased consumption of coffee in Britain, equalization of import duties with West Indies in 1835, and the absurdly low price of suitable land in Ceylon. These lowered costs of production in Ceylon while raising prices high enough to overcome higher shipping costs (Patrick 2001, 26). All the cited reasons favored Ceylon swing into the plantation industry. In regard to labor movements of Ceylon, in the early years of the planting, the Indians came on their own forming themselves into gangs of from twenty five to one hundred. In fact, recruitment in India was prohibited by Indian Act No.14 of 1839, which made it illegal to recruit laborers there until 1847; the few references in contemporary sources to attempts by Ceylon planters to hire laborers in India during the early 1840s state that they were prevented from doing so by Indian officials. While rules were relaxed, plantation owners sent their own agents to India to recruit labour (Patrick 2001, 27).

According to a history of the planters' association the first planter to attempt to recruit laborers in India was Lt. Col. Henry C. Bird (or Byrde) in 1844: *ten years before the Planters*

Association was formed, he imported the first Indian coolies to work on a coffee estate, his conductor, half Tamil and half Sinhalese, proceeding from Black Forest estate to Trincomalee, when a Tamil was sent over to the coast who recruited fourteen men' (Patrick 2001, 27). Early coffee plantation workers in the 1840's were appeared to be only seasonal laborers. But that system was changed after they adopt of the recruiting system. In this scenario, the British had imported thousands of lower-caste Indian Tamils to work the coffee, and later the tea, plantations in Ceylon's lush green central highlands. By 1911, Indian Tamils numbered 500,000 and by the time of independence, nearly 800,000 (Court 1991, 4). In swift succession, three pieces of legislation-most notably the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948-rendered stateless, then voiceless, the vast majority of the plantation Tamils. Citizenship, in the case of Indian and Pakistan residents, became contingent on proof of three generations of paternal ancestry in Ceylon as well as proof of income or possession of property. A 1949 law subsequently restricted voting rights to citizens (Court 1991, 4).

Emigration to Mauritius began as early as 1819, but some reports mentioned certainly it was between 1826 and 1830. Basic statistical data on emigration available from 1834 onwards when the slavery was abolished in the British Empire and the indenture labour system was inaugurated. Of these, Mauritius was the largest recipient of Indian labour under the indenture system (Dharma Kumar 2008, 485) where a planter aristocracy established a harsh system of indentured labor drawn from the poorest regions of India. From 1834 to 1839 they imported over 25,000 laborers. The brutality of indenture in Mauritius provoked the Government of India to prohibit emigration there in 1839, but the Colonial office responded to planters' appeals and in 1842 the Colonial Secretary authorized its resumption. Until the 1880s, the sugar plantations of Mauritius were still organized like slave plantations (Patrick 2001, 26). While at that time Ceylon response to opportunity to create plantation economy was in a position of mixed response due to cite reasons in Mauritius. The Government of Ceylon and the colony's newspapers condemned labor conditions in Mauritius. 'Colombo Observer' on July 4, 1838 highlighted Colony's governor, J.A. Stewart Mackenzie's (soon to be an investor in a coffee plantation himself) concluded remarks to legislative Council on June 28, 1838, with

what is said, it seems, to be passing elsewhere; if the accounts of the emigration and transport of Coolies from the shores of India, be really true to those ports, where, if the reports of public men are to be trusted, they meet with no other treatment, than that of slave, though not indeed branded with the name (Patrick 2001, 26).

The movement to British Guyana, largest importer in the Caribbean, commenced in 1838 (1835 to Mauritius and 1845 to Trinidad and Jamaica); it was stopped the following year; it recommended in 1845, suspended three years later and continued uninterrupted from 1851 to demise of the system during the First World War i.e. in 1917. East Indians arrived in Guyana in response a so-called labour vacuum caused by the gradual withdrawal of Africans from plantation agriculture schemes following final emancipation of slavery in 1838. Soon after emancipation, the sugar planters throughout most of the Caribbean, substituted slave labour with indentured labour contracts. For an over three quarters of a century, about 240,000 East Indians were shipped over high seas to labour on Guyana's sugar plantations as indentured servants under the conditions reminiscent of slavery. The influx of East Indians into Guyana continued until 1917, when for

reasons relating to the inequities in the recruitments system and mal-treatment of East Indians abroad, the Indian government deservedly handed down a death-blow to the system of indentured servitude. Of the 240,000 east Indians who were brought to Guyana, 65,538 were would succumb to plantation life and returned to familiar and settled life in their *Janmabhumi* (motherland).

The first Indians arrived in Trinidad on May 30, 1845. And 143,900 people immigrated in to Trinidad and 36,412 to Jamaica from the ports of Calcutta and Madras. Most of the immigrants to Trinidad and Tobago came from places in the United Provinces where Bhojpuri is spoken. A Significant minority came from Madras Presidency or present-day Tamil Nadu where Tamil and Telugu were spoken.

A substantial minority of Indo-Trinidadians trace their ancestry to indentured labourers who immigrated to Guyana, Jamaica, St. Vincent, Grenada or other islands in the Caribbean. A few are descendants of later immigrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, predominantly doctors and Gujarati businessmen. By 1917, Indians comprised 42 per cent of the Guyanese population (today below 50 per cent) (<http://gidhs.org/articles.html>). Migration of coolies to Natal and other places in South Africa also vey discriminative though it was started in 1860 theirs woes some what we familiar with M.K. Gandhi's' (his Autobiography) treatment while he was stay as a Indian Barrister, there Indian indenture laborers, or *Girmitiyas* (on an agreement) and Gandhi was called as coolies Barrister and even he possessed a First Class Train Ticket he was not allowed to occupy the position and was pushed out from the train in the Johannesburg. These were the some of the best examples of the Indians treatment even after their survival started over three decades i.e. in 1890s. What will really surprise a reader are Gandhiji's tireless efforts to organize these minorities as politically awakening community amidst the trouble situations of racism, colonialism and other forms of oppression.

Emigrations to above countries was a regular phenomenon, but increased very much in a time of famines. Many of the groups that left Indian shores had lived on very small incomes and suffered harsh environments in their places of origin. The decade of the 1830s, which saw the Guntur famine and a super cyclone followed by inundation, was disastrous for agriculture in the Andhra coast, and pushed many people out of their homes and towards the Madras port. From the second decade of the nineteenth century onward a certain number of handloom weavers joined the migrant gangs in South India (Tirthankar Roy 2006, 355-56). And yet, in the early nineteenth century at least, the 'push' factor does not completely explain the decision to migrate such immense distances to unknown destinations. Labourers, mostly from rural areas, would initially sign up for a five-year contract. Many renewed their contacts, and a significant portion chose to stay permanently, deciding to accept a piece of land or a certain payment in lieu of their right to be shipped home (Kadekar 2009, 1). Under the indenture system, some 1.5 million persons migrated to different countries. Today, they constitute more than ten million dispersed across the cited parts of the world, including 'twice migrants' in the developed countries (Kadekar 2009, 1).

The importation of Indian indentured workers in to post-emancipation British Guiana was part of a continuing search by the sugar planters for a labour force that was tractable, disciplined and accustomed to plantation agriculture under harsh topical conditions. They perceived immigrant labour as a means of restoring the control they had exercised under the iniquitous slave system as well as enabling them to keep plantation wages down and reduce operational costs. Colonial rulers sheltered the workers in barracks and regulated their lives in almost every regard

with severe punishments for disobedience and *insufficient work* (<http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/print.cfm?ID=745>). Their attempt to introduce black labour from the overpopulated West Indian islands, West Africa and Southern United States, and while labour from Europe and the Portuguese Atlantic islands, had limited success. It was India with its teeming millions in heavily congested areas which satisfied their needs, and the planters never stooped reiterating the importance of Indian labour to resuscitate the sugar industry and prevent an impending ruin (<http://gidhs.org/articles.html>).

In January 1836, John Gladstone, father of William Ewart Gladstone and owner of plantations Vreed-en Hoop and Vree-es-Stein, wrote to the Calcutta firm of Messer's Gillanders Arbuthnot and Company inquiring whether the firm could supply 100 *young, active, able – bodied* labourers on contracts for his estates. The exporters replied that they did not envision any recruiting problem, *the natives being perfectly ignorant of the place they agree to go to, or the length of the voyage they are undertaking*. This reply virtually set the stage for deceit, fraud, coercion and kidnapping which permeated the whole recruiting system.

After some correspondence, two sailing ships – the 'Whitney' and Hesperus – landed in British Guiana on May 5, 1838 with 396 Indians of whom only 22 were women. This shortage of women was to continue throughout indenture with disastrous social consequences in the Indian community. Inter alia, it produced unstable marital relations and an alarming incidence of Indian wife murders in nearly all the recipient colonies. The revelation that Indian women were leading immoral lives in the sugar colonies produced bitter resentment in India and galvanized articulate Indian nationalists into a massive anti-indenture campaign which parallel the anti-slavery movement a hundred years earlier (<http://gidhs.org/articles.html>).

Immigrants of first phase were treated by plantation owners as the depressed communities of India; we can rightly call them or count their history as part of subaltern studies, with the sweet words of recruiters and their future life of immigrants work in the sugar cane or plantation to be rosy. But their entity in the new land as indenture labour as nothing but slavery or servitude. Their work in the plantations at least 5 years as indentured labor, and in the mean time they experienced worst or miserable life. It's a phenomenon of diasporic community. Prior to the pre-census period often their socio-economic history was very scantily recorded. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries no systematic records were kept of the people who travelled across national boundaries, especially the northern and western land frontiers, and therefore little is known about the number and other characteristics of the immigrants. Indian community in South Africa as recently as they have struggled against discrimination, poverty, and lack of political and civil representation. Today they have achieved South African citizenship as temporary sojourners', although this status is still the *second grade* (Laxmi Narayan et al. 2009, 8).

Push factors of Diaspora:

Despite social conservatism, caste prejudices and the traditional non-migratory nature of the Indian populace, villages left *Matrubhumi* for a variety of reasons. Among these were the socio-economic plight of landless labours, rack renting by landlords, rural indebtedness, exploitation by Banias and the loss of a traditional livelihood due to the importations cheap manufactured goods from Britain. Recurrent famines in India were another key factor in colonial emigration. Famines often broke the morale of villagers and produced a state of complete

desperation. Indeed, there was a strong correlation between economic distress and high migration and a good harvest and recurring difficulties. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 also gave a great fillip to colonial emigrations. The total number of emigrants shipped from Calcutta in between 1857 to 1859 jumped from 31,184 in 1854-56 to 88,895 or an increase of 185 per cent. The Indians Mutiny was a significant reason in this sudden spurt in colonial emigration (Laxmi Narayan et al. 2009, 8).

Indian workers were drawn largely from north India with smaller batches coming from Tamil and Telinga districts in the Madras Presidency. Hardly any emigrant was shipped to West Indies from the port of Bombay as the government deprecated emigration to distant colonies. In North India the main recruiting areas were the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (Modern UP), Bihar and Bengal. Within this vast area the principal recruiting districts were Allahabad, Ghazipur, Kanpur, Azamgarh, Shahabad, Patna, Gaya, Bhagalpur and the 24-Parganas. From the 1890s to the end of indenture (1916), Basti was the single largest exporter of Indian labour to overseas. In South India the main recruiting districts were Madras, Madura, Ganjam, and Vizagapatam. For the first twenty years of colonial emigration significant numbers comprised *Hill Coolies* from Chota Nagpur plateau about two to three hundred miles from Calcutta (Laxmi Narayan et al. 2009, 8).

Survival Question of Diaspora:

The first ship load of Indians arrived in Trinidad in 1845; other went to British Guyana and Surinam, and at others to plantations in Mauritius (where Indian first arrived in 1834), Fiji, and Malaysia or to help build railroads in east Africa. Nationalists' opinion, and the efforts of English sympathizers such as C.F. Andrews, brought the system of indenture to a close in 1917, but not before 1.5 million Indians, in the "lines" formerly inhabited by the slaves. These Indians humanized the landscape, tilled the soil, and put the food on tables; they are the great unsung heroes and heroines of the diaspora.

Conclusion:

One strand in historical research on overseas migration has seen the whole movement as evidence of exploitation of the most blatant kind. The migrants, in this version, would appear as victims of colonialism. True, the colonial state, despite occasional noise about the abuses, generally helped the planters and played a facilitating role in this transaction. That said, the view that the migrants were helpless tools in an evil trade is being revised in more recent research. Even in the earliest days of mass migration, the 1930, interviews of returnees showed that coercion and fraud were exceptional than the rule.

Most went willingly with sufficient knowledge. There was a substantial wage differential between home and the plantations. In one account, a day labourer in the Birbhum district of Bengal earned Rs 1-2 per month in 1840. The same person would earn Rs 4-5 in Mauritius on arrival and frequently, Rs 7-10 after a couple of years stay. Not surprisingly, after completing a five-year indenture, returnees brought with them princely sums of money. At 1840, a Sardar routinely carried Rs200-300 on the journey back. Such amounts, and the reports that the Sardars gave on return, had tremendous persuasive power. Increasingly as the century wore on, the lure of wages and persuasion by the returnees exercised greater influence on the decision to migrate than coercive tactics.

In general, this mosaic of Indian identities abroad is presented as the mirror of India itself. India is diverse, and so too are its migrants. It is acknowledged that Indian migrants abroad tend to reproduce their religion, family patterns, and culture as much as possible. At the same time, however, they adjust to local circumstances. This is not a natural process, but one in which great efforts need to be made – sometimes in the direction of maintaining one's culture, but also in the direction of the host society. In other words, these migrants differ in their cultural and religious backgrounds, in the causes and duration of their migration, and the extent to which they adapt to local societies.

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