

## **Girmitiya System-Indentured Labour**

The Indian indenture system was an ongoing system of indenture, a form of debt bondage, by which 3.5 million Indians were transported to various colonies of European powers to provide labour for the plantations (mainly sugar). It started from the end of slavery in 1833 and continued until 1920. "Agreement" is the term that has been coined into "Girmit", referring to the "Agreement" of the British Government with the Indian labourers. The descendants of these labourers are now called Girmitiyas.

During the late 1820s, the French in India (Pondicherry) laid down terms for the introduction of Indian labourers to the colony. Each man was required to appear before a magistrate and declare that he was going voluntarily. The contract was for five years with pay of rs. 8 per month and rations provided labourers had been transported to distant French colonies. This attempt could not succeed, however, upon abolition of slavery by the British Empire in 1833, the need of cheap labour in the plantations across the British Empire soared and therefore, the transportation of Indian labour gained pace. By 1838, 25,000 Indian labourers had been shipped to Mauritius alone.

Colonial British Indian Government Regulations of 1837 laid down specific conditions for the dispatch of Indian labour from Calcutta and Madras. The emigrant and his emigration agent were required to appear before an officer, with a written statement of the terms of the contract. The length of service fixed was five years, renewable for further five-year terms. The emigrant was to be returned at the end of his service to the port of departure.

By 1850s, the major absorbers of the Indian girmitiya labourers were Caribbean islands. Later the labourers were also sent to South Africa in substantial numbers.

The planters pressed consistently for longer indentures. In an effort to persuade labourers to stay, following measures were taken

- Governments of Caribbean countries offered a gratuity of £2 to each labourer who decided to remain in Mauritius and renounce his claim to a free passage.
- The Government of India agreed to change the conditions whereby if a return passage (back to India after completion of term) was not claimed within six months of entitlement, it would be forfeited.
- It was also considered that if the labourers had a family life in the colonies they would be more likely to stay on. From mid 1850s, it was mandated that women must form 25% of the total, which was raised to 40% few years later.
- Few Caribbean Governments offered the labourers a stake in the colony by providing real inducements to settle when their indentures had expired. On forfeiting the return passages, labourers were provided by a land grant (generally of 5 acres).

By 1870 a total of 550,000 Indians emigrated (legally) to the British and French Colonies (400,000 to Mauritius, 76,000 to Demerara, 42,000 to Trinidad, 15,000 to Jamaica, 6,000 to Natal, 15,000 to Reunion and 16,000 to the other French colonies).

This figure does not include the labourers who went to Ceylon or Malaya and illegal recruitment to the French colonies. Thus by 1870 the indenture system, transporting Indian labour to the colonies, was an established system of providing labour for European colonial plantations.

Workers for plantations in Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, and Mauritius were mainly recruited in the present-day states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In Guyana and East Africa, labourers originated mainly from 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 indentured labourers in Natal (South Africa) were Tamils.

### **Leaving India**

Majority of the labourers left India for working in the plantations due to the push factors rather than pull factors. The devastated economy, especially rural, due to the British policies left them with very few choices. Also high levels of unemployment, chronic poverty, indebtedness and even famine were the primary causes. They had no idea of the working conditions or quality of life etc. Recruiters exploited their ignorance and simplicity as they were lured by way of glowing promises, and were assured of lucrative employment and enriched opportunities. Peasants were lured to the city by agents who promised them relief from the misery of their lives and substantial pecuniary gain and indubitably many were kidnapped or otherwise tricked. These girmityas 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 labourers were to receive their freedom. The Europeans almost never adhered to these agreements.

### **Middle Passage**

Overcrowding of the emigrant ships, inadequate food and lack of fresh water, water-borne diseases such as cholera, dysentery and diarrhoea, and the long and arduous voyage, made life unbearable. Many did not survive the long and brutal middle passage the bodies of the dead were, quite unceremoniously, thrown overboard. The slavery had indeed ended but the officers were accustomed of handling the labourers in the old way.

### **Life at work**

Isolated from the rest of the local population, colonial rulers housed the workers in barracks and regulated their lives in almost every regard, with severe punishments for disobedience

and "insufficient work". Throughout the period of Indenture ship, immigrants were faced with meagre wage rates and unrealistic task work. Weekly earnings depended on the number of tasks, the nature of the tasks, whether it was weeding, shovelling, manuring, planting or harvesting and the speed with which they were completed. In any event, it was the employer who invariably determined the wage rate and whenever there was a fall in sugar prices immigrants found their earnings minimized. Indian labourers experienced a persistent problem surrounding the "muster roll", which was held every morning. Non-attendance meant the penalty of a fine, which was arbitrarily deducted from their wages. The pressure of getting into the fields early in order to complete unrealistic tasks at the expense of missing the muster roll, was very great. On the other hand, if he attended the muster roll and failed to complete the day's task, the end result was the same arbitrary deduction of wages. In effect the labourer had little choice. One way or the other, he was penalized. The Indian immigrant often went before the courts as victims of the labour laws and the legal system in general. The planter had at his disposal several instruments of prosecution. He could prosecute for refusal to commence work, or work left unfinished, absenteeism without authority, disorderly or threatening behaviour, or even neglect. Punishment resulted in fines or imprisonment. Throughout the period of indenture ship, the immigrant suffered from a paucity of social amenities. The tenement ranges were small and unventilated, potable water was virtually non-existent, and medical facilities and sanitation were poor. As a consequence outbreaks of diseases tended to assume epidemic proportions.

### **Demand for rights**

It was not surprising, therefore, that from the 1860s onwards, Indian indentured labourers began to openly defy the system. Violent eruptions were occasioned by many specific and localized grievances, such as overbearing behaviour of managers, wage rate disputes, disagreement over tasks, sexual exploitation of women by overseers and the arbitrary deduction of wages of labourers. Riots and disturbances continued with regularity in the 1890s and in the early years of the twentieth century. Indeed, towards the end of the indenture ship system, labour protest had assumed various forms including work stoppage, mass picketing, violent demonstrations, marching to the Immigration Department, assaults on managers and overseers, coupled with passive resistance such as feigning illness, malingering and deliberately performing poor work.

### **End of the System**

In response to severe criticism, the British Imperial Legislative Council abolished the indenture system in 1916. By that time, more than 1.5 million Indians had been shipped to colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

### **Legacy**

They toiled unceasingly to ensure the survival of the sugar industry and the emergence of the rice industry. They contributed significantly in the areas of village development, cash crop cultivation, cattle-rearing, milk selling and other economic activities during the period of indenture ship. From the late nineteenth century Indian immigrants displayed a high occupation profile in several off-plantation economic activities including cab- drivers, bankers, tailors, carpenters, boat-builders, charcoal makers, goldsmiths, porters, small scale manufacturers and fishermen.

In recent times their descendants have made, and continue to make tremendous strides in the social, economic cultural, education, political and trade union fields. Many of them are today leading sports personalities, entrepreneurs, educationists, politicians and trade unionists in their own right.