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A STUDY OF INDENTURED DIASPORA AND TRAUMA OF INDIAN IMMIGRANTS

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ABSTRACT

Britisher's abolition of the slave trade and slavery had global ramifications. Millions of Asians were moved under the indentured system to labor on sugar plantations in the British ruled South Africa, Caribbean, Fiji, Peru and Mauritius etc. During the 50 year period between 1860 and 1911, many indentured labors from across India landed in the British ruled colonies. Indian immigrants were brought here as indentured laborer with 5 years renewable contracts. The primary reason for coming to the sugar colonies was the promise for better life. What awaited the indentured laborers were extreme hardship, abuse, betrayal and inhumane treatments.

The proposed paper will be a modest attempt to explore the trauma of Indentured immigrants, also known as 'Coolies', who migrated to British ruled sugar colonies with special reference to Ashutosh Sharma's *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920* (2017). This paper, intends to demonstrate how the British tricked indentured immigrants in the name of land and wealth.

Keywords: Indentured, Trauma, Migration, British, Coolies

When the slave system ended then there was a need to replace that system with something else. When it was recognized worldwide that slavery was crime against man, a new form of evil took its place- Indentured Servitude. A ship carrying 342 Indian indentured laborers landed in South Africa, marking the start of a terrible era in the history of the Indian Diaspora. Great Britain's abolition of the slave trade and slavery had global ramifications. Millions of Asians were moved under the indentured system to labor on sugar plantations in the Caribbean, Fiji, Peru, and Mauritius. During 1830s and 1911, many indentured labors from across India landed

in the British ruled Sugar Colonies. India was thought to have an abundance of laborers who might be moved to abroad sugar fields to work. Indian immigrants were brought here as indentured laborer with 5 years renewable contracts. The primary reason for coming to the sugar colonies was the promise for the better life. What awaited the indentured laborers were extreme hardship, abuse, betrayal and inhumane treatments. The province was impoverished and undeveloped so every effort was made to attract European settlers to the region. New agricultural ventures were implemented. After repeated trials Edmund Morewood was able to improve the production of sugarcane on his farm. In Natal this success story attracted more white colonizers into the country. As a result, the need for sugarcane field labor had risen considerably. The Zulus were the original inhabitants of this region who had little inclination to work for a living. The British administration and the Government of India (which was part of the British Empire) collaborated to find a solution to the labour problem. Indentured labour was allowed to be imported into the sugar plantations.

Indenture is a type of debt servitude but it is different from slavery. Under the various terms and conditions, workers were to receive food and a small monthly stipend in return for their labor. Indian indentured laborers were promised crown lands and citizenship at the end of five years but unfortunately for them this promise was not entirely honored. In India, life was a continuous struggle so when these Indians were called to work as an indentured labor, the Indian people grabbed this opportunity to go there. Land, improved living and wealth were promised to these indentured servants. Totaram Sanadhya, an indentured laborer tells his experience regarding this:

...this arkati fooled me and brought me to his house. Once there I saw about 100 men sitting in one line and about 60 women in another...arkati explained things to the people there: "Look, brothers, the place where you work you will never have to suffer any sorrows. There will never be any kind of problems there. You will eat a lot of bananas and a stomach full of sugarcane, and play flutes in relaxation." (qtd. in *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920*, 167)

As a result, many of people fled their villages in search of a brighter future in the Sugar colonies. The growing demand for labor in mineral, industrial, infrastructural, and urban projects and on plantations could only be met since an increasing number of individuals were pushed to migrate because of hardship in their home land and were pulled by the lure of opportunities in places of which they had previously probably never heard.

Because of the high rate of illiteracy, only a few workers understood the provisions of the contracts. They were duped or convinced into signing a contract that transported them to an immigration depot and to plantations in other countries. Totaram recalls that the recruiters misguided the Indians and many people were deceived about where they were going and what they would be paid:

Some wander in Mathura like a Chaube, some are acting as priests in Haridwar, some are saying in Riyasat that "we cause coolies to get employment at twenty-two rupees a month. This work is not for our own sake; it is government work." Some becoming bankers in Kanpur, keeping watches in their pocket, taking canes in their hands, are saying, "We will give you a job. In Calcutta, a pilgrim's house (dharmshala) named Jamaica is being built. We will give nine annas daily.

(qtd. in *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920*, 170)

They suffered discrimination in the colonies beginning with the moment they boarded the steamers. They had to suffer numerous hardships aboard steamers because they were black. They were assigned to uncomfortable seats. Their clothing had been sanitized. The conditions aboard vessels were foul and wretched. The labourers were, as stated earlier, packed like sardines. Diseases regularly broke out, and high percentages of deaths occurred on board. Of those that died, they were disgraced and simply thrown into the sea. Some were not given the honour of being called by their names, and were simply called "Coolie". The young children

even below double digits were amongst those aboard the ships, and were expected to labor as well. When the passengers arrived in the Sugar Colonies, they were pushed into unfinished barracks surrounded by pools of stagnant water. Barracks were long wooden buildings, perhaps 11 to 12 feet wide, divided into 8 to 10 smaller rooms inside, and separated by small partitions that couldn't even touch the roofs. Ashutosh Kumar describes the condition of the rooms given to indentured immigrants in the sugar colonies:

Coolies were given small rooms to live in. Each of them was twelve-feet long and eight-feet wide. If a man had his wife with him, they were given this room; otherwise, three men or three women were lodged in a single room. (Kumar, 174)

All smells, noises and voices passed through, and privacy was impossible. There were no basic amenities, no space for cooking or latrines; they had to go either into the fields or the bushes. Throughout the British sugar colonies, there were no proper medical facilities and there was lack of clean drinking water. Many of these Indians were ill with anemia, dysentery, hookworm, malaria, cholera and typhoid which often rampant among Indians. There was no electricity. Many Indians suffered from malnutrition but these Indians were ignored. Because of the tough working circumstances which included long hours and poor pay, their physical condition deteriorated. From the age of five, children were expected to assist their parents in their labor. These Indian indentured laborers, also known as 'coolies' by white men had to work from sunrise to sunset six days a week. As if living like this wasn't enough of a punishment, they were also penalized for alleged violations of contract terms. Many laborers attempted to flee their severe working conditions, but were apprehended and imprisoned. For attempting to flee, their initial five-year contract was sometimes increased to ten years. They were beaten and whipped, overworked, lynched and sexually abused. The conditions of the women were pathetic. They had to wake up at 3:30 am in the morning. Ashutosh Kumar writes about their condition:

According to Totaram, a woman had to face more hardships than men in the plantations. First, she had to wake up at 3:30 in the morning and cook for the family, followed by ten hours of work in the fields. After returning home, she had to cook again. (Kumar, 175)

Workers' freedom was restricted by the indenture system, which made it difficult for them to exit the contract. They were sexually abused at the hands of both Indian males and European plantation overseers and agents. Beautiful women were assigned to work in remote locations, and both blacks and whites sexually exploited their solitude. Sugar estate overseers, who were young and ruthless, took all sorts of liberties with attractive Indian women and tortured them and their husbands if they refused. Compounders of medicine would sometimes summon female Indians into a locked room, claiming to examine these women, and then torturing them indecently to satisfy their lust. Pregnant women were required to work till the end of their pregnancy. If they refused, they were tortured so severely that they had an abortion.

These coolies had the ability to survive the darkest of challenges. The planters overburdened these Coolies, and when they could not complete the tasks given to them, the planters used to slash their salaries. Coolies were sometimes hauled to court for failing to execute their duties and subsequently imprisoned. The whitemen would sometimes increase the workload to punish laborers, and this could bring them even to the point of alcoholism, or even death. On other plantations, labourers were shot and perhaps even killed.

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