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A Janus-faced narrative: Bursting the Colonial Myth on Labour Migration and Indenture

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Abstract: *Conventional and even some revisionist scholarship on indenture and labour migration in the Indian context are premised on the push and pull model, that tries to explain the huge exodus of labour from primarily eastern and southern India to various plantation economies, both inland and overseas, as resulting from labour shortages in the economic zone and financial deprivation and excessive scarcity, that often caused terrible famines, in the source regions. The Marxist historiography on the subject has also suffered from economic determinism and has failed to appreciate the colonial prerogatives that caused migration. However, this paper will argue that such hypothecations are based on a superficial understanding of the causalities behind the phenomenon of indenture. It asserts that such narratives, lend credibility to the stance that was adopted by the colonial government. In rendering the massive workforce available for exportation through various legislations and introduction of subsidies the colonial government claimed for itself the role of a benevolent protector, that genuinely cared about the welfare of its subjects, providing them opportunities of a better economic life and opening for them gateways to escape famines that were ravaging their homeland, while in reality it was serving its own capitalist agenda.*

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Famines, Relief, Racial Politics and the Rule of Colonial Difference

Colonial history is over-stuffed with so many instances of ravaging famines that British Raj can be used as a synonym for Famine Raj. Famines were not a novelty in many parts of the subcontinent. Agriculture, even in vast rain-shadow regions were heavily dependent on the notorious monsoon cycles, due to the unavailability of proper irrigational facilities. William Digby's *Prosperous British India* (1901) located fourteen major famines between the eleventh and seventeenth centuries, averaging one every fifty years or so. But these numbers shot up to paramount dimensions during the days of the Raj, with twelve major famines occurring in the years between 1765 and 1858 and twenty of the forty-nine years between 1860 and 1908 scarred by famines and scarcity. Post 1908 no such major famines happened in the subcontinent, with the major and glaring exception of the Great Bengal Famine in 1943, when a rough estimate of 1.5 to 3 million people perished to the famine or the epidemics that followed the famine.[1]

Famines had differential bearings on the people, as Amartya Sen argues, depending on their location in geographical and socio-economic and gender hierarchies. Rural population suffered a lot more in comparison to their urban counterparts, women taking less food than the working male population even in urban households. Famines were usually associated with village desertions and epidemics followed famines as inevitable sequels.[2]

With the rising incorporation of environmental studies in the writing of history, many scholars like Mike Davis have called for the study of the famines through a new educational prism that he calls 'political ecology'.[3] Such theories wish to bring into play the impacts that environmental phenomena had on the economy in particular, for instance, the draughts that caused big famines in India were seen as a direct effect of the El-Nino effect (formulated by environmental scientist Jacob Bjerknes in the late 1960s), that also caused simultaneous massive draughts in China, South East Asia, Egypt, North Africa and north-east Brazil.

But the enhanced frequency and severity of famines cannot solely be explained by environmental factors. With all due respect to Mike Davis and his new approach to the study of the famine conundrum, I think that such a study takes the focus out of the primary issue that led to the famine. If such droughts were leading to famines in the subcontinent, then why was there no reported signs of food scarcity in the imperial metropole in an age when transport and communication had been revolutionized by steam and railways, and by the opening up of the Suez Canal. The age also saw newer technologies for enhancing agricultural output, though, the fruits of such inventions remained limited only to the Western borders. Plainly speaking, the attitude of the colonial government on famines were framed within the folds of the imperial and racist

ideology of the rule of colonial difference. Famines, scarcity, epidemics were deemed as idiosyncrasies of the East, while the West was a land of a prosperity and stability.

What needs discussion is the colonial attitude that was so central in, as ironical as it might sound, normalizing famines in the subcontinent. India, in its assigned role of the periphery, was made to keep an export surplus in agricultural commodities with the rest of the world even in times of scarcities, so that Britain could balance its deficit from imports from other countries by maintaining an export surplus over colonial India. The measures through which the Raj tried to or pretended to tackle scarcity or famines are extremely problematic. The pre-colonial practice of private philanthropy as a relief measure was denounced by the colonial state on grounds that it was conducive to indolence and parasitism. Its own relief measures came in the form of test relief and not through any direct acts of governmental intervention in the indiscriminate hoarding of food grains in a highly unregulated market. The panacea for rising prices of food crops in the rural interiors was said to lie in better communication networks and free trade. In reality, it was not really in the interests of the colonial state and global imperial capitalism (the two not quite isolated to each other) to diagnose famines in the economically crippled and highly populated zones situated in the peripheries of the empire. Infact it was profitable to maintain such a condition of artificial scarcity in these regions so that they could be turned into lucrative labour pools for various colonial/capitalist enterprises. It is with this context in the back of our head, that we can approach indenture as a phenomenon.

Colonization of the Indian Economy

This paper presents an altogether different speculative lens to understand the driving forces of indenture. I wish to show that the massive scale of labour migration that began in the 1830s and continued all the way upto the first decade of the twentieth century was a direct response to the contingent economic demands of global capitalism. As opposed to the self-assessed and self-assumed role of the benevolent protector that allowed immigration for the benefit and welfare of the labour population that would have otherwise perished to famines, in this reading the colonial state has been seen as a party deeply implicit in the process of capitalist accumulation by the exploitation of cheap labour. The colonial rationalization of famines in the Indian subcontinent as caused only due to geological factors, a rationalization that was essential in washing clean the hands of the state, has also been challenged in this issue. I have argued in the course of this paper, that famines became a regular customer in the Indian rural landscape thanks to British mismanagement of India's economy. To add to this, British intervention in local systems of production obviously done to serve colonial interests of enhanced revenue collection destroyed the existent production structures

and the relations arising out of it. Infact, it was absolute British incomprehensibility of pre-colonial Indian land ownership with its multiple layers of proprietorship and sovereignty that had its basis in the specific culture of pre-colonial political economy, of sub-infeudation, and the subsequent move to create private property to be owned by a class of landed gentry, destroyed the existent relations of ownership that the peasant had to his land. That is not to say that landlessness was a novelty in the South Asian rural landscape produced by colonial re-structuration of the land revenue collection systems.

Sumit Sarkar observes that landless or near-landless agricultural labourers constituted between one fifth to one fourth of the rural workforce. Dharma Kumar drives home the point that rural landlessness must be read as a continuity from the pre-colonial times to the colonial economy, a point that has found reiteration in the works of Irfan Habib.[4] However, the continuation of the numbers and statistics cannot be allowed to blur the qualitative changes effected by colonial developments in the lives of the landless. Restrictions to forest resources, coerced sedentarization of mobile agrarian communities, tightened conceptions of private property and decline in military labour markets cut down on pre-colonial and early colonial avenues of income supplementation and augmentation. These closed the doors of economic and social upward mobility and certainly led to a worsening of their conditions. In many instances, it was colonial rule that freed the peasant from his ties to the land, thus making him available for industrial or plantation labour. It is henceforth logical to postulate that the very conditions that necessitated indenture was created exclusively by colonial policies, and as a process it was fueled by capitalist goals of accumulation and sustained by the institutional chariot of the empire.

It would be too much to assume that a government that didn't even care to bring forth famine relief measures, promoted indentured migration for the sake of welfare of the suffering population. Rather, the drives were purely capitalistic - of accumulation of profit through the unchecked exploitation of the cheap labour pool, which was made possible with the emergence of a world capitalist system and the integration of India into the same through the colonization of its economy in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century chronological space. In the specific context of indenture labour system in the tea plantations of Assam, Rana P. Behal has explored how the physical and economic exploitation of the indentured worker in order to step up tea production for a competitive market with ultimate motives of profit maximization gave birth to an exploitative labour system.[5]

Behal also observes that the colonial state was in full cognizance of the atrocities

that these contractual workers were subjected too. The absence of any native voice in the government during the early days of indenture (1830s-1860s) didn't particularly help the labourer's cause. Pressure groups of the time generally had an upper-caste and upper-class character and they were not quite interested to or even capable enough of representing the interests of the migrant labourers. That does not, however imply that the case of the migrants received no attention in the nativist discourses of the time. Marina Carter cites a very interesting dialogue that took place in the chronological landscape of nineteenth century Bengal, when the objections of the Landholder's Association to indentured migration was rebutted by the government. In response, the government that Marina Carter refers to as the Protector with unabashed sarcasm, justified this state-sponsored wholesaling of Indian labour as a form of famine relief.[6] This Protector status of the colonial government also becomes extremely questionable when we note that indentured migration stopped almost immediately after the introduction of Indians into the government in the 1910s with the introduction of the Indian Councils Act 1909.

Ironically, it was the same colonial government, which had claimed for itself a position of neutral benevolence with regard to migration in general, that introduced legislations which granted arbitrary and extra-judicial powers to the planters. As pointed by Tirthankar Roy, such provisions allowing disciplinary action by the planter, e.g. the infamous Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (Act XIII) 1859 invariably led to the exacerbation of the already deplorable working conditions of the worker.[7] Later down the argumentative line, Roy visualizes a link between migration and famines. In contrast to the Tinkerian historical tradition, he rejects the blunt assumption that all forms of migration were coerced. Infact, Tirthankar Roy notes that most of the migration to Assam tea plantations were voluntary and made as a reaction to evade death and deprivation at home. Migration increased during times of famines. It is therefore very apparent that a direct link existed between famines and migration. However, what is important to notice is the agency behind migration as a phenomenon. Migration must be studied as the impulsive response of a mobile labour population to economic deprivations and extreme conditions of scarcity at home.

Debating on the Nature of Indentured Labour

Now, it is essential to map the evolution of the indentured labour system in a chronological space. In the process I will also attempt to note the idiosyncrasies and variations in causalities that determined indentured migration to different geographical zones.

With the introduction of the Slavery Abolition Act (1833) in the British Parliament

calling for the eradication of slavery in all parts of the Empire, an immediate need was felt for a new cheap labour force that would substitute the ex-slave population (mostly, African) in the lucrative sugar plantation economies spread across Mauritius, West Indies, Fiji, Natal, and the French colonies. Such legislations had their replications in India, though late, in the form of the Indian Slavery Act of 1843 which banned slave transactions and the Indian Penal Code (1860) which made the possession of slavery a legal offence. This thirst for cheap labour found quenching in the labour catchment areas of eastern and southern India, where a significant chunk of the agricultural labour force had been severed from its connections with the local economic base thus rendering them landless and mobile.

For the sake of understanding importation of labour as an alternative to an ex-slave labour population, it is essential to question the very nature of the contracts and the degree of the 'freedom of will' that was there in the act of signing. It also needs to be determined whether such labour can be likened to a new form of slavery. At the very outset, it must be understood that 'free labour' did not exist in the rural economic landscape of India. In an agricultural economy where produce was heavily dependent on the whims of the monsoon and the structure was that of sub-infeudation, agricultural labour was always, in some way or the other, bonded. Alongside economic obligations that bonded labour, like indebtedness, a very immobile caste hierarchy also provided the necessary instruments of labour bondage. To such landless mobile labourers suffering from chronic indebtedness and a host of other exploitations in the economically stagnant labour catchment areas of eastern UP and Bihar, a little amount made as an advance by the *arkatis* in return for accepting contracts always served as a recruitment net. Then again, there were regional variations in the modes of recruitment. In the South Indian context, recruitment was less oppressive and it followed a pre-colonial structure of labour mobilization under the Kangani system. An advanced credit from a kangani contractor would free the dalit labour from the agrestic slavery that he was hitherto engaged in. In the context of the Assam plantations, the tribal communities became the target labour groups. British laws had restricted these tribal adivasis from unhindered access to forest resources, something that used to be their source of livelihood. Labour kidnappings were also endemic in these regions of the Chhotanagpur plateau.

This process of migration of labour from these LCAs to plantations both in India and abroad gained momentum in the 1830s. However, it needs to be noted that all migration did not happen in the form of indenture. Out of the 6.5 million Indians who migrated to overseas plantations, around 1.5 million were inducted by the system of indenture. Indians amounted to 80 percent of indentured labour working on plantations spread across the British empire. These migrants were shipped to the sugar plantations

of the British Carribean, Mauritius, Fiji, Natal and so on to substitute the existent slave workforce, after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834. However, both abolition and slavery must be put in quotes. Sarkar believes that both these terms have dicey connotations especially when we observe that although institutionalized slavery, in form of trade and transaction of human beings as a commodity, was banned by the Act of 1843, there was no clear definition of what comprised slavery and therefore what was being banned. Moreover, while slave labour was being abolished an in-between category, 'bonded labour', fraught with ambiguities was recognized as allowable by the Law Commission in 1841. Other than the fact that the workers would now have to be paid wages, however meagre for their labour, the nature of labour remained more or less the same. Conditions of labour and livelihood remained as poor as it used to be, leading, critics like Tinker, to draw parallels of this new form of labour exploitation with slavery. Infact, contemporary colonial officials, though far from being empathetic about the miseries of the labourer, could also find parallels between indenture and slavery. J.B. Fuller, a senior Government of India officer and later the Chief Commissioner of Assam, speculated in 1901:

The truth is of course that serious abuses must occur under a labour system which is something of the nature of slavery, for an employee who can be arrested and forcibly detained by his master is more of a slave than a servant and that these abuses are the price which has to be paid for the great advantages which has resulted from the establishment and growth of the tea industry in Assam.[8]

However, there are questions that need asking in this context. Who were benefited by these 'great advantages'? Certainly not the native labourers. Who were the ones that paid the prices for such lopsided development? Certainly not the capitalist planters?

The official historians like Sir Percival Griffiths provided justification for the chastisements and extra-judicial punitive measures that the planters inflicted on the indentured labourers by narrating it in paternalistic tropes, i.e. a planter was picturised as a benevolent father who undertook disciplinary measures for the eventual benefit of the labourer. R.P. Behal vehemently challenges such notions of 'benevolence' that Girffiths endowed on the planter. Such a connotation is a far cry even from euphemistic standards. Behal finds it appropriate to see the initial bunch if planters as 'coolie drivers', managing an irrational labour regime for a competitive corporate market.[9]

Simultaneous legal provisions provided for adjudicating powers to the planter over the indentured labourer. Punitive measures taken against escape or other forms of breach of contract were heavy. The abolition of slavery and the transition to indentured labour as a form of free and liberal system cannot be read as a clean transfer without its problematics. The wages were again excessively low.

A penal contract system introduced in Act VI of the Bengal Council in 1865 and later modified in 1882, stipulated the wages for men and women to rupees 5 and 4 respectively. The term of contract was fixed at 3 years (later extended to five years) and working hours set at 9 hours. No wonder why the local population showed no interest in working under such financially prospective and 'liberal working conditions'. For them, the continuation of subsistence farming provided a far better life. That also explains for the coerced nature of indenture in the early phase of labour migration. The marginalized tribal communities were specifically targeted for providing 'coolies' for the plantation cause, since, few agrarian labourers were initially interested in signing a contract that not only alienated him from the direct product of his/her labour, but also required him to travel to locations far from his/her natal setting. Such feelings of aversion were not unknown to the government as disclosed in a personal letter from Lord George Hamilton, Secretary of State for India to Lord Curzon, the Viceroy:

I agree with you that the present labour system is a modified version of slavery, and reacts prejudicially upon the masters. It is only justifiable on the plea that without it the tea plantations could not be worked, as outside the half savage tribes from whom the coolies now come, it would be difficult to induce the ordinary Hindu to volunteer.[10]

Though Assam tea plantations, had no previous history of slavery like the Atlantic and Indian ocean plantations, yet, contemporary critics as well as observers and supporters of indenture, all agreed that indentured labour was not much different from slavery. If this was the condition of the labour in a plantation which did not have a previous history of using slaves as labour, then, it hardly requires much speculation to posit that the practices associated with slavery would have found obvious continuation, in both subtle and unapologetic dimensions, in the overseas plantations of the Caribbean islands, Mauritius and so on which had prominent histories of slavery.

Living conditions in the plantations were also miserable. Death from diseases was quite common, given the unhygienic and cramped living conditions. So, while there was an effort to smudge the institutional face of slavery, there was not much that was being done to improve the condition of the labourer. Tirthankar Roy might argue that the social problems that these indentured labourers faced like the searching for wives, came to the generous notice of the planters and that recruitment was encouraged through the sardari system for bringing in more and more families to the plantation areas to redress such problems in order to improve the lives of the labourers.[11] Advances and stipends were provided for settling in the plantation areas. However, Roy misses the basic capitalist intentions that drove the planters to adopt such strategies. Such settlement policies, that were also adopted as Marina Carter explains in post-independence Mauritius, were early efforts at creating a steady pool of labour in the

plantation area so that future costs of indenturing labour all the way from the LCAs could be evaded.[12] The pulls of capital accumulation are unavoidable.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the colonial narratives justifying indentured and normal labour migration from the famine hit Indian regions to British plantations fails to hold ground. Indenture was everything but an exemplary policy of British benevolence aimed at providing relief to the people of the famine affected regions. On the very contrary, the exportation of labour from the underdeveloped and financially drained Indian colony provided a solution to the problems of labour shortages in the plantations. Trapped inside the cogwheels of a global capitalist economy that functioned solely on the imperative of the imperial capitalists, migration was not a matter of choice, but a matter of compulsion.

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