

SESSION 4: INDIAN EMIGRATION DURING COLONIAL RULE

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• **Session 4: Indian Emigration During Colonial Rule**

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- Evolution of Indenture labor Scheme
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Objectives

- Understanding the historical context of emigration from India;
- Situate indentured labour in the context of the colonial interest of the British Empire
- Analyse the indentured system of Labour; and
- Provide an overview of emigration of Indian labour during colonial Times.

▪ **Session 4: Indian Emigration during Colonial Rule**

- The British East India Company began to export raw material from India like cotton, spices, indigo to strengthen industries in England.
- The British East India Company gained ascendancy and began to control the various parts of the country.
- This accelerated growth of the British economy and technology but brought hardship and miseries 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 food-grains, mainly rice and wheat, to England. The export of food-grains to England rose sharply from 9.3 million worth in 1901.

- 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.
- 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.

- During the first phase of the British control over India, there was large-scale poverty, famines, 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 hope that they will return to their 'home'.

▪ **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 19th 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 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 the European countries.
- For this reason, cane production has been called 'industrial agriculture'.

- For this, the labour force was imported from Africa and the institution of slavery was developed with all its cruel and harsh features.
- In the beginning tropical products were luxury products consumed by the affluent in Europe.
- 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 sugar 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.

▪ **Politics of Humanitarian Consideration**

- The condition of the slaves picked the conscience of some people in Europe and they began to demand the abolition of the system of slavery.
- It is obvious that in spite of the pressure exerted by the abolition of slavery, the governments in power 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.

▪ **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 Kalkata. 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 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 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.

■ The Plight of the Indentured Labour

- A small fraction of the indentured emigrants left the country voluntarily.
- However, the economic hardship in the home country led the labourers to emigrate in large numbers.
- Agents who promised them relief from the misery of their lives and substantial economic gain lured peasants to the city; and indubitably many were kidnapped or otherwise tricked.
- These *girmitiyas* (means labourers in agreement) were initially bound to serve for five years, it being understood that the planters would pay for their passage, and at the end of this term the indentured labours were to receive their freedom.

- If they wish to do so, they could return to India at the expense of their employer, or they could settle in their new home land and gain the rights accorded to free men, or at least such rights as colored people could expect.
- 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 indentured were just as often without not provided the most elementary form of medical care.
- Many did not survive the long and brutal ‘middle passage’; the bodies of the dead were, unceremoniously thrown overboard.

▪ **Sources of Cheap Labour**

- Chotanagpur region had a number of communities like Munda, Oraon and Santhal. 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 restrain 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 assumed 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 19th 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.

- **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. 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. Even after enquiry and setting up of a bureaucratic machinery, mortality was high.
- There was no security for 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.'

• **Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Identity**

- 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. The survivors 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.

■ Conclusion

- There was massive migration of impoverished peasantry and artisans during colonial rule to British colonies and plantations.
- These are some of the oldest Indian diasporic communities who survived and formed communities and through maintaining their distinctiveness have become part of the culture and landscapes they have migrated to.
- The migration during the colonial period was essentially of two types- the indentured labour system and the kangani/maistry system.
- Subsequently there were passage émigrés who were essentially business communities who went to mostly East Africa to set up small business.

▪ Quiz Question

1. 'Slavery Abolition Act' was came in-

- 2. 1833
- a. 1834
- b. 1835
- c. 1838
- d. 1841

2. Which Indian cities were the first trading posts established by the East India Company?

- a. Calcutta and Delhi
- b. Madras and Calcutta
- c. Madras and Bangalore
- d. Delhi and Bombay

3. What was the primary motivation for Britain's colonies in Asia?

- a. Economic
- b. Social
- c. Political
- d. Military

Readings

- Tinker, Hugh. 1974 *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Oversea 1830-1920*, London: Oxford University Press.
- La Guerre, John. 1975. *Calcutta to Caroni: The East Indian of Trinidad*, Trinidad: Longman Caribbean Ltd.
- De Verteuil, Anthony. 1989. *Eight east Indian emigrants: Gokool, Soodeen, Sookoo, Capildeo, Beccani, Ruknaddeen, Valiama, Bunsee*, Port of Spain: Paria Publishing.

- With this I come to an end of the session on Indian Emigration During Colonial Rule and leave you with few questions which you will find easy.

Thanks for watching the video.



Thank you