

The abolition of Indian Indentured Migration to Mauritius

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ABSTRACT

The passing of a bill in 1917 in the Indian Legislative Council to abolish the use of contracts of indenture to recruit Indian migrants to work overseas has been hailed as a great achievement for Indian nationalists, helping to raise the status of Indians overseas, and improving the working lives of Indian labourers. However, there was a large gap between the passage of this bill and its implementation, which has been overlooked by historians. In Mauritius, the last ship carrying indentured workers arrived as late as 1924 and the last contract of indenture did not expire until 1929. The delay was justified in terms of allowing employers time to 'adjust' to the new 'freer' labour market conditions. In practice, this adjustment had already begun two decades earlier. Falling sugar prices and the growth of the settled population on Mauritius, had already led to a dramatic reduction in the number of indentured workers being recruited from India compared with the hey-days of sugar in the nineteenth century. Time-expired labourers and their descendants working on short or informal contracts had become the back-bone of the economy. In successive years in the 1900s no migrant ships set sail at all for Mauritius and a growing proportion of Indians who did arrive in the late 19th and early 20th century were traveling as 'free passengers'. Indians had already found their niche within the economy and rather than look to the colonial government for recognition and enfranchisement, were busy enfranchising themselves. Therefore this paper argues that both the 1917 bill, and the delay in finally abolishing indenture, were marginal events in the labour history of the island.

Emigration of indentured workers from India arose primarily from the labour demands of the sugar colonies after the abolition of slavery. Initially unregulated, in 1842 Mauritius became a model for a government-sponsored scheme of labour

recruitment, generating a flow of migrants from India which lasted, with minor interruptions, until 1910. This paper examines opposition to the so-called 'coolie trade' and assesses the political pressure towards abolition alongside the economic arguments which brought indenture into being, sustained it for nearly a century, and contributed to its demise.

Historians have long argued that indenture had outlived its usefulness by the early twentieth century. As Thomas Metcalf has written:

Indian skills and labor were ever less necessary to keep the colonial state and economy functioning. Even indenture, as colonial authorities had begun to discover by the 1910s, was no longer essential to successful sugar cane cultivation. In 1911, five years before its empire-wide abolition, indenture was brought to an end in Natal. This act, long under consideration, evoked but little protest even among the planters.¹

David Northrup, on the other hand, appears to credit the political agitation of Indian nationalists rather than economic realities, in the cessation of indenture, and explicitly links the abolition of the 'coolie trade' with that of slavery decades earlier:

Indian indentured labor was banned for being incompatible with free labor. The change in official views was more a reaction to rising Indian nationalism rather than a reconsideration of the actual circumstances of indentured labor. When the young Mohandas K. Gandhi led protests in southern Africa over the general erosion of Indian rights there, nationalists back in India took up indentured labor as a convenient example of how Indians were treated unequally. To deflect criticism from the major issues of British rule in India, the government of India was willing to sacrifice a system of no particular importance to India as a whole, even if it remained important to the individual Indian migrants. Opposition by Indian members of the legislative council precluded the resumption of Indian indentured labor exports to Reunion and their extension to German Southwest Africa in 1911-12. It was in this context that the Indian viceroy, Lord Hardinge, in July 1915 urged the end of indenture 'to remove a racial stigma that India entailing much misery and degradation and differing but little from a form of slavery.' The government of India then made the decision to end the indentured labor trade from India as of March 1916, though most of the trade actually ceased a few months earlier because of the requisitioning of passenger ships for war use. Like the abolition of slavery in British colonies eight decades earlier, the cessation of indentured labor from British India was achieved through a combination of high idealism and practical politics.²

However, elsewhere, Northrup himself admits that ‘changing economic conditions’ diminished much of the ‘luster of an explanation of the end of indentured labour’. He points out that in the 1890s a British commission to Guyana and Trinidad recommended the phasing out of indentured immigration, adding ‘the fact that Indian labor imports were already declining in several overseas locations (and had even ceased in Mauritius) made it much easier for the forces favoring the trade's abolition to succeed.’³ A similar conclusion was reached by the ‘Cotton’ Commission of 1906 in Assam.

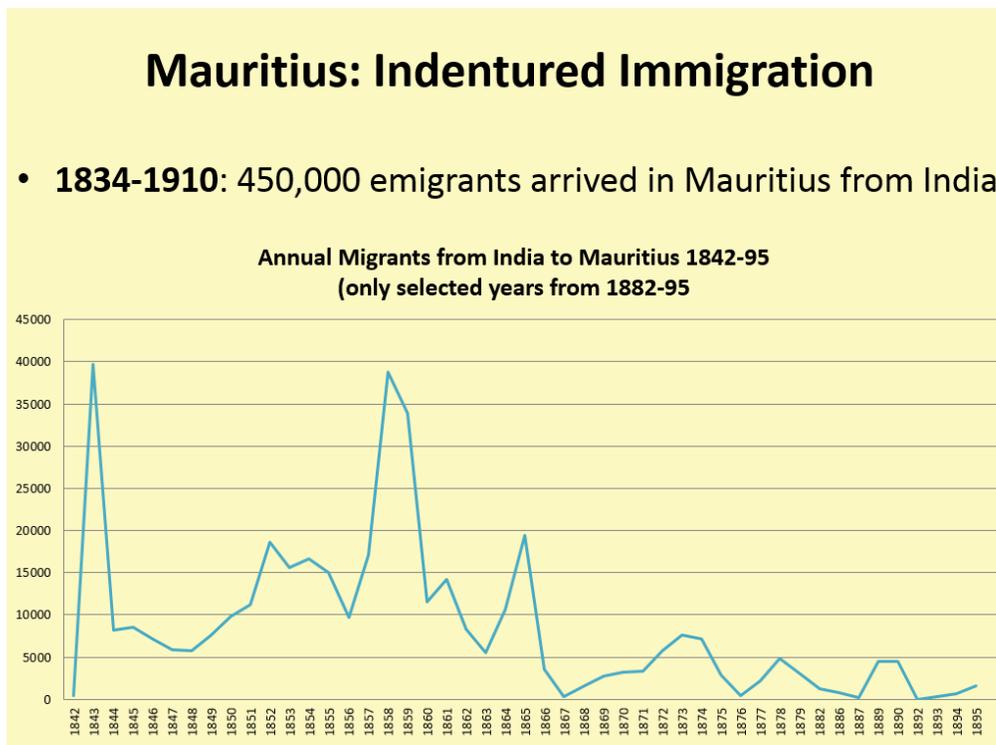
Some authors have contended, indeed, that nationalist understandings of Indian indentured labourers were flawed. T. Niranjana argues that for Indian nationalists ‘there was no room for formations of modernity other than those which involved as its subjects middle-class, upper-caste Indians.’ Consequently, they solved the problem by imagining the indentured migrants as ‘victimized, pathetic, lost and helpless.’ In such readings, far from being the ‘heroes of abolition’, nationalists are pitted against subaltern models of diasporic ideas. Indentured women, in particular, ‘could not be accommodated’ in the nationalist discourse, except as victims of colonialism.⁴ Indeed the contemporary appraisal of the plight of indentured Indian women in the colonies was exemplified by Totaram Sanadhya’s reading of her story. He wrote that Kunti, working on the banana plantation of Sabukere in Fiji, was given the task of cutting grass in an isolated place. ‘The *sardar* and the overseer went there to rape her ... Kunti freed her arm and jumped into the nearby river. By god’s will, the dinghy of a boy named Jaidev was nearby. Kunti was saved from drowning.’ The story was publicized in India through the columns of *Bharat Mitra*, a Hindi language newspaper, in 1913. Educated Indian public opinion was outraged, and like the noble housewives of 1830s Britain, galvanized to action on behalf of unjustly treated slaves, a Mrs Jaijee Petit of Bombay leading a deputation of women to the viceroy to call for abolition – an unprecedented event.

Recent re-readings of the Fiji colonial archives throw a nuanced light on this inflammatory subject matter. Kunti, it emerged, was married and had been involved in a sexual relationship with another man, a sirdar. She and her husband had both benefited financially from this arrangement; with the sirdar’s departure, the couple were once

again forced to work long hours for the ordinary, meagre wage of plantation labourers. According to Margaret Mishra, it was only at this point that Kunti set out to punish the system (and the men) and ‘concocted’ her story of rape. Kunti, Mishra adds, subsequently ‘stood by her story so convincingly that it triggered a series of actions contributing to the abolishment of the indentured system.’⁵

One may conclude that the abolition of indentured labour was the work of a coalition of humanitarians, missionaries and Indian liberal reformers who first condemned and then sought to dismantle the global export system of Indian workers, but that this took place at a time when the profitability of indenture had declined as planters across the empire were finding new ways to exploit local labour.⁶ The remainder of the paper describes how this potent combination of nationalist rhetoric and economic reality played out in the early decades of the twentieth century in Mauritius, where, more than anywhere else, Indian labour had come to symbolize the nation’s greatest asset and was at the heart of its most testing trials.

Figure 1



Between 1834 and 1910 Mauritius received nearly 450,000 emigrants from India. Over this time, on a number of occasions, allegations of abuses, and cases of labour unrest sparked investigations and commissions of enquiry. By the early twentieth century, the nationalist movement in India added a further dimension to growing opposition to the scheme, with the organization of an anti-indenture movement. The denigration of ‘coolies’ worldwide had become a burning issue in Indian politics.

The ‘coolie labour trade’ had faced opposition from its very beginning. Among the earliest critics were sections of the reformist Anglo Indian press, and the Anti-Slavery Society. Julia Maitland, resident in Madras in the mid 1830s, had evidently been reading such reports when she wrote that the emigration of ‘hill coolies’ was ‘neither more nor less than an East Indian Slave Trade - just as wicked as its predecessor, the African Slave Trade...Numbers are kidnapped and all are entrapped and persuaded under false pretences... They are so ill treated by their new masters that few even live to come back, and those who do bring with them the marks of the same cruelties and floggings that we used to hear of among the slaves.’ Reporting to the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 Daniel O’Connell professed himself convinced ‘that the planters in Mauritius are the worst guardians that could be appointed to protect these labourers. I would rather be a party to the total annihilation of that unfortunate race, than to their being subject to a new species of slavery.’ These white middle-class voices raised in opposition to Indian labour migration had a very low opinion of the ‘coolies’. Lord Brougham expressed his doubts, before the House of Lords in 1838, that ‘a poor native who has never seen the ocean, or any sheet of water larger than the tank of his village, or the stream in which he bathe’ could possibly ‘comprehend the nature of a ship and a voyage, the discomforts of a crowded hold, the sufferings of four months at sea, the labours of a sugar plantation, the toils of hoeing and cutting and sugar boiling under a tropical sun - toils under which even the hardy Negro is known to pine and which must lay the feeble and effeminate Asiatic prostrate in the scorched dust.’ Julia Maitland was even blunter: ‘There is a great deal of verbiage in the Government newspapers about the Coolies carrying their labour to the best market, and so on, but the fact is these poor creatures are far too ignorant and stupid to have any sense or choice in the matter. Some slave agent tells them they are to go, and they go – they know nothing about it. A

Hindoo does not know how to make a choice, it is an effort of mind quite beyond any but the very highest and most educated among them.’⁷

Even after the entrenchment of a government regulated indenture system in the middle decades of the 19th century and the enlargement of the experiment to other sugar colonies, occasionally a crusading governor would add his voice. During the 1870s, for example, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon’s tenure at Mauritius led to the appointment of a Royal Commission. Gordon’s own views were well summarized in a letter to his wife: ‘The immigration system here is a bad one, I should like to mend it before I go’.⁸

In the 1890s, growing opposition to indenture coincided with the passing of a series of discriminatory laws in Natal, South Africa affecting the rights and status of indentured and non-indentured Indians settled there. Mohandas Gandhi’s development of a passive resistance strategy against these laws and his highlighting of the discrimination suffered by overseas Indians lit the fuse of abolitionism in India.⁹

On 29th October 1901 the steamer *Nowshera* brought Mohandas Gandhi to Mauritius for a brief stopover on his way home to India from South Africa. Speaking of the visit, years later, in his autobiography, Gandhi wrote: ‘I went ashore and acquainted myself fairly well with the local conditions. For one night I was the guest of Sir Charles Bruce, the Governor of the Colony’. He also attended a reception held for him by the Muslim trading community and gave a speech extolling the virtues of education and the need for Indians in Mauritius to engage with local politics.¹⁰

In 1907 Manilal Maganlal Doctor was delegated by Gandhi to work for the cause of Indians at Mauritius. On 18th October of that year Manilal was sworn in at the Supreme Court of the island to practice as a Barrister. His first case was to defend an Indian immigrant, Cowlessur, accused of fraud and over succeeding months his activities were often reported on in the local press.¹¹ Manilal soon decided to launch his own weekly newspaper ‘The Hindustani’ which commenced publication in 1909 under the motto, ‘*Liberty of Individuals! Fraternity of Man!! Equality of Races*’, in apparent homage to the ideals of the French Revolution. In its first issue the Hindustani discussed the philosophies of universal brotherhood, justice and the spiritual equality of

mankind irrespective of creed and race and opined optimistically, 'we had friends, we have friends, we are sure to have friends for all time'.¹²

Doctor pressed for the institution of a Royal Commission to enquire into the conditions of Indo-Mauritians, deponed before the Sanderson Commission which was set up in 1909 and mobilized many others to testify on oath. Among measures called for by Manilal were making civil marriage obligatory, enforcement of a law of inheritance to empower the Indian children to inherit property, and introduction of Indian languages in Public Schools.

Gandhi helped to bring the question of the Indians overseas to the attention of Indian nationalists, but it is Gokhale who is credited with the legwork in India, focusing on the discriminations faced by Indians in South Africa, and, in 1909, moving a resolution at the Indian National Congress proclaiming the necessity for the prohibition of recruitment of Indian indentured labourers from India to the colonies. In February 1910 Gokhale took his resolution to the Imperial Legislative Council, presided over by the Viceroy, Lord Minto, recommending the prohibition of the recruitment of Indian indentured labour. He stressed that the victims of the system were 'generally simple ignorant, illiterate, resourceless people belonging to the poorest classes of this country, ... induced to enter- or it would be more correct to say are entrapped into entering into these agreements by the unscrupulous representations of wily professional recruiter...' He added that should the Council's decisions not meet the terms of this resolution, it would not be the end of the matter, it would be brought forward again and again. The Indian nationalists therefore equated the indentured system to that of slavery. In their view indentured labour was inimical to individual freedom and that it was therefore in the interest of the Indians, that 'the system of indentured labour be abolished'.

At Gandhi's request Manilal Doctor had also attended the Indian National Congress annual session in 1910. In a letter dated 30th September 1910 Gandhi introduced him to Gokhale in the following term: 'Mr. Doctor has been practicing in Mauritius for some time. In my opinion he belongs to that class of professional men who use their profession, or try to, to advance national rather than personal interest'. During his meeting with Gokhale and Malaviya in India, he conveyed to them the Indians'

difficulties in the colony of Mauritius. The *Indian Opinion* of 26th November 1910 gave an account of the sufferings of Indians in Mauritius describing numerous incidents of injustice which had occurred throughout the years and which served, it was believed, to prove that the indenture system was indistinguishable from slavery. 'Is there any Indian who will remain unmoved after reading about these sufferings of his countrymen? Indians ought not to rest in peace till they have put an end to them,' the article proclaimed.¹³

At Calcutta, in 1911, while seconding a resolution on indentured emigration, Manilal again presented a detailed report on the condition of Indians in Mauritius and demanded an immediate prohibition on further emigration to the island: 'It was by painful experience that I came to learn how iniquitous, unjust and immoral that system is. Almost every week gangs of labourers would come to my house and ask my advice and request me to plead their cause before the court of law ... the penal provisions of the labour law ... makes the system of like that of slavery'. He called for the outright abolition of indenture, arguing 'It should be stopped for any country, be it British Guiana or British Demerara or any other place. I think you will agree with me that indentured system should be stopped at once because it is immoral, irreligious and highly detrimental to the best interest of the country'.¹⁴

Gandhi later commented on the work which Manilal Doctor had accomplished in Mauritius between 1907 and 1909, writing '*Manilal has done commendable public work in Mauritius, and appears to have won the affection of the Hindus in abundant measure*'. Doctor's next stop was at Fiji where he continued to serve the interests of overseas Indians.

Meanwhile, in India, the Government of India had announced the discontinuation of migration to Natal. The nationalists had scored a victory, it seemed and the campaign was invigorated. At a meeting held in March 1916, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya moved the following resolution: 'that this Council recommend to the Governor-General in Council that early steps to be taken for the abolition of the system of Indian Indentured labour'. Malaviya argued that the indenture system had been a great injustice to the Indians in the colonies. Then, in March 1917, Gokhale put forward

another prohibition resolution to the Viceroy's Imperial Legislative Council. His objections to indenture highlighted the unfairness of the penal clause in contracts, and the high death rates overseas, including many suicides. Indenture, he concluded, was 'a monstrous system, iniquitous in itself, based on fraud and maintained by force.' Although the resolution did not pass, resistance broadened, the Arya Samaj took up the cudgels and an 'Indentured Coolie Protection Society' was organized. These groups went into the recruiting districts of Bihar and UP, distributing pamphlets calling on would be migrants to 'save yourselves from depot wallahs.' During World War 1, with other demands on labour and shipping, indentured migration was suspended on 20 March 1917. In 1920, the system was official abolished.¹⁵

How significant was Indian nationalist opinion in relation to the ending of indenture in Mauritius? In reality, the decline in requirements for further immigrants had already been recognized by key policy makers. The Sanderson Commission's report, published in 1910, had already recommended the discontinuation of emigration to Mauritius. It was found that the labour supply on the island was already more than sufficient and that a continuation of immigration would lead to unemployment, distress and destitution in the colony. Indeed, the Mauritius Almanac indicates that between 1906 and 1910 more Indian labourers had left the colony than had arrived [3400 departures, as against 1,700 arrivals].¹⁶ The sugar industry had been in general decline over the last decades of the 19th century and early 20th century, only briefly re-energised during periods of general conflict and disruption, occasioned by the first world war [See Figure 2]. As a result, the traditional employers of indentured labour, the sugar barons, adopted alternative strategies: selling off marginal estate lands to small producers and centralizing their operations.

As a further indication that economic imperatives, rather than political agitation, was the decisive factor in understanding the rise and fall of indenture, the declining trickle of immigration, and its stoppage, did not mark a definitive break with the system. On the contrary, the temporary renewal of emigration to Mauritius was permitted by the Indian government in 1922 - on the understanding that an Indian official would report on the continuing experiment.

Figure 2*Mauritian sugar and the world market, 1812–1934*

Period	Annual average per quinquenium			
	Exports (tons)	% World cane production	% Total world production	Average price (£/ton)
1812–14	426	—	—	61.3
1815–19	3,097	—	—	52.8
1820–24	11,107	—	—	32.5
1825–29	20,407	—	—	33.6
1830–34	33,784	—	—	27.0
1835–39	32,502	—	—	37.4
1840–44	34,707	4.0	3.8	39.2
1845–49	56,069	5.4	5.0	28.2
1850–54	71,388	6.0	5.2	21.6
1855–59	111,522	8.6	6.8	26.6
1860–64	123,609	9.0	6.8	22.6
1865–69	113,311	7.0	4.9	22.2
1870–74	111,445	6.3	3.9	23.6
1875–79	115,844	6.3	3.6	21.0
1880–84	116,019	5.7	2.8	18.8
1885–89	119,815	5.1	2.3	13.2
1890–94	113,219	3.5	1.6	13.1
1895–99	143,641	5.0	1.9	10.0
1900–04	167,380	2.9	1.4	9.3
1905–09	181,636	2.5	1.3	9.8
1910–14	223,746	2.5	1.3	11.0
1915–19	223,139	2.0	1.4	28.3
1920–24	218,682	1.7	1.1	27.8
1925–29	216,359	1.3	0.9	11.9
1930–34	191,820	1.2	0.8	5.7

In 1924, four steamers reached the colony with immigrants from Calcutta; the last one was the ‘Surada’ which arrived on 18th June 1924 (Figure 3). From that date no more immigrants were received for the reason that the authorization granted by the Government of India for recruiting emigrants for this Colony had expired on 14th May 1924.

Figure 3

Date of Arrival	Name of Vessel	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	Infant Boys	Infants Girls	Total
16.01.1924	S.S. Janus	220	46	30	15	2	2	315
14.03.1924	S.S. Janus	86	67	23	20	4	4	204
19.05.1924	S.S. Janus	56	55	27	25	163
18.06.1924	S.S. <u>Surada</u>	52	52	34	16	154
TOTALS:		414	220	114	76	6	6	836

(Source: Report on Immigration Department for 1924)

Kunwar Maharajsinh, an Indian civil servant, was deputed in 1924 to survey the conditions of immigrants in the colony. He visited all the sugar estates as well as spending some time with Indians who were cultivating their own plots of land. After listening to all of their grievances, the cessation of further immigration to the colony was again recommended. Following this report, no further indentured workers were brought to Mauritius, but the termination of the system was a damp squib in comparison with the fiery rhetoric which had surrounded the issue of abolition, virtually since its commencement, some 90 years earlier.

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- ² Northrup, D. *Indentured labor in the age of imperialism*, p. 144-5
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp 147-8.
- ⁴ Niranjana, T. "Left to the Imagination": Indian Nationalisms and Female Sexuality in Trinidad, *Public Culture*, 11,1, 1999 pp 223-243
- ⁵ Margaret Mishra 'The Emergence of Feminism in Fiji' *Women's History Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, February 2008, pp. 39-55
- ⁶ See, for example, the discussion in Amrith, S. *Indians Overseas? Governing Tamil Migration to Malaya, 1870-1941' Past and Present*, no. 208 (August 2010).
- ⁷ Maitland, J. *Letters from Madras* 1843; Daniel O'Connell quoted in Kale, M. *Fragments of Empire*, p. 113; House of Lords Debates, 6 March 1838.
- ⁸ De Plevitz, L. *Restless Energy*, p. 29.

⁹ Mangru, B. *Indenture and Abolition Sacrifice and Survival on the Guyanese Sugar Plantations*, TSAR, Toronto, 1993.

¹⁰ Gandhi, M.K. *An Autobiography*, p. 186.

¹¹ *Le Radical* of 14th December 1907, for example, reported an incident when a group of Muslims called as witnesses in a court case at Rose Hill, refused to remove their caps when swearing the oath, mentioning that Manilal Doctor had advised them that it was their right to refuse.

¹² Bissoondoyal, U. (1984). *Indians Overseas: The Mauritian Experience*. Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute. p. 334.

¹³ *Indian Opinion*, 26 November 1910.

¹⁴ *We shall be with you to the end*, A.K.M.

¹⁵ Fuller details can be gleaned from Mangru, B. *Indenture and Abolition Sacrifice and Survival on the Guyanese Sugar Plantations*, TSAR, Toronto, 1993.

¹⁶ Statistics of arriving and departing Indians, Mauritius Almanach, 1913.