

Challenging the Myths and Distortions of Indenture History: The Suppressed Realities

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The people of Indian ancestry generally clubbed as the Indian Diaspora have not only made a mark in their present home countries but have immensely contributed in the survival and economic development of the former plantation colonies. In fact, the induction of indentured labour after the abolition of slavery, saved the plantation colonies from ruin, and India was converted into a huge market for procuring labour to enrich the colonial power.

At the same time, a new social order was also being created that aimed at having not only loyal and passive subjects, but subjects who could be made to give up the culture, religions, traditions and practices of their motherland by adopting and imitating those of the rulers. This colonial psyche worked in India to demolish every aspect of Indian culture, by attempting to create 'brown sahibs' and royal subjects. For a vast country like India, this was not an easy task, for there developed the Indian psyche of resistance, in response to the colonial psyche of domination.¹

But this was simpler in the plantation colonies, and it is in this scenario, that certain myths were created and distortions of many aspects related to Indian cultural traditions and social life were purposely propagated. The economic and social status, including the political stake of the Indian Diaspora today is definitely an advancement from the conditions their ancestors faced during the indenture era. Hence, the history of indentureship is very often projected by colonial historians and their apologists by taking into account the present status of the Indian Diaspora in the former plantation colonies and then showing comparisons as to not only what situations their ancestors experienced in India before they landed, but even today.² It is this prejudiced history that perpetuates the myths and distortions.

The present paper seeks to examine and analyse certain such myths in a historical context that need to be understood in relation to the prosperity or marginalization of the people of the Indian ancestry. Unfortunately, most of the new research, debates and the new findings on the indenture issue, remain confined to conference rooms or

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The paper is based on Archival date and personal interview based on field work.

¹ Kapil Kumar, "Challenging Colonial Historiography : The Indian Scenario" in M. Hassan (ed.) *Historiography*, Paramabiro, Suriname 2013

² Brinsely Samroo "From Whence We Came", *UWI STAN Magazine*, April – July 2011, Vol. Page 12.

caged in academic books and journals instead of reaching the younger generations who in their day-to-day life, are made to live with the propaganda that the colonial apologists have carried out over the years. The paper is based on field work, interviews, archival files and published histories.

The history that stems out from the pens of the colonial apologists not only justifies the system of indenture but cautiously negates the entire oppressive process, right from the advent and recruitment to what the Indian indentured workers were subjected to from boarding the ships, to the life in plantations, and any return journeys. Another questionable statement is that even the status of the present Indian Diaspora which has its roots in indentureship, is taken as though all are prosperous, social and political distinctions have vanished, oppression has disappeared and everyone is leading a happy life.

The result is that this distorted history, written and advocated from the point of view of colonialism flourishes in history writing and teaching of indenture and consequently, many unfounded myths dominate this research field. And this has become the comparative parameter for writing the history of Indian Indenture except for the major work of Hugh Tinker that unmasked the tyrannies of indenture by calling it “A new form of slavery.”³

Important to note here is that even the contemporary conditions in all the plantation colonies are not the same and there is ample evidence to demonstrate that certain oppressive and differentiating attitudes dominate, leading towards discrimination of the people of Indian ancestry in the fields of culture, economy, employment, agriculture, education, infrastructural facilities and so on. These are areas that need to be researched without bias to understand the realities. Many problems of the contemporary conditions lay hidden under the carpet for fear of further victimization, and are not even talked about in some of the countries, with the outside world only having an understanding of the prosperity of the Indian communities.⁴ It has to be noted that the Indian communities, economically and politically, are stratified with many being prosperous and many just surviving.

³ Hugh, Tinker, (1974), *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. One would see the debate this book generated with the colonial apologists aggressively denouncing his findings. However, there are a number of works that have recently come out like the one's edited by Maruitt S. Hassan Khan, et.al., which has contributions from young scholars besides the earlier works of Brij Lal and Others. Very significant is the work of Lommarsh Roop Narine in relation to remittances which again was totally ignored by the colonial apologists.

⁴ This is based on my personal interviews in Guyana and Trinidad and the identity of the persons is being withheld at their request. Further, the closure of sugar mills, withdrawal of subsidies on agriculture, closure of rice mills and the violence against Indian community in some of the ex-plantation colonies bear testimony to this. For example, also see “Indians Betrayed”, Guiana Indian Heritage Association, Crime Report GIHA, June 2003.

In order to challenge the constant, conscious negation of the entire oppressive processes of the indenture history, let me start with my field work experience in Trinidad where I posed a question to an old man: why did his ancestors leave the shores of India? The answer was, "*Because of poverty, and no job to earn a livelihood.*" Here, it is a question of methodology in oral history. If I had stopped my interview there, that would have been the conclusion. But when I further questioned: "was he aware for the reasons behind this?" He said that the "*Englishmen had made new rules, new landlords were there, and their lands were taken away. This is what my aja (Grandfather) told me*".⁵ Now, it has to be noted here that whatever little this common man knew about the creation of poverty in India by the English, is not to be found in any of the history books in the Caribbean. What is found is that there was poverty in India but no analysis and not even a word mentioned as to who was responsible for this poverty. How did a prosperous country for which all European powers had been madly searching for trade routes, become poor? Why a country whose pre-industrial revolution products like textiles and spices were sought world over, a self-contained country, had become full of poverty for the common people in a period of 90 years, under the rule of East India Company?

I have exploded this myth elsewhere, while dealing with the aspect of creating such situations through the English rule which upturned the entire financial, social and political conditions of the country throwing it into an economic mess.⁶ Hence, it is extremely essential that while discussing the 'poverty of Indians' that Historians must also deal with the factors for this poverty, which Indians were thrown into by the East India Company. It is this very basis from where the history of indenture starts.

This aspect of poverty also has to be analyzed from the viewpoint that in certain cases people did not come as indentured workers, that they repaid their own passage and were able to buy their own lands and started extremely small businesses. There are ample evidences to this effect which means that some people also went with money.⁷ This indicates not all Indians were poor, as is persistently taught, but there were other reasons pushing Indians out of their homeland: reasons related to the psyche of domination by the English who used racial and religious hegemony to bolster their economic thievery of India.

Moreover, current indentureship history also totally ignores the deportation of thousands to the plantation colonies of those who had fought against the British in 1857 and/or other rebellions against British rule. These were not migrations because

⁵ Interview, Trinidad.

⁶ See, Kapil Kumar, "Colonial Exploitation, Resistance and Forced Migrations: The Indian Scenario in the Era of Indenture Labour" in Hassan Khan, et. al. (Ed.) *Resistance and Indian Indentured Experience*, Delhi 2014; Kapil Kumar, *Peasants and Revolts*, Manohar, New Delhi 1984.

⁷ The Ship Registers and records of the labourers sent to plantations mention many such cases. Trinidad and Tobago National Archives Port of Spain.

of poverty, but forced exile as a serious punishment inflicted to all those brave sons and daughters of India who fought and challenged the English. The British psyche at work was well defined by Nicholson the 'English hero of 1857':

*"We are told in the Bible that stripes shall be meted out according to faults, and if hanging is sufficient punishment for such wretches, it is also severe for ordinary mutineers. If I had them in my power today, and knew that I were to die tomorrow, I would inflict the most excruciating tortures I could think of on them with a perfectly easy conscience."*⁸

Marina Carter and Crispin Bates have referred to the British views regarding this "Wholesale transportation of every mutineer" and the British psyche. It was under this psyche that for those who were deported:

*"their families should be forced to travel with them, and if the transportees, averse to plantation labour, should commit suicide," it was proposed: "hang their bodies, headless, in chains, and plant the head in a conspicuous quarter, near the habitation of the living – the fashion will soon cease. Chains and fetters may be necessary in some of the islands The hair should be cut in a particular fashion and the dress, of such a pattern, as to distinguish those under transportation from the free natives"*⁹.

Many among the present generation of Diaspora scholars need to unearth the documents related to the relation between 1857 and indenture in their countries. As stated by Carter and Bates, *"the relationship between the Indian Uprising and the surge in numbers migrating to the sugar colonies were either neglected or carefully ignored by policy makers and commentators alike at the time, and have scarcely been investigated by historians since."* Their evidences point that *"British officials, keen to exploit the outcome of the revolt and to manipulate the labour market to the advantage of their respective colonies, competed with and contradicted one another"*¹⁰. It is significant, that it has been those particularly of British birth, such as Tinker, Carter and Bates, who based on sound research, have unabashedly exposed Indian indentureship for what it was, and for the myths that surrounded its operation, while the academics of the former plantation colonies are those who continue the colonial era propaganda of Britain.

It must be noted here that most of the indentured labour in the Caribbean belonged to the regions of Avadh, Eastern Uttar Pradesh and North Bihar, the epicenters of the

⁸ Cited by Majumdar, R.C. (1988), *The History and Culture of the Indian People : British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance* (Part I), (IIIrd Edition) Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan: Bombay, p.600.

⁹ Marina Carter and Crispin Bates (2010). Empire and locality: a global dimension to the 1857 Indian Uprising. *Journal of Global History*, 5, pp. 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

great uprising of 1857. Many of these freedom fighters even disguised their identities to escape harsh punishments at the hands of English and took to the ships. No doubt, the planters saw a great opportunity for cheap labour amongst not only the rebellious soldiers, but also in the distress that the aftermath of 1857 created in India. The new land system which created loyal *Talukdars*, the burning of villages causing hundreds of thousands of Indians to flee, etc., created and contributed to the misery of the Indian people.¹¹

Here, my argument is to re-emphasize this point that the reasons for indenture were distorted by the English, and all those who were deported or were forced into indentureship had among them Indians who had fought for their homeland and were not eager migrants who were trying to escape 'India's poverty.' In alien lands, these workers did remain silent regarding the disclosure of their real identity or nationalistic deeds, but the administrators of the plantation colonies saw in every protest by the indenture labourers, a fear of 1857 as Carter and Bates have demonstrated from examples in British Guiana, Mauritius, Cape Argus and Trinidad. It is not a coincidence that one finds in Trinidad, habitations named Barrackpore and Fyzabad: the epicentres of the 1857 independence struggle in India.¹²

Carter and Bates put a question mark on the relationship between "*mutiny and migration: a conspiracy of silence*".¹³ There is no doubt that the great Indian struggle of 1857 was looked upon as enriching the supply of labour and there is much more to be researched on the relationship between 1857 and the forced indenture migrations to unfold this 'conspiracy of silence' – a conspiracy between the British colonial planters regimes and the same empire's, British rulers of India. This was like the vultures feeding themselves on the dead bodies.

The other myth propagated that the 'poorest of the poor came because of caste operation in India' is again a fallacy. A detailed examination of the ship records which lists the caste of the labour clearly indicates the different castes/ communities/ names of professions. There were Brahmins, there were Rajputs, there were Ahirs, Bhoomihars, Jullahas, Nais, Chamars, etc. etc.¹⁴ In fact, if it was a case of caste oppression then, why did Brahmins and Rajputs: traditionally considered as dominant castes, come? Why did Muslims: who are supposed to be a casteless community?

It has to be noted here that the British listed many professional communities as castes during the census operations. Nai (Barber), Jullaha (Weaver), Dhobi (Washer man) etc. were professional communities and not 'low-castes' and yet their professions were

¹¹ See Kapil Kumar in Hassan edit, op. cit. pp. 29-35

¹² Ramdial-Maharaj Sandili, 'Colonialism and its Psychological Impact on Indians in Trinidad' (2015 under publication)

¹³ Carter and Bates (2010). *op. cit.* 67.

¹⁴ All Emigration records list these, including Ship Registers. See these in National Archives of Trinidad & Tobago.

converted and listed by the British as 'low castes.' The census operations had classified every single member of Indian society into a hierarchical order which destroyed the traditional '*Bhaichara*' and '*Jajmani*' social systems, through the now infamous British policy of 'divide and rule': by creating divides in Indian society, it sought to erode unity which had been such a powerful force in opposing brutal British rule. Again, this well-known doctrine is not even considered by academics in analyzing records, nor in researching records from Britain and India which explain how this strategy was developed and implemented by the British for their benefit. Once again the so-called 'history' taught in the former plantation colonies, is a myth propagated by colonial forces to divide Indian society both in India and overseas. If it was Britain who created such myths earlier, it is 'brown sahibs' who perpetuate them even today.

A new community of Christians, loyal to the British was also constantly encouraged through conversions. After 1857, Brahmins who are popularly vilified in former plantation colonies' as holding posts of power and suppressing other castes in India, were in fact those who suffered the worst under the British, since they opposed conversions, British foreign rule, and the alien practices being imposed the most as back as Sanyasi Rebellion of 1770 when 150 sanyasis were shot in North Bengal. The Fakirs had joined this revolt that demonstrated the unity of India. British accounts themselves state how Brahmins hid their caste when in depots, since they were most likely to be arrested as trouble makers by British authorities for their freedom efforts in India, and the fear that they would encourage revolt on the plantations.¹⁵ No doubt, the colonial apologists started describing the Brahmins in Trinidad as "Brahmins by boat and not by birth" to demolish their influence.¹⁶ The very fact that the so called caste distinctions faded among the *Jahaji Bhais* and *Behans* points towards harmonious social relationships, which did not need the lack of job stratification of indentureship to encourage it.

The British also created new social categories in India like 'criminal castes', 'criminal tribes', and 'Martial Races': again another tool of domination which is often ignored by historians. Who were these? Those who fought and rebelled against the British were put into the categories of 'Criminals', while loyalists were termed as 'Martial races'. In fact, the very application of the term 'caste' in relation to the Indian social order is a misnomer, for the origin of the word is Latin and later used by the Spanish/Portuguese where the word '*Casta*' meant 'Race' or 'breed': terms bandied about by both powers during their colonial empire building to subjugate the ethnicities of the New World. Both meanings are discriminatory and were in turn used by the British during their empire building in India, to describe the entire Indian social order. There has never been a term in India to refer to different professions as a different race. This again is a

¹⁵ This attitude about Brahmins had its roots in the Sanyasi Rebellion of 1770's and also their role in 1857 like that of Mangal Pandey with whose rebellion started 1857 at Barrackpore.

¹⁶ Ramdial-Maharaj Sandili, op. cit.

deliberate manipulation in the English language for describing Indian society and creating divisions to restrict unity.

Another falsification is that the 'indenture labourer came willingly after signing the agreements' a statement that insinuates that there is no coercion involved in the process, making them willing migrations or mobilities.¹⁷ Very recently Hira Singh exploded these agreements in a presentation in Trinidad.¹⁸ The literal meaning of an agreement is that both parties willingly and knowingly enter into an understanding agreeing upon the conditions laid down in the document of which each party should be aware and agreeable to. And here, the colonial apologists forget that those who were made to sign, or in other cases, put a thumb impression, either were unfamiliar with English, or were signing documents which falsely advertised indentureship conditions. The whole agreement was a mockery and no agreement mentioned the social, cultural, religious, political or legal conditions under which a labourer had to serve in the overseas colonies. Even these so-called agreements were altered as per the planters needs: from 3 years to 5 years, then to 10 years; even changing the free return passage to retain the labour. Many questions are to be raised as regards these one-sided agreements, like:

- Did any agreement mention that the Indians would not be allowed to cremate their dead? (The author has himself seen the Hindu graveyards in Guyana and Trinidad.)
- Did any agreement mention that Hindu and Muslim marriages would not be recognized? (In Trinidad until around 1935 for Muslim marriages and up to 1945 Hindu marriages were not legally recognized.)
- Did the agreement tell them that children born to them would, on their birth certificate be called an illegitimate child? Literally meaning *haramzada*, a word which inflicts humiliation on the child by stating he/she does not know who their father is, and insultively suggests sexual debauchery of the mother? It is the worst abuse used in Indian society.
- Did the agreements mention the whipping and punishments at estates?

¹⁷ Even many files in the National Archives of India mention this justification by planters and colonial officials. For example, see Proceeding Nos. 8-13, Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, August 1875, NAI. Tota Ram an indentured labour in Fiji who contributed in the resistance to indenture has given a vivid description as to how he was recruited; the questions asked to him by the Immigration Officer and how he was locked and tortured when he denied to go to Fiji in his book in Hindi "*Fiji Dweep mei merai 21 varshs*". Many more such records are available in *Bharat Mitra* and *Abhudaya*, Hindi Newspapers from 1912 to 1925.

¹⁸ Hira Singh, "How Indian Indenture Civilised England" Paper presented at a Conference on Global Indian Diaspora-- Charting New Frontiers, March 17 – 20, 2017, Trinidad. No doubt, indenture labour saved the plantation economy.

- Did the agreement say they would be confined to their specific plantation estates and would require permits to go even in search of medical treatment?
- Did the agreement say they would have to convert to educate their children?
- Did the agreement say that they would stay in the same barracks of the ex-slaves and endure similar working conditions of the ex-slaves? Conditions which even British humanitarians had already argued were so inhumane that they had resulted in the abolition of slavery.
- Did the agreement spell out their legal rights?
- Did the agreement say that the families would be separated to different estates?
- Did the agreement say that the sick could be thrown from the ships into the sea? (Nelson Inland Episodes based on interviews in Trinidad. Else what were the methods adopted to cremate those who died on ships?)
- Did the agreements talk of any compensation of deaths on the ships or in plantations to dependents at home? As files after files in the National Archives of India talk of such deaths conveniently referred to as mortality on ships.

For example in 1866-67, out of a total of 4527 to 180; 1867-68, out of a total of 3021 to 109, 1868-69 : out of a total of 5059 to 186; 1869-70 : out of a total of 6721 to 323 and further 1870-71 – 81; 1871-72 – 84 and 1872-73 – 92 Indian coolies died in the plantation estates in Jamaica, and this happened in the very first year on their arrival.¹⁹ Similarly, 45 out of 533 died on the ship Sussex, going to British Guiana and among them 2/3rd were children and infants. 24 died on another ship sent to British Guiana, but no responsibility was fixed as the file states, “*No blame is attributable to Sergeant Superintendent or to the Master or officers of the ships in the performance of their duties.*”²⁰ The excuses given are that they were in bad health at depots before boarding the ships. If so, then why were they allowed to board? Records show that even those nearly blind were sent on Board, simply to allow British paid recruiters extra earnings.²¹

In 1873, 223 out of 2368 that is nearly 10 percent had died on 17 Estates in Suriname. In one Estate, Catherina Sophia, 48 out of the 110 indentured immigrants had died

¹⁹ Emigration Proceedings Nos. 11 and 12, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, January 1875, NAI.

²⁰ Confidential Report into the Treatment of Emigrants in British Guiana, 1872, Emigration Proceeding No. 5, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, June 1872, NAI.

²¹ Proceedings Nos. 5 to 9, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, Sept. 1875, NAI. The treacheries of recruitments are well known. You are going to Shri Ram Desh, Chini Desh and in many cases even the destinations were not declared.

though the Governor maintained that medical attendance was excellent.²² Between 1856 and 1867, 40% of Indian immigrant labourers had died and by 1874, 792 had returned back to India from French Guiana.²³ Most tragic in terms of deaths of what the colonial literature refers to as mortality at the ships is the account by Mrs. Swinton's *Journal of the Voyage from Calcutta*, only 199 out of 324 had survived, an account so well known.²⁴ Leave aside compensations for such deaths, the families back home even would not know about the deaths of their loved one. Such were the agreements imposed by the "civilised" and cannot be termed as "**willing migrations**" as done by the advocates of the colonialism. At best they can be termed as "forced migrations, imposed migrations, fraudulent migrations and exile punishments and forced exiles to punishment. Researches are being carried out by young scholars in India on the role of *arkatia's*, deceptions, allurements and life in the depots to unearth the realities.

It is high time that the present generation knows the realities of these agreements for the trauma of such psychological betrayal continues to affect the present generation as has been pointed out by a practicing psychologist from Trinidad, Sandili Maharaj Ramdial in her thesis. Her research shows that "*the indentureship experience inflicted substantial trauma as understood in its modern meaning. Historical records provide significant evidence that indentureship evoked symptoms that would meet the criteria of 'psychological trauma' as is understood today, with chronic and multi-generational consequences*".²⁵

Another indentureship myth taught in the former plantation colonies, meant both to deter Indians from leaving plantation labour and returning to India, and also to degrade Hindus, is that, '*In Hinduism whosoever crosses the Kala Pani (Bay of Bengal) loses his religion and caste.*' There is nothing in Hindu religion in any Hindu scripture which mentions this. On the contrary, the Hindus believe in *Samudra Manthan* (churning of the sea). If this refers to religion, then religiously speaking didn't Lord Rama, Lakshman, Sita Devi and Hanuman, in fact with an entire army, not cross the sea, and that too back and forth? Didn't they all returned to Ayodhya? Why is it so that even today, the elderly descendents mentioned that the period of indenture was compared with Ram going to the forest for specific period? And even today, the song "*Sakhi re sakhi re kaun tumara desh*" (Oh friend, Oh friend, which is your country?).²⁶

²² Proceeding No. 527, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, February 1875, NAI.

²³ Proceedings Nos. 8 to 13, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, August 1875, and Nos. 4 to 24, March 1875, NAI.

²⁴ Swinton, "Journal of Voyage with Coolie Emigrants from Calcutta to Trinidad", in Ron Ramdin (Ed.) *The Other Middle Passage*, 1859

²⁵ Ramdial-Maharaj Sandili, "Trauma of Indenture and Hindu Healing Methods in Trinidad" Ph.D. Thesis, Essex University, UK: 2015. I am grateful to Sandili Maharaj Ramdial as discussions with her have proved extremely useful in writing this paper.

²⁶ A popular Chatni song today in Trinidad.

Furthermore, given that Ayodhya is in Uttar Pradesh: the origin of most of the Indian immigrants, and the *Ramayana* is the most popular Hindu epic among Hindus worldwide and especially in the indentureship era Diaspora, then how can this myth ever have been true?

Such derogatory attributes also relegate to the background the brave Indians who went to South East Asian countries as far as Bali almost a 1000 years ago, including the trading communities throughout coastal India from Gujarat, to Kerala to Bengal. No one has ever tried to explore where, when and most importantly, why this saying started. This, in fact, came into existence in certain parts of India only after English East India Company started sending its Indian soldiers in Burma wars or to curb the uprisings in China. Though, the exact origin and usage, at the moment, cannot be dated what is absolutely clear is that this was a saying that emerged under specific conditions in Eighteenth Century to check military recruitment by the East India Company. Obviously the aim was to check conversion which was one of the reasons of the struggle of 1857.

Some argue that those who returned to their villages were not welcomed. Firstly, the numbers in such cases are very few and moreover, the reasons for this appear to be governed by changing land relations and ownership aspects, due to the upheavals brought about by warring conditions in India as under the British rule. In fact, a simple analysis of historical records, show that by 1872 almost half of those who went as indenture labour had returned to their homes.²⁷ Where then is this myth of non-acceptance? It was a means of deterring Indians from returning: an act which meant a loss of 'seasoned hands'; incurring the cost of a new labourer and the possible payment for the return fare which had been promised to workers.

The number of returnees could have been much more had the agreements not been tampered and changed as per the vested interests of the planters. There is strong evidence of increasing the years of indenture through punishment; withdrawing free return passages; labourers duped of their savings, etc. etc. We also find evidence that the returnees, in many cases, were duped of their savings which they had deposited on their ships for safe custody during the voyages.²⁸ These instead were the real reasons that deterred Indians from returning: the betrayals practiced in indentureship, and not a Hindu myth of cast off from homeland. In any case, the number of returnees, often highlighted by some historians was insignificant those who settled back in India.

Another distortion that has grown as a myth is that the relatives in India forget them and that the indentures were happier in their new lands, so why remember India as

²⁷ Proceeding Nos. 14 to 17, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, July 1875, NAI. Seasonal migrations for work had always been there in India and the connections with villages were never lost. It was like going for work, earning and coming back. Even today, this continues.

²⁸ Proceedings Nos. 1/3, Department of Revenue Agriculture and Commerce, October 1875, NAI.

the Motherland. Even today, some politicians lecture in temples in Trinidad, stating that India is full of poverty and hunger; nothing has changed in villages, and our ancestors 'were lucky to leave' : a repetition of Brinsely Samaroo's viewpoint that 'those who stayed back still lead a wretched life in the villages.'²⁹

Before I take up the first point let me mention here that the visits of most of these Diaspora politicians and visitors are confined to either places of pilgrimages or certain areas of rural India. It is an irony that they fail to see the developments India has made in the fields of aeronautical engineering and space programmes, science and technology, information technology, education, medicine, self-sufficiency in agriculture, a vast and rapidly rising middle class, urbanization in all states of India, and many other sectors. And many among the elite Diaspora visitors, in spite of having experienced these developments remain silent, keeping in view their politics at home.

It serves a purpose to make Indians in the former plantation colonies believe their ancestral homeland is the same colonial ravaged country under British rule of some 150 years ago. It serves a purpose to distance them from association with India other than in a genetic sense. Emotional ties should be cut, since this makes for easier neo-colonial indoctrination. This is what was done with slaves, in teaching them that Africa was a continent of savages, causing them to even today, admit ancestral origin from Africa, but nothing more. It served colonial interests to break religion, cultural practices and even language, and it serves the same purpose today by politicians and academics to continue to sever the indentured descendant Diaspora Indians' ties to India. Faults exist in all countries, India is no exception, it is after all a country of 1.3 billion, but by emphasising only a backward India, it serves the ruling classes' agenda to make the Diaspora Indians feel they should be content with their conditions, and not notice or protest against the continued discrimination they face in these countries for being Indian.

All I can say is that even today India is one of the richest countries in the World (though the number of poor remains large), even despite the 1000 years of plunder. India's fight for independence catapulted independence for all the other plantation colonies without bloodshed afterwards.

Furthermore, a far easier comparison should be made of the wealth of the former plantation colonies among each other. Why even look so far to India? What about just within the Caribbean region for instance? What is the basis that these regional academics and politicians use to determine wealth, and in Trinidad's case for example, if not for a century of oil and gas, how would it's wealth and standard of living be any different from living conditions in neighbouring Guyana and Suriname for instance, whose indentureship history is almost the same? Why what happened in Fiji a few years ago is side tracked.

There is also another financial aspect and looked into the contexts of events of the times of indenture. Sending remittances to India was a common practice and their

²⁹ Brinsely Samaroo, *op.cit.*

relatives and family would know about them only when the remittances or a letter came. Lommarsh Roop Narine's work shows that how millions of pounds sent back as remittances never reached India, and instead the Bank of England benefitted from it. Rightly, he laments who this money belongs to. The countries where the indenture settled, and had earned them, or to India, which they were en route to, or to Britain which has confiscated them for more than a century?³⁰ It is worth quoting here a letter from Officiating Secretary to Government of Bengal dated 2nd October 1873 to the Secretary, Department of Agriculture, Revenue and Commerce:

*"I am directed to state, for the Information of His Excellency the Governor General in Council, that the Commissioner of Patna has brought to notice the fact that the Colonial Bank of Trinidad is in the habit of receiving money from Indian Labourers in that Colony for remittance to their friends here; but instead of giving the remitters bills drawn upon Indian Banks gives sets of bills on the Colonial Bank of London. These bills can only be negotiated in India when the first, second and third of exchange are offered together. In several instances only the first of exchange has been received, and the bills are perfectly worthless to the recipients."*³¹

This is an area which needs to be explored much more for the loss of young breadwinners to overseas colonies, whose intended money never arrived, played a role in lengthening the impoverishment of regions of India which now had neither a age group able to work, nor money for themselves to survive under the colonial regime.

In addition, preventing earnings from returning to India, also served a dual purpose of interfering with communication between family members on both sides, thus making them unable to trace each other and for Diaspora Indians to feel unable to return home, with no word from loved ones, without actually knowing the reality.

Lack of communication modes increased the gaps in the family ties but the very emergence of *birha* songs in Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh being collected by the researchers today are sufficient indicators that the wives, families and lovers, not only remembered those who went, with great agony but waited for their return and for their letters: another indicator that the non acceptance into country and family after crossing sea water was a fabrication.

*From the east came the train, from the west the ship, they loaded my lover and took away,
The rail became my enemy, loaded my lover and took away.*³²

³⁰ Lommarsh Roop Narine paper entitled "Indentured Indian Historiography in the Anglophone Caribbean" presented in Conference *The Indian Diaspora : Identities, Trajectories and Transnationalities*, The Teaching and Learning Centre, U.W.I., St. Augustine, May 2015, and Paper entitled "More problems with Indian indentured Caribbean historiography" published in *Guyana Times*, February 14, 2017

³¹ Proceedings for October Nos. 22/23 (Part B), Revenue and Agriculture Department (Emigration), 1873, NAI.

³² Tota Ram op.cit. page 15

In *Ballia* there is still a group that performs street theater on various issues related to indenture. Separation had led to the emergence of a new cultural tradition in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar Bhojpuri speaking districts known as the *Bideshiya*. Drama, dance, music, songs, poetry and art forms developed under this culture expressing the agony, pain and anguish that emerged out of separation.³³

I will agree that today the urge to find relations and roots in India is very strong among the present generations of Indian Diaspora rather than among the present generations in India whose ancestors' relatives had been forced out. And for this there are historical reasons. It is ironic that the entire process of oppressive indenture system did not find even a chapter in the School or University level textbook in India. This is in spite of constant reporting about the oppressive indenture conditions in the Indian newspapers like *Abhudaya*, *Bharat Mitra*, *Leader* and *Modern Review* up to the decades of 1920s.³⁴

Till 1947, the history syllabus structures in India were determined by the British rulers so why mentioned indenture and after 1947, the *Nehruvian Era* had virtually discarded the concerns about the people of Indian origin. Vishnu Bisram rightly laments that "this act by the Indian government, which is practically absent from Indian historiography, is the shameful abandonment of indentured Indians during and after indentureship. Those Indians who chose to settle in the Indo-phone Caribbean lost their Indian citizenship"³⁵. Though Bisram mentions that "there seems to be no concrete explanation as to why the Indian government chose to take such action." I would point out here that it is more from 1996 onwards that the *Pravasi Bharatiya* started getting importance in India and efforts are down to further strengthen these ties into real relationships.³⁶

³³ Known as *Sankalp*, this Group of youngsters follows the *Bideshiya* tradition, and reenacts in Street Theater Form the oppressive role of recruiters, agony of relatives, Birah of wives left and so on. See Mausami Majumdar (Ed.) *Kahe Gaile Videsh*, Allahabad, 2010.

³⁴ It has to be noted here that the plight of indenture became a national issue of concern for Indians in the beginning of 20th Century. The Indian newspapers *Bharat Mitra* from Calcutta, *Abhudaya* from Allahabad, *General Modern Review* from Calcutta, all extensively highlighted and reported the indenture issue. The leaders of Indian national movement like Madan Mohan Malviya, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi consistently raised this issue and fought for the abolishment of indenture. Besides, there had emerged a leadership in the plantation colonies and leaders like Dr. Manilal Gandhi, Tota Ram and many others were consistently raising the issue of indenture. It is also worth mentioning here that the Indians in these colonies made their contributions not only to the freedom struggle but also sending relief during the British made famine of Bengal in 1943 and at the same time supporting the Azad Hind Fauj of Subhash Chandra Bose.

³⁵ Vishnu Bisram, "More problems with Indian indentured Caribbean historiography" *Guyana Times*, February 14, 2017

³⁶ Current Government of India has made certain changes in the PIO's regulations and some are still under review for further amendments. It seems that the day is not far that dual citizenship will also be offered in Caribbean and other parts.

The racial supremacy and the Whiteman's Burden is also reflected in the myth propagated that the indenture labourers were illiterates. Here one must note that literacy does not mean being literate in English language and colonial culture. The fallacy of this argument also ties in this myth when on the one hand the colonial apologists defend the indenture system by stating that the labourers had signed agreements and on the other hand declare them illiterate. One should not forget that those who went not only took with them their Indian languages but also the religious texts like *Ramayana*, *Gita*, or the *Quran*. In the *Avadh* country side, *Ramayana* was not just a religious text, but also a way of life with citations from it being made in relation to day-to-day life. It was also a text for solace in oppressed conditions and an inspiration to fight and struggle also. Baba Ramchandra claims in his writings that he had started the *Ramleela* in Fiji and no wonder that this indenture labourer on his return led the strongest peasant movements in *Avadh* during 1918-22 and made use of *Ramchirtmanas* to moralise the peasants.³⁷

The most recent of the propaganda, and this too from the brown sahibs on India's side, is being made by certain Leftist historians that Indian indentured labourers had not gone from India, they went from the villages as the concept of India was not known to them.³⁸ Nothing can be more ridiculous than this argument, as it follows the colonial psyche of denouncing and demolishing India, while it is also completely ignores the psyche of the Indian people.³⁹ Yes, they did not go from India for they had gone from *Bharat* the *Desh* they belonged to and they knew about. The very concept of *Desh* has multiple usages in the Indian context which integrates home, village, region and country. Even today when I speak to a migrant in Delhi from another part of India, the answer comes, "*Hum chutti manane desh ja rahe hai*": *desh* meaning thereby that I am going to my home for holidays. The indenture labour remembered their Motherland as a country – *Bharat Mata* and not just coming from a village.

Further, the very identity of the indenture labourer was and their contemporary descendent is that of they came from India and they are people of Indian origin. Whatever religion one might have converted to, whatever life style one might have adopted. The fact of being of Indian ancestry/Indian origin will always remain as the identity.

³⁷ Kapil Kumar, "Using the *Ramcharitmanas* as a Radical Text – Baba Ramchandra in Oudh in 1920-1950", in a book "*Social Transformation and Creative Imagination*", edited by Prof. Sudhir Chandra, a *Nehru Memorial Museum and Library publication*, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1984; Kapil Kumar, *Peasants and Revolts*, Manohar, New Delhi 1984.

³⁸ I was shocked to hear this argument being made by Prof. K.L. Tuteja, during a discussion on the Preliminary Presentation by Sandili Ramdial-Maharaj at Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla on 8.12.2016.

³⁹ Kapil Kumar, "Challenging Colonial Historiography : The Indian Scenario" in M. Hassan (ed.) *Historiography*, Paramabiro, Suriname 2013

Another myth has been about the freedom Indian indenture had about their religious practices. If so then why attempts to convert? Why was the conversion propagated as a blessing for Indians to improve their lot? The Indians could build their temples only on the lands they had purchased and the strongest evidence to contradict this myth is the story of the Temple by the Sea in Trinidad where an indenture labourer was imprisoned on the behest of the planter's complaint for having built a small temple in his barrack without the permission of the planter. Besides, better facilities and opening for school children in the missionary schools were to be there only when converted or adopting Christian names. I myself in 2012 had to hear the sermons of a group that knocked at my doors early morning saying why I should convert.

A critical evaluation of the Archival Records in India that has reports from the plantation colonies as regards the conditions of the indenture labourers also explores the myth of adequate wages; medical facilities being taken care of and free lands to indenture labourers, etc.

There was not only wage differentiation between male and female workers but also there are plenty of evidences in relation to child labour with less wages. For example, under the Amended Immigration Act 1859, the Immigration Agent for St. Vincent was to classify immigrants as:

“1st Class – All of 16 years and upwards

2nd Class – All of 8 and under 16

3rd Class – All under 8

The wages to be paid are 10d, a day to first class, 5 d, a day to second class, and 3d, a day to third class. But it is provided that if a labourer is able to do more than the work allotted to his class, he shall be paid accordingly. The children in the third class are not, except with the express permission of the Immigration Agent, to be compelled to labour without the consent of their parents or protectors.”⁴⁰

The records of deaths in hospitals tell a very different story against the distorted propaganda. Overcrowding in hospitals, deaths in hospitals, lack of civil conditions, lack of medicines, etc. are mentioned again and again in various reports in the Archival files in India and in yet most of these cases, the Governors of the colonies give a clean chit to medical facilities.⁴¹ This is one reason that the Indians continued with their own healing methods.⁴²

⁴⁰ Proceeding No. 14, Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, August 1875, NAI. See also for Suriname, Proceedings Nos. 13 to 17, October, 1875, *ibid*.

⁴¹ Proceeding No. 5 to 7, Department of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, February 1875, NAI.

⁴² Sandili Ramdial-Maharaj, Ph.D. Thesis, *op. cit*.

One can go on adding to myths and distortions and a lot of research is still required to understand the realities in relation to gender issues keeping in view the political, social, cultural and economic environment, contexts and conditions of the time span that one is trying to evaluate and understand.⁴³

For all such researches one has to go through the crime records, the prison records and also explore the themes through oral history tools. Not having any faith in the judicial system of the colonies and the injustice that the Indian community faced had led them to organize themselves into Panchayats, the traditional Indian system in the countryside for imparting justice and setting up social norms. The colonial regimes ridiculed the Panchayats and as fate would have it now. President Anthony Carmona delivering his *Indian Arrival day Message* on May 30, 2017 stated that “the Panchayat system is a hallmark of Indentureship”. This again, is a tacit acknowledgement of rectifying the insulting distortions that were propagated about the Indians during the Indenture Era.⁴⁴

I have often heard the argument that we have had enough of History and we should now look at our present for the future. My answer to such thinking is that firstly, what has been heard and propagated is mainly a distorted history that is even being taught in the present. And here it is crucial to understand that in the plantation colonies the colonial regimes were structuring a new social and cultural order. In colonies, particularly India, they had attempted this through denouncing and demolishing practically all aspects of Indian history and culture. In the plantation colonies they did this by propagating false notions about the Indian community so as to facilitate the reconstruction of a mind that was a loyal colonial mind, brainwashing away whatever earlier, religious cultural or social practices and beliefs that might have existed.

Solutions to many contemporary problems need a historical understanding for it is through history that one evaluates the past to understand the present and then by analysing both one plans for the future. These are only some of the myths propagated, and for all of them there is ample evidence to discredit their ‘authenticity’. It calls for a re-haul of colonial era propaganda parading as history, and the need for genuine research to be done in order to do true credit to both the ancestors and the descendants of the Indian indentured labourers sent overseas.

⁴³ See the works of Gaiutra Bahadur (2013), *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, University of Chicago Press: US; Brinda Metha, *Diasporic (Dis.) Locations, Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani*, UWI Press, 2004; Kalpana Hira Lal “Rebellious Sisters’ : Indentured Indian Women and Resistance in Colonial Natal, 1860-1911; Marina Carter “Resistance and Women Migrants to Mauritius under the Indenture System” in Maurits S. Hassan Khan, et. al. (Ed.), *Resistance and Indian Indenture Experience: Comparative Perspectives*, Manohar, 2014.

⁴⁴ Newsday, May 30, 2017.

At the same time, we have to appreciate and acknowledge the Indian Diaspora for their achievements and strengthening the Indian culture in their home countries alongwith their love for India.