

## **Complexity of Labour Recruitment: Colonial Indian Emigration System**

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### **Abstract**

*This article investigates about the complexity of the labour recruitment occurred under the Indian (Indentured) Emigration System<sup>1</sup> (1834-1920). In the beginning, the first section of introduction, this article highlights broadly about the interpreting rhetoric contexts of Indian emigration system with its particular reference to the role of recruiting channels, through which intend Indian labourers were finally permitted to embark from the Calcutta and the Madras port to their desired overseas colonies. In second part, in view of initial development of recruitment process, beyond its formal structure, is investigated by highlighting the enquiry conducted by Major D.G. Pitcher on the labour recruiting upheld under the IES. In the third part of my assessment, I try to conclude that the recruiting system of the Indian indentured emigration held a complex nature rather to accept it as 'an organized and regulated' system (as acclaimed by K.L. Gillion and Crispin Bates) and thus, without understanding the nuances of principled and practical basis of recruiting system, it would remain incomplete to perceive about its nature as tried to bring out by several documented illustrations, whether it is produced with or without any influence on available colonial historical literature.*

### **Introduction**

Historical writings about the analysis of recruitment of the Indian indentured labourers under the Indian Emigration System (IES) that existed during the period from 1834 to 1920 under the rule of the colonial British Indian government, rarely dealt to unmask the complexity of the process of the recruitment under IES. The 'formal written document' of the provisions regarding the Indian Emigration System, particularly about its recruiting mechanism, gives an impression of the system being fair and favourable to the cause of the destitute Indian labour class. However, when such theoretical assumptions of those documents and their superficial interpretations are compared with the execution of the same in reality i.e. the level of formal introduction of the recruitment system of Indian labour under IES to its actually applied form, it becomes clear that

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<sup>1</sup>Henceforth IES

the system did not comply with its own provisions. Such complexities are neglected by many historical writings. The writings appear substantially ignorant of that complexity of the system, especially about the ways Indian emigrant labourers were recruited. All these indentured labour recruitments were held after the abolition of 'slavery' (1833) and during the period from 1834 to 1916 for the purpose of labour procurement demand of the colonial plantation (sugarcane, cotton etc.) economy. In reality this system was a replacement of the system of 'slavery' with the 'Indian Emigration System' (IES)<sup>2</sup> that aimed to achieve uninterrupted labour procurement just like its previous practice for the evolving sophisticated capitalist economy under the guise of a false pretence of a benevolent State for the labourers. It is therefore, majority of the historians, like **Hugh Tinker**,<sup>3</sup> considered the commencement of Indian Emigration System, as 'a new system of Slavery. This was introduced as 'a controlled and regulated system' of IIES (Indian Indentured Emigration System) through which extraction of labourers could become possible for the British colonial masters. Hence, this area of IES has been a globally ponderable academic area, but unfortunately all the traditional historical literary discussions have seen it under the influence of colonial literature, specifically in the context of recruitment of the labourers that revolves around interpreting it either as 'a new system of slavery' or as 'voluntary activity' or under the 'push & pull' factor and sometimes more critically as 'a coerced/forced recruitment'. In contrast to the 'Tinkerian' assumption, Richard B. Allen<sup>4</sup> and Crispin Bates<sup>5</sup> have intelligently tried to uncover some other related nuances in this regard. Such varied dimensions of the indentured labour recruitment system, maintained by *licensed recruiters and their subordinates*, *Protector of Emigrants and the Magistrate* of the colonial government, made the historians and the researchers to review the process of this system in the context of such a significant transition from the period of slavery to the period of indentured labour recruitment. Hence, in this article,

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<sup>2</sup> After the abolition of 'Slavery', IES was introduced in 1834 for the purpose of plantation labour procurement.

<sup>3</sup> The writing of Hugh Tinker 'A New System of Slavery' (OUP, 1974) considered as a classical writing of Indian diaspora studies followed by several contemporary and even present historians too.

<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Allen, 'New Perspectives on the Origins of the New System of Slavery', in Maurits S. Hassankhan, LomarshRoopnarine and Hans Ramsোধ (eds.), *The Legacy of Indian Indenture. Historical and Contemporary Aspects of Migration and Diaspora*, (Manohar, New Delhi, 2016) pp. 37-61.

<sup>5</sup> Crispin Bates, 'Coerced and Migrant Labourers in India: The Colonial Experience published in Edinburgh Papers in *South Asian Studies*, Number 13, 2000. (Centre for South Asian Studies, School of Social & Political Studies, University of Edinburgh, 55 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9LL).

the area of labour (*girmityas*)<sup>6</sup> recruitment of the IES (1834-1920) with special reference to the labour recruiting Enquiry Report of D.G. Pitcher<sup>7</sup> is investigated and a base is created to examine it beyond the traditional and prejudiced colonial interpretation of the same.

### **Analysis of D G Pitcher Report**

D.G. Pitcher has mentioned that the recruitment system under the Indian (Indentured) Emigration System was never without its fundamental flaws. For the first time, he enquired into the operation of the system in detail. He examined the labour recruiting methods under the Colonial IES. The indentured labour recruiting system of the IES cannot be properly assessed without its centrally attached vital elements of corruption such as *deception, fraud or misrepresentation*. The problems existed from its initial level of the recruiting practice to the embarkation of the recruited intend Indian emigrant. After their arrival in the colony, they found that the work condition was opposite to their expectations. However, in very few instances at the formal administrative level, complaints about unfair means applied in the recruitment of Indian destitute labourers were entertained. These complaints included the frauds by the local recruiters in procuring the 40 percent of women for the total number of recruits. To establish justice in such complaints, provisions were there for either suspension of the recruiters' licenses or imposing penalty on the recruiting agents. Such ways of penalty against the corrupt recruiters was not sufficient to establish smooth and fair conduct of the Indian indentured labour recruitment. In other words, the efforts to eliminate bad recruiting practices based on false pretences were not adequate. The Indian labour procurement system of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century introduced and conducted by the British colonial administration in the name of the so-called organized Indian Emigration System for labour recruitment is marked as *a complex labour recruiting system*, which was full of flaws in its application.

On 9<sup>th</sup> February, 1882, E. C. Buck, then Secretary to the Government of India wrote to the J. R. Reid, then officiating Secretary to Government, North-Western Provinces and Oudh that the

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<sup>6</sup>The indentured labourers came to known as '*Girmityas*' from the word '*gimit*' that is a word from Bhojpuri local dialect chiefly spoken in Bihar and Eastern UP, which is linguistically cross-coding of 'agreement'.

<sup>7</sup> Revenue and Agriculture Department (Immigration, Fiji), Proceeding no. 64 to 73, April, 1882, File no. 35. (Deputation of Major D.G. Pitcher to Enquire into the present System of Recruiting labourers for the colonies).

Government of India desires to appoint a special officer to investigate the manner in which the recruitment of labourers under the different Emigration Acts was being carried on in the North Western Provinces, Oudh and Bengal and to ascertain in what respects the system was defective, and how the defects might best be remedied. Major D.G. Pitcher was thus appointed in this particular context to enquire into the defects of labour recruiting procedures adopted under the IES.<sup>8</sup>

Despite of the several recommended reforms and amendments, most notably amendment of 1864 and recommendation of varied kinds of reforms in 1872 in the context of recruiting of desirous Indian emigrants for overseas colonies like Mauritius, Trinidad, Guiana, St. Lucia, Fiji etc., the condition remained the same. Deputation of Major D.G. Pitcher was made to Enquire into that System of Recruiting labourers. In April 1882 he admitted that the complaints of the *coolies* ('*Girmitiyas*'), which were also many times represented by the local native vernacular newspapers such as *Bengal Hurkaru*<sup>9</sup> and were pointed out in the official reports (Protector of Emigrants, Magistrate and Annual Reports)<sup>10</sup>, carried some reality. These complaints of misleading, fraud and false pretences in the recruiting process of the intended Indian emigrants were observed throughout the entire course of the colonial indentured emigration (1834-1916) and which were further recorded in the official, non-official and empirical records. This historical analysis of D.G. Pitcher enquiry itself proves that the recruiting system of labourers under the Indian emigration system had certain fundamental problems, which made the Indian labourers victims of the colonial emigration system. Hence, through further critical narratives, the system of Indian indentured labour recruitment that occurred during the colonial British rule was considered as a problematic and complex system of labour recruitment for overseas colonies.

E.C. Buck, in connection with the ongoing overseas Indian emigration, had made clear to J.R. Reid about his instructions regarding Major Pitcher's inquiries. Mr. Buck specified certain broad

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>*Bengal Hurkaru*, Calcutta (See 21 December 1838).

<sup>10</sup>For details see Annual Reports of Immigration and Emigration available in National Archives of India and Suva Fiji. Also see LeelaGajudharSarup, Colonial Emigration 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century: Annual Report from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies (Vol. 6), available in National Archive of India-NAI (New Delhi, India, 2008)

areas, where recruiting channel was severely affected, in the following manner; 1) to ascertain by visiting local depots how arrangements were carried on, and whether they were properly managed, 2) to make enquiries as to the recruiters employed, of what class they were, and what was their character, and as far as possible what was their method of recruiting, 3) to ascertain the feeling of the native community on the subject of emigration, 4) to ascertain whether in ordinary years any part of the population were in want of work, and whether the labour market was in any part of the recruiting field overstocked, 5) Whether the system of registration admitted of any reform, if so, what better system were proposed, 6) Whether the system of recruiting females needed reform, 7) Whether there was any hope of inducing families to emigrate, 8) What, if any, were the objections of natives to emigrate, and if they could be overcome, 9) Whether coolie emigration was more popular in some districts than others; and if so, why.<sup>11</sup>

The British colonial rule while conducting recruitment of Indian indentured labour emigrants for its overseas colonies, at several times in its Annual Reports of Indian Immigration, Indian Emigration and in many other *enquiry reports*, reported about varied kinds of involved intrinsic abuses in the process of labour recruitment. Notably, during the entire period of colonial indentured emigration (1834-1920) to overseas colonies operated by the British government, the procurement of Indian labour activities always underwent through fraudulent means and false-pretence. Because of this, the feeling of hatred against the British Indian indentured emigration system remained since its beginning to the formal declaration of its abolition (1916). It is important to know that it was pointed out not only by the emigrants, Aborigines' Protection Society (APS),<sup>12</sup> local newspapers (Bengal Hurkaru) etc. but also by some government officials in their enquiry reports too. At the initial stage of the indentured emigration system (1834 - 1842), the Calcutta Commission Reports itself admitted about the involvement of false-pretences in the recruitment of Indian labourers. Therefore, in view of such official enquiry reports about rectification of the IES in its recruiting process, adoption of new measures were initiated. Hence,

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<sup>11</sup>*Proceedings Emigration, Revenue and Agriculture Department*, April, 1882.

<sup>12</sup> Aborigines' Protection Society was an organization protecting the human rights of indigenous people who were ruled or dominated by the colonial powers. It was founded in 1837.

after the suspension of indentured labour recruitment in 1838, the procurement of Indian labour for overseas colonies could be restored in 1842, especially for Mauritius, where European planters were constantly demanding to supply the shortage of their labour requirements.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the then ongoing pressure of labour demand from the planters, forced the British government to restore the recruiting system of Indian intend labour for their overseas colonies. In 1842, the British Indian government re-initiated the recruitment with the assurance of its fair and smooth conduct. However, the constructed optimism given by the British officials brought Indian socially and economically downtrodden labour communities again into the previous trap of deception. Despite of the suggested amendments of 1864, 1872 and the recommendations of D.G. Pitcher & Grierson in 1882, the condition remained the same in its varied forms. So, in order to portray a real picture of the Indian Emigration System, segregation of official framework of recruiting practices (terms and conditions, channels of recruiters- particularly role of “Arkatis, Protector of Emigrants, and Magistrate etc.) from its actual practice is a prerequisite need. In other words, the official formal provisions of the recruiting system must be compared with its pragmatic practices in actuality.

‘Coolies’<sup>14</sup> (indentured migrant labourers) were very often detained due to pending inquiry that was required by law to ensure their willingness and fitness to be allowed to leave the district as emigrants. It was very important exercise for the intended emigrants to get opportunity of their dreamed betterment on the one hand and on the other, for the British official-agents like *arkati* (recruiting agents) to attain monetary benefit fixed for per recruit. These two elements- emigrants and *arkatis*, were associated with very initial part of recruiting process, the process of *registration*, through which poor and desirous intended emigrants were indulged into the colonial labour trading. But, unfortunately, at the part of British administrative machinery, theoretically sound recruiting-process of Indian emigration system was pragmatically led by the unfair means. In other words, the recruiting of intend Indian indentured labour processed by the *arkatis* and

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<sup>13</sup>The Calcutta Commission Enquiry Reports, 1838, Calcutta Enquiry Commission (1839)

<sup>14</sup>Initially in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the Word ‘Coolie’ was applied by the European traders to address their labour class procured from their colonies in the Asian continent. Later, ‘coolies’ were referred for the Indian indentured labourers, procured by the planters of Britain, France and Dutch colonizers under the Indian Emigration System.

other recruiting channels was generally operated through the 'misrepresentation' of terms of labour services. British Government has always been unknown rather ignorant of such misrepresentation, fraud, deceiving incidences etc. Thus after a long time of the introduction (1834) of Indian emigration system, **D. G. Pitcher**, in the month of April, 1882 under his special deputation was intended to be E.C. Buck to enquire into the present system of recruitment of labourers for the British colonies. The directives of the Secretary, Govt. India, E.C. Buck to Major Pitcher in relation to conducting enquires in several areas of the recruitment of intend emigrants, evidently depict that the recruiting until 1882 had not been carried out in accord to the Emigration Act, rather this was operated with several abuses. Therefore, Mr. Buck specified following remedies in eight areas for the ignorant Indian labourers:

- 1) By visiting the local depots, it should be supervised how the arrangements are carried on, and whether they are properly managed.
- 2) To make inquiries about the recruiters who are employed and to see of what class they are from, what is their character, and as far as possible what is their method of recruiting.
- 3) To ascertain the feeling of the native community on the subject of emigration.
- 4) To ascertain whether in ordinary years any part of the population are in want of work, and whether the labour market in any part of the recruiting field is overstocked.
- 5) Whether the present system of registration admits of any reform; and if so, what better system can be proposed.
- 6) Whether the system of recruiting females needs reform.
- 7) Whether there is any hope of including families to emigrate.
- 8) What, if any, are the objections of natives to emigrate, and if they can be overcome.
- 9) Whether coolie emigration is more popular in some districts than others; and if so, why.<sup>15</sup>

After a detailed enquiry conducted by D.G Pitcher in the North-West and Bengal District had suggested '*...that the registration should be put into different hands; that coolies should not be*

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<sup>15</sup>A Letter from E.C. Buck, Secretary to Govt. Of India to the Secretary to the Govt. of North-Western Provinces and Oudh, No. 59, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1882 in *Revenue and Agriculture Department*, April 1882.

*required to go before the Magistrate of a District, but that some special officer or officers should be appointed for the purpose of registering them*<sup>16</sup>.

D.G. Pitcher also noticed and suggested that “there are other points of a similar character, which can only be properly examined in connection with a local investigation in the recruiting areas. We have hitherto been making rules and regulation without having a sufficient number of facts before us.”<sup>17</sup> The opening remarks of Mr. Buck proceedings of the meeting held at the office of the Revenue and Agriculture Department at 11am on the 24<sup>th</sup> February 1882 to discuss about the emigration of native labourers to the colonies itself reveals:

*‘....that there was good reason to believe that certain difficulties existed in the way of carrying on successful recruiting, which it was most desirable to remove. On several occasions there had been prolonged discussion on the various questions connected with emigration; but hitherto no local enquiries had been made to bring forward facts connected with the system of recruiting. Opinions, as a rule had been based on theoretical arguments, with the result that many questions have been left in exactly the same position as before. No reforms had therefore yet been attempted or carried out in the system of inland recruiting. The Government of India had now considered that it is desirable to supplement previous investigations by the deputation of a special officer to the recruiting fields for the purpose of ascertaining what difficulties exist and how they can be removed’.*<sup>18</sup>

Although, enquiries in these areas were conducted and recommendations were also initiated, yet defects in labour recruiting continued as ascertained by Sanderson Committee (1910), C.F. Andrews & W.W. Pearson’s ‘Report on Indenture’ (Feb. 1916)<sup>19</sup> and the only available

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<sup>16</sup>Pros., *Emigration, Revenue and Agriculture Department*, April, 1882, NAI (New Delhi). For more details also see, Report by Major Pitcher on emigration from the North-West Provinces and Oudh, India E.P February 1883, A.1-12; report by G. A. Grierson on emigration from Bengal and Bihar, India E.P. August 1883, A.9-15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup>Proceedings, *Emigration, Revenue and Agriculture Department*, file no. 71 April, 1882.

<sup>19</sup>Report on Indentured labour in Fiji. An Independent Enquiry conducted by C. F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson submitted on 16 February 1916.



empirical illustration produced by the Indian emigrant, Totaram Sandhya, '*Fiji Dvip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh*',<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Finally, this article is an initiative to determine the fact that the study of Diaspora specifically the study of Indian indentured emigration period with special reference to 'recruitment' has been a complex area of scrutiny. It shows its complexity, as traditional historical literature under the colonial influence interpret the official formal enactment of emigration of Indian indentured emigration system as a 'most regulated and organized'<sup>21</sup> system. The complexity of recruitment appears when despite of ascertainment of varied kind of involved serious errors and flaws in the recruiting of Indian Labourers by non-official records, complaints of migrants, even the official records as well, presented by the Colonial British government as a favorable move to the cause of poor and destitute agrarian section of the Indian society. It is tended to establish a claim of 'benevolent state' notion and become ignorant in the process of re-writing or re-constructing the history of Indian emigration. In the concluding part, Brij V Lal also admitted, in his article titled with 'Approaches To The Study Of Indian Indentured Emigration' (The Journal Of Pacific History, vol. XV, 1980) that "the indenture experience was a varied and complex process" and "cannot easily be explained within a simple theoretical framework". The analysis of recruiting structure adopted under the IES provides us a space to recite that the recruiting system under the Indian indentured emigration system was not at all on its fair track. The historical writings under the colonial umbrella try to protect the colonial notion face of 'benevolent state' and construct more of its 'utopian' character. Readers must understand, this all have been part of the colonial psychic narration of Indian history. Of course, as emigrants were from varied socio-economic background in India and they had different motivations (as mentioned by Brij V Lal), it (migration) cannot be simply 'A new system of slavery' or a 'voluntary migration' or due to the

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<sup>20</sup>Pt. Totaram Sandhya, *Fiji Dvip Me Mere 21 Varsh* (Bharti Bhavan Firozabad- Agra, First publication in 1914, Second Edition 1972)

<sup>21</sup>K.L. Gillion (*Fiji's Indian Migrants. A History to the end of indenture in 1920*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne) and Crispin Bates both accepts.

influence of 'push and pull factors' as official records. Emigrants testimonies, folksongs also represent varied forms of the occurred incidences. Hence, official report brought out by the enquiry of D.G. Pitcher on recruiting of Indian indentured labour become a most significant document for the critical analysis of recruiting complexity attached with the recruitment patterns of the Indian Emigration system operated by the Colonial British Government during the period from 1834 to 1920.