

Colonial Exploitation and Resistance of Fiji's Indian Indentured Migrants

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Abstract

This paper probes into the history of Indian Indentured Labour Emigration System (ILES) with reference to the British colonial exploitation over the perceived aspirations of Indian indentured labourers experienced during their stay in Fiji from 1879 to 1920. Fiji came into the British control when Cakobau (Chief of the Fijian Islands Chiefs) ceded it to Queen Victoria in 1874 and Indian labourers were introduced in 1879, specifically when the first ship 'Leonidas' embarked from Calcutta port and arrived on 15 May, 1879 in Fiji. The study brought out hereby in the particular context of passive resistance of Indian migrant communities existed in Fiji which retaliated exploitation faced there, on the one hand, has focused on the paradoxical positions intrinsically connected with Indian labour recruiting idealism adopted under the British system of Indian indentured labour ('coolie') emigration conducted in India. On the other, it also highlights about the consciousness of Indian immigrants that had been emerging towards incidences of deceiving occurred in India but later faced in Fiji with varied kind of difficulties. In the quest for livelihood and better employment opportunities, the mobilisation of Indian people significantly in the late nineteenth century and early years of twentieth century had taken place towards various overseas colonies, such as Mauritius, Trinidad, British Guiana, Jamaica St. Lucia, Surinam, Fiji. Albeit, such mobilisation/migration (1834-1916) encouraged by the British Colonial Indian government for the purpose of Indian labour procurement raised by their overseas colonies, Indian immigrants attained opposite or unimagined experiences of their indentured life. Some of the Passive Resistance, but significant indicator towards Colonial exploitation against the aspirations of Indian impoverished agrarian communities, like Navuso & Koronivia (of 1886), Koronivia (of 1888) and Labasa (of 1907) plantation strikes in Fiji were representing such kind of predicament of Indian labourers in Fiji, and therefore, it is needed to revisit to envision how did awareness of Indian indentured labourers outburst against colonial ill-treatment and fraudulent labour recruiting held in the case of British Colony- Fiji.

(Key words: Indentured, Labour, Recruitment, Exploitation, Resistance)

Introduction

Due to ongoing criticism by humanitarians, British parliament abolished slavery in 1833 and replaced it (slavery) by introducing Indenture emigration labour system in 1834. In fact, formally it was introduced as Indian Emigration System¹ that existed during the colonial British rule from 1834 to 1916. Many of the economists, historians, sociologists and anthropologists have considered this entire period as a replacement of slavery.² Literary

¹Henceforth it is IES.

²Hugh Tinker has produced a classical writing on the Indian Emigration System by the title of *A New System of Slavery*, OUP, 1974.

critics have designated it by the *Girmitiya* system³ too. However, conventional historical literature on such diasporic studies has, now, overturned from utopian narratives (whether supporting the argument of *slavery* or contesting against remarking it as slavery) to its pragmatic approach of diasporic studies, and it has developed beyond the traditional historical narratives too. Across the disciplines, presently researches on the study of Indian diaspora are much more insisting on the role of institutions, employers, political masters and the aspirations of migrants that shaped the global labour market during the colonial period and later on as well, and the settlement of diasporic communities, their assimilation in that host country or that society.⁴ Fiji's limited amount of passive resistance in this particular context is investigating how a group Indian communities retaliated against British or colonial exploitation for their humanitarian rights and misrepresentation they experienced while they were in the quest for labour work opportunities that had been offered by the British institution, under *acclaimed 'organized and regulated'*⁵ system, popularly known as Indian Emigration System. It was a political consciousness, emerging among the Indian *diasporic communities*.

A systematic formulation of oppressive mode of plantation work that existed during the British colonial rule was more or less carried out with slightly different ways wherever it was imposed in British or any other foreign colonies, but the purpose of introducing Indian indentured labourers to overseas colonies for its plantation work was same. In order to achieve the purpose of bringing labourers to overseas colonies, colonial plantation masters had been given priority to suppress Indian to its maximum limit. In its consolidated form, indentured labour system was designed to suppress labourers' resistance and the complete control over plantation work. Significantly, *docile attitude*⁶ of Indian labourers could lead to the success of planters, and it was witnessed in Fiji and other overseas colonies too.

Under the uneven power structure of Indian Emigration System (IES), where labourers had no value of their voice, even against that frequently faced injustice encountered by such indentured labourers, where everything determined by European/ colonial masters only, collective or organised resistance had been perceived as impossible option from the Indian labourers brought in Fiji. Hence, Indian labour never engaged themselves in open and bootless encounter, as administrative machinery could easily control their any of such

³ A novelist, storywriter and critic, Giriraj Kishore, is popularly known for his work published work (novel) *Pahla Girmitiya*. The word *Girmitiya* emerged from the 'gimit' which was the misspelled form of agreement, spoken in Bhojpuri dialect in the area of Bihar and Eastern U.P and thus, a person who obtained agreement (labour contract) was popularly addressed as '*Girmitiya*'.

⁴ Diasporic communities comes under the notion of diaspora, which actually mean a sense of mobilisation from one place to other or state to other state or the country to other country under either organised or the unorganised emigration, where people initiate to have some new settlements beyond their own village or state or country cultural periphery. Restoration of cultural legacy, that may be moderated, is the challenge faced by those people in the host society. Across the disciplines, series of numerous amount of writings have been produced on overseas Indian migrants' communities that is still carried out under the literary and historical dichotomies.

⁵ British Government claimed that the Indian Emigration System is well defined, organised and regulated under the ordinances. However, it was a single side of the coin, pragmatic portrait was opposite to its declared documented form, agreement and emigration Act. There it seems as so-called organised and regulated system of labour recruitment.

⁶ Brij V. Lal considered Indi-Fijian resistance as a docile resistance.

resistances. Thus, they were confined to 'day-to-day' resistance only⁷ that is also known as 'weapon of the weak'.⁸

The Indian indentured labour emigration system was actually a system of labour importation introduced for British overseas colonies such as Fiji. It was a system of oppression through which the labourers from India were extracted largely by coercive control and the denial of legal justice. Such systems of power, however, are not self-maintaining, rather they are created, reproduced and further interpreted by human actors for their economic/capitalist gains by an attempt to control their subject. Whatever else it might be, but the sugar plantation culture structured around the exercise of power designed to control and discipline labour, as evinced in the case of Indian labourers in Fiji and other overseas colonies too. The purpose was to maintain output and production under such circumstances where workers had had no stake in the enterprise and the nature of the work itself intrinsically had been unattractive. Hence, the authoritarian character of the plantation and largely coercive control over the labourers had emerged under such an exploitative system.

It comes as no surprise that resistance against exploitative mode of operandi applied by British colonial plantation masters in Fiji, only four plantation strikes occurred. The nature of these strikes or resistance was either passive or docile. In 1886, in separate incidents at Navuso and Koronivia, labourers protested at being systematically over-tasked. These were serious affairs of plantation culture, involving 300 and 130 labourers respectively, but short-lived. There was another short-lived strike at Koronivia in 1888, that also prompted by over-tasking. However, interestingly, 1907 Labasa strike was unprecedented in the history of any resistance that occurred in the plantation economy of Fiji, where Indians were involved fewer labourers and the grievances were different—on this occasion being deceptive recruiting, low wages, physical abuse and unacceptable work.

Resistance emerged in the form of Labasa strike began on 6 April, 1907 on the complaint of seventeen Indian immigrants, they complained to the Inspector of Immigration, Mr. Russul was on their measures of distribution of ration by C. S. R. (Colonial Sugar Refinery Co.) at their plantation in *Labasa*. Later, their complaint also attached the issue of falsified recruitment, 'when fifty-six Punjabis and Pathans at Labasa in Fiji struck work, complaining of low pay, insufficient food and unsuitable work; they claimed that in India they had been promised employment as policemen'.⁹ One of the protestors, *Gunda Singh* pointed out that he was made aware of agreement (Girmit— that was consisting about the detail terms of labour services the indentured labourers were supposed to perform under the Plantation economy existed distant places) : 'I was only told that I would have Government work'. Another, Mahi,

⁷Michael Adas, Imperialism and Colonialism in Comparative Perspective, *The International History Review*, vol. 20.1998.

⁸ For the detail see, Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, 'Day to Day Resistance to Slavery', *Journal of Negro History*, 37 (1942), 388-419; Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American slavery and Russian serfdom* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 241-44; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven/London, 1985), p. 28-35.

⁹ K. L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 48.

claimed that when the Indenture Ordinance was read out, it stated that '[w]e would have government work, but not work as coolies'.¹⁰

The Magistrate, Mr. Brough who was dealing with their complaints, ordered them to go back to their work, and assured them that their complaints are referred to Suva for further investigation. Despite, their strike continued and they refused to work, even they denied receiving ration from the Government. Their complaints would be referred to Suva for investigation. They raised some fund for their survival, encouraged their shipmates at other plantations to associate with the cause. Such a strength of these strikers made plantation overseer dreadful; now they were asking for police protection by claiming that strikers had warned them, if they become barrier in their struggle, they might be killed.

Why do we need to recollect our past memories? Well, the circumstances under which Indian migrant communities could dare to resist in Fiji was really unique. There was limited amount of resistance observed during the entire indentured period Indian migrants spent in Fiji. Two strikes in 1886 at Navuso and Koronivia for the cause of systematically over-taxed issue. Third strike occurred in 1888 again at Koronivia for the same cause and forth one was the Labasa strike, however Labasa strike led by fewer plantation labourers (fifty-six labourers). Albeit it was a significant resistance, which was registered by Indian immigrants, as Labasa strike for the first time expressed Indian cause of predicament and produced resistance against their recruitment on false pretences conducted by the British recruiting agencies. There was another reason, that makes Labasa strike significant- this time it was resisted from the Punjabi and Pathans. Punjabi were considered relatively more of quarrelsome and thus always remained unpopular for the recruiters to be recruited as Indentured labourers.

It also indicates towards emerging political consciousness of Indian labourers in Fiji. The actions of Labasa strike under indenture was not only forbidden but also rare; and it is noticeable that the big plantation strikes in places such as Queensland, Fiji and Hawaii only occurred after the institution of indenture had been abolished. 'The strike is instructive because those involved were far from acquiescent and displayed an unusual degree of solidarity and determination. This caught both plantation and colonial authorities off their guard, and they struggled to find a solution when confronted with particularly tough and resolute labourer.'¹¹

At the end, it appears that the Indenture in Fiji, even elsewhere too, was a system of exploitation and oppression central to its purpose to extract Indian indentured emigrants largely by the mode of false pretences¹² and the Labasa strike brought an unprecedented event witnessed from its outset history of Indian indentured labour in Fiji. Until now (1907),

¹⁰Brij V. Lal, ChaloJahaji, p. 352.

¹¹Brij V. Lal, ChaloJahaji. ANU 2000.

¹²C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson report illustrate how ignorant and innocent desirous Indian poor labourers were sent to overseas colonies by creating false optimism as challenges awaited for these people in the overseas colonies had created there equal set of difficulty rather more painful. Various historical writings have thrown some light on such predicament of Indian emigrants faced in India, and after their arrival in Fiji as well. For detail, see J.W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London, 1910); C.F. Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth, 1918); Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the export of Indian labour overseas, 1830-1920* (London, 1974); K.L. Gillion, *The Fiji Indians: challenge to European dominance, 1920-1940* (Canberra, 1977); Ahmed Ali, *From Plantation to Politics: studies on Fiji Indians* (Suva, 1980).

retaliation from Indian 'coolies' (labourers) towards exploitative mode of Indian indentured system (plantation system) was never seen, but now Punjabi and Pathans have raised their voice to obtain their due rights and resisted against the fraudulence they encountered in their recruitment as labourer rather than the police work for which they desired and committed by recruiting agents (*arkati*). The outburst of Indian anger towards prevailed injustice in adapted methods of labour recruiting in India and the unlawful treatment at workplace that emerged in the form of Labasa strike (1907) was a clear representation of Indian *Girmitiyas* tacit voice, who could dare to express it until now.

The expression of resistance (Labasa strike, 1907) of challenging state authority had unfolded not the power of uniformed identity asserted by a small group of Indian indentured labourers to that oppressive administrative machinery, but, it also exposed the weakness of plantation work operationalised by the white European State instruments in Fiji and other overseas colonies. In other words, the resistance whether it had been in the docile form such as Koronivia, Labasa strikes in the history of Indian indentured emigration, specifically in the history of Fiji, was an expression of struggle between colonial exploitation and political consciousness of insubordinate Indians that later led their resistance in the form of Indian Nationalist Leaders to achieve their liberated status in Fiji.

In totality, such emerging resistance in the host society brings a kind of great transformation new patterns of cultural traits, their geographical and political positions in that society as well. It also influence their literary view as it happened in the case of Fiji's Indian migrants. The resistance came out in the form of Labasa strike is one of the example for bringing political consciousness among the Indian migrant communities. It also brings the ways developing a sense of belonging and their mutual commitments to resist the cause (s) of adversities and subsequently develop a comprehensive national cultural uniformity. Labasa strike in Fiji somewhere provided a take-off point that ultimately led to ensure their existence in the contemporary society with the sense of dignity.

In the socio-cultural history of Fiji's Indians, the emerging docile resistance like Koronivia (1888) and Labasa (1907) gives an insightful indication that how significant could be the assertion of an organised mobilisation of labourers, which had been prominently influential for the agrarian pre-capitalist economy. In the contemporary economic structure of global world, imitating similar pressure on the masters/employers that can determine the aspiration of workers /labourers alive. Hence such studies of such human relations of labour and capitalist classes are well connected to shape up the socio and cultural order of that society whether it had been occurring in own country or on the foreign country, Colonial Exploitation and its docile/passive Resistance produced by the Fiji's Indian Indentured Migrants provide such an example of their liberation from the bondage of indentured labour servitude.¹³

¹³ For detail, see Gyan Prakash, *Bonded Stories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India*, South Asian Studies 44, (CUP, 1990).

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