

Mobilise to Immobilise: Recruitment of Indian Indentured Labourers for British Sugar Plantations in Mauritius

AMIT KUMAR MISHRA

Associate Professor, School of Global Affairs, Ambedkar University Delhi, Karampura
Campus, New Delhi. E-mail: amitmishra@aud.ac.in

Abstract: *This paper attempts to critically explore the recruitment and mobilisation of Indian indentured labourers to work on sugar plantations in Mauritius to engage with the larger global mobilisation and circulation of labourers in nineteenth century to facilitate the growth of imperial plantation capitalism. This paper attempts to make the departure from studying recruitment and labour mobilisation as a 'static system' to study it as a 'dynamic strategy' which was mended and modified to suit the purpose of planters, by situating it within the historical context of recruitment of Indian indentured labourers for work on sugar plantations in Mauritius.*

Keywords: *Indentured labour, labour mobilisation, sugar plantation, Mauritius*

Received : 11 January 2022

Revised : 31 January 2022

Accepted : 17 February 2022

Published : 15 July 2022

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Mishra, A.K. 2022. Mobilise to Immobilise: Recruitment of Indian Indentured Labourers for British Sugar Plantations in Mauritius. *South Asian History, Culture and Archaeology*, 2: 1, pp. 9-23.

Introduction

The expansion of the capitalist world economy under the aegis of imperialism necessitated a colossal demand for labour, especially for the labour-intensive plantation work which could not be satisfied with the locally available labour force in the regions of expansion. The problem of scarcity was further augmented by the abolition of slavery in British empire in 1833. To meet this increased demand of labour, a new labour regime, known as Indian indentured labour regime, was inaugurated in which Indian labourers were recruited to work on plantation settlements of the empire like Mauritius, Trinidad, Fiji, etc. Recruitment of indentured labourers had a very profound and critical implication in the working of indentured labour regime. It was also a subject of grave concern for the colonial governments primarily for two reasons: first, an effective recruitment system was essential for securing the required supply of labourers and second, the malpractices associated with recruitment such as kidnapping, deception etc.

earned an ill repute for the indenture system which was articulated by the anti-indenture lobby in their campaign for its abolition. Historiography of the indentured labour recruitment is polarized between the two opinions – the ‘deception approach’ and the ‘free choice approach’. The *deception approach*, first promulgated by the anti-indenture groups such as British and Foreign Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society and Indian nationalists, and later adopted by Tinker and many others, lay emphasise on the incidents of fraudulent methods, kidnapping in the recruitment system and question the recruits’ ability to understand the complexities of the contract.¹ As an antithesis to the ‘deception approach’ which asserts that the emigrants were forced into indentured emigration, the *free choice approach*² put emphasise on the ‘informed choice of emigrants’ and argue that there was no need of a labour mobilization strategy as ‘the colonial recruiting agencies only tapped the stream of migratory workers which already existed’³. The primary function of recruiting mechanism, according to this approach, was only to facilitate and direct the stream of emigrants towards the specific locations.

Both these approaches essentially discuss the nature of recruitment and conceive it as a static structure regulated through government regulations. The recruitment of indentured labourers was conducted through a ‘recruitment strategy’ which evolved in a historical process as per the needs of the destinations and the circumstantial necessities to maintain the inflow of emigrants. This paper attempts to make the departure from studying recruitment and labour mobilisation as a ‘static system’ to study it as a ‘dynamic strategy’ by situating it within the historical context of recruitment of Indian indentured labourers for work on sugar plantations in Mauritius.

Working of Indentured Recruitment

In this section I shall be discussing the structure and problems of the recruitment of indentured labourers for emigration to Mauritius. Since the recruitment was one of the most controversial parts of the indenture system, almost all the legislations related to the indenture system addressed this aspect. Therefore, in this section we may find certain repetitions from the chapter one of this work in the description of certain legislations. This apparent repetition became imperative for me to make the description of the structure of recruitment coherent and comprehensive. However, in this section, the discussion of various Acts is limited only to recruitment part and that too on the functional implications while in chapter one, I have discussed their implications for the indenture system as a whole. The system of indentured emigration began as a private initiative of Mauritian planters. These planters would send their requirements of labourers to the various firms located in port towns in India who would then procure labourers through local recruiters, known as *arkatis*, *duffadars* (in north India) and *maistries* (in South Western India). These recruiters were paid ‘per head’ or according to the numbers of emigrants recruited by them and their remuneration was drawn from the six months advance wages supposedly paid to the intending emigrants⁴ at the time of entering into the contract. From the very beginning, indentured labourers from India became the preferred choice of Mauritian planters, and within four years of the commencement of the system more than 25,000 Indian labourers entered Mauritius under the indentured system. Because of the heavy demands, the recruitment operation expanded manifold. Large number of firms set up operations⁵ to procure labourers through native recruiters and the primary motive of both the agencies of indentured recruitment, the recruiting firms and recruiters, were to meet the demand from the colony at any cost and by every possible means. There was no regulatory measure imposed upon the recruitment process by the Government of India except Act V of 1837 aimed at ascertaining that the emigrants are formally engaged, and that too was enacted only after three years of the commencement of system in 1834. Heavy demand of labourers and the peculiar mode of remuneration to the recruiters, which lured them to maximize their gains by

recruiting maximum number of recruits, led to a number of malpractices in the recruitment process, including deception and kidnapping. These malpractices were further aggravated by the absence of any effective regulation by the Government and very soon the problems of recruitment began to blow up. T.P. Woodcock of Bengal Civil Services who visited Mauritius in 1836, reported the prevalence of misrepresentation by the recruiters.

‘Island was described to them in glowing terms and advantage taken of their ignorance to provoke the belief that every necessity of life was cheap, labour light, and the voyage would only occupy ten days’⁶.

He concluded that ‘the manner in which they (emigrants) are collected’ is the chief abuse of the system.⁷ To bypass the police observation at ports, and despatch the recruits collected through force or kidnapping, it was a common practice to embark emigrants off-shore, in the river.⁸ The high mortality rate of emigrants during voyage also had its roots in the abuses associated with the recruitment. Since the recruiters were paid on the basis of the total numbers of recruits at the port of embarkation, irrespective of their physical fitness or ability to undertake such long voyages, recruiters induced many unfit and aged people to emigrate who in turn could not bear the vagaries of weather and voyage and many of them died en route.⁹ Instances of kidnapping, deceit and heavy mortality on ships carrying emigrants to Mauritius were widely reported by the anti indenture humanitarian groups, people and press in India as well as England. They used these abuses of recruitment to reinforce their demands for the abolition of the indenture system. Finally, committees were set up to enquire into the alleged malpractices in the indenture system, most of which were associated with the recruitment. Subsequently, the emigration of Indian labourers under the indenture system was completely prohibited by Government of India vide Act XIV on 29 May 1839, though to be resumed soon in Madras and Bombay. In its report dated 14 October 1840, Dickens Committee (also referred to as the Calcutta Committee) found every allegation against indenture system to be true. The report of Dickens Committee revealed that:

‘the coolies and other natives exported to Mauritius and elsewhere were (generally speaking) induced to come to Calcutta by gross misrepresentation and deceit practiced upon them by native crimps, styled duffadars and arkotties employed by European and Anglo Indian undertakers who were mostly cognizant of these frauds’.¹⁰

It also noticed considerable occurrence of kidnapping in forcing recruits into emigration:

‘Kidnapping prevailed to a very considerable extent and the coolies while kept in Calcutta itself and its neighbourhood were actually in a state of close imprisonment’.¹¹

Dickens Committee concluded that no system or regulation would ever, in practice, suffice to counteract the falsehoods and secure a just performance of system and therefore it recommended that it would be better to abandon the indenture ‘trade’.¹² However, the real motive behind this recommendation was something else than the genuine concern for the plight of poor recruits. They (committee members) were concerned more in protecting the paternalistic, humane image of the empire, which was very meticulously painted through emancipation of slaves empire wide, from the damaging attacks of anti indenture liberal lobby in England and Indian public opinion. The Dickens Committee emphasized that, ‘permission to renew this traffic would weaken the moral influence of the British government throughout the world and deaden or utterly destroy the effect of all future remonstrances and negotiations respecting slave trade’¹³. In the wake of heavy losses to colonial revenues because of the labour crisis on plantations, the exigencies for resumption of emigration of Indian labourers under indenture system were gradually being felt across the administrative and commercial spheres. Mauritian planters formed

a Free Labour Association (FLA) to collectively lobby for reopening of emigration. FLA submitted an all-inclusive and comprehensive plan to Governor of Mauritius for conducting the emigration process under the government supervision and setting up a fair system of labour mobilization. Among others, the two most important provisions of this plan which worked as quintessential elements for all the future legislations of Government of India to regulate the indenture recruitment were:

- i) Appointment of agents at the ports to conduct the recruitment and embarkation under government control.
- ii) Proper information about the working conditions, wages and other allowances to the intending emigrants by the agent.¹⁴

Finally emigration was resumed and to put proper safeguards, Government of India enacted Act XV of 1842, heavily in accordance with the provisions of plan of Free Labour Association which the Governor of Mauritius, Smith had forwarded to the Indian government. Act XV of 1842 established direct control of Indian government on the recruitment process as it abolished recruitment through private enterprise. To supervise the recruitment and emigration process, it provided for appointment of Emigration Agents at each port (Calcutta, Madras and Bombay) at fixed salaries instead of a commission according to the numbers dispatched. Indian government was determined to remove the malpractices associated with the recruitment. Therefore, to give teeth to these regulatory means, and to ensure their effective implementation, it provided for stringent punitive measures for any violation, especially for kidnapping.

‘Every person who shall attempt, by means of intoxication or by false imprisonment, or other means of crimping to export any native on board contrary to the provisions of this Act, shall be liable to be punished in a fine not exceeding Rs. 500 or imprisonment not exceeding six months’¹⁵.

Under this newly introduced government controlled recruitment, emigration agencies were set up at the ports of embarkation – Calcutta, Madras and Bombay to replace commercial agencies. Captains T.E. Rogers and Bidon were appointed as Emigration Agents at Calcutta and Madras ports respectively and the overall supervision of the recruitment and embarkation process was placed under the control of Emigration Agents who was responsible to the government. However, in procuring labourers, Emigration Agent had to take services of middlemen (arkatis) who were remunerated according to the number of recruits brought into the depot. As the emigration was opened to different locations, Emigration Agents employed recruiters in localities who would recruit people in villages and towns and then dispatch these recruits to Calcutta for transportation to colonies.

This reformed system, however failed to eliminate the abuses in the recruitment as it intended to do because the mode of recruitment was very similar to the first experiment except a control mechanism put from the above. Complaints about abuses in recruitment began to appear. *Bengal Harkaru*, a Calcutta based weekly newspaper sympathetic to Indian cause, noted the deceit and forced emigration:

‘cases have been brought to light of coolies inveigled under false pretences from the interior, of their illegal detention in Calcutta and even of an attempt to force them on the public wharf to embark against their will for the Mauritius’¹⁶

Commenting upon the vainness of any regulatory measure in effectively removing the abuses associated with the recruitment, John Scoble, Secretary of the British and Foreign Anti Slavery Society, described the system as ‘incurably vicious’ in light of the numerous reporting of abuses. He wrote to the Governor of India,

‘Already the result (of second experiment) appears to have been most melancholy. If the statements in the public papers are to be believed – and there seems to be no ground for discrediting them – the very same evils which before existed have broken out again. Persons were inveigled from the interior under false pretences, held in a kind of imprisonment in Calcutta, and smuggled onboard ship; the whole business being conducted by the duffadars, or crimps, and being nothing short of systematic kidnapping’¹⁷.

Colonial authorities held the recruiters (duffadars) responsible not only for most of the abuses related to the recruitment but also for the high costs of introduction of emigrant labour force and its inferior physical quality. Following this opinion, when Charles Anderson, Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius, visited India for inspection of emigration system, his most important recommendation was uprooting of the whole duffadars and crimping machinery¹⁸ because he had, on earlier occasion, noted the frequent occurrences of frauds and kidnapping,

‘many of them have been actually kidnapped from their own country, which they have all been induced to leave under circumstances of gross fraud and by false and deceitful representation’¹⁹

However, the real motive of this determination of Government of Mauritius for removing the middlemen was to reduce the cost of introduction of labour in Mauritius by saving the bounty paid to duffadar for each recruit, and not any genuine concern for the protection of emigrants’ interests.²⁰ Following the recommendations of the Governor of Mauritius, Anderson*, Government of India passed Act XXI of 1843 which restricted the emigration to Mauritius from port of Calcutta only and as a measure to place direct control over the recruitment and embarkation, and a cross check to the Emigration Agent, who was an appointee of Government of Mauritius, it provided for the appointment of Protector of Emigrants at the port of embarkation who was to be appointed by the Government of India. Subsequently Captain Rogers (who was Emigration Agent till then) was appointed as Protector of Emigrants at Calcutta and Thomas Caird (a former Civil Servant from United Provinces) became the Emigration Agent. Act XXI also fixed the quota of emigration to Mauritius for 500 per month.

Apart from the high costs of introduction, another reason of concern for the colonial authorities, especially in Mauritius within the existing system of recruitment was the recruitment of unable, unfit labourers which not only adversely affected the efficiency of indentured work force but also responsible for high mortality rate during voyage. Figures of high mortality rate caused a lot of discomfort among the administrators of indenture as it was constantly used by the anti indenture lobby to discredit the system. Governor Anderson wrote to Colonial Secretary:

‘The person hitherto employed in procuring emigrants, and whose profits increased with the numbers procured, would be very scrupulous about the condition of the notice presented by them... hundreds of natives have been passed,... whose infirm, decrepit, and diseased appearance could not have escaped the most inattentive observer... Can it then be a matter of surprise that numerous deaths have occurred on the passage, or that so many should have reached the colony in a state of infirmity or disease’²¹.

The growing demand from Mauritius led to a strong resistance from Mauritian planters to the system of restricting emigration to a fixed quota and only to Calcutta port, and emigration for Mauritius was resumed in 1849 from other ports as well. The plantation lobby demanded the extension of recruitment operations and appointment of ‘auxiliary agents in principal recruiting districts and establishment of sub depots to facilitate the recruitment’.²² After securing the augmentation of labour supply, the next aim of planters was to reduce the cost of introduction. And to achieve both these goals, they resorted to employ returnee emigrants for recruitment as they were expected not only to attract more recruits but

also to push down the increasing fees demanded by the local recruiters and the coercive methods used by them which were earning bad repute for the system.²³ Governor Anderson noted that,

‘It would perhaps be found of much advantage if some of the most intelligent of the immigrants who return were attached as ‘peon’ in the office of the Emigrant Agent, and employed in pointing out to the other natives the advantages which emigration to the Mauritius holds out to both sexes of the population of India’²⁴.

Despite these efforts to control the abuses associated with the recruitment, fraudulent methods and violation of regulations continued to prevail throughout as reported by the various enquiries instituted to investigate the working of recruitment. H.N.D. Beyts visited India in 1861 to investigate the recruitment system and suggest possible improvements, noted the continuing prevalence of unscrupulous tactics used by the recruiters and many other irregularities in recruitment. He also accentuated the limitation of Protector of Emigrants in preventing these abuses. He described the method of recruitment ‘radically defective’ and urged the Government of India to take necessary steps to check the evils.²⁵ In 1870s, evidence before Geoghegan, who was preparing a comprehensive report on emigration from India, described the recruitment as ‘a regularly organized system of kidnapping’²⁶. Similarly in 1880s, two enquiries conducted by Major Pitcher in UP and Grierson in Bengal uncovered the pervasiveness of fraudulent methods in recruitment,²⁷ Grierson, however, showed some reservation about false pretences. It would be interesting to note that despite recognising the abuses associated with the recruitment, they did not recommend the abolition of system. The general concern over continuing abuses associated with the indentured recruitment is questioned by some revisionist scholars; most notably P.C. Emmer who argues that what distinguished indentured system from slavery was the process of recruitment and emigrants made deliberate choice to go overseas, without any fraudulent method being used by recruiters. To quote Emmer:

‘Little evidence exists indicating that fraud, deception and even kidnapping were widely used in order to meet the yearly demand for indentured labours overseas. On the contrary, many precautions were taken, both by the Indian authorities as well by the recruiting agencies in order to prevent irregular recruiting practices’²⁸.

This revisionist portrayal of recruitment system as free from evil is based on rather a historic approach and overlooks the plethora of historical evidence which establishes beyond doubt the rampant practice of unlawful recruitment methods. These abuses were recognized from time to time not only by the anti indenture collective but by the colonial administration and recruiters as well. The continued reporting of abuses associated with recruitment of Indian labourers necessitated the structural improvement in the system of recruitment. After some impromptu legislative experiments, Government of India introduced Act XIII of 1864 which continued to govern the recruitment process till the abolition of system in 1915-16, with certain modifications through Act XXI of 1883. Under Act XIII of 1864, all recruiters had to be licensed issued by Protector of Emigrants (appointed by Government of India) and countersigned by the District Magistrates of recruiting district and they had to wear their identifying badges. For recruitment job, agents were to be paid fixed salaries instead of commissions upon the numbers of emigrants despatched. To ascertain that recruits fully understood the terms of service and were going of their own wish and not under any force, all recruits had to be taken before a magistrate in the district of recruitment. It also legally defined the duties of Protector of Emigrants and introduced penal provisions in terms of cash fines, imprisonment or cancellation of license for any violation of the prescribed pattern of recruitment. Protector had the rights to refuse the embarkation of any emigrant

who, in his opinion, did not understand the terms of engagement or had been introduced in through misrepresentation or fraud.²⁹

On the basis of the above narrative we can draw a descriptive map of the indentured recruitment operations and its different structural layers. (See Illustration) On top of this structure was the Emigration Agent of a particular labour importing colony. He would seldom recruit himself and his main job was also to manage the emigration depot established at the ports of embarkation. Emigration Agents employed head recruiters or sub agents who were supposed to look after the sub depots in regions. These head recruiters were paid a fixed salary and commission on the number of actually embarked emigrants, which varied according to the distance between the recruiting area and port of embarkation. To conduct actual recruiting in localities, head recruiters employed ordinary recruiters who were both licensed and unlicensed. These ordinary recruiters either received salary or commission, though the practice of paying commission was more common. According to Grierson they received Rs. 5 to 10 for each male and Rs. 7 to 14 for each female who would go to Calcutta.³⁰ Therefore, despite all the deliberation to weed out *arkatis*, the actual recruitment was still conducted by the ordinary recruiters (*arkatis*) in localities and Saha had very rightly underlined their inevitable significance, 'It is beyond doubt, therefore, that the ordinary recruiter or *arkati* was the backbone of the whole recruiting operation, throughout the whole period of emigration...'³¹ Prevalence of unlicensed recruiters was noted as late as in 1871 by the District Magistrate of Ghazipur, which was one of the most prominent recruiting grounds for indentured emigration,

'The licensed recruiter has in his employ a number of unlicensed men called *arkatias* and while the licensed recruiter sits leisurely in some district these creatures of his go out into all the neighbouring districts and collect emigrants. The *arkatias* entice the villagers with a wonderful account of the place for which the emigrants are wanted and bring in their victims for long distances to the neighbourhood of the headquarters of the licensed recruiter (sub depots)'³².

These ordinary recruiters (often unlicensed *arkatis*) approached people in villages, markets, fairs, road side, pilgrims, temples etc. and mobilize them to emigrate by luring about the benefits of working in the said place of which distance and location was more than often misrepresented.³³ Then he would take all these potential emigrants to the licensed recruiter or the head recruiter. Licensed recruiter or head recruiter housed these recruits in sub depots, where their names and other details would be registered. The recruits were housed in sub depots for several days without being allowed to go out. They got uncooked rations and blankets (in winters)³⁴. In sub depot, they were examined by a Magistrate to ascertain that they had decided to emigrate by their free will. After Magistrate's examination, recruits were transported to the port of embarkation and handed over to the Emigration Agent. At the port of embarkation they were housed in an emigration depot where they were examined by a medical officer to check their physical condition and Protector of Emigrants to ascertain that they are fully aware of the terms of the contract and going without any pressure. After Protector's examination and consent, recruits were allowed to embark. Recruitment process was not a smooth sail for recruiters either, who had to procure required numbers of emigrants despite several problems in their working such as the hostility they had to face in localities and competition and clashes between rival recruiters of different colonies. In recruiting regions or zones, recruiters had to face hostility not only from the public but also from the administrators and police who would harass them and prevent recruiting operations. Major Pitcher who made a comprehensive enquiry into the recruitment of indentured labourers in UP noted that,

'...that the recruiter, though occasionally guilty of malpractices in the exercise of what is looked upon by a number of people as not a very reputable calling, has to contend with many unnecessary

difficulties, that he is frequently impeded in most objectionable ways by the police and the underlings of the court.³⁵

Major Pitcher further reported that ‘Perhaps the feeling most general to rich and poor, in which even native Deputy Collectors and Inspectors of Police share, is that the coolies are made to eat pork or beef, are deprived of caste..., and forcibly converted to Christianity’.³⁶ These prejudices provoked the local administrators to obstruct the recruitment in order to pacify the popular discontent against indenture. This popular discontent and hostility against recruiters aggravated at the turn of the century when a strong anti indenture movement was launched by the Indian nationalists in localities,³⁷ as the following pamphlet, circulated in Eastern Uttar Pradesh & Bihar, warns:

‘Save yourself from depot-wallahs.

Don’t get enmeshed in their meshes, you will repent.

They spoil your religion under the pretence of service. Don’t hear sweet talks, they are your enemies.’³⁸

District Magistrates would refuse to allow the recruiters to conduct recruitment in districts by refusing to countersign their licenses, ordering the closure of sub depots or by just delaying the registration proceedings. Local police would also interfere; frighten the recruits by telling stories about losing their religion, and of harsh working conditions.³⁹ However Grierson revealed that the obstructions placed by the local police were less attributed to their prejudices against indentured emigration than their greed. Local policemen would often demand graft and at Howrah Bridge in Calcutta, they refused to pass the bands of recruits unless they were paid a bribe of Rs. 2 or Rs. 3.⁴⁰ The other problematic factor for recruiters was the rivalry and jealousy from recruiters of other labour importing colonies.⁴¹ Beyts who came to India from Mauritius in 1861, reported frequent clashes between different recruiters in Raniganj, an important sub depot for recruits coming from districts of Bihar. Beyts quoted the magistrate of Raniganj, ‘there were a great many different duffadars, arcotties (crimps) at Raneegunge... quarrels frequently occur amongst them’⁴².

On innumerable occasions, the basic issue for the clash between the recruiters was one recruiter enticing away the recruits whom some other colony’s recruiter had recruited. In stiff competition for procuring emigrants, recruiters often indulged in appropriation of emigrants from sub depots of other colonies. To lure potential emigrants and distract them from going to another depot, recruiters would often spread rumours about the harsh working conditions in rival colonies, ill treatment etc. In 1856, Emigration Agent for West Indies at Madras, Mr. Thomson, blamed Mauritian recruiters for difficulties in procuring labourers for West Indies. He complained that the Mauritian recruiters... ‘are spreading such reports about the West Indies, saying that if they go their arms and legs will be cut off, and that they will never see their country again...’⁴³ On another occasion, Emigration Agent for British Guiana complained that the two batches of coolies collected for this agency at Benares were decoyed by the recruiters of Mauritian agency.⁴⁴ A similar case was reported again, through this time recruiters of Mauritius were at the receiving end, when recruiters for French colonies tried to take away the coolies recruited by the agents of the Mauritian depot.⁴⁵ Whenever these incidents got reported, authorities in-charge of emigration and magistrate in localities and Protectors at the ports interfered and tried to restore the recruits to the agents who appeared to be the genuine recruiters.

Recruiters

Recruiters were very critical part of the entire labour mobilisation process. While describing the recruiting staff for overseas emigration and discussing what was their socio-economic background, contemporary observers and sources have made completely contradictory observations. Towards the

end of the indenture system, J.A. Brown, in his deposition before the Sanderson Committee, noted that the job of recruiter is considered to be very disgraceful because ‘...the recruiting staff is very bad, the recruiters are the worst kind of men they could possibly have. They are generally very low class men’.⁴⁶ Similar contempt could be traced during the earlier period as well: ‘the recruiters employed for the purpose were said to be low caste, who had no motives in mind other than to make fortunes’⁴⁷. Because of the nefarious methods used by recruiters, there was strong antagonism against them among the general public, local administrators and the police, which could be seen as the possible reason for non-involvement of respectable section of native society in the recruitment process. As Major Pitcher had pointed out:

‘the amount of ridicule and abuse which recruiters stand from the bazaar, the undoubted fact that their occupation is much looked down upon by the well to do classes, and the strong antagonism with which they frequently have to cope with both in the police and in the district offices. These, together with the absence of any sort of controlling authority to promptly punish or give support, made it difficult to attract the right type of persons to serve as recruiters’⁴⁸.

Contrary to the above observation which describes the recruiters as being of low caste and class, let us look at the following evidence which shows that the recruiters came from a high social strata. Deputy Magistrate of Shahabad noted in Grierson’s report that ‘They are generally Brahmins, Rajputs or Mohammedens’, who do not act generally in a criminal or dishonest way to procure the labourers they want.⁴⁹ These contradictory observations make it difficult to determine their background. However, collating all the observations leads to two conclusions. First, recruiters came from all sections of the native society and second, there were two tiers of recruiters. We should discuss the hierarchical order of recruiters first as it would help us understand their cross section representation. There were two types of recruiters functional in localities – head recruiters who were licensed and recognized by the law and ordinary or subordinate recruiters who were unlicensed and mostly employed by the head recruiter. Head recruiters were ‘superior class of men who have some capital’⁵⁰ because of the resources needed for procuring the license. They belonged to ‘high castes’ and traditionally affluent class of society – money lenders, petty landlords, traders, etc. Only these people were given licenses and authorized to conduct recruitment because the authorities perceived that only people with some influence in society and enough resources of their own would effectively mobilize people to emigrate and these people would not indulge in fraudulent methods because of the fear of losing their reputation. Obtaining recruits in localities and their dispatch was a tedious task, making it difficult for the recruiters of superior class who were already involved in various other activities and who had taken up the job of recruiter only for prospects of adding to their fortunes. As Hobsbawm has observed:

‘... a variety of intermediary entrepreneur has had a financial interest in doing so. Where there is a large demand for labour (or land) on one side, a population ignorant of conditions in the receiving country on the other and a long distance between, the agent or contractor will flourish’.⁵¹

Actual recruitment in localities was often conducted by unlicensed *arkatis* who formed the second strata of recruiters. They came predominantly from the lower sections of society. Major Pitcher observed that *arakatis* were from the class ‘which supplies *sepoys*, *cutcherychaprasis* and domestic servants... who had previously been employed as bearers, *khitmatgars*, cavalry *sawars*, infantry and police *sepoys*, *cutcherychaprasis* and so on...’⁵². On their caste affiliation, Grierson noted that they could be Brahmins (highest in caste order) and Chamars (lowest) but he too emphasised the relatively poor economic background of *arkatis*, who came from class of men of *chaprasis* or domestic servants, cloth

sellers, and were not much better than the class of people they try to mobilise.⁵³ There is a derogatory contempt in official descriptions of these recruiters who, as colonial officials perceived, were in a condition of economic distress because of debt, gambling, loss of job etc. In official narratives, this strata of unrecognized recruiters (arkatis) were held responsible for all the abuses associated with indentured recruitment as these arkatis would turn in troublesome characters, shift from one agency to other and resort to fraudulent methods, even kidnapping, in procuring recruits so they can earn a few rupees.⁵⁴

Recruiters came from all social categories – they were Hindus, Muslims, Brahmins, Rajputs, Pathans, Chamaras, Harijan and so on.⁵⁵ Brij Lal, a noted scholar of indenture Diaspora in Fiji, studied the recruiters' origin in Banaras region and tried to question the view that recruiters were from lower strata of society. He has observed that the majority of recruiters were from the upper castes and Muslims and there were few from the lower castes.⁵⁶ Brij Lal's observation emanates from data compiled from, '*Register of Recruiters for the Benaras district for the decade 1882-1892*'. This was an official document and therefore it is possible that it listed only the licensed recruiters working in the region who obviously belonged to the upper strata of social structure for reasons already discussed above.⁵⁷

Though at times emigration agencies desired to employ women recruiters 'in order to recruit more females labourers',⁵⁸ recruitment primarily remained a male dominated job owing to its negative image in the minds of the people, rough working conditions and other practical difficulties. However, there were instances of women who worked as recruiters. Evidence of many coolies who returned to Madras from Mauritius revealed that a woman named *Curpayeeor Caroopyee* was actively involved and her agency recruited a large number of emigrants for Mauritius.⁵⁹

Recruitment and Returnee Emigrants

Parties involved with indentured emigration – planters and administrators both, were constantly trying to make the recruitment process effective, fair and economically viable. Among the various alternatives with which they experimented, one of the most important strategic experimentation was employing returnee emigrants in the recruitment process, who in official perception, would attract more people by their improved condition and wealth and by informing people about the enormous opportunities available in Mauritius. The official desire to involve returnees in recruitment process was first expressed by Charles Anderson during his visit to India. He stated that:

'It would perhaps be found of much advantage if some of the most intelligent of the immigrants who return were attached as 'peons' in the office of the Emigration Agent, and employed in pointing out to the other natives the advantage which emigration to the Mauritius holds out to both sexes of the population of India'⁶⁰.

He recommended for employing those returnees who come back with substantial savings as it had already stimulated the growth of emigration to Mauritius.⁶¹ Apart from inducing people in localities to follow their path of fortune through emigration, they were also the preferred choice because they were expected to bring down the cost of recruitment and to avoid many coercive methods of recruiting employed by the local recruiters.⁶² They could disseminate information about the destination better than local recruiters, who themselves had no clue of the location and working conditions of the destination which led to the alleged deception. Role of returnee emigrants in labour mobilisation is one of most important findings of Marina Carter's research on Indian diaspora in Mauritius.⁶³ She has examined this role of returnees in the larger context of labour mobilization and labour management, and production relations of plantation economy. According to Carter, use of returnees not only helped

in maintaining the dynamism of labour mobilization and sustaining the inflow of Indian emigrants to Mauritius but also in managing the immigrant labourers on plantation. She argues:

‘It (use of returnees) was also a means of maintaining a migrant stream to the colony in the face of rising competition between labour exporters. The study of returnee recruiting helps to explain the manner in which strategies for reproduction of the work force evolved over a period. Such recruiters, who often received sirdarships when they returned to Mauritius with a band of new immigrants, played an important role ...in the management of labour on sugar estates,..’⁶⁴

To substantiate her arguments, the evidence Carter has used is of figures of emigrants accompanying returnees. For example, she quotes the case of Mauderbuccuss and Chuttoo who brought 43 men from their home district of Azimgar (Azamgarh) in 1848, 141 immigrants who arrived in Mauritius on board *Champion* in 1850 had come with 17 returnees. She has very meticulously compiled a table of number of returnees arriving in Mauritius between 1849 and 1853 and the bands of emigrants collected by them.⁶⁵ However, a careful observation leads to the conclusion that the use of returnees in labour mobilization was not always a successful and effective venture for procuring emigrants and curtailing the abuses. It was definitely successful in initial decades but in later phase of indenture emigration the role of returnees had lost its instrumental position in labour mobilization. In 1883, Grierson observed:

‘Returned coolies as a rule are of little use as recruiters. A returned coolie either comes back successful or unsuccessful. If the former, he is too well off to undertake the unpopular duties of recruiter. If, the latter, he is for obvious reasons not suitable’.⁶⁶

Similarly returnees often failed to perform the second task expected from them by administration of indenture as well as by Marina Carter, i.e. to revamp the image of indenture system and provide efficient labour control in Mauritius by using their influence on the emigrants recruited by them. Instead, they discredited the system by their activities as the Protector in Mauritius highlighted in his annual report of 1859:

‘The strategies and expedients these Sirdars (who used to go to India with a view of inducing newly recruited emigrants) used to resort to, for the purpose of acquiring their ascendancy over the recruits despatched from India, the disgraceful use they made of that influence... had reached to an extent which reflected discredit on our immigration.’⁶⁷

The second aspect, which initially worked for the success of returnees in recruitment but paradoxically worked against them as well in later period, is their crucial role in shaping the popular perception of indenture. Many emigrants returned from Mauritius as paupers, without any saving and in infirm physical condition. In India, they disseminated information about harsh working conditions, exploitation, and loss of religious and cultural values in Mauritius. In complete contrast to the rosy picture of working in Mauritius portrayed by the rich returnees, these distraught returned immigrants portray Mauritius as a site of despair and people would lose everything if they go there. These tales of failure and loss of emigrants in Mauritius was widely propagated by the anti-indenture lobby in India to dissuade people from emigrating to Mauritius. As a result, when returnees tried to mobilize people to go to Mauritius, they had to face enormous hostility in localities. Therefore, the stories of failed returned emigrants severely restricted the utility of returnees in labour mobilization. The third limitation of the role of the returnees, which Marina Carter herself has admitted, was its failure in Madras and Bombay regions and in a competitive commercial recruitment. She admits:

‘...both at Bombay and Madras local contractors continued to exercise overall control of the

labour supply...’ and ‘Returnee recruiters certainly could not operate as effectively in a situation of competition for labour, when rival capitalist were recruiting in the proximity and offering financial inducements to attract indentured labour to other overseas destinations’.⁶⁸

The strategy of labour recruitment through returnees succeeded more at informal levels of mobilization, like promoting family emigration – returnees generally took their family members – wives, children, brother, sister etc. while re-emigrating to Mauritius. Therefore, although on occasions returnees played an important role in indentured labour mobilization for Mauritius, it cannot be blown out of proportion. A large-scale human displacement like overseas emigration of Indian labourers under indentured system required two essentials, first, the creation of a vulnerable, volatile, available work force which was ready to dislocate itself to new locations and, second, a well-structured system to facilitate this movement. This paper makes a modest attempt to explain how the recruitment of Indian indentured labourers was conducted in a well-structured, dynamic manner to work on overseas plantation settlements.

Notes

1. Tinker, Hugh, *New System of Slavery*; Saha, Panchanan, *Emigration of Indian Labour*.
2. Emmer, P.C., *The Meek Hindu*, Lal, Brij. V., *Girmitiyas*. Lal however recognises the existence of frauds and deception in recruitment.
3. Emmer, *Meek Hindu*, p.189.
4. *Report of Dickens Committee*, 1841, p. 16. Committee observed that ‘of the six months’ advance wage, to be paid to the labourers on entering into the contract, labours got little or nothing.
5. In Calcutta some of the prominent firms engaged in procuring labourers were – Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co.; Chapman and BarelaySmith, Ewing and Co.; Honley Dowson and Bestel, Jardine, Lyall Matheson & Co., Scott and Co., etc. *Report of Dickens Committee*; Prog. No.46, Gen.(Emi.), dt. 17 March 1841, WBSA.
6. *Papers Respecting the East Indian Labourers Bill 1838*, *Report of Mr. JP Woodcock*, dt. 19 November 1836.
7. *ibid*, p. 156.
8. Evidence of Capt. James Rapson, Appendix, pp. 1-5 ‘Out of 336 emigrants on board ship Sophia, only 140 embarked at the part and rest embarked while its passage towards sea; without any pass or permit from police’, *Report of Dickens Committee*.
9. Mortality on board ship William Wilson, 23 February, 26 passengers and 5 crew workers died. On Ship Indian Oak, 29 March, 6 passengers died, *Papers Respecting the East Indian Labourers Bill*, OIOC.
10. *Report of Dickens Committee*, p. 2.
11. *ibid*, p. 3.
12. *ibid*, pp. 10-12.
13. *ibid*, p. 11.
14. Free Labour Association’s plan of immigration from India, Madagascar, Muscat and others, PP, Vol. xxx, No. 26, 1842.
15. PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 530, 1844.
16. *Bengal Harkaru*, dt. 20 October 1843, NL.
17. PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 530, 1844,

18. PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 356, 1844; *Select Documents*, Vol. II, Doc. 2.5, pp. 110-12.
19. Anderson cited in the petition submitted by the British and Foreign Anti Slavery Society, *Emigration from India: The Export of Coolies and Other Labourers to Mauritius*, OIOC.
20. *Select Documents*, Vol. II, Doc. 2.5, p. 86.
* in 1843, the name of the Mauritian Governor was C. Anderson and the name of Protector of Immigrants was also Charles Anderson.
21. Anderson to Colonial Secretary, dt. 6 January 1844, PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 356, 1844.
22. *Select Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 82, and 106-07.
23. Carter, Marina, *Servants*, p. 46. Marina Carter has very suggestively explored and emphasized the crucial role played by returnee emigrants in labour mobilization and recruitment. However my research limits the utility of returnees in recruitment and raises questions and doubts to the extent which these returnees contributed in recruitment. I have discussed this in much detail in next section of this chapter.
24. PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 356, 1844.
25. *Report of H.N.D. Beyts*. MA.
26. *Geoghegan Report*, 1873, p. 63.
27. *Report of Major Pitcher*, 1882; *Report of George Grierson*, 1883.
28. Emmer, P.C., *Meek Hindu*, p. 187.
29. *Geoghegan Report*, pp. 39-66.
30. *Grierson Report*, pp. 11-13.
31. Saha, Panchanan, *Emigration of Indian Labour*, p.86.
32. DM Ghazipur to the Governor of North-Western Provinces, dt. 10 Nov. 1871. cited in Tinker, Hugh, *New System of Slavery*, p. 123.
33. *Report of Dickens Committee*.
34. *Grierson Report*, p. 8.
35. *Pitcher Report*, pp.9-10.
36. *Report of Major Pitcher*, p.13.
37. This has been discussed at length in Chapter 1 of this work.
38. Enclosure to Prog. No. 29, File No. 463/1914, Industries Dept., UP, March 1915, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow. (hereafter UPSA)
39. *Grierson Report*, p. 14.
40. *Grierson Report*, p. 16, 68; Gillion, KL, 'The Sources of Indian Emigration to Fiji', *Population Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, November 1956, p.141.
41. *Grierson Report*, p. 15.
42. *Report of H.N.D. Beyts*; Tinker, Hugh, *New System of Slavery*, p. 102.
43. PP, Vol. xvi, No. 2542, 1859.
44. Prog. Nos. 16-18, Gen.(Emi.), March 1862, WBSA.
45. *ibid.*, Prog. No. 43-47, WBSA.
46. *Report of Sanderson Committee*, 1910. Evidence of J.A. Brown, ex-Commissioner of UP.

47. *Grierson Report*, p. 12.
48. *Pitcher Report*, p. 9.
49. *Grierson Report*, p. 14.
50. *Grierson Report*, p. 10-11.
51. Hobsbawm, Eric, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875*, Vintage, New York, 1996 (1975), p. 199.
52. *Pitcher Report*, pp. 9-10.
53. *Grierson Report*, p. 12.
54. *ibid.*
55. Reports of Major Pitcher and Grierson.
56. Lal, Brij V., *ChaloJahaji*, pp. 83-84.
57. The arkati's (unauthorized recruiters) recruitment network was so complex and unstructured that it was very difficult for administrators to actually count how many such recruiters were functioning in localities and to ascertain their social origins.
58. Emmer, *Meek Hindu*, p. 193.
59. Statement of Ramalingam, Veerapillay, Vencatachellum, *Examination of Coolies Returned from Mauritius to Madras*, 1842, OIOC.
60. PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 356, 1844,
61. *ibid.*
62. Carter, Marina, *Servants*, p. 46.
63. Carter, Marina, *Strategies*, p. 230.
64. *ibid.*
65. Carter, Marina, *Servants*, pp. 93-54.
66. *Grierson Report*, p. 12.
67. ARPI, 1859, MA.
68. Carter, Marina, *Strategies*, p.234.

References

Primary Sources

- Deerpal singh, Saloni, and Marina Carter, (eds.) *Select Documents on Indian Immigration: Mauritius, 1834-1926*, 3 Vols., MGI, Mauritius, 1994-96
- Enclosure to Prog. No. 29, File No. 463/1914, Industries Dept., UP, March 1915, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow
- Examination of Coolies Returned from Mauritius to Madras*, 1842, OIOC
- Free Labour Association's plan of immigration from India, Madagascar, Muscat and others, PP, Vol. xxx, No. 26, 1842
- Note on Emigration from India by J. Geoghegan (1873), referred as Geoghegan Report in this paper
- PP, Vol. xvi, No. 2542, 1859
- PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 356, 1844

PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 356, 1844

PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 530, 1844

Prog. No.46, Gen.(Emi.), dt. 17 March 1841, WBSA

Prog. Nos. 16-18, Gen.(Emi.), March 1862, WBSA

Report of Mr. JP Woodcock, dt. 19 November 1836

Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Working of the Labour Ordinance 31 of 1867 by H.N.D. Beyts (1869)

Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Abuses Alleged to Exist in Exportation of Hill Coolies (1840), referred as Report of Dickens Committee in this paper

Report on Colonial Emigration From Bengal Presidency by George A. Grierson (1883)

Report on Emigration from North-West Frontier Provinces and Oudh by Major Pitcher (1882)

Report on the Condition of Indian Immigrants in Mauritius by J.W.P. Muir-Mackenzie (1893)

Books and Articles

Tinker, Hugh, *A New System of Slavery: The Import of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920*, OUP, London, 1974.

Emmer, P.C., 'The Meek Hindu; The Recruitment of Indian Indentured Labourers for Service Overseas, 1870 – 1916' in Emmer, P.C., (ed.) *Colonialism and Migration; Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery*, MartinusNijhoff, Dordrecht, 1984, pp.187-204.

Carter, Marina, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius 1834-1874*, OUP, Delhi, 1995.

Saha, Panchanan, *Emigration of Indian Labour*, Peoples' Publishing House, Delhi, 1970.

Gillion, KL, 'The Sources of Indian Emigration to Fiji', *Population Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, November 1956, p. 141

Lal, Brij V., *ChaloJahaji; On a Journey Through Indenture in Fiji*, Prashant Pacific, Canberra, 2000.

Carter, Marina, "Strategies of Labour Mobilisation in Colonial India: The Recruitment of Indentured Workers for Mauritius", *JPS*, Vol. 19, Nos. 3-4, 1992, pp. 229-245.