

Effects of the Indenture System

Breakdown of caste

Most of the immigrants were Hindus and members of castes which had rules forbidding intermarriage or eating with one another. By crossing the sea, the laborers lost caste in the eyes of those left behind in India. Furthermore, the cramped conditions on the ships made it impossible to observe the rules of caste, especially those related to eating. Once in Fiji, all Indians worked in the plantations, no matter what occupations their caste may have followed in India. Indeed, some low caste workers found themselves appointed as sardars, thus not only helping to break down the caste system but also providing them with power over those formerly regarded as being above them. Intermarriage dealt another blow at the caste system.

Overlying all this was their physical remoteness from India, removing many of the pressures which kept people strictly within their own castes. There was a lack of traditional leadership and knowledge of correct rituals, resulting in a fusing of cultural identities. Consequently, the caste system almost disappeared among the Fiji-Indians.

Prosperity

Despite the abuses of the indenture system, most of the Indians were better off than they had been in India. Although their work was hard and their conditions were cramped, they were getting a regular wage and were assured of food and shelter. Many became prosperous, and although quite a number returned to India with no money, many more took back money or remained in Fiji to invest their earnings.

The end of the indenture system

The evils of any such system always attract more attention than do its benefits. A missionary, J.S. Burton, wrote a book in 1912 which he outlined the abuses of the indenture system and made a plea for better treatment of the indenture laborers. His attack was taken up in India by G.K. Gokhale, a member of the Legislative Council, who urged the Indian Government to abolish the system.

It was not until C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson were sent to Fiji in 1915 to investigate conditions that the system was abolished. Andrews and Pearson produced a report which gave such a vivid picture of the social evils of the system, that the Indian Government had no alternative but to give way to popular opinion. Recruiting stopped straight away in 1916, and the remaining contracts were cancelled on 2 January 1920.

After indenture

At the time when the indenture system ended, the CSR Company had almost full control of the sugar industry, and thus most of the indentured laborers came under its control. With the end of the system, the CSR Company was faced with a lack of labor and so had to change its land policy.

Many Indians had remained in Fiji as independent farmers, leasing land from Fijians, and still more remained after 1916. The company cut up its land into farms of about four hectares to be rented out to these tenant farmers. Thus, the basis of the system was laid whereby farmer rented his land from the company and sold his cane to its mills.

Other Indians who remained in Fiji took up a variety of jobs as laborers, skilled tradesmen, clerks and storekeepers. In business, Indians proved highly efficient, and today they control a large proportion of the country's commercial interests.

Industrial troubles between growers, workers and mill owners, often over methods of setting the price paid for cane, were frequent. Bitter and violent strikes occurred before, during and after World War I. Cane workers went on strike in 1957, and cane farmers (growers) engaged in a long strike in 1960. Negotiations with CSR over prices, the amount and type of cane to be provided to the mills, the date the mills would close each season, and other issues lasted several months. CSR and the colonial government made some concessions but clearly won more from the negotiations. An interesting outcome was the formation, three years later, of a political organisation, the Federation Party - which initially represented cane growers northern Viti Levu.