THE INDIANS IN MAURITIUS IN THE 1840s

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1.1 Even though some Indians had been taken to Mauritius during the days of African slavery, it was only during the decade 1834-1844 that the real foundations for an Indian community were laid. Almost half of the Indian immigrants during this period settled in the new land where European culture had been transplanted by the French and the English rulers and planters and the African slaves had brought aspects of their own culture.

1.2 Early 'tentative importations" at times developed into a "steady influx."[1] The planters, so far accustomed to a mantality of coercive control over the slaves[2] took time to realise that the new labourers were not supposed to work on Sundays and on the working days also they were to work for limited hours only. Moreover, corporal punishment like flogging was prohibited.

1.3 By the middle of the 1840s about 25,000 Indian labourers had arrived in Mauritius. There were Bengalis, Biharis and the people of the United Provinces from the North and the Marathi, Telugu, Tamil and Malayalam speaking people from South India.[3] But these uprooted people of diverse sub-cultures from the vast Indian sub-continent, Hindus or Muslims, when they settled in the tiny island, were after all Indians' trying to maintain their identity. These Indians were not a part and parcel of the Indian society with interdependent occupational castes maintained at a village level, but they formed a distinct labouring class under the parameter of a plantation economy and culture.[4] So the distinction between the 'high' and 'low' castes got blurred.

1.4 The indentured labourers were seldom permitted to leave the states, for once they had free intercousse with their countrymen in other plantations they might create problems.[5] Those who wanted to return to India were often prevented from doing so.[6]

1.5 With the help of indentured Indian labour the quantum of sugar produced in Mauritius was increasing, but the Acts the Government of India and the protests of the Anti-slavery Society[7] of Great Britain and the enlightened public opinion in India almost failed to prevent the ill-treatment of these labourers on board the ships and later in the plantations. Indeed, the Indian labourers were often regarded as mere 'implements of husbhandry or machines' for raising sugar. Even the children had to work in the fields and nothing was done for their education. On the other hand, the Christian missionaries like the Rev. Onslow[8] lamented that they were not allowed to preach among the Indians with the result that they were getting discontented with their situation and their masters.

1.6 It was alleged that the Indian labourer worked less than this African counterpart. This was obviously an effort to justify the lesser wages paid to the Indians than the apprentice Africans had been getting. The daily task performed in the slavery days was said to be much more higher. While the daily task performed by a slave was usually digging of 100 holes, cutting and clearing of two to three cart-loads of cane and clearing of 800 by 5 feet of ground, the African apprentice did one-fifth less, i.e. 80 holes, cutting of two cart-loads of cane and 600 feet of clearing the ground. On the other hand, an Indian labourer did the same amount of work only after a year. In the first year he dug only 30 to 40 holes, cut only one or one-and-a-half cartload of canes. Thus the loss of work was estimated by the planter class to be 50 per cent in the case of new Indians and 20 per cent of the old ones or on an average 33 per cent. Thus in 1848 the actually working hands among the Indian population in Mauritius came to 17,034 efficient men.[9] However, unlike the Africans the Indians never squatted on the outskirts of the hills.

1.7 Even though the stipulated amount of monthly wages was five rupees, the labourers from the Madras presidency accepted three rupees only and those from the French enclave of Pondicherry even two rupees.

1.8 On some estates the Indians wore a peculiar dress and had a particular badge. They celebrated the Hindu festivals of Phagua (Holi) and Diwali and possibly the Shia Muslim festival of Mohurram. On these occasions the Indians of one estate tried to outshine their counterparts elsewhere.

1.9 The Indian way of life was not appreciated in Mauritius and the planters and government officials often considered them savages. Thus G.W. Lang, a former Deputy Commissioner of Police of Mauritius (1826-1846) who had seen the first period of Indian immigration, described them as "a very improper class of men" from Calcutta.[10] They were first brought from the boat into the police yard and distributed among the different planters according to their tickets. They were often 'headstrong' and would like to get their punishment from their planter rather than from the police.[11] Already in December 1840 the Governor of Mauritius had described the Indian labourers as "the outpourings of the lowest caste of the plantation of each presidency, who are deplorably disorderly and dissolute."[12]

1.10. In 1842 an order in Council provided that the Mauritius governor would appoint emigration agents at Indian ports of embarkation—Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, and a Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius. Salaries agents were to ascertain that the labourers were emigrating voluntarily and were in good health. They would have proper accommodation and provisions on the boat and in the estates on their arrival. The Colonial Secretary of Britain stressed the necessity of a secure guarantee for the return passage of the immigrants who wanted to be back after five years of service.

1.11 C. Anderson was appointed the Protector of immigrants at Port Louis and emigration agents at the three ports of embarkation were also named.[13] The Act XV of 2 December 1842 allowed emigration under proper supervision and control. The first boat carrying Indians under the new Act was the Emerald Isle which arrived in Mauritius on 23 January 1843. This Act was strengthened by another Act of 1843.

1.12 In view of these developments in 1842-43 one would expect that the immigrants were well looked after since their recruitment. But that was not so as the government records of the period show. In Mauritius a magistrate was supposed in each district to protect the Indians, to enforce the fulfilment of the articles of agreement as well as to resolve all the disputes between the labourer and the master.[14] However, except in flagrant cases like that of disorder, robbery or a systematic perseverance in annoyance, he remained indifferent.

1.13 In many cases the health of the Indian labourers improved in Mauritius, for they usually arrived there a poor, sickly, emaciated creature. But this was not because the labourers were alway in a bad shape in India; they usually became sickly on the boats, sometimes because of sea sickness, sometimes because they did not like the food and the seculded life there. Those who maintained caste exclusiveness would not eat the food cooked by the people of castes other than their own, particularly if the cooks happened to be of lower castes.

1.14 It was claimed by the planters' spokesmen that the Indians not only got high wages but they saved all the money because they got all the provisions, etc., free. Even if the wages in India and Mauritius were the same, they argued, "thousand (if not millions)" of men in India were unemployed; many sold their children at times for food and if Mauritius threw its industry and labour market open to them they should deem themselves lucky.[15] But they hardly mentioned the eagerness with which they indented Indian labour, or the jeers which the uprooted Indian received from the Africans and others in Muritius. Nor did they refer to the crimping or the kidnapping of the unfortunate Indians by their recruiters (*arkatis*). Quite often the unfortunate labourers were decoyed from their homes on false pretences and transported in a state of intoxication or delusion. One can well imagine the plight of such people in a strange country.

1.15 In 1846 G.E. Gladstone alleged in Britain that the Indians were having promiscuous relationship with the woman who accompanied them and to the 'unnatural practices' among the men.[16] Gladstone also criticized the "thin sprinkling of women" with "the large mass of males" and "yet rarer occurrence of cases of immigrants in families" and felt that the length of time for which the men were separated from every natural and domestic relationshp and the lack of moral influence upon them presented difficulties for the Indian labourers. But the Indians were not, by any stretch of imagination, responsible for this state of affairs.

1.16 Gladstone also lamented that the Indian emigration had relegated the Africans to whom the island owed so much, into the background. He was saddened by the fact that the land was cultivated not by those who made "short migrations to meet some particular and temporary

demand for labour at their own expense, and without any sensible shock to their social habits. but by those who, though inhabitnnts for years, yet inhabit as labourers only; strike no roots into the earth; have none but a pecuniary relation to their superiors; are separated from womankin... ; have sustained loss with reference to their own religion; and yet have not made any approach to the Divine Truth."[17] Apparently this was a dig at the Indians even though they could not be blamed for this situation. Indeed, Gladstone was not only against the extension of the Coolie immigration, but against its maintenance on a large scale.[18]

1.17 John Scoble, the Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society, alleged that most of the women introduced into Mauritius in 1843-44 were prostitutes picked up in the streets of Calcutta and Bombay.[19] However, he does not say how he collected the data. Perhaps it was a figment of his imagination.

1.18 Lionel Smith described the Indians in 1841 as having "given themselves up to a degree of disgraceful licentiousness". One stipendiary magistrate S. Thatcher thought that the plantations had turned many of them into drunkards.

1.19 However, another stipendiary magistrate H. M. Self spoke highly of the Indians : Their industry was evident from the many well-planted gardens near their houses. They usually kept garden goats and poultry.[20] Yet another magistrate appreciated their 'neatly cultivated kitchen gardens and clean and comfortable dwellings'.[21] They had few quarrels among themselves and maintained a 'graceful atmosphere in their camps after the working hours. Any riotous behaviour was rarely seen. They were quiet by nature and spent their leisure in preparing food or in reading to one another scriptures like the *Ramayan* of Tulsidas or telling stories, others visiting their friends on a neighbouring estate; yet others cultivating their gardens or tending their cattle. A few estates had their own priests reading scriptures for their countrymen every evening after hard work in the canefields. These *babas* and some wrestlers were well-respected and much attention was given to the religious rites. The priests also played an important role in the *panchayats* which resolved their disputes peacefully. There was no rowdism and they spent their nights peacefully.

1.20 However, at least one stipendiary magistrate reported that the barracks of the Indian indentured labourers were dirty due to their "natural filthiness".[22] Obviously this was a biased view. Surely the immigrants preferred modest accommodation to good buildings and sometimes when they could not get firewood they destroyed the huts and used the materials as such.[23] Sometimes four men would occupy the same dwelling and the task of cooking would rotate from the one to the other.

1.21 According to a stipendiary magistrate several estates had 200 to 300 Indians employed as labourers and mechanics and 20 to 30 married ('or so styled') women who cooked and managed the house for their menfolk. And he rightly said that the Indians were not "exempt from faults to which the most perfect amongst us are liable". He further asserted that sometimes public morals were scandalized even in Europe.[24] Another magistrate thought that the women brought from the Indian ports were like their counter-parts in the seaportes of England.

1.22 When one compares these views with that of one Presbybertian clergyman George Blyth who said that the Indians often chased and "improperly molested"[25] the African women, the real reason for such a wild charge seems to be the failure of the Christian missionaries to convert the Indians to their faith.

1.23 In 1848 Buxton, an abolitionist, said that the 95,000 Indians brought to Mauritius in ten years at a cost of £900,000 had doubled sugar production but left the island "in a state of ruin and bankruptcy".[26] Another abolitionist G. Thompson thought that these were indolent mendicants," runaways, vagrants, thieves, vagabonds, filthy, diseased, dissolute, immoral, disgusting, covered withe sores; some were priests, some jugglers, some barbers, some wrestlers, some cooks, some grooms, some buffoons, some herdsmen, some pedlars, some scullions, bakers, tailors, confectioners instead of agricultural labourers".[27]

1.24 Most of the allegations against the Indians seem to be false. They were obviously a result of age old prejudics against the 'Asiatics'. Otherwise why were the planters and the Mauritius government pressing hard for more and more Indian labourers ?

1.25 One Henry White[28] was specially posted in the Malabar coast (Western India) to procure more and more Indian labourers, and he assured W.E. Gladstone that since he knew the Malayalam language and the customs and character of the people he would be able to get hundreds of 'coolies' and mechanics for Mauritius.

1.26 But the main area of recruitment was not South India but the Gangetic plains suffering from famines, floods, epidemics and social and economic oppressions under the British rule. No wonder by 1848 about 95.000 Indians came to Mauritius. About 20,000 of them were said to be vagabonds,[29] and about 1,000 were runniug retail shops on behalf of the planters' wives who earned huge profits.

1.27 Those who came from the Bombay port were supposed to be 'superior in strength and in feeling" to those who emigrated from Calcutta or Madras. But the number of the Bombay immigrants was very small, and they preferred to live separately and would not work under a *sardar* from the Bengal presidency.[30]

1.28 In short, the Indians had made their presence felt in Mauritius in the 1840s. Even though uprooted from their traditional environment many of them were trying to adjust to their new existence. Those who were more hardworking and clever saved money and led a more comfortable life than the idle ones, but more or less everybody had to suffer on account of the racial and cultural prejudices.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1 I. M. Cumpston, *Indian Overseas in British Territories 1834-1854*, London, 1953, p. 13.

2 H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, London, 1974, p. 71: J. P. Grant, a member of the Bengal Civil Service in a note of dissent said that in a country "where nearly all the inhabitants were very lately eit!er slave-owners or slaves" the Protectors of Immigrants and the estate officers had to learn much in the management of ree labourers,

3 Burton Bandict, 'Caste in Mauritius', in B. M. Schuartz (ed.), *Caste In Overseas Indian Communities* San Franssico, 1965, P. 21.

4 *Ibid.* p. 29.

5 P. Saha, *Emigration of Inian Labour 1834-1900*, New Delhi, 1970, p. 116.

6 Government of Indta to Stanley, 11 November 1845' Papers on Maurítius in microfilm in the Trinidad Archives, reel 10.

7 Founded in 1823.

8 *Parliamentary Papers, no. 45 of 1841.* They should have known that so far as the Hindu immigrants were concerned their 'karma' theory was enough to get them reconciled to their situation.

9 Extract, *Minutes of Evidence*, p. 193, Microfilm of Papers on Mauritius in Trinidad. op. cit.

10 Lang's evidence, *ibid.* report II.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Tinker, *op. cit.* p. 56.

13 J. Geoghegan Note on *Emigration from India*, Calcutta, 1873, p. 11. Every ship carrying the Indians was to have a proper licence from the Indian authorities.

14 R. Brunan to D. G. Gordon, Papers on Mauritius, *op. cit.* reel 2, p. 141.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Gladstone to Mauritius Governor, 24 Feb. 1846, *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 Scoble to Colonial Secy, 12 Jan. 1846' *Ibid.* reel. 3.

20 Report of 14 Aug. 1846, *ibid.*

21 Report of 22 Aug. 1846, *Ibid.*

22 G. F. M. Elliott to Col. Secy, 20 Aug. 1846, *ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 S. Seignette to Colonial Secy. 19 Aug. 1846, *ibid.*

25 See John Scoble to B. Hawes, Dec. 1846 on the "gross immorality" of the Indians in Mauritius, *ibid.* True, many immigrants had left their wives behind in India and the proportion of women to men in the estates was very small : there were in 1846 only 741 women among 2, 873 men on 19 estates. Dnring 1834-39 not more than 8 per cent of the immigrants were women (198 out of the 25,468) and in 1842-44 not more than 12 per cent (during this period about 46,014 labourers came). Of the 70,000 immigrants introduced during the decade 1834-44 hardly 7,000 were women. But the ratio was gradually getting more and more favourable. In any case, the women in India even of the lower caste, were generally not willing to go abroad. Even then in 1845 four ships brought 160 women and 139 children along with 675 men.

26 Vide Eric Williams. *From Columbus to Castro* ; *The History of the Caribbean* 1492-1969. London, 1970, p. 346.

27 *Ibid.*

28 He was born in Cochin, the son of Lt. Thomas White of the Bombay Army and the nephew of Dr. W. R. White Principal Medical Officer of Mauritius : White to Gladstone, 1 July 1846, *Papers on Mauritius, op. cit.* reel 3.

29 *Minute of Evidence Mauritius Papers, op. cit.* reel 3, p. 193. J. G. Raymon stated that these vagabonds would sleep here today and ten miles away tomorrow and many of them were arrested by the police from the bazars. The language barrier might have been the reason for such arrests : they might not have been able to explain why they were in the market place. Moreover, the police had their own definition of vagrancy.

30 *Ibid.*