

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Indian Indentured Laborers in Mauritius, Diseases, Mortality and Sexual Encounters: Some Reflections

Debasmita Dey

Research Scholar (Ph.D.), Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

The legalization of the indentured system of labor transport from India to the island of Mauritius began from the year 1842. The system witnessed some drawbacks in the form of high rate of mortality amongst the natives who were transported as laborers. The poor dietary condition during the voyage at sea led to outbreak of contagious diseases. Cholera and dysentery frequently broke out due to improper and unhygienic water provided to the natives. The matter became worse as the native female began to join the batch of emigrants to work as laborers. Venereal diseases quickly spread within the laborers leading to their deaths. The native women faced blames for prostitution and were tagged as fallen women who polluted the minds of not only other innocent women but also the men by spreading diseases. The British government debated over the possible measures and remedies to solve the unprecedented spread of diseases and the high rate of mortality of the natives, while the death continued to proceed at a slow rate on the ships that carried the laborers to and from the island of Mauritius.

1. Introduction

The system of indentured labor was introduced in India under the British initiatives as an adverse consequence of the emancipation of the slaves through the Emancipation Act of 1833. Faced with the dearth of labor force and the ruinous state of plantation farms, the European planters turned their attention to India, a colony of the British government that provided ample supply of 'cheap'¹ labor force out of its ever expanding population.

2. The Condition of the Native Women

As the floodgates of the emigration depots opened for the independent recruiters, the government witnessed a large scale transportation of Indian laborers from India to Mauritius, most of who were unlicensed. But it was another problem that posed a more serious threat than others. It was the dearth of presence of women amongst the emigrant laborers. The native Indians were always apprehensive towards the emigration of native women to the colonies. Even the intellectual minds of Calcutta believed that the duffadars or the local recruiters induced the wives, daughters or female relatives of poor or even respectable families for recruitment and those women were molested at the hands of different men. J. P. Grant also referred to extracts from Mr. T. P. Woodcock's report referring to two incidents, one where a woman was dragged and carried off to a ship by three laborers going to Mauritius and was not allowed to return, she was shipped to Mauritius as a laborer. Another native woman, named Ameen was sent on board in an intoxicated condition in November 1839. Grant did mention that the few numbers of women present at the plantations was one of the evils of the indentured system. Grant never mentioned in his report what consequences this evil had brought upon the natives at the island of Mauritius. He just gave his explanation behind this small female proportion due to the meager salary of the laborers which was not enough for the maintenance of family life, and that their loneliness cannot be remedied by supplying females from the 'bazaars of the sea-port towns', which often the Captains did 'to fill up their legal female complement.'²

George A. Grierson argued that if the men were unwilling to come to Mauritius, they were even more unwilling towards the fact that women should emigrate, for there was general believe among the natives that the recruiters carry off 'honest' women to Mauritius to make 'prostitutes' out of them³. The natives of India had strong prejudices against their wives appearing before the European magistrates to prove their marriages⁴. According to Grierson, native women once brought to depots, were informed of their destination and type of work at the colonies and if they refused to proceed they were allowed to return to their homes. But the problem with the Hindu or Muslim society of India is that once a woman leaves her home 'she cannot return back with honor and respect, and once fallen into the power of the recruiters, they were forcibly kept with him, and after the lapse of few days cannot but give way. Instances of some of these women remaining as concubines of the recruiters and their friends were not rare.

¹ "The Recruitment of Laborers in Excelsis", (February 2, 1900) *The Bengalee*, p. 4

² Grant, J. P. (1839). *Minute of Collie Question*, British Government of India, p. 26

³ Grierson, George A. (1883). *Report on Colonial Emigration from Bengal Presidency*, British India Government, p. 30

⁴ General Department Proceedings, December 1848, no. 17, West Bengal State Archives(WBSA)

He was of the opinion that when a woman persistently refused to go, the recruiters secured another in her place, and got her registered in her name; but when the time of sending away came, the woman who had refused was forcibly sent⁵.

The question that arises is that why women chose to emigrate? When a man chose to emigrate, he left behind his wife, his children and his caste. For a woman to step out of her home would mean losing not only her family and caste but also her honor. She would be tagged as a 'loose' or a 'fallen woman' with no morals. Every time a single woman of young age entered her name for emigration, she was misjudged as a prostitute or a fallen woman. Captain Rogers, the then Protector of Emigrants at Calcutta, informed of two cases where women of 'low character' enlisted their names as wives and boarded with their supposed husbands on the ships Candahar and Charles Napier to Mauritius. If those women indeed were of low characters then it can be assumed that the natives took them into confidence and posed them as their wives to get their hands on the reward of Rs. 5 that the Mauritian government offered to every man who immigrated to Mauritius with his wife⁶.

But how much of these women were prostitutes can never be ascertained today. There had been some recorded evidences when women of low characters posed as wives of the natives, but only a few single women embarked as emigrants to the Mauritius as widows⁷. Moreover the Indian custom of having more than one wife was never accepted by the British government, who recognized only the first wife as the legal companion and the other wives were tagged as concubines. The British officials themselves had agreed that since the Muslims and Hindu couples were married by their religious preachers in the presence of several other family members, and hence it is impossible for them to establish their marriage by legal evidence.⁸

The chance of the women being lovers were more probable than their being prostitutes. True the conditions of the prostitutes kept at the lock hospitals were poor, where many were held against their will. But to travel as indentured laborers would not make much difference to them. This was because the condition in the plantations, where male to female ratio was always irregular, would mean a much similar situation that they faced in the lock hospitals. Most of the fellow travelers, travelling in a cramped space of the between-deck of the ship with not much area for privacy, became aware of the social and economic position of their fellow passengers at sea, making them 'jahaji bhai'⁹ at the time of voyage, and if a prostitute travelled along with them, it would not take much time to figure that out. Naturally, the women were forced to be subjected to physical demand of their fellow passengers as well as of the crew men. In the year 1859, the third mate of the ship Dudbrook was accused by the Surgeon of having illicit relationship with a particular coolie woman¹⁰. Two ships bound for British Guiana in the same year faced a similar charge when a crew man of the ship York was reported of placing his hands indecently on some of the native female immigrants, on the second instance, the Captain and his Mates of the ship Victor Emmanuel were blamed of having illicit relationships during the voyage.¹¹

It would be wrong to judge the character of the native women for each of the three cases stated above. It is true that not every woman who indentured were accompanied by their families, but not every single woman was prostitute. The lonely and long voyage at the ship often created an atmosphere where the natives, seeking emotional and psychological companion, were attracted towards the women who journeyed along with them.

Every woman that came for enlisting her name as an indentured laborer in the Mauritius was tagged as 'fallen woman' by the British officials. The image of a noble woman inculcated within the minds of the British molded by their Victorian morality can never fit the class of women that ventured out as indentured laborers to Mauritius. Indian women (excluding the new middle class Bengalis who had remodeled their lives based on the same Victorian morality since the Bengal renaissance) of rural areas had always been different in their dress codes, behavior and manner that the British society tagged uncultured and shameless without really understanding their background. While discussing the visual depiction of the Indian indentured laborers by the British, Amar Wahab states that native women in the plantations were made to look moral and respectable in resonance to the Victorian moral code of conduct as propaganda to silence the growing protest against the indentures system in India as well as in Britain. In comparison to the black African slaves, Indian women were depicted as submissive and gentle, 'voiceless' and 'expressionless', although the oriental dress habits that exposed ample skin of the Indian women made them the object of male fantasy, and were thus considered one with slipping morality¹².

3. Mortality

3.1. Emigrants on Their Journey to Mauritius

Another peculiar observation regarding the indentured system was the high rate of mortality among the indentured laborers that occurred during their journey to and from Mauritius.

The most common causes of deaths documented by the British officials were either because of contagious diseases like cholera, dysentery, etc, and deaths caused by 'accidental' drowning. What the British official reports recorded as drowning often itself

⁵ Grierson, pg – 30

⁶ General Department Proceedings, September 1843, no. 82, WBSA

⁷ General Department Proceedings, September 1843, no. 84, WBSA

⁸ General Department Proceedings, December 1848, no. 18, WBSA

⁹ Brij Lal used this term in his famous work *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*, ANU E Press, 2000. An outstanding work on the lives and struggle of the indentured laborers in Fiji.

¹⁰ General Department Proceedings, January 1859, no. 21, WBSA

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Wahab, Amar (2008). Race Gender and Visuality: Regulating Indian Women Subjects in the Colonial Caribbean, *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, Issue 02, p. 11

carried contradicting views which if carefully judged can be considered as a desperate attempt towards freedom. The proceedings of November 1843 recorded an incident where an officer of the Botanical Garden rescued a native, whom he witnessed falling overboard the Faize Robany at the port of Calcutta¹³. After making further enquiry it was revealed that the person was trying to escape the cruelty of the captain of the ship who had put them on a poor diet to preserve the ration for the journey ahead.

One major reason behind the high mortality rate among the native passengers was the due the illegal practice by the local recruiters who brought 'aged and feeble Indians' a recruited laborers¹⁴. In 1843, the Marine Surgeon of the Emigration Office at Calcutta, Dr. R. Thomson complained to the Emigration Agent that the duffadars employed fraudulent methods to collect laborers wishing to emigrate, by enlisting those persons who were unfit from disease, or who have been rejected by the doctor. Some were so anxious to be passed that they employed various artifices to elude the doctor's vigilance after their rejection, and finding no other means of accomplishing their objects they gladly paid four or five rupees for the certificates and were received on board¹⁵. The consequence was high mortality rate on maximum ships that were hired to transport these laborers to Mauritius. In one instance, the Protector of Emigrants reported in the year 1844 that fourteen men died of fever, acute dysentery, constitutional debility and infantile diseases and from drowning on the ship Sultaney, and when the surgeon of the ship, when asked for explanation, stated that the natives were sickly and weak at the time of embarking the ship at Calcutta¹⁶. Dysentery and cholera frequently occurred during their journey down the Hooghly River. An unusual rate of mortality was reported on the ship Orient carrying natives from Calcutta to Mauritius. The deaths occurred from the outbreak of cholera among the native passengers due to vicissitudes of the temperature and the possibility of the emigrants having drunk water from the river after their embarkation¹⁷. A similar situation was reported for the natives on board the ships Cheapside, Errand, Marion, Faize Allum, Lady McDonald and Sultaney, where the majority of the deaths occurred due to the outbreak of cholera during the period from 1844 to 1850.

According to the Emigration Commissioner, the annual records of emigration had been helpful to narrow down the inquiry. According to them, the great mortality rate, particularly during the years 1856 – 57 was peculiar not only to Calcutta ships, but within these ships to a certain class of persons described by the Surgeons sometimes as "jungles" or as "hill laborers" or sometimes as "junglies and Santhals"¹⁸. In The Appleton, 16 hill coolies died out of 131 embarked, while only 5 died out of 273 native emigrants belonging to other castes. In the ship The Earl of Shefton, 15 deaths out of 18 were among the hill laborers. In The Ally and Bucephalus the small mortality was ascribed to the small proportions of the hill laborers. In Startled Fawn, the number of hill coolies was large and the mortality was slightly above the average. Similarly, the presence of these hill coolies on board the ship Akbar was for the high percentage of death amongst the native emigrants. The surgeon of that ship later complained that biscuits served to these tribal groups caused indigestion.

Mr. Cullen (in 1859), the surgeon of the ship Edith Moore, that was carrying a considerable number of hill coolies, observed that the coolies had bowel complaints until they had ceased to use the Calcutta water, i.e., tap water from the vicinity of Calcutta. Since the biscuits were causing indigestion amongst the tribal laborers, it was substituted with chrooah, but without any fruitful result. The surgeon observed in his diary that the tribal emigrants showed a great desire for animal food and on receiving it rapidly regained their health and strength. Hence he suggested providing for some preserved meat (mutton or beef) in each ship carrying tribal laborers to the colonies¹⁹.

While inquiring the causes behind this high rate of mortality among the hill coolies during the 1850s, Dr. Mouat saw a similar pattern in causes of death of these tribes who were serving terms in the jails of Calcutta. He suggested that these people live in forests in open air and confined space made them weak and they rapidly pine and die, and hence they required more care and management than the other classes of Indian emigrants²⁰.

While examining the causes of the high mortality rate within the natives at sea, Dr. Mouat commented that the female laborers tended to spread diseases among healthy males. This indirect effect could not have been very considerable, because the mortality amongst the adult males did not in fact exceed 6.4%²¹. Both male and female immigrants were physically examined for any kind of venereal diseases, yet several instances of such diseases were witnessed on the depots and especially on board the vessels. Dr. Mouat was of the opinion that the Emigration Officers in India should not be charged for any amount of carelessness; rather the high amount of mortality rate amongst the immigrants was due to the lack of discipline and cleanliness on board, that it was aggravated by the number of female on board²². The Emigration Commissioner of Calcutta Port too supported Dr. Mouat's suggestion that the female immigrants tend to spread the diseases amongst the healthy males. This statement also confirmed the fact that many native women either consensually or were forcibly established sexual relationships during their voyage. As early as 1843, Bushby, the secretary to the government of Bengal, too had predicted that great evil might be produced by such interference than can rise from the present practice which permits the emigrants to make their own election in regards to the embarkation of their wives.²³

¹³ General Department Proceedings, November 1843, no. 37, WBSA

¹⁴ General Department Proceedings, July 1843, no. 26, WBSA

¹⁵ General Department Proceedings, February 1843, no. 2 A, WBSA

¹⁶ General Department Proceedings, January 1844, no. 15, WBSA

¹⁷ General Department Proceedings, July 1846, no. 11, WBSA

¹⁸ General Department Proceedings, September 1843, no. 84, WBSA

¹⁹ General Department Proceedings, August 1859, no. 21, WBSA

²⁰ General Department Proceedings, February 1860, no. 21, WBSA

²¹ General Department Proceedings, August 1859, no. 21, WBSA

²² *ibid*

²³ General Department Proceedings, March 1843, no. 02, WBSA

3.2. *The Return Emigrants*

The state of diseases and mortality were even higher in the case of the return immigrants from Mauritius. The Protector of Emigrants at Calcutta reported in his annual report of 1844 the arrival of the ship Watkins with 127 return immigrants from Mauritius of whom 41 men and 3 children died on the passage. On a careful medical investigation it was found out that the captain of the provided rice and salt fish daily to the native passengers, the latter being unwholesome, and only a pint of water. Many native passengers jumped overboard in the Bay of Bengal from the want of water and ill treatment. Two of them were picked while two drowned. So much was the demand for water that many had to drink sea water out of thirst²⁴. The Assistant Protector of Emigrants at the port of Calcutta reported to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, J. P. Grant, on the bad effects of the consumption of salt fish by the return laborers from Mauritius at sea. He argued that ½ tbs of rice and 2 tbs of salt fish weekly, together with a sufficient quantity of salt, and one gallon of water per day would excite diseases and mortality particularly in weak native passengers when from accident or other cause a ship might have a long passage. Native seaman, when by any accident, fed on rice without the usual addition of dhol was subjected to blindness. In the barque, Brammer that brought 115 return emigrants from Mauritius to Calcutta in 1852, 5 Indian laborers were blinded due to the above mentioned reason, and their disease was confirmed by the eye infirmary at Calcutta. A similar case occurred on the ship Bhundell where out of 135 return emigrants 6 were totally blinded²⁵.

The long period of the indentured system witnessed a series of arguments, discussions, documentations and experiments undertaken by the British government regarding the dietaries and the medicinal facilities provided to the natives during their voyages. Trapped within this storm of dilemma of the British government (about which medicines to be kept on board the ship, how much ozes of dal and salt fish to be included in the diet of the natives, whether to include river water or tank water for drinking purpose, etc), the natives remained hapless lab rats who suffered and perished pressurized by their own internal trauma of leaving their native land, caste and family, and the external weakness created by the first-hand experience of sea sickness and the poor dietary treatment of the crew men on board the ships.

4. References

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²⁴ General Department Proceedings, March 1844, no. 37, WBSA

²⁵ General Department Proceedings, March, 1852, no. 16, WBSA