



An overview of History of Indenture



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Introduction

Indenture was a world wide phenomenon which started in the nineteenth century. It was initiated by the British in Mauritius and was considered as an 'experiment'. The 'Great Experiment' after the abolition of slavery was to demonstrate to the world the superiority of 'free' labour over slave labour. Indenture involved the mass migration of workers from India, China, Africa and South East Asia to labour- importing colonies. Mauritius was the first country which had recourse to indentured labour. Other British, French and Dutch colonies then adopted the system after its success in Mauritius.

1. Abolition of slavery and the 'labour problem in British Empire

In Mauritius, as elsewhere in the 'slave and indentured world', the sugar plantations depended, for their success and profitability, on cheap, plentiful and coercible labour. Slave labour had, for centuries, been the backbone of the plantation colonies of the Caribbean. In the Indian Ocean it was only in the 19th century, that sugar plantation economies and societies were to emerge. In Mauritius, the economy was centered on sugar production. With the abolition of taxes on Mauritian sugar in the British market in 1825, the Mauritian sugar industry experienced an upsurge.

British society was sensitised to the question of slavery quite early. Although the humanitarian motive was the driving force of the Anti-Slavery Society, the move to abolish slavery was also supported by British economic and political forces. The advance of capitalism in Europe has been considered by some historians as one of the reasons for the abolition of slavery. The Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed by the British Parliament on March 25, 1807. The act imposed a fine of £100 for every slave found aboard a British ship.¹ After the 1807 act, slaves were still held, though not sold, within the British Empire. In the 1820s, the abolitionist movement again became active, this time campaigning against the institution of slavery itself.² On August 23, 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act outlawed slavery in the British colonies. On August 1, 1834, all slaves in the British Empire were emancipated, but still indentured to their former owners in an apprenticeship system which was finally abolished in 1838.

¹ Abolitionism. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolitionism#Abolitionism_in_Britain_and_the_British_Empire

² Ibid.

The French Empire abolished slavery in 1848. The Dutch, who were the last Europeans to abolish slavery, freed their slaves on July 1, 1863.

The lack of slave labour which the British had installed on the tropical plantations (producing sugar, coffee, to bananas, tea) quickly made itself felt, and an international migration of free labourers replaced the forceful importation of slaves. Countries whose economy had depended on the continuous importation of slaves found other sources of labour supply within a few decades.

2. Indenture system in the nineteenth century

2.1. A unique phenomenon

The defining feature of nineteenth century plantation labour was the indenture system. The term indenture refers to a written contract entered into by a person to work for another for a given period of time. As stated by Carter, 'an indentured migrant was an individual who had not paid his or her passage' but had entered into an agreement to receive transported assistance to a colony in return for a fixed period of labour. A fundamental condition of plantation life was that the indenture contract regulated the terms of employment of labourers and it defined the general standard of living since it specified wage rate, working hours and the type of work, rations, housing and medical attendance. The Indenture system, although based on a contractual agreement between employer and labourers, differed from other forms of contractual labour that existed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indentured labour derived its authority from the various Acts regulating relations between Masters and Servants (enacted in most colonies) which were established to set out mutual rights and obligations but in reality they provided criminal punishment for breaches of contract by workers. In Mauritius, Ordinance no 16. of 1835, was designed to combat so called 'idleness' of apprentices and to legislate indentured labour. The contract made punishable by forfeiture of wages or imprisonment with or without hard labour where a Servant without reasonable cause³

(a) neglected or refused to attend work

³ MA. SD 15/7.Despatch from Governor to Secretary of State., , 23 January 1836 Ordinance 16 Of 1835.

- (b) was guilty of absence, disobedience of orders, insolence, gross neglect of duty or other misconduct in the service of the employer,
- (c) quitted service before the expiry of the contract.

Article 10 of Ordinance 16 of 1835:

Any labourer, workman or apprentice above the age of 14 years who shall commit a serious offence or who shall not fulfill the conditions of his contract, or act of apprenticeship, whether by a refusal to work, negligence, bad will, absence or otherwise, shall independently of the special conditions embodied in the contract or act of apprenticeship, be sentenced to a pay a fine not exceeding £ 5 or to imprisonment with or without hard labour for a period of not more than three months.⁴

Furthermore, the ordinance also prohibited the formation of associations of labourers having as objective to terminate their contract or claim increase in wages:

Article 16 of Ordinance 16 of 1835:

Labourers, workmen or apprentices who shall form to the number of three or more, an association or conspiracy having for its object to quit or neglect their service or to change the conditions of their contract, or to enforce an increase of wages, shall be punished by imprisonment with or without hard labour for any period not exceeding six months.⁵

⁴ MA: SD 15/7. Despatch from Governor to Secretary of State., , 23 January 1836.

⁵ Ibid.

On their return to the plantation they had to make up the time lost through their incarceration.⁶ At the time the Ordinance was adopted, the Anti-Slavery Society supporters claimed that the system was merely a revival of slavery. The Governor of Mauritius persuaded his colleagues in Britain that “the Regulations contained in that Ordinance, have already produced a good practical effect, without any manifestation of discontent, or complaint of oppression”⁷ In 1875, a Royal Commission of Enquiry was set up and it highlighted the fact that the immigrants were not made aware that they could “suffer in the shape of fines, forfeiture, or imprisonment, for any breach of the engagement to work for five years”.⁸

Hence, the indenture system was a penal contract system and was as such a form of ‘unfree labour’. The purpose of this system was on the one hand to provide for a fixed term of service and on the other to give employers a blunt instrument of discipline through the penal sanctions. The indenture system with penal sanctions was in force throughout the British colonies. The system, first experienced in Mauritius was afterwards established under the same basic principles in other colonies. French and Dutch labour-importing colonies resorted to the same scheme after the success of the system in the British colonies. In Mauritius the penal clauses regulating contract violations were abolished by the Ordinance no. 12 of 1922. By this Ordinance all contracts of service were limited to periods not exceeding

⁶ Carter Marina.(1996). *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University press., p 101

⁷ MA: SD 15/59., Letter from Governor Nicholay to Secretary of State:, 25 July 1836.

⁸ MA: Report of the Royal commission of enquiry. 1875. p 49.

one calendar month and all new immigrants entitled to repatriation after the two years' residence in the colony.⁹

2.2. The search for labour and the beginning of the 'Great Experiment' in Mauritius: 1820s- 1838

In the first decades of the 19th century, planters in Mauritius anticipated the upcoming insufficiency of labour that will result from abolition of slavery. From the late 1820s till early 1830s, colonists worked to devise means of importing a new workforce. Mauritius had an advantage over its West Indian competitors in being close to several potential sources of labour. Asia and Africa on the Indian Ocean rim had been supplying manpower to the island for centuries. This was the beginning of the 'Great Experiment' for the British Government: to test whether plantation production in Mauritius might not be more profitable with the use of 'free' labour. As Stanley wrote to the British Governor in Mauritius:

The abolition of slavery has rendered the British Colonies the scene of an experiment whether the staple products of imperial countries can be raised as effectually and as advantageously by the labour of free men as by that of slaves. To bring that momentous question to a fair trial, it is requisite that no unnecessary discouragement should be given to the introduction of free labourers into our colonies.¹⁰

⁹ MA: B2 Annual Report of the Protector of Immigrants, 1922.

¹⁰ MA: SA 33/47 Stanley to Governor Gomm, 22 January, 1842.

The island was therefore given the opportunity to become the site for this 'Great Experiment' in the use of free cheap labour.¹¹

Chinese Labourers

The recruitment of labour from China was proposed as early as 1826. In 1829, agricultural workers were recruited from Penang and Singapore.¹² However, they were not able to adapt to the working conditions and they were repatriated shortly afterwards.¹³

African Labourers

Because of the difficulty to dissociate African indentured recruitment from slavery, proposal for importing African labour was rejected in 1834.¹⁴ Similarly, proposals were made to import labourers from the island of Johanna (Anjouan) in the Comoros and from the dominions of the Imam of Muscat in 1835 and 1836. However, sugar planters continued to rely on slave labour because they were able to bring in large quantities of illegal slaves.

Indian Convicts

India , as a British Colony, was the natural choice from which to import labour. Between 1815 and the mid 1820s, Governor Farquhar brought

¹¹ Carter Marina.(1996). *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University press.p 19.

¹² Carter, M. & Ng Foong Kwong , J. (1997). *Forging the Rainbow: labour immigrants in British Mauritius*. Mauritius: Alfran Co. Ltd. p 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p 5.

Indian convicts from Bengal and Bombay to work in Mauritius. In 1815, 835 convicts were introduced. They lived in the 'Convicts Barracks' at Grand River North West and Trou Fanfaron and in camps in rural districts. Some were sent to work on sugar plantations. Many were skilled and worked as tailors, cooks, cotton spinners, indigo manufacturers. Others were literate and employed as clerks. Some helped to launch, very successfully, opium and silk production on the island.¹⁵ Importation of convict labour stopped in 1838.

Table 1: Number of convicts in Mauritius 1815-1848

Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.	Year	No.
1815	316	1824	601	1833	unknown	1842	497
1816	527	1825	582	1834	986	1843	468
1817	723	1826	565	1835	unknown	1844	438
1818	735	1827	548	1836	unknown	1845	406
1819	686	1828	607	1837	730	1846	372
1820	663	1829	591	1838	674	1847	unknown
1821	649	1830	611	1839	640	1848	315
1822	639	1831	unknown	1840	603		
1823	618	1832	unknown	1841	537		

(Source: C. Anderson, Convicts, 137)

Free Indian Labourers

Free Indian workers under engagement were employed as from 1825, but the beginning of the 'Great Experiment' started with the recruitment of 75

¹⁵ MA. B3, report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry. 1875. ch. 4. p 26.

labourers from Calcutta and Bombay by Arbuthnot in 1834.¹⁶ Indian workers were perceived as being quiet, docile and industrious by colonists and soon other planters followed the example of Arbuthnot. The recruitment and arrival were done by private parties. However the Anti-Slavery Society brought indentured immigration to the attention of the British Parliament and this culminated in the suspension of emigration from British presidencies in 1838.¹⁷

2.3. Alternatives to Indian labour - 1839-1842

Relying on a single source of labour was risky, as the occasional suspension to the indenture trade testified. Mauritian colonists were constantly looking for other possibilities. It was when migration from India was prohibited that Malagasy, Comorian, South East Asian and African workers were imported in Mauritius. In February 1840, the committee set up to administer recruitment and transportation of labour, requested the authority to introduce labourers from Madagascar and East Africa.¹⁸ Importing labour from these two regions presented some advantages: The voyage was relatively short and the cost of introducing Malagasies cheaper. Labourers were imported from the east coast of Madagascar and from regions that did not fall under the sovereignty of the Hova Government. On the subject of the East Coast of Africa, the colonial government was cautious because of illegal slave trade.

¹⁶ MA. B3, report of the Royal Commission of Enquiry. 1875. ch. 4. p 26.

¹⁷ Carter Marina.(1996). *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University press. p 21.

¹⁸ Carter, M. & Ng Foong Kwong , J. (1997). *Forging the Rainbow: labour immigrants in British Mauritius*. Mauritius: Alfran Co. Ltd. p 7

Liberated Africans

During the post-emancipation period, between 1840 and 1869, slaves captured on slave vessels near the Mozambique channel were brought to Mauritius as 'liberated Africans'. They landed in Port Louis harbour and the majority of them were kept for 48 hours at the Immigration Depot. Between January 1856 and October 1869, or over a period of thirteen years, 2365 Liberated Africans were brought to the Immigration Depot where they were processed and allocated to various private employers by the Protector of Immigrants. They were freed on their arrival in Mauritius and allocated to planters as apprentices. In June 1840, the 'Lily' arrived in Mauritius with 265 African slaves on board who were apprenticed to local planters.¹⁹ The Ordinance No.18 of 1865 officially legalised the role of the Protector of Immigrants as well as the Immigration Depot in the allocation process of the Liberated Africans. Article 5 provided for the maintenance of the Liberated Africans at the Immigration Depot under the superintendence of the Protector of Immigrants from the time of their arrival in Mauritius until their allocation to employers. The Protector was also given the task of selecting the employers in order to protect the African recaptives from cruel and unsuitable masters and mistresses. The significance of Ordinance No.18 of 1865 cannot be underestimated because it legalised the whole process which took place at the Aapravasi Ghat since 1856 through which the Liberated Africans were given a new status and identity, in other words, they became indentured immigrants and were no longer recaptive slaves. Eventually, they became free wage earners and permanent members of Mauritian colonial society.

¹⁹ SD 19, correspondence from Smith to Russell, 22 May 1841

Table 2: Number of Liberated Africans arriving in Mauritius, 1856-1869

Date	Ships	Males	Females
January 1856	Mascareignes	290	35
May 1857	Governor Higginson	350	50
September 1860	Manuella	638	92
March 1861	Sidon	186	74
June 1861	Sidon	104	62
October 1865	Vistula	3	15
November 1865	Estelle	74	32
January 1866	Clifford	11	33
September 1866	Vistula	7	
January 1867	A. Auguste	88	45
July 1868	Admiral	12	5
August 1869	Mozambique	15	0
September 1869	Dryad	76	64
October 1869	Perseverance	4	0

Source: Carter, M., Peerthum, S. (2003). *The last slaves, liberated African in nineteenth century Mauritius*

In addition, negotiations with local authorities in Comoro lead to the introduction of 200 Johanese labourers in 1841.²⁰ Throughout 1841, Chinese labourers continued to arrive, chiefly from Penang, Singapore, Macao and Canton.²¹

²⁰ Carter, M. & Ng Foong Kwong, J. (1997). *Forging the Rainbow: labour immigrants in British Mauritius*. Mauritius: Alfran Co. Ltd. p 11

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 12.

Table 3: Chinese Arrival in Mauritius 1837-1843

SHIP	DATE OF ARRIVAL	FROM	No of labourers
Watkins	9 Nov 1837		12
John Hayes	29 Dec 1849	Calcutta	14
Leverick	15 April 1841		11
Ganges	4 July 1841	Penang	307
Patriot	1 Aug 1841		126
Swallow	10 Aug 1841		156
Sir C. Forbe	9 Aug 1841		202
Leverick	22 sep 1841		25
Exmouth	15 Feb. 1842	Calcutta	117
Mary Bulme	10 may 1842	Singapore	75
William Bryan	26 may 1842		103
Dona Carmelita	8 July 1842		130
Dona Carmelita	9 Nov 1842	Singapore	140
Mary Bulmer	16 Nov 1842	Singapore	100
Dona Carmelita	26 Mar 1843	Singapore	140
Rambler	17 April 1843		122
Europe	19 April 1843	Penang	79
William	2 May 1843	Penang	127
Watkins	4 July 1843	Singapore	114

Source: PE 159, Register of Chinese Immigrants

2.4. Resumption of Indian indentured immigration: 1843

Indian migration after 1842 was reintroduced on a new scheme: government-controlled immigration. Despite the reinstatement of Indian indentured immigration, non-Indian labourers continued to arrive. In the first half of 1843, 9002 Indians, 582 Chinese and 110 Johannese arrived in Mauritius²². In 1843, the Government encouraged Malagasy immigration but dissuaded immigration from Comoro.²³ One of the reasons why Malagasies were sought was because of the cheapness of the passage. However, over the years non-Indian indentured immigration dried up for various reasons. In the case of Madagascar, politics was always to prove to be the stumbling block in the labour trade. The fear of antagonizing the Queen of Ranavalona and the Hova Government if negotiations were made with local chiefs discouraged an important importation of labourer from Madagascar. Arrivals from Madagascar remained very little despite several measures taken by the Government.

²² Carter, M. & Ng Foong Kwong, J. (1997). *Forging the Rainbow: labour immigrants in British Mauritius*. Mauritius: Alfran Co. Ltd. p 13.

²³ Ibid.

Table 4: Malagasies arriving in Mauritius in 1840

SHIP NAME	PORT OF ORIGIN	LABOURERS	SHIP NAME	PORT OF ORIGIN	LABOURERS
Comet	Angontsy	10	Cesar	Angontsy	31
William Allen	Angontsy	8	Caledonia	Maranset	8
Manchester	Angontsy	7	Lord Sannarez	Vohemar	12
William Allen	Maranset	8	William Allen	Angontsy	25
Tartar	Tamatave	8	Midas	Maranset	10
William Allen	Tamatave	7	David Charles	Fort Dauphin	21
Manchester	Tamatave	7	Tiger	Foulpointe	10
Tartar	Tamatave	7	Manchester	Maranser	7
Edward	Angontsy	30	Comet	Angontsy	15
Tartar	Tamatave	7	Cesar	Angontsy	26
Comet	Angontsy	10			

Source: Carter, M. & Ng Foong Kwong, J. (1997). Forging the Rainbow: labour immigrants in British Mauritius. Mauritius: Alfran Co. Ltd. p 121.

As for Chinese labourers, they were unprepared for the rigours of the plantation regime. They rapidly developed a reputation for resistance and they were unfavourably compared to Indian indentured labourers. On the whole, statistics reveals that the number of non-Indian labourers gradually diminished during the 1840s. Between 1845 and 1848, there was a continual decline in the number of Malagasy and Comorian workers in Mauritius. Short recovery occurred during cane cutting seasons and increase in wages but it remained a seasonal migration type. Planters were richly served by the Indian contingent system which brought 43, 346 men and women from 1844 to 1849.²⁴ After the unsuccessful attempts at introducing non-Indian indentured labourers, planters relied solely on India for the supply of labour. Indians thus formed 95 % of the total number of indentured labourers brought in Mauritius.

²⁴ Carter, M. & Ng Foong Kwong, J. (1997). *Forging the Rainbow: labour immigrants in British Mauritius*. Mauritius: Alfran Co. Ltd. p 16

3. Indenture in other colonies

On the 1 August 1834, three-quarter of a million men, women and children in the British West Indies were freed. The period of apprenticeship, just like in Mauritius served to post-pone the labour-availability problem. The British and West- Indian government were anxious to maintain the sugar production and alternative sources of labour were experienced. It was found that most British colonies had the same experiences as Mauritius with the various sources of labour before finally relying on India for a constant labour supply. As the first colony to undertake government-controlled importation of indentured labour, Mauritius served as a model for the countries mentioned below:

British Colonies	The Pacific Region	Dutch colony
British Guiana	Australia	Suriname
Trinidad and Tobago	Samoa island	
Jamaica	Fiji	French colonies
Grenada	Barbados	Guadeloupe
St Kitts and Nevis	Hawaii	Martinique
St Lucia		Réunion Island
St Vincent		Seychelles
Cuba		

Planters in the Caribbean needed more labour than was available to them and they also wanted labourers who would work for lower wages than those already living there. They looked to Africa, China and India for a new labouring population.

3.1 BRITISH GUIANA

After the success of Indian indentured immigration in Mauritius, British Guiana also imported labourers from India. Four years after Mauritius, Indians were imported in 1838 under the "Gladstone Experiment". John Gladstone, owner of sugar estates in British Guiana, through the Calcutta Company of Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Co., and acting on the permission of Lord Glenelg, imported 396 "hill coolies" from Northern India in January 1838.²⁵ On May 5, 1838, the *Whitby*, after a sea voyage of 112 days, arrived in British Guiana from Calcutta with 249 immigrants on board. The ship immediately sailed to Berbice and 164 immigrants, who were recruited by Highbury and Waterloo sugar plantations, disembarked. The ship then returned to Demerara where the remaining 80 immigrants landed and were taken to Belle Vue Estate.²⁶ Soon after the Indians landed, allegations of serious abuses were levelled by John Scoble, Agent of the Anti-Slavery Society in British Guiana. The result was a temporary injunction against further emigration from India. With the ban in importation of Indian indentured labourer in 1838, British Guiana looked for other supplies of labour. Chinese labourers were recruited from Malacca, Singapore and Penang.²⁷ The first batch of Chinese landed in Georgetown, British Guiana in 1853, and for the next few years all were men brought forcibly. To curb the excesses of this trade in human cargo the British and Chinese authorities in Canton agreed to a formal supervised recruitment process and families were encouraged to emigrate. Chinese women began arriving

²⁵ Carter Marina.(1996). *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University press., p 21

²⁶ *The Arrival of the East Indians*. (online). (March 2003)
<http://www.guyana.org/features/guyanastory/chapter49.html>

²⁷ F. r. Auguier., S.C. Gordon., D. G. Hall., M. Reckord. (1960). *The making of the west indies*. London: Longman Caribbean Limited., p 198.

in 1860, but in small numbers. The period from 1860 to 1866 saw a relatively large influx of immigrants, bringing the local Chinese population to a peak of 10,022 in 1866.²⁸ The Chinese who came before 1860 were brought from the 'baracoons' at Macao.²⁹ Subsequently only two boats arrived with Chinese immigrants, one in 1874 and the other in 1879. By that year, 13,533 arrived in British Guiana. Chinese immigration was not a success. Subsequently, India became the main source of indentured labour by the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁰ Among the indentured population 238,000 were from India and over 32,000 from Europe. Over 14,000 Africans and 13,000 Chinese workers were also employed.

3.2 TRINIDAD

After failed attempts to source much-needed labour through bountied European immigration, the Jamaican Government turned to China, Africa and India. In Trinidad, the Governor had suggested the importation of Chinese labourers as early as 1806.³¹ The Chinese in Trinidad did not take to estate labour. The few hundred Chinese who entered Trinidad in 1806 demanded repatriation in 1807 or left the plantations for business and trade.³² In 1841, a committee of planters recommended Africa as an area from which to recruit free workers. But attempts to import labourers from Sierra Leone and the Kru Coast were not successful. Most of the African brought to the West Indies were slaves rescued from captured slave ships

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p 198

³⁰ F. r. Auguier., S.C. Gordon., D. G. Hall., M. Reckord. (1960). *The making of the west indies*. London: Longman Caribbean Limited., p 198.

³¹ Ibid., p195.

³² Ibid., p196.

and introduced in the colonies as 'Liberated Africans'. This was the result of the campaign of the British Navy against the Atlantic Slave trade after 1833.³³ (Refer to table on p 21) Almost 145,000 Indians were indentured to work in Trinidad, 120,000 of whom had arrived by 1850.³⁴ Trinidad acquired the third largest contingent of Indian indentured labourers. Indentured labour in that colony included 2,500 Chinese, 18,000 Africans and 900 Europeans.³⁵

3.3 JAMAICA

The first shipment of 261 Indians arrived in Jamaica on the barque Blundell Hunter on 8 May 1845. They were despatched to Old Harbour on 9 May, and then on to the Clarendon Estates, including Halse Hall and Mammee Gully, which had contracted their services.³⁶ They came from Northern India and comprised of 200 men, 28 women under 30 years old and 33 children under 12 years old. Indentured labourers brought to Jamaica included 36,000 Indians, 1,100 Chinese labourers, over 11,000 Africans and 4,500 Europeans.³⁷

Indians were recruited and shipped to Jamaica in response to the applications sent in to the Protector of Immigrants. Advertisements inviting such applications usually appeared in the colony's newspapers. Applications were usually required by 1st February of each year in order to

³³ Ibid., p 197

³⁴ Grainger, Melissa. (2001). *The Growth of Non-European populations in the Americas and Caribbean*. University of Calgary. (Online).

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/migrations/five2.html

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Shepherd, Verene. (1994). *Transients to Settlers: The Experience of Indians in Jamaica 1845-1950*. Warwick: University of Warwick Press. pp44-46

³⁷ Grainger, Melissa. (2001). *The Growth of Non-European populations in the Americas and Caribbean*. University of Calgary. (online).

http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/migrations/five2.html

satisfy the deadline of 1st April imposed by the contracted shippers, Nourse Ltd. The applications were processed by the Immigration Advisory Committee in the Immigration Office in Kingston which then advised the Colonial Secretary of the numbers required. The Colonial Secretary in turn transmitted this information to the Crown Agents in London who in turn passed on the information to the Emigration Agent in Calcutta or Madras. Recruiting operations were then set in motion. In order to sign onto an indentureship Indians were to appear before a magistrate, hold a government permit and fully understand the conditions of the labour contract. However, the contract was often explained in English and thousands of labourers simply put their thumb marks on the required line, without any true understanding of what awaited them following their journey across the sea.³⁸

Table 5: Africans brought to the West Indies after 1838

Country	Number of Africans
British Guiana	13, 970
Jamaica	10, 000
Trinidad	8, 390
Grenada	1, 540
St Vincent	1, 040
St Lucia	730
St Kitts	460

Source: F. r. Auguier., S.C. Gordon., D. G. Hall., M. Reckord.(1960) *The making of the West Indies*. London: Longman Caribbean Limited., p 197

³⁸ Shepherd, Verene. *Transients to Settlers: The Experience of Indians in Jamaica 1845-1950*. Warwick: University of Warwick Press. 1994. pp 44-46.

3.4 CUBA

Cuba was a Spanish colony when it began importing indentured labourers after the abolition of slavery in 1886. However, other sources of labour were sought before the end of slavery, including a small number of Mayan prisoners from Mexico under ten-year bonds. The most important source of indentured contract labour, however, came from China, where from 1852 to 1874, over 125,000 were employed on the island³⁹. Planters looked to China largely because the cost of indentured Chinese workers was less than that of African slaves. Labourers in Cuba worked primarily in the sugar industry and in other plantation crops such as coffee, tobacco, and rubber, but also worked on the British-financed railroads. Labourers were recruited from Amoy and Canton, through the agency of town British firms but when those sources were stopped, they used the barracoons of Macao.⁴⁰ The methods of recruitment were kidnapping on a large scale and the buying of prisoners taken in the civil wars in South China.⁴¹ The labourers were made to sign a contract of eight years in China. They received four pesos a month, plus food, shelter and two changes of clothes a year.⁴² Conditions in Cuba for Chinese indentured labourers were often extremely harsh. They were generally forced to work long hours, were inadequately fed, suffered beatings which could be crippling or fatal, and were often coerced into renewing their contracts. These abuses compelled the Chinese government to take actions to halt the movement of Chinese to the island. From 1861, Chinese workers in Cuba were forced to either

³⁹ F. r. Auguier., S.C. Gordon., D. G. Hall., M. Reckord. (1960). *The making of the west indies*. London: Longman Caribbean Limited., p 202.

⁴⁰ F. r. Auguier., S.C. Gordon., D. G. Hall., M. Reckord. (1960). *The making of the west indies*. London: Longman Caribbean Limited., p 202

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

return home or to accept another term of indenture after the end of their first term. Since few Chinese had the resources to afford return passage, most were forced to continue working, usually for another eight-year term. Efforts to remedy the worst abuses were largely ineffectual as local governments tended to side more with the economic needs of planters than with those of the labourers. Despite these difficulties, the system in Cuba generally improved after the 1870's with the institution of several important reforms, and official supervision began to take effect.

3.5 AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC REGIONS

Plantation systems in the Pacific became widespread in the 1860s. When the American civil war disrupted supplies of raw materials to the textile factories of British and Europe, cotton plantations in places as Fiji, Samoa, and Queensland developed rapidly. Ultimately, cotton as a transitional crop boomed for about a decade and then collapse to give rise to emergent staples such as sugar and copra. Planters were initially confronted with the unwillingness of pacific islanders to work on expatriate plantations near their own villages. In order to close the gap between labour needs and supply, planters in Australia, New Caledonia, and the Samoa Islands were forced to look for labour elsewhere.⁴³ The Melanesian islands became the most significant labour reserve. The dramatic expansion of the sugar industry in the second half of the nineteenth century led to an increase in the labour needs. Consequently, waves of Asian workers from India, china, Japan, Korea and the Philippines, comprised the overwhelming proportion

⁴³ Brij V. Lal., Doug Munro., & E. D. Beechert. (Ed). (1993). *Planters Workers. Resistance and Accommodation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. pp 2-4.

of the industry's labour force.⁴⁴ On 22 August 1837, 61 male labourers were shipped to Sydney and a further 28 in December of that same year. They were recruited to work in the fields of New South Wales.⁴⁵ Private entrepreneurs brought in 2 shiploads of Indian labourers in the same year. In 1837 the Immigration Committee was told that 1203 Coolies were imported by 111 settlers. The Indian Emigration Act 1839 strictly controlled the recruitment of Indians. Indentured labourers (mostly from the Dhangars community) were also brought in by pastoralists in 1830s and 1840s.

3.6 THE BLACK-BIRDING SYSTEM IN QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

Queensland was a self-governing British colony in north-eastern Australia until 1901 when it became a state of the Commonwealth of Australia. A long-term indentured labour trade called "blackbirding" was the system through which labourers were introduced in the Pacific.⁴⁶ Blackbirding refers to the recruitment of people through alleged trickery and kidnappings to work on plantations, particularly the sugar cane plantations of Queensland.⁴⁷ Melanesian islands to the north and northeast were brought to Queensland between 1863 and 1904, mostly to work in the sugar industry, on three-year contracts of indenture. Once underway, some 8,000 indentured Melanesians (or Kanakas as they are often termed) on average were in Queensland at any one time, whether as first indentured,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Carter Marina. (1996). *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University press.,

⁴⁶ *Blackbirding*. (online)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Island,_Trinidad_and_Tobago

⁴⁷ Ibid.

reengaged, or as time-expired workers. The question of how many Islanders were kidnapped or blackbirded is unknown and remains controversial. Official documents and accounts from the period often conflict with the oral tradition passed down to the descendants of workers. Stories of blatantly violent kidnapping tended to relate to the first 10–15 years of the trade. Over a period of 40 years, from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, labourers for the sugar cane fields of Queensland, were "recruited" from Fiji, New Caledonia, and the Samoan Islands. The "recruitment" process almost always included an element of coercive recruitment and indentured servitude.⁴⁸ Australia repatriated many of these people to their places of origin in the period 1906-1908 under the provisions of the Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901. The Australian colonies of Papua and New Guinea (joined after the Second World War to form Papua New Guinea) were the last jurisdictions in the world to use indentured servitude.⁴⁹

3.7 HAWAII

Up to 1875, labour demands in sugar had met largely with Hawaiian labour. However, Hawaiian refusal to accept low wages and the authorities urged the replacement of Hawaiian labour. It was this refusal to work for lower wages that played a major role in the enactment of an indentured labour system in 1850, thus adopting the system of other sugar-producing areas of the world. The Masters and Servants Act provided for the signing

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ *Indentured servant*. (online)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Island,_Trinidad_and_Tobago

of labour contracts, enforced with penal sanctions.⁵⁰ Hawaiian authority wanted to 'Europeanise the work force such that planters turned to the Atlantic islands to bring Portuguese and Norwegians under the indenture contract. The reluctance of European workers (whether Portuguese, Norwegian, German or Spanish) to accept the conditions of work in Hawaiian plantation, compelled the planters to turn to Asia for indentured labour.⁵¹ After experimenting with various Melanesian and Micronesian imports, Hawaii turned to Japan for labour. Japanese were introduced in Hawaii under the indenture contract. Further shortage of labour after 1875, compelled the Hawaiian authorities to import Chinese workers. The Chinese took advantage of the scarcity of labour to organize themselves into contracting companies and were thus able to divide and organize the work and salary according to their own rules.⁵² The situation in Hawaii thus differs from other colonies. A situation was created whereby three distinct labour forms existed side by side: indentured labour under penal compulsion, free day labour allowed to withdraw at any time, and a self-organising gang labour system contracting their services.⁵³

3.8 FIJI

The first group of labourers for Fiji plantations came from the neighbouring Pacific islands of New Hebrides, the Solomons and the Gilbert Islands in 1864. This supply was however not adequate to meet the need of Fiji plantations, particularly with the decline of these native

⁵⁰ Brij V. Lal., Doug Munro., & E. D. Beechert. (Ed). (1993). *Planters Workers. Resistance and Accommodation*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press., 49.

⁵¹ Ibid. p 50

⁵² Ibid. p 53

⁵³ Ibid.

populations in the islands of recruitment.⁵⁴ The need for dependable and sustained outside sources of labour supply was sharpened soon after Fiji became a British colony in 1874. Sir Arthur Gordon, who had experience in other British colonies realized that the chiefly system in Fiji worked well, so rather than try to lay down the law from above, he ruled the country through the existing chiefs, whose communal land he protected from ever being sold. Sir Arthur Gordon also realized that it would be futile to try to make Fijians work the land of the foreign plantation owners. He initiated the immigration of indentured workers from India. Over a period of 40 years (ending in 1916), 63,000 Indian workers came to Fiji to work out a ten-year contract. ⁵⁵ Of these, the majority were men and women recruited in the North Indian state of Bihar and the United Provinces, who embarked at the Emigration Depot in Calcutta. More than half of them elected to stay behind when the contract expired. ⁵⁶

3.9 SRI LANKA

In 1828, Barnes the Governor of the Island, imported 150 “Tamil Coolies” who were amongst the first of their kind to come thus to the Island, for their own coffee plantation. Within a year all these men deserted. These workers, when they found other planters offered more, abandoned their contracts. Civil remedy against such desertions was long drawn out and was to no purpose. To remedy this situation in 1841 the Government introduced the Service Contracts Ordinance No. 5 of 1841 which repealed

⁵⁴ *Fiji's Historical milestones : Indentured labour.* (online)

http://www.undp.org.fj/elections/Fiji/hist_indenture.htm

⁵⁵ *Historical overview of the fiji Islands- the Arrival of Indentured Laborers From India: A Stage is set.* (online)

<http://www.naia.com.fj/fiji/history.html>

⁵⁶ *Fiji's fascinating history.* (online)<http://www.naia.com.fj/fiji/history.html>

and replaced a tentative attempt towards the same end in 1840. By this Ordinance an employer was enabled to take criminal action against an employee who broke his contract. The objective of this Ordinance was set out as “the better regulation of Servants, Labourers and Journeymen Artificers, under Contracts for Hire and Service.”⁵⁷ It applied to “any menial or domestic servant or labourer in the Service of Government, or of any person or persons”. A written contract signed by both parties could be made valid for a period of one year and was terminable by one month’s notice. The contract was enforced through the penal provision in Section 7 of the Ordinance.⁵⁸ At the abolition of indentureship in Sri Lanka, a new system of labour was established which was known as the Kangani system.⁵⁹

3.10 SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa, especially the province of Kwazulu/Natal received a large number of indentured labourers. In the mid-1800s Natal, a separate colony with fertile land to be exploited was facing a shortage of labour, due to the abolition of slavery and the local population's unwillingness to work on European farms. The Natal government arranged for cheap labour to be imported from other colonies, and in 1859 the Natal Coolie Law was passed to facilitate this. The first batch of indentured labourers - 342 people - arrived in Durban harbour on November 16 1860. The practice of recruitment of indentured labour ended in 1911, following protests by

⁵⁷ *Evolution of Labour Legislation in Asia*. Hong Kong: Documentation for Action Group in Asia). (1986)., chapter 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Ibid

Indians and British antislavery activists. Nevertheless Natal continued having recourse to indentured labour from India until 1917 when indentureship was finally abolished in all British colonies. More than 150 000 indentured labourers were brought to South Africa between 1860 and 1911.

3.11 PERU

With the abolition of slavery, in 1854, the Peruvian planters looked to Asia to fill the labour gap. Peru first imported almost 100,000 Chinese, then 18,000 Japanese and 2,000 Pacific Islanders into the country. By 1924 there were 21,000 Japanese who came to Peru as indentured labourers. The newly arrived workers were sold by auction at Callao, where their contracts would regularly sell for up to \$400. They worked primarily in sugar plantations, building the railroad through the Andes, or mining guano.

3.12 SURINAME

Ten years before the abolition of slavery in 1863, the owners of the plantations had started importing labourers from China, India, and Java. Chinese immediately left the plantations after a 5-year obligatory working period. Chinese brought from Indonesia immediately left the plantations after a 5-year obligatory working period.⁶⁰ Indians came to Suriname between 1873 and 1916. On 5 June 1873 the sailing ship *Lala Rookh* from

⁶⁰ *The history of Suriname.* (online)
<http://ilps.science.uva.nl/~erikt/suriname/history.html>

Calcutta with 452 Indian indentured labourers on board. They were also recruited to work on the plantations for some years after which they could return to India or prolong their contract. The relatively small demand for indentured labour in Surinam made it impossible to charter more than two ships per season from India; in some years only one ship was used. Over 37,000 Indian and almost 20,000 Javanese labourers as well as 2,800 Chinese and 500 European workers were recruited under the indenture system.⁶¹

3.13 FRENCH COLONIES: Réunion Island, Martinique , Guadeloupe

At the abolition of slavery in French colonies in 1848, planters were faced with the same labour problems as in British colonies. Conditions throughout the French Caribbean were similar to those which existed in French Guiana, and planters turned initially to direct access to British labour markets in India to alleviate labour shortages on their plantations. The British, however, were reluctant to concede such access, fearing that the rights of the Indians, now under their care, would be compromised. Long negotiations with the British left the French looking to other areas for much-needed labour. Subsidised French migrants and indentured Madeiran workers were initially sought, but insufficient numbers due to the fact that such migrants would receive no long-term benefits from their move forced the French to turn elsewhere. From their small coastal establishment at Pondicherry, in India, they recruited some Indian labour, and looked also to China and to their colonies in Africa to augment their work force. Although the indenturing of Africans was viewed by

⁶¹ *The Growth of Non-European Populations in the Americas and the Caribbean.* (online) <http://www.ucalgary.ca>

contemporaries as little different than a continuation of the slave trade, African imports to the French colonies rose in numbers, to a high of 10,000 in 1858, due to a reduction in the numbers of available labourers from India. As previously mentioned, abuses with the African system prompted the British to allow the French into British Indian markets in 1862. Importation of labourers from British India was allowed by the Act XVI of 1860, thus adding Reunion Island, Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana.⁶² The French were allowed to engage workers in five-year periods of indenture, but had to ensure free return passage at the end of that time.⁶³

At the end of apprenticeship, inhabitants in Reunion sought to diversify their sources of labour. In 1843, the Governor authorised the introduction of 1,000 Chinese on a tribal basis. In July 1844, 69 Chinese arrived from Singapore. Recruitment of Chinese was stopped in 1846 since the quota was almost reached. The Chinese protested against the terms of their contract. During the years following the abolition of slavery, there were already more than 6500 Chinese and Indian indentured labourers in the country. By 31st December 1848, 3440 Indians including 60 women and 8 children came in the country under indenture.⁶⁴ However, in 1849 the number of Indian indentured labourers increased by four times. Around 118,000 indentured labourers were brought to the country to work in plantation between 1829 and 1924. In Martinique the number of Indian indentured labourers amounted to 25 000 in 1884. Guadeloupe recruited

⁶² Carter Marina.(1996). *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University press., p 27.

⁶³ The French Caribbean. (online)
http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/migrations/five2c.html

⁶⁴ Les Cahiers du CRI 1er Semestre 1986 : L'engagisme indien à l'île de la Réunion

indentured labourers as from 1842. On the 25 December 1854, 344 Indian indentured labourers arrived in the colony on board the ship *L'Aurélie*. At the end of indenture in Guadeloupe, the number of Indian indentured labourers amounted to 40,000.

4. Comparing the indenture system in different colonies

The indenture system, as it was mentioned above, was first experienced and established in Mauritius. Afterwards, the system was adopted by other colonies under the same basic principle of the penal-contract labour. However, contractual terms were not uniform throughout all labour-importing colonies. The experience of the indentured labourers depended on the provisions made in the contract that he or she signed and the way in which it was enforced.

4.1 Duration of contract

In Mauritius the industrial residence for indentured labourers was increased from 1 year to 3 years by Ordinance no 3 of 1849 and finally to five. In the West Indies, initially labourers signed a contract of 10 years. In 1856, the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners declared that the West Indies were at a disadvantage compared to Mauritius. The Emigration Agent for the West Indies at Madras, Mr Thomson, recommended that the industrial residence be shortened to five years to match the legislation in Mauritius.⁶⁵

4.2 Modes of recruitment

The Indian Government took great interest in indentured labour. Recruiting depots were established in Calcutta and Madras and agents

⁶⁵ Carter Marina.(1996). *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University press., p 26.

were paid significantly less, per recruit, than for a European labourer). The Government monitored recruitment, the terms and conditions of indentureship, and the guidelines for transport to Jamaica as well as eventual repatriation to India. The process of recruitment was similar for all colonies. Recruitment was carried out by men licensed by the Protector of Emigrants, but employed by Sub-Agents who manned the up-country depots at which emigrants were assembled prior to their journey to Madras or Calcutta for embarkation. Licensed recruiters often appointed assistants--Kutty Maistries in Madras, Arkatias in North India--who travelled around the villages to obtain recruits. Recruiters were paid by commission. Though perhaps the only practicable method of payment, this was accompanied by many abuses which at times led to the cancellation of licenses. Unlicensed recruitments however, often operated undetected.⁶⁶ However, as already discussing in chapter 3, Chinese labour brought to Cuba, British Guiana and Queensland were often kidnapped.

4.3 Rations

In British Guiana labourers were fed for the first four months while in Trinidad for the first two years. In Jamaica labourers could convert their rations into money wages. In Mauritius labourers were fed during the whole of their period of indenture. In Grenada, Antigua, St Lucia and St Vincent labourers did not receive rations and were paid in money.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Shepherd, Verene. *Transients to Settlers: The Experience of Indians in Jamaica 1845-1950*. Warwick: University of Warwick Press. 1994. pp 44-46

⁶⁷ Carter Marina. (1996). *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*. London: Leicester University press., p 48.

4.4 Wages and duration of work

The indenture contract set a fixed rate of pay for the entire indenture period. In all countries labourers could not bargain their labour market value. In Jamaica and British Guiana they were paid weekly, in St Lucia and Trinidad fortnightly and in Mauritius monthly. Labourers had to work for five days a week and seven hours a day in British Guiana, 280 days for 9 hours in Trinidad, St Lucia, Grenada and Jamaica six days a week, (excluding holidays). In Mauritius, labourers work during 9 hours from Monday to Saturday and for two hours on Sundays.

4.5 Punishment for absence from work

In Trinidad absence from work was punished by imprisonment for 7 days while five days absence led to two month imprisonment in British Guiana. In Mauritius absence from work led to loss of wage and rations, a halfpenny reduction on every shilling of his monthly wages or imprisonment for 14 days or had his contract extended. If the labourer was absent for 3 days he was imprisoned for 3 months.⁶⁸

4.6 Return passages

The basic principle of indentureship was that indentured labourers were provided with a free return passage at the end of their contract. The term 'free passage' was deceiving as in reality the labourers were paying the

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p 49.

charges. In Mauritius, the contracts passed with immigrants allowed for up to one fifth of the wages of labourers to be retained by their employer until the expiration of the terms of contracts. The money was used to pay for the return passage of the labourer. If the latter decided to re-engage himself, the money was given back to him.⁶⁹ In the West Indies as well as in Mauritius, earliest ordinances provided for a 'free' return passage for immigrants but after 1854, only when an immigrant had lived for ten years in one West Indian colony did he become entitled to a free return passage. After 1895, in British Guiana, he had to pay part of the cost, a quarter until 1898 and after that a half. Later on, only the invalids and the destitute were entitled to a free passage in Mauritius as well as in the West Indies.

4.7 The Immigration Department

To ensure that the contract was being respected by both labourer and employer, a Department of Immigration was established in every colony receiving immigrants from abroad, with an Agent-General or Protector of Immigrants as its Head. In theory, the department was to hold the scales evenly between the employers and their immigrants but in practice it happened only in those colonies where the Governor and the Protector or Agent General were determined to protect the immigrants.⁷⁰ In Jamaica, Sir John Grant and in Trinidad Sir Arthur Gordon, took such close interest in the working of immigration. The Agent General in British Guiana, James Crosby made tremendous efforts to help immigrants. He was greatly

⁶⁹ S. Deerpalsingh., M. Carter., (1996). *Select Documents on Indian Immigration. Mauritius, 1834- 1926.* v iii. Moka : Mahatma Gandhi Institute., p 2.

⁷⁰ F. R. Auguier., S.C. Gordon., D. G. Hall., M. Reckord. (1960). *The making of the west Indies.* London: Longman Caribbean Limited., p 205.

appreciated by the immigrants such that his successors in office were all known as 'Crosbys' and the sub-agents were called 'little Crosbys'.⁷¹

⁷¹ Ibid.

5. Assessment of the importance of Mauritius in the Indentured labour Diaspora

The indenture system was first experimented in Mauritius before being adopted in other British, French, Spanish and Dutch colonies. In Mauritius, it started under a private scheme in 1820s and it took a greater magnitude as from 1834, which is considered as the official year for the start of the ‘Great Experiment’. British Guiana and Australia resorted to importation of indentured labour under a private scheme four years after Mauritius, in 1838. Countries in the British Empire, like Trinidad, Jamaica, Sri Lanka and South Africa adopted the system in the 1840s.

The system established in Mauritius was applied with some variations in other colonies. By comparing the contracts signed by Indentured labourers in the different countries, it can be established that in principle it was the same as in Mauritius. Colonies in the Atlantic, Pacific as well as those in the Indian Ocean were constantly in competition with Mauritius in the recruitment of labourers since the latter had an advantage from its geographical position in relation to the sources of labour. This is the main reason why Mauritius received the largest number of indentured labourers compared to the other colonies. In addition, the number of labourers who permanently settled in Mauritius was larger than that in other colonies. Indenture has had an important demographic, economic, cultural and social impact on the societies of all countries which experienced this nineteenth century phenomenon. The role that Mauritius played in the development of a new system of free labour that eventually wiped out slavery was indeed very significant.

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