

## CHAPTER 3

# How Indian Indenture Civilized England

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[He] cannot believe that any country would be so barbaric as to allow its merchants the freedom to harm and despoil the people of a foreign realm.

AMITAV GHOSH, *River of Smoke*

COLONIAL MODE OF HISTORIOGRAPHY popularized colonialism as the civilizing mission. The colonized, on the other hand, knew throughout, as part of their concrete experience, that colonialism was barbarism. Following the above passage from Ghosh, England not only ‘allowed’, but aided and abetted its merchants to despoil foreign countries – colonies – putting its military and naval power at their disposal, as and when needed. Yet, so powerful is the impact of the dominant discourse of colonialism as the civilized and colonized as ‘barbarians’ to be rescued by the former that any suggestion that the colonizers were, indeed, barbarians and colonial rule barbaric and that colonies could and did contribute to the process of civilizing the former in any respect is almost a heresy, a lunatic idea to be laughed at, certainly never to be taken seriously. But that is what happened with Indian indentured labour in the British Empire: it civilized England, a fact yet to be recognized in the historiography of Indian indentured labour during colonial rule.

## PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION AND INDIAN INDENTURE

In terms of time span, the beginnings of indenture are traced back to the migration from India to Mauritius and end with the expiration

of the last batch of the indentured emigration to the Caribbean. What were the 'underlying forces' that caused the new intercontinental indentured trade from the beginning to the end? It was the end of slavery that set off the export of indentured Indians to British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean islands and Fiji. What made it possible was the British colonial rule in India that made it possible for England to turn India into a pool of the reserve army of indentured labour – the coolie. Indians under colonial rule had no control over their own resources including the most valuable resource – human labour. The colonial state in India used the labour from India to serve the interests of the British planters in the colonies. What ended Indian indenture, on the other hand, was the power Indians acquired in the process of their struggle for freedom from colonial rule – power in social movements. Unlike the abolition of slavery, Indian indenture was abolished, not by the British parliament in England, but by the parliament in India demanded by the Indians.

Given the potency of the present occasion, that is, centenary of the abolition of Indian indenture, it is particularly important to be reminded that recruitment and transport of indentured labour from India were not abolished because of a change of heart or a sudden realization of inhumanity of the regime of indentured labour and innumerable injuries indentured Indians suffered at the hands of their masters in colonies daily by the British parliament, the Crown, the colonial state in India, or its counterparts in the colonies. It is important to be reminded in this context that the abolition of slavery, was not a pious act of morality on the part of the British parliament and the Church of England. After all, it was the British parliament that legislated slavery and the Church of England not only condoned it but owned a plantation where slaves worked. Both slavery and indenture were the means to procure labour. The plantation economy and plantations were capitalist enterprises. The main objective of capitalist enterprise is the maximization of profit. As argued by the Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of sociology, maximization of profit in capitalism was seen as the highest end of human existence as defined by the Protestant ethic. Hence, the abolition of slavery and its replacement by indentured labour drawn from India was not driven

by consideration of morality. What I want to emphasize though is that the story of the abolition of slavery and its replacement by Indian indenture is intertwined in myriad ways, and the dominant discourse of this narrative as a morality tale driven by the abolitionists, enacted by the English parliament, condoned by the Church of England is not the whole story. This narrative deserves further critical scrutiny.

Abolition was considered – packaged and sold – as a ‘progressive step toward free labour’ but it was followed by a new form of bonded labour (Northrup 17). Adam Smith argued that free labour would be both cheaper and more efficient: this was taken up by abolitionists as a *mantra*. The abolitionist movement developed in the eighteenth century when the plantation economy of the Empire depended totally on the slave labour and planters were economically and politically powerful. Abolitionists aimed at the abolition of the slave trade (not slavery per se) assuming that the end of slave trade will lead the planters, in self interest, to eventually transform their slaves into free labourers. The planters and their political organs, British parliament and the colonial state in India had a different path to follow, that is, creating a new form of labour, which was free compared to slavery, but unfree compared to ‘free labour’ in capitalism. Combining freedom and ‘unfreedom’ in a single form of labour made Indian indenture a reality *sui generis*.

#### INDISPENSABILITY OF INDENTURED LABOUR TO THE SURVIVAL OF SUGAR PLANTATIONS

The Anti-Slavery Reporter kept the issue (of immigration) alive, but within two decades indentured immigration, subsidized from public funds, met with no significant opposition, especially in British Guyana. It was because indentured immigration was indispensable: it saved the colonies from ruin and set both British Guyana and Trinidad on the road to expanding production and a developing economy. It is important to emphasize that sugar was not a dying enterprise rather, a vibrant, expanding economy and it was impossible to sustain it by free labour. The anti-slavery movements and anti-slavery legislations must be seen in this light (432).

INDIAN INDENTURE CIVILIZED ENGLAND:  
ENGLAND'S TREATMENT OF INDENTURED  
INDIANS WAS ANYTHING BUT CIVILIZED

To understand how Indian indenture civilized England, we must look at slavery and sugar plantation: no slave labour, no sugar plantation. What were the conditions for the renewal and reproduction of slave labour? Slaves were captured in war. As noted by Marx, force, fraud, and robbery were the common methods used in headhunting for slaves in Africa. Slavery was savagery. Persuaded by the abolitionists, a number of parliamentarians in England characterized slavery as savagery. Owning humans as property contradicted the spirit of freedom and equality, the twin slogans of modernity. Indenture allowed England to get rid of the savagery of slavery while having access to an unlimited supply of unfree labour, without resorting to war. Colonial conquest of India allowed England access to Indian labour in an apparently peaceful way. Unlike slavery, indenture was a contract – agreement. A contract implies consent as opposed to coercion.

That was the theory. The two parties to the contract were not equal. Nor was the 'agreement' based on free will. The indentured labourers were not only ignorant of the terms of the agreement but were even unable to pronounce it properly calling it 'girmit'. Agreement in indenture was typical of the fraud alluded to by Marx in his analysis of 'Primitive Accumulation'. Despite that, it met the labour needs of the planters exactly as slavery did before. Indeed, it did much more. It allowed England a competitive advantage over other colonial rivals seeking labour for their plantations. No other colonial power had a guaranteed supply of 'contract' labour through 'peaceful' means, at least in appearance, as did England, thanks to the reserve army of the surplus labour British colonial rule in India created. If slavery was savagery, as leader of the slave trade, England was at the head of the pack of slave traders. Abolition of slavery and acquisition of indentured labour from India gave England a semblance of civilization while protecting its economic interests. That was India's unique contribution to England – civilizing it while giving it a competitive advantage in meeting its labour needs. Historiography of Indian indenture has yet to recognize this fact.

If Indian indenture liberated England from the savagery of slavery,

how did England reciprocate? The planters in the colonies treated indentured Indians as savages and justified it racially and legally as they were used to in slavery. This was the irony noted by Gandhi dealing with the Indian Question in South Africa. He saw the root of servitude of indentured Indians in colonies in Indians' servitude to colonial rule in India. The solution was India's independence from colonial rule – Swaraj. It was no coincidence that indenture was abolished in the process of India's struggle for freedom from colonial rule.

#### LIBERATION OF INDENTURED INDIANS

Indenture had one significant outcome – unintended and unforeseen, but logical. It liberated indentured Indians from caste. If race is the foundational sin of America, caste is surely the foundational sin of India, with a much longer history. What led to the dissolution of caste in indenture? The common refrain is that caste is a creation of Hinduism. 'No Hinduism, No caste and No Caste, No Hinduism' is the folklore of the mainstream sociology and social anthropology. If caste could be produced and reproduced by Hinduism, caste would be alive in the colonies indentured Indians settled in. Conversely, if caste is essential to the survival of Hinduism, Hinduism should have died long ago in the colonies. Indians in the colonies are Hindus, without caste. The secret of what created caste in India and reproduced it generation after generation over millennia does not lie in Hinduism, but in political economy – monopoly of economic and political power by the upper castes and dependence of lower castes on the former for their very subsistence. Indenture flattened that economic-political infrastructure and caste evaporated. Indentured Indians kept their religion alive, indeed strengthened it. They even revived monogamous family, which was damaged, if not destroyed, during indenture. But not caste. Because they could not reproduce the economic-political infrastructure, the foundation of caste mentioned above, and caste died. Gandhi, Ambedkar, many more saints, *sadhus*, *fakirs*, social reformers, and the civil rights activists have been preaching and agitating for the annihilation of caste in India, with no end of caste in sight. They have to learn it from the story of indenture and caste.

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