

Aspects of
Indentured Inland
Emigration to
North-East India
1859-1918

J.C. JHA

Professor J.C. Jha had a uniformly brilliant academic career. He secured merit scholarship at different levels. He did his M.A. from the Patna University in 1952, standing first and became a lecturer in his alma matter the same year. He is a Ph.D. from the University of London (1961). He became a Reader in History in 1963 and in 1964 he was a Supervisor of Studies in the National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie.

From 1970 to 1976 Prof. Jha served as Professor of Indian Studies in the University of the West Indies; during 1977-78 he was Director, Institute of Correspondence Course in the Patna University and from 1978 to 1992 he was Professor of History in the same university. From 1985 to 1989 he was Head, Department of History in this university and during 1990-92 he was on deputation to the K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna as its Director.

Prof. Jha has participated in several national and international seminars in India and abroad. As a member of UNESCO's Expert Committee for writing the History of the West Indies he attended its meetings in the Dutch West Indies and former British West Indies.

Prof. Jha lectured in Venezuela, Barbados and several other countries in the West. He was visiting Professor in the universities of Nagpur and Magadh. He organised a number of national seminars and as the coordinator of UGC's Curriculum Development Centre in History in Patna University, he prepared a report which the UGC published and circulated to all Indian universities.

Prof. Jha is a Life Member and Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of England and Ireland; Life Member and past Sectional President, Indian History Congress; Fellow and Member of the Executive, Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta; Member, Advisory Committee, Indian Council of Social Science Research, Eastern Regional Centre, Calcutta; and Life Member, Vice-President and Treasurer, Bihar Research Society.

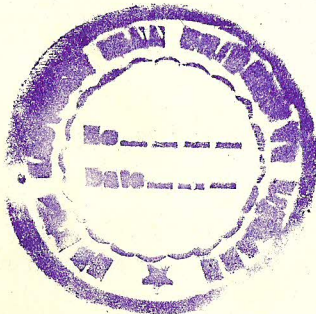
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H.K. Barpujari Endowment Lecture, Jorhat
North-East India History Association, 14th Session

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Abbreviations

Agr.	— Agriculture
Beng.	— Bengal
Cal.	— Calcutta
Commr.	— Commissioner
Dec.	— December
Dep.	— Department
Ed. (Edn.)	— Edition
Emig.	— Emigration
Gen.	— General
Govt.	— Government
Offg.	— Officiating
PP	— Parliamentary papers
Rev.	— Revenue
Supdt.	— Superintendent
Secy.	— Secretary

Glossary

Anna	— Sixteenth part of a rupee
Basi	— Stale
Bazar	— Daily market
Bhuinhar	— Original clearers of land among the Oraons
Chakbands	— Holding a particular plot in perpetuity
Chamar	— Harijan engaged in leather work
Chapati	— Indian bread
Chatank	— Almost a sixteenth part of a kilo
Chura	— Flattened rice
Dal	— Lentils
Dusadh	— A depressed class Hindu, mostly employed as a watchman
Hat	— Periodic village fair or market
Khuntkattidar	— Original clearers of land among the Mundas
Kudali	— Spade
Larai	— Battle
Mahajan	— Moneylender
Manjhi	— Boatman; Santhal headman
Machan	— Big bench made of bamboos
Munda	— A village headman among the Mundas
Naukari	— Service
Nirukh	— Overtime work
Nunia	— A low caste Hindu engaged in making salt
Pargana	— A fiscal division
Pie (pyce)	— 1/192nd part of an India rupee
Raiyat (Ryot)	— Tenant on land
Roti	— Indian bread
Sadr, Sadar	— Principal
Sardar	— Leader
Sardari	— Engaged by a Sardar
Thana	— A police station

Preface

Of late colonial emigration and settlement of indentured labour from the Indian subcontinent in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been attracting attention in India and abroad.¹ However, inland emigration of indentured labour to North-East India during the same period has not yet been studied in depth. P. Saha² and Hugh Tinker³ have touched upon inland emigration in their studies but their main thrust is on colonial emigration. The reports of B. Foley⁴ and E.A.W Hall⁶ just describe some features of indentured inland emigration for a limited period.

My interest in both colonial and inland indentured emigration goes back to the early 1950s when as a young lecturer I started working on the tribal history of the Chotanagpur plateau in Bihar. I was surprised to see that in both the schemes of emigration the tribals of Chotanagpur, called 'hill coolies', 'Kols' and some of them Dhangar (Oraon), dominated. Later while doing my doctorate in the University of London I came across a mass of material on this theme in the India Office Library. And during my long sojourn in the West Indies in the 1970s I collected more material from Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica Archives as well as in the Public Record Office, London in microfilms. Since then I have participated in many national and international seminars on Indians abroad.

In a seminar in the history department of the North-Eastern Hill University in 1977, I lectured on the emigration of labour to North-East India and one of the participants refused to believe that the 'hill coolies' from Chotanagpur had come to these parts in large numbers. Later in the Burdwan session of the Indian History Congress, I presented a paper on Emigration of Non-Assamese Labour to Assam and this was published by the Bihar Puravid Parishad at

Patna in its research journal. Recently one of my research students worked successfully on this theme for her doctorate under my supervision.

This work is a modest attempt to focus attention on some important features of indentured migration to North-East India from 1859 to 1918. First the terms 'indenture' and 'migration' are explained and then both the 'push' and 'pull' factors are examined. The process of recruitment, transport through road, rail and river and the working of the emigration laws and the glimpses of plantation life are presented.

A couple of years back when I was working on a book on the migration of Maithila Pandits⁶ I got the invitation from Professor J.B. Bhattacharjee of NEHU to give the H.K. Barpujari Lecture and I decided to tackle the theme of inland emigration of unskilled labour to North-East India. I thank the authorities of the North-East India History Association for giving me the opportunity of delivering this lecture.

At a time when historians are trying to present 'history from below' and the 'subalterns', the oppressed and depressed people, are attracting their attention, it may be worthwhile to highlight the indentured inland emigration system under which the poor labourers of the Gangetic plains, Central Provinces (M.P.), Orissa, Madras, etc. were lured to the tea gardens of North-East India and consequently they suffered terribly. They were uprooted from their own surroundings and transported to a strange climate with unfamiliar people who had a different language and customs, nay, the whole life style. All this was done for the benefit of the British capitalists who invested money in tea, a new commercial agricultural adventure.

Even though the Bengal Government passed laws from time to time to regulate this traffic, the emigrants suffered much from the time they were recruited to the end of their indenture in the tea gardens. Many could not even survive the rigours of work and climate, nor could they be properly repatriated.

Ultimately there was vigorous protest against the system by the nationalist leadership of India and the whole system—both colonial and inland—was scrapped at the end of the first world war.

The main primary sources for this study have been found in the

Bihar State Archives, Patna, the National Archives, New Delhi and some general aspects of colonial emigration for the sake of comparison and contrast were found in the archival material available abroad.

I thank the authorities of these Archives and of the main libraries of Patna.

I also thank Mr M.L. Gidwani of Indus Publishing Company for sincerely looking the book through the press.

December 1995

J.C. JHA

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1

Introduction

Indentured Inland Emigration

It is natural for living beings to go out in search of greener pastures. They are particularly keen to better their environment. No wonder migration has greatly influenced world history, transforming the political, social and economic milieu of many societies.¹

Migrants may be pushed by circumstances in their region of origin or may be pulled by better prospects.² Sometimes only 'push' factors suffice to cause emigration, for example, famine, earthquake, epidemics, etc. Similarly, a 'pull' factor may be strong enough like the gold rush or discovery of oil in some areas. There are examples of Europeans rushing to South America or to India to shake the proverbial pagoda tree. Social and political oppressions also led to migration.

The nineteenth century saw mass migrations in many parts of the world; hundreds of thousands of men, women and children were uprooted and transported into strange surroundings. Indeed, international migration was dramatic, but "for people from a traditional agricultural background migration from village to city, or from one province to another within the same country, might be an equally radical change."³

The Indian sub-continent had a long tradition of migration: the Indians in ancient times emigrated to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Java, Cambodia and Thailand. A study of landgrants shows that the Brahmans of Kanauj and other areas of the Gangetic plains migrated in large numbers to the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. At the turn of the last century East Bengalis and Marwaris began to emigrate to

Assam in search of employment or trading business.

However, the migration we are concerned with here was a special type of colonial government sponsored system. Its guiding principle was indenture—one of the devices through which the government or the business concerns transported labour from one area to the other.

We have evidence of indentured servants in the West Indies (specially in Barbados)⁴ in the 17th century. The servants were bound for a period of three or seven years and got the return passage. They also hoped to get land after the expiry of the indenture. In the eighteenth century some Englishmen used to take indentured servants from India to England or to Mauritius. In the early nineteenth century this process continued. In 1829 a few artisans emigrated to the French colony of Bourbon.

Organised indentured emigration from India to Mauritius began in 1834⁵ and since it came immediately after the emancipation of African slaves, it retained some features of slavery. Indenture has therefore been called semi-slavery or camouflaged slavery. Indenture, however, was for a limited period and not for life as in slavery. The indentured servant might be compelled to carry out his/her agreement by specific performance of the work.

This system was introduced with regard to the West Indies in 1838 only for British Guiana (Guyana). It became a regular feature for the West Indies (Trinidad, Jamaica, etc.) from 1845. It was here a short-term industrial immigration.⁶ Like in Mauritius, the 'hill coolies' (Dhangars) formed the majority of the first batch to Guyana.

Under the colonial indentured emigration the contract provided for five years engagement at Rs. 5 a month. Food and clothing were to be provided according to a fixed scale. A return passage was also promised.

Almost the same was introduced for emigration to North-East India. As the Indian labourers saved the sugar industry in Mauritius, Trinidad,⁷ Guyana, Fiji, etc., the non-Assamese indentured labourers saved the tea industry by providing the necessary field workers. The planters, like Oliver Twist, were always asking for more labourers.⁸ In the last four decades of the nineteenth century and more than a decade of the twentieth century, British capital dominated this system in the West Indies and in North-East India.

The main features of the system in the context of colonial emigration were: five years of state regulated labour, denial of the right to change the employer or employment, recruitment of labour units, gross disproportion of men to women emigrants, payment of emigration charges by the employer, the denial of increased wages in spite of increased prices and profit, the entitlement of the labourer to fixed wages, free housing, medicine, etc.

Indian labourers were treated as one of the component parts of the commodity production. The colonial government treated indentured emigration as a commodity transaction. The Indian interest was ignored; the interest of the empire was uppermost in the minds of officials.

The tea planters were pressing the government through the Landholders and Commercial Association before 1860 to get cheap labour from outside Assam. Therefore the tea planters of Assam and Cachar were asked to devise an inland emigration like that of colonial emigration.

The story of indentured inland emigration from the Bengal Presidency, U.P., M.P. and Madras Presidency is indeed sad but instructive. It is concerned with the exploitation of the manpower of an undeveloped and inward looking country by an industrialised colonial country.

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