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Sunanda Sen

Unfreedom and the Indenturing of Labour: A Few Conceptual Aspects

We intend to analyse in this paper aspects related to the large-scale movements of indentured labour from colonial India, between the years 1834 to 1920, to plantation islands owned by Britain. Labour deployed as above can be labelled as 'unfree', judged by the yardstick of the so-called 'freedom' that is supposed to be enjoyed by wage labour under capitalism. Unfreedom, as faced by those indentured labourers, concerns the denial, in terms of the contractual arrangements, of command over their own 'labour power'. The employers had full control over the labourers employed, and their labour power could be used, exchanged or even sold at will without need for acceptance or consent by the concerned labourers.¹ In effect, thus, labour got 'alienated to the master'.²

We dwell on a distinction here between 'labour power' and 'labour'. This relates to the essential *non-exchange* nature of labour-capital relations in capitalist economies. As has been pointed out,

the commodity which the worker sells is not a fixed amount of labour embodied in a completed product but 'labour power'; i.e. the capacity to work. Thus the commodity (labour power) which is exchanged in the marketplace is not the same entity which enters into the production process (labour).

From this angle, the 'market models or notions of contract are inadequate conceptually to grasp the relations of subordination and domination governing the labour process'.³

As for slavery, which ended in British colonies by the 1830s, the plantation islands ruled by Britain started experiencing severe labour shortages, especially with the reluctance of former slaves to continue as wage labour at the rates that prevailed during slavery. With the planters failing to turn labour power fully into a commodity, they sought 'an alternative and politically acceptable form of unfree labour', which was to be found in the indentured population from British colonies like India.⁴

Changes such as above brought in a new category of labour, which was to face 'restrictions on freedom of movement, penalties for negligence, absence of work etc. as criminal offence'. From this point of view, such labour was 'in practice near bondage due to dispossession and fear of vagabonding which was punishable'.⁵

Going by the available literature, one can find different interpretations relating to what we refer to as the notion of 'unfreedom'. As held by some, 'unfreedom' of labour under pre-capitalist formations is followed by 'dispossession' which also provides a pace for primitive accumulation. Dispossession in turn provides for wage labour which is ready to work under capitalism. The argument, however, is questioned on the ground that 'dispossession' as such cannot be a prior condition for labour to be 'unfree'. This is because labour which is delinked from means of production can exist both under pre-capitalist formations as well as under capitalism.⁶

In an alternative approach to unfreedom, the distinction of free *versus* unfree labour has been considered as redundant. The argument is based on what is observed as an absence, altogether, of the so-called free labour under capitalism. Labour in general can thus be considered as unfree even when deployed in a formal capacity as wage labour under capitalism.⁷

As pointed out, capital always prefers labour of the unfree variant as opposed to (so-called) free workers in the organised sector who are usually covered by formal labour rights and contracts. This also explains the frequent 'assaults' on part of capital on the rights of wage labour under capitalism,⁸ by taking away their command over their own labour power which thus renders them unfree. As held, 'assaults by capital on freedom of wage labour is a general feature of capitalism'.⁹ Capitalism provides freedom to those who own and profit by using labour, particularly in processes from which the labourers are unable to withdraw.¹⁰ Dispossession in such cases is not only from means of production but also of labour power, the latter initiating a process of de-proletarianisation on the part of unfree labour. These processes cover contracts, convicts, indentures as well as chattel slavery of labour over space and time. As pointed out in the context of labour movements from India over those years: 'In nineteenth-century India, there was a close association between convict transportation and indentured migration, discursively, institutionally, and imaginatively.'¹¹

The above links, as pointed out in a recent study,¹² to a new labour history which can relate to the peripheral countries. For this, one needs to connect three aspects which are also of relevance in metropolitan labour history. First, that

the new proletariat of the Third World consists only *in part* of free wage earners as Marx conceived of them, i.e. free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale. (Emphasis added)

Second, that

the semi-periphery makes it clear (that) wage labour is integrated throughout in households and families whose survival always remains partly dependent on subsistence labour (performed chiefly, but not exclusively, by women).

Finally, that

the new proletariat does not exist exclusively or even mainly in the industrial sector. The agricultural sphere is proportionately more important in that in this sphere rapidly advancing proletarianisation has created a large stratum of agricultural labourers and share tenants.

One can observe that a position as above considerably changes the context of labour history and its periodisation, which no longer should rest on the classical notion of the Paris Commune or the Russian Revolution of 1827 as the beginning of the organised labour movement.¹³

The fact remains that the proletariat of the third world have always been free wage earners only in part, unlike what was conceived by Marx in the context of the advanced nations in earlier periods. This is because the majority of wage earners in this part of the world do not freely dispose of their own labour power, say, due to debt peonage or due to the absence of a formal as well as transparent contractual relationship with their employers. From this angle, those who can be considered as 'pure wage' workers continue to remain as abstractions as in the classical notion of capitalism in Marxist theories. In our view, interpretations as above have a lot of relevance in interpreting the pattern of labour indenturing as took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries across the British empire.¹⁴

Options as opened for Britain to use labour in an indentured capacity by the late nineteenth century to source as well as deploy in the overseas colonies were both made possible by the territorial expansion of the British Empire by this time. The latter enabled Britain to use her colonies as sources as well as destinations of indentured labour.

It may be recalled that by the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain had already taken possession of several older colonies that soon became major importers of indentured labour needed for plantation. These included the islands including Trinidad, acquired from Spain in 1797, Mauritius (Lile de France) taken from France in 1810 and British Guyana, annexed from Holland in 1814.¹⁵ As for India, which was under the direct administration of the Crown since 1858, these island plantation colonies of Britain turned out as a major destination for the indentured labour from the country. Thus in effect Britain was enabled to use her colonies as sources as well as destinations of indentured labour.

Analysis in the present paper which follows is divided in two parts. The first part begins with a few facts on labour indenturing and is followed by an account of indenturing which came up as a practice in labour recruitment after the abolition of slavery in British colonies, a matter widely debated in Britain by the abolitionists on slavery. This is followed by the link, as can be observed, between shortage of labour as came up in the British-controlled plantations at the end of slavery and the related demand for indenturing as alternate sources of labour recruitment from older

colonies like India. Managing the plantations with indentured labour in plantations is discussed next, with instances of labour abuse which turned it similar to what prevailed under slavery. The above raised questioning in the homeland with a temporary ban on further shipments of indentured labour from India. The ban, however, was soon overturned, largely to comply with the need felt by the planters, while the British government took over the management of the recruitment process, largely to ensure a smooth process of labour transfers, so far left with private contractors.

The story as narrated in this part of the study has dealt with the unfreedom of labour under indentures, much of which was related to the commercial interest of Britain, by using the plantation islands and the Indian subcontinent. While the latter provided cheap (or unpaid) labour to be carried by the British shipping lines, the islands provided fertile land, which, with indentured labour, was used to produce commercial crops like raw sugar and then processed in the British soil to fetch handsome returns to British industry with sales at home and abroad.

The second part of the paper deals with the financial aspects relating to the plantation colonies of Britain. While the scale of cultivation in the plantations was determined by the state of the economy in the plantations, the above also influenced the indentured labour flows, changes in which were of import to the British financiers of plantations. Transactions across India, the plantation islands and Britain as took place during the period present a web of triangular trade which involved the indentured labour flows, shipping of raw sugar from plantations to Britain, British finance in plantations and commerce, the latter with exports of white sugar from Britain to other destinations. The pattern reflected the British imperial order as prevailed across her colonies during those years.

Indenturing as Source of Labour for British Plantation Colonies

One can mention three aspects which are of importance in understanding the process of what would be analysed in the rest of this paper. First, the end to slavery which came with its abolition in the British Empire on August 28 of 1833 with the passing of the Slavery Abolition Act. While slaves in the British Empire were all emancipated, they could, for some time, remain attached to their former owners in terms of an apprenticeship system which ended by August 1840.¹⁶ Interestingly, while the British government set aside £20 million as compensation to slave owners in plantations for losses in their 'property' across the Empire, there was no talk about offering the former slaves any compensation or reparations.¹⁷

The second fact relates to the large-scale shipments of Indian labourers, organised at the initiative of planters as well as the British commercial and financial agencies. Operating in alliance with the colonial office in Britain which was in league with the Indian government, these shipments were

effective in ensuring steady supplies of labour to the plantations. In this the State power as well as capital in Britain had a significant role, especially in introducing the new breed of labour in the sugar plantations which was much in demand at the end of slavery. This also was an opportunity to 'replace free workers (former slaves) with unfree equivalents'. By this, as has been observed 'legal, political and economic systems served to limit worker rights and incomes', providing a basis for the creation of unfree labour which could be coerced through 'threat or physical violence (authorised by the State) or legal compulsion (State-administered)'.¹⁸

Third, the prevailing trade in labour which took place across the high seas between 1835 and 1920 was between the older colonies like India and China to the newly acquired plantation islands. Such movements relied as much on the West's 'informal' empire of financial and commercial networks as it did on the 'formal' empire of colonies. In general, as the cost of ocean travel was going down and its speed higher in the nineteenth century, distant parts of the world became important to the Western imperial powers. By one calculation, the volume of world trade rose tenfold between 1850 and 1913.¹⁹ Trade in labour across the seas was one aspect of above.

From Slaves to Indentured Labour: Slavery Outlawed in British Colonies, 1807–1834

One can observe, by end seventeenth century, a noticeable change in the mode of expropriation in colonies within the British empire, moving out from piracy and robbery by merchants in the high seas to settled cultivation in the plantation islands. Labour engaged in the latter were initially procured as slaves from Africa, often kidnapped or procured forcibly.

Slavery however, could end in the plantation islands in successive stages, often backed by attempts by 'abolitionists' in England who started voicing protests as early as in 1796. A formal end to slavery, announced for the British colonies in 1833, was preceded by a withdrawal of trade involving slaves for the British-owned plantation and other colonies. The latter included a bill outlawing British participation in the slave trade from Africa, thus terminating two-thirds of such trade by the British citizens. A process as above was a wartime measure against Napoleon's continental domination, with the British Parliament banning its subjects from engaging in the slave trade to foreign colonies. This was followed by an end to the actual use of slaves in all British colonies by 1834.

While slave trade in the non-British colonies was to continue on an informal basis for some more time, slave population in overseas colonies started declining as fresh supplies were turned off. Between 1807 and 1834 the number of enslaved persons in the British Caribbean as a whole decreased by 14 per cent, with similar shrinkages in the slave population of the British colony of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. The decline was most marked in the relatively new sugar-producing colonies of British

Guiana and Trinidad, which had already received the highest proportion of African-born slaves.²⁰

The Abolitionist Lobby in Britain

The bans were influenced by pressures from the abolitionist lobby in England which, however, did not entirely rest on humanitarian grounds. As it has been observed, the abolitionists were motivated more by the Smithian doctrine of efficiency under free trade than by moral issues related to slavery.²¹ As stated by a leading abolitionist Lord Howick at end of 1832, 'The great problem to be solved in drawing up any plan for the emancipation of slaves in our colonies and to devise some mode of inducing them when relieved from the fear of the driver and his whip, (is) to undergo the regular and continuous labour which is indispensable in carrying on the production of sugar'.²² Thus on the whole the views held by the abolitionists were essentially based on the superior alternatives provided by 'freed labour', which, as held by them, had the potential to produce tropical products more cheaply than what was possible by using slave labour.²³

While the anti-slavery group was supporting the end to slavery and the emancipation of slaves, especially in the British Caribbean where such labour moved in much earlier, the protagonists, at the same time, were opposed to the inflows of immigrant labour under indenturing. Claiming that 'shortage of labour was a false cry', they recommended the use of former slaves at higher wages as demanded by the latter. Offers of higher wage, as held by them, could bring forth enough number of labourers who would be willing to work in the plantations, thus ending the so-called 'labour shortage' claimed by the planters. It was also pointed out that the prevailing wage rate in Jamaica at one shilling per day was inadequate even to cover the subsistence of the former slave labourers, especially with the high taxes levied on imported food. Commenting on the demand for indentured labour those anti-slavery protagonists stated, 'it proceeds from a desire to graft upon free labour a system of forced service which was incompatible with the spirit of the Act of Emancipation'. However, it is rather revealing that there was a rather racial slant in the anti-slavery lobby with their statements as to 'why undersell them (former slaves) by introducing *barbarians*, under ten year indentures, at 10 shilling per day, to compete with them in their own labour market?' (emphasis added).²⁴

It can be noticed that free trade was held as the cherished goal for a number of influential writers in the anti-slavery camp. The group included C.S Solomon who wrote two tracts on the problems faced by the plantation islands in West Indies. The tracts pointed at (a) the high share of customs duties, ranging between 20-30 per cent of the total revenue earned by the plantation colonies. Also that duties as above were imposed on imports of food which included corn, flour, rice, fish and meat; (b) wages at around

one shilling per day which were considered to be lower than those paid to slave labour in plantations of South America; (c) a drop in health of the African workers in the island, and finally (d) an acute shortage of capital faced by the planters.²⁵

Shortage of capital, as pointed out by Solomon in another tract, could be explained by the fact that most of those funds were provided by the 'mercantile classes' who often held legal rights on the heavily indebted plantations owned by the absentee planters. This was linked to an Act of the British Parliament, passed in 1854, for establishing what was known as an 'Encumbered Estates Court'. The Act was to provide prior rights to merchants for management of the indebted plantations. As pointed out in one of Solomon's tracts,

the law set by the Encumbered Estates Court gives the merchants and their agents the control of the money market, because they have the disposal of the crops and the command of the labour market; they have consequently the most power in the settlement and (can) largely influence the legislation.

More importantly, the merchant was 'more intent in the handling of produce and does not encourage tillage except what is necessary to raise the articles he deals in'. Raising money from the city, as an alternative source, was no longer possible on part of the planters, who were often the absentee owners from England.²⁶ Finally, there remained the cultivators (including the planters) who, as further mentioned, 'can only borrow of a merchant on condition that all produce be shipped in his own vessel, at his prices, at unfavourable terms for loans'. Thus the cultivators (planters) were not free to 'till land on crops he wishes'.²⁷ In our judgment, the pattern reflects a rather staggered transition in these plantations from merchant capital to one of industrial capital, notwithstanding the advances of latter in mainland Britain.

Situations as above, which were faced by the planters made it easy, and also, more convenient to import indentured labour from India. As it was held, 'from the circumstances of hiring, (indentured labour) would be more under command, more certain to get, and more reliable than local West India labour'. Again, 'the hiring of coolies limits wages to a definite and fixed standard for some years, and therefore, reduces to that extent the hazards of cultivation; it makes the calculation of marginal profit for a term almost a mathematical identity'.²⁸

Statements as above make it clear that the English abolitionist lobby which included influential persons like Solomon shared very little the humanitarian concerns for the slaves. Rather they seem to have been more focused on freeing the labour market with offers of wages at the market rate, and with the avoidance of new labour recruits from overseas, and despite being considered as 'barbarians'! Looking further into their attitude to abolition, 'by 1830 it was clear to the abolitionists in Britain that only

direct legislation by the London government would secure emancipation in the colonies, and they renewed their campaign with increased vigour'.²⁹ Views held as above led to the final abolition of slavery by the British government in 1834.

Plantations at the end of Slavery

As already mentioned above, the end of slavery had a rather severe impact on the plantation colonies; especially with the reluctance of the former slaves to work at the wages offered by the planters. Interim measures were tried in terms of the 'apprenticeship' system which allowed cultivation to continue by having former slaves to work as apprentices. The scheme was virtually a forced apprenticeship of four to six years for the former slaves above age six and a half.³⁰ In effect it amounted to a form of compensation to the planters, requiring the emancipated slaves to provide 40½ hours a week of *unpaid labour* to their former masters over the six years of apprenticeship following emancipation. It was also expected that by this the freed persons would be initiated to wage labour since the apprentices were supposed to be paid for any additional labour. However, in effect many planters used the apprenticeship laws to extract as much unpaid labour as possible and simultaneously reducing some customary distributions of food and clothing to the prevailing plantation workers, thus turning 'apprenticeship' into 'little more than a mitigated form of slavery' as pointed out by those who were opposing it.³¹ With reluctance of ex-slaves to continue the West Indian legislatures finally were forced to terminate apprenticeship in 1838, earlier than was initially planned. This finally brought the complete emancipation of former slaves on 1 August 1838 in the British West Indies and nine months later in Mauritius.³²

Facing the shortage of labourers in the plantations at end of slavery, the planters started putting acute pressures on the British government, to help out their fortunes which was in a state of disarray. Given the arduousness of the work and the low wages the planters were ready to pay, it soon became apparent that it was only those too poor to pay their own passage to the islands would accept such terms of employment. Though labour from around the Atlantic were tapped for the West Indies, the planters' search for an adequate supply of recruits soon targeted the denser populations of Asia which included those in the poverty and famine-stricken India. One recalls at this point the severe famines in India around 1897 and later in 1907-08.³³ To help out the sugar plantations whose fortunes were often linked to those in the City, Britain started organising large-scale emigration of Indian indentured labourers to those colonies. Thus began indenturing as a major form of labour transport from large Asian economies like India and China to the overseas plantation economies.

Indenturing of labour from the British colonies like India was a quick solution to redress the problems faced by the plantation islands, which

continued till 1920s. As pointed out by the Royal Commission of Labour in 1892, 'importation of East Indian Coolies did much to rescue the sugar industry from bankruptcy'.³⁴

It may be mentioned here that labour from Eastern India was being transported to Mauritius even before indenture started formally from India in 1834. People who moved included nomadic peasants, members of the poorer labouring classes, or aboriginal people called 'Hill coolies', often known by the name of 'dhangurs'. As pointed out in the *Overseas Records Information 21 of the National Archives*, UK, those 'coolies were in large measure young, active, able-bodied people often "ignorant" of the place they agreed to go or the length of voyage and the problems they were going to face'.³⁵

Reports of Labour Abuse in Indenture Plantations

Opposition, especially in Britain, to labour migration under indentures gathered strength as reports of *labour abuse* started trekking in, both from Mauritius and from the West Indies. Deviating from the standard official position, Lord John Russell, the British secretary for the colonies aired his deep reservations. As stated, 'I should be unwilling to adopt any measure to favour the transfer of labourers from British India to Guiana which may lead to a dreadful loss of life on the one hand, or on the other, to a new system of slavery.' Russell's successor also conceded to the complaints, while sticking to the 'voluntary' acceptance by immigrants.

In Mauritius a repressive 'vagrancy act' was passed in 1867 which authorised the colonial State to invade and arrest the 'time-expired' Indians, a legislation intended to deal with what was termed the 'vagrancy problem' in Mauritius. In a similar vein, the Ordinance 31 which was passed in Mauritius related to a 'pass system' to old immigrants on completion of their contractual stay in the island, with pre-conditions related to their residence.³⁶ In effect all of above attempted to 'place 'old immigrants' under the same regime of surveillance and discipline as their indentured counterparts on the plantations'.³⁷ This was to tighten their control over labour population as a whole in the islands.

The system of indentured labour migration from India, within a few years of its inception in 1834, was questioned in the British Parliament in 1837. Following that the Government of India ordered a ban in 1838 on similar movements of labourers from the country.³⁸ Based on above, further migrations of Indians to plantations as indentured labour was temporarily suspended in 1839. A Committee in Calcutta was appointed in 1840 to enquire about the alleged abuses in the immigration process. Following that, a system of *regulated immigration*, with legal sanctions from the legislature, was instituted by the British government and its Indian counterpart. The humanitarian appeals against indentures, however, were contested in Britain and drowned within a short time in terms of considerations which included both moral grounds (based

on the so-called rights of the indentured to move) and practical aspects (the sustainability of plantation economies). In terms of an Order from the official Council for Colonial Immigration, Britain's Prime Minister Robert Peel directed the India government to re-open emigration to Mauritius in 1842 subject to proper official safeguards. Immigration started again, in 1842 for Mauritius and in 1844 for British West Indies.³⁹

Managing Plantations with Indentured Labourers

Of the British elite who had interest in the sugar plantations in the Caribbean, and also in Britain's shipping business, John Gladstone, the Liverpool merchant was a prominent one. He was instrumental in launching a planters' lobby in England for indenturing of labour from India. Thus Gladstone, along with two more British merchants, sent a letter to Robert Peel the Prime Minister in 1838, dwelling on their mutual interest in plantations owned by Britain. As mentioned in the letter, 'unless labour could be secured, the produce of the British Caribbean Colonies would be lost to the Mother Country'. Incidentally, Gladstone was the owner of the major plantation estates Vreed-en-Hoop and Vree-es-Stein in British Guyana.

Another petition, by as large as 773 'Clergy, Planters, Merchants and other Inhabitants' of British Guiana similarly appealed in 1839 to Queen Victoria of England for a continuation of labour imports from overseas, and also for a loan to make the sustenance of the plantations a possibility.⁴⁰ In Calcutta also representatives of as many as twelve firms interested in labour indenture for Mauritius sent a petition to government of Bengal asking for a re-opening of the trade. As held by them, 'It is a question involving the rights of British subjects to carry the manual labour to most productive market' where they earn higher wages with better living condition.⁴¹ The statement echoed the moral sentiments involved in arguments for 'free trade' which included the dealings with labour! It may be recalled that above was in the context of the temporary ban of indenturing between 1838 and 1842.

Initiative taken by John Gladstone did work in cultivating connections in Britain. Thus it worked to enable him organise shipments of indentured labour by 1838 between India and the plantation islands. Significantly, John Gladstone, the Liverpool corn merchant had also an interest in real estate, insurance and shipping all over the British empire. He already owned sizeable estates in the plantation islands which were earlier run by slave labour and had already faced unrests as well as uprising in 1823. The stern measures adopted by Gladstone to deal with the latter, in particular with a few executions, lent a bad name to Gladstone, especially among the abolitionists in England. However, despite the blackened image of him as a plantation owner, Gladstone's fortunes were unaffected. While he made

ample inroads to the business of indentured labour, he was, in addition, generously compensated by British government for the loss of slave labour in the estates he owned.

To expedite matters, Gladstone had already written to the Calcutta firm of Messrs. Gillanders, Arbuthnot and Company with a request for the supply of 100 'young, active, able-bodied' labourers on contract for his estates. Gladstone's ventures as above were linked to his family connections with the Gillanders Company.⁴² Remarkably, the response of the company was that they did not envisage any recruiting problems, and more so because, 'the natives being perfectly ignorant of the place they agree to go to, or the length of the voyage they are undertaking'.⁴³

By an order in Council on July 10, 1837 Gladstone got the sanction to import labour under five year contracts, commencing with the arrival of the coolies in Demerara, an island in West Indies which later was recognised as Dutch and British Guyana. At end of some more correspondence, *Whitby* and the *Hesperus*, two sailing ships owned by Gladstone, landed in British Guyana on May 5, 1838. However, not much of the contract in terms of the obligations of employment could set the actual conditions of employment as in reality were experienced by the immigrants.⁴⁴

Gladstone's contacts with Gillanders and Arbuthnot, the British shipping agency in Calcutta, worked very well in drafting a formal 'contract' for indenturing of labour, primarily from Calcutta, as was recommended by the shipping agency itself. Gladstone was advised by the company to withhold a part of wages against cost of return passage, till the term of contract was over and also a registration with the police in India; which was to be witnessed by a magistrate and explained in the vernacular language of the indentured persons. Both were in conformity with the need to avert possible financial losses as well as legal hassles in those ventures.⁴⁵ A main issue in labour movements was the concern, on part of British administrators, to make it consensus, i.e. voluntary and not coerced or kidnapped. For this the necessary legal ammunitions were provided by the concerned authorities in India and Britain.⁴⁶

In between, Gladstone was also pleading for an extension of the contract period of workers, from the prevailing three years to seven years. The latter was finally conceded in part by the Home Government which fixed the period to five years. Financiers in Britain of shipping and transport of the indentured labour force also demanded a longer stay as above in order to secure a minimum return on their investments. Gladstone's ship *Hesperus* was finally sent from Liverpool to reach Gillander and Arbuthnot's in Calcutta to carry shiploads of indentured labour with provisions for two years. Those included locally produced rice and *dal* (lentils) from Calcutta and its neighbourhood. The arrangement was thus complete, to carry cheap labour as well as cheap wage goods (food) to destinations where those could be used to enhance production with profits.

Opposition to indenturing was in the air with the news that Gladstone's venture ship *Hesperera* from Liverpool was to reach Calcutta port in July 1837, carrying labour from India on a five-year contract, as demanded by Gladstone. The charges, as carried in the periodical titled as *British Emancipator*,⁴⁷ condemned the practice as 'tantamount to revival of slave trade'. Those also carried an accusation that ships used for indenturing were meant for passenger traffic only. The same journal also carried the forceful writings by an abolitionist of the time in England, John Scoble who drew attention the abusive deals as were common with indentured migrations from India. He also mentioned that the Indian workers in West Indies were paid in East India rupees which was valued at 'Two bits a piece'.⁴⁸ Even British administrators like Governor Light of British Guyana reported abusive treatments of labour which included the use of 'cat-o'nine' tails⁴⁹ to punish the deserters. While Gladstone's ventures were at the centrestage, John Scoble, the abolitionist continued to reveal more on what he described as 'Gladstone slave trade'. Complaints and agitations as above finally started working on the administrators in Britain with the temporary suspension of indenturing Indian labour in July 1888.⁵⁰

From available evidence one can observe that despite the initiation of legal procedures and government control over indentures from India, much in practice were left undone, as indicated by the experiences of the labourers who migrated. However, notwithstanding reports of harsh working conditions, kidnapping⁵¹ and high mortality rates, the administrators continued to justify the venture with various excuses.⁵² They even justified the high mortality rates among labourers as 'due to the sudden change from the meagre diet which the coolies had been used to, to the ample allowance secured by their indentures'.⁵³ As pointed out later by a descendant of the early immigrants, 'This reply virtually set the stage for the deceit, fraud, coercion and kidnapping which permeated the whole recruiting system.'⁵⁴

While importation and use of indentured labour in the plantation colonies followed legal procedures which were carefully drafted by the British rulers, their implementation left much to be desired.

Pattern of Labour Abuse under Indenture in Different Plantation Colonies

To dwell a bit more on the harsh and rather abusive practices in the indenturing process of labour from India, which was run mostly on a private basis by agents in India till 1842, and later by the British appointed officials and agents, one observes the prevalence of considerable ill-treatments faced by the indentured.

To narrate the indenture experience of an average Indian labourer embarking on indenture, who 'in company with other coolies, under charge of "forwarding agents"', starts for Calcutta:

'Dry food' (the local term for anything eatable that does not come under the category of rice–curry or *chapattis*), that may be eaten by any caste, is supplied by the government to the emigrants, who, after weary days and nights in the train, arrive dazed and travel-worn in Calcutta, which must, indeed, be to them a land of wonders, the 'City of Palaces'. Many have never seen a ship and are now confronted with the varied and crowded shipping of the Hooghly. Dingies carry the newcomers down the river to their first resting-place, the Depot of Garden Reach. Further, a path from the main avenue leads to the depot where the coolies are lodged, sometimes to the number of a thousand at a time, in neat wooden huts: a big family, for whose health and discipline the English manager is responsible to the Government.⁵⁵

Private entrepreneurs who were responsible for shipping could later sell the contracts of their recruits at auction to plantation owners.⁵⁶ We note here that such practices were close to one of transacting bonded slaves across countries.

Life waiting for the indentured labourers in plantations was far from what they expected. A statement, in one of the pamphlets circulated by the abolitionists, sums up the miseries faced by the contracted plantation workers. Thus, 'In reviewing the foregoing facts, one cannot fail being struck, first, by the circumstance, that so much oppression, cruelty, and misery, should have escaped the attention of managers, attorneys, magistrates, and even the executive itself.'⁵⁷

We review, next, the different practices of labour use in some of the individual plantation colonies.

Jamaica

Problems in continuing with cultivation in the plantations turned out as most acute in the island of Jamaica. Incidentally, it was in Jamaica that the majority of former slaves, mostly from Africa, were residents. With emancipation of slave labour, falling sugar prices, overhang of debt faced by the plantation estates and the lack of investment by the British government, Jamaica was facing severe crisis in her sugar estates by 1834. As pointed out the prevailing wage rate at 1shilling for Jamaica was not adequate to cover the subsistence of the former slave labourers, especially with the high taxes on food when imported. With planters hoping that immigration might solve the labour shortage which was caused by the reluctance of former slaves to work further, imports of indentured labour from the Eastern colonies of Britain, described as 'coolies', proved an easy way out. While sugar output rose substantially after the inflows of indentured labour restarted in 1840 in the rest of British West Indies, Jamaica had no such favourable outcome.⁵⁸

Mention may be made here of the concerns of missionaries. Those include the views of Edward Underhill, the secretary to the Baptist

Missionary Society. Underhill, on a visit to Jamaica, was deeply concerned at the plight of the black population. In a pamphlet he compiled data relating to poverty, wages, crime and unemployment levels in the island, he suggested, in a separate letter, measures for improvements in their economic conditions. The letter was publicly denounced by the Jamaican officials, accusing him of inciting the revolt which actually followed.

In October 1865 an armed crowd led by a local Baptist preacher marched to Morant Bay, the capital of St Thomas parish, and rioting broke out in which eighteen persons were killed while the rioters were brutally handled and the riot suppressed. However, there was considerable outrage at such harsh reprisals in Britain. A royal commission was appointed to investigate handling of the crisis while the British government subsequently adopted many of the Baptist missionary Underhill's recommendations.⁵⁹ Subsequently the Jamaican government, by an Ordinance, fixed the terms at which the immigrant East Indians were to work in Jamaica. Those included wages, fixed at one shilling per working day of 9 hours for adult males (which was 9 pence for females and minors). But the sum which actually paid was, however much lower, hovering at around 10 pence for adult males. Also when the job was on 'tasks' (or piece rates), wages remained at the discretion of the employers. For the new recruits, ration was supplied over the first three months, the cost of which was later deducted from their wages. Wages as paid were hardly adequate to allow any savings, especially after meeting the cost of living, calculated at 3sh. 6d. per week. Moreover, immigrant indentures were not permitted to supplement the cost of living expenses by keeping livestock.⁶⁰

In Jamaica the contract signed by the immigrants, while covering aspects such as wages and hours of work etc. had no reference to absence from work or other penal actions which often was dealt with harshly by individual employers. The rather appalling condition faced by the immigrants was explicit in the high suicide rates, calculated as 306 per million for the indentured population in Jamaica during 1903-13. This was much higher than the rate at 52 per million for the non-indentured population in Jamaica over the same years. Death rates, largely with diseases like malaria and tuberculosis were found to be in the uptrend, rising from 16.4 per cent during 1908-09 to 30.9 per cent by 1911-12.⁶¹

Demerara

As for Demerara, the former Dutch colony and parts of British Guyana in later years, similar concerns were there. The latter dwelt on the miserable conditions faced by the immigrant coolies, and indicative of 'a dangerous probability of a revival of the worst features of slavery'. Also that it amounted to racial overtures which goes as 'a system of importing large bodies of coloured labourers from one dependency to another, for the sole purpose of enriching white-skinned proprietors akin to slave trade'.⁶²

Trinidad

Trinidad happened to be one other plantation island in West Indies, where the East Indian migrant arrived, which helped to mitigate the seasonal scarcity of labour. However, objections, in a tone rather racial, came up, with the claim that the system 'had flooded the country with hordes of barbarians, Pagans and Mohammedans'. Opinion expressed in defence of the absentee planters, who were living on renter income and unwilling to cultivate themselves, could be typically found as

where is a man to live? If he has property in more than one? If he is a businessman in Glasgow, or a man of money in Liverpool, must he come out to look after Trinidad Estate? Are we not greedy or unreasonable to want a man's money or land and himself also?⁶³

Surinam

Emigration from India as indentured labourers also reached Surinam, one more island in West Indies, in large numbers. As held by the officials, the conditions of workers were satisfactory in terms of housing and medical services provided. As for the wages and 'tasks' Surinam followed the Ordinances of British Guyana, offering rates at 24 cents per day for a 7-hour duty. Above was less than what was paid in British Guyana. As for food, rations were provided free of cost for the first week and charged over rest of the first three months. Unlike other islands, Surinam offered free housing, medical services and water to the immigrant coolies. Tools needed for cultivation were provided free only at the beginning and then to be charged. Return passages were free at end of five years of service while the returnees had to pay for their clothing etc. The immigrants were found to remit their savings home and exchange letters from home. With resources allowing for compensations to immigrants for staying back and the officials hinting at possible hikes in wages, Surinam possibly provided a relatively congenial atmosphere for the immigrants who actually stayed back in large numbers. Thus of the 31,000 immigrant indentures between 1873 and 1912, less than 9,000 actually returned back. Of course the reasons also included the difficulties in return journeys, with irregular shipping services and hardships on board.⁶⁴

Mauritius

Mauritius happened to be the large island proximate to India which received large numbers of immigrant labour from India even before indenturing was formally introduced in 1834. However, the adverse conditions of work there as well as shipping started drawing attention from different quarters. Concerns as above led officials in Mauritius introduce some regulations in the system of indenturing. However, continued abuses of the immigrants, as reported, led to a temporary suspension of the indenturing from India

between 1838–42 at end of which above was back and Mauritius continued to remain a major source of raw sugar as well as an important user of immigrant labour from India.

As it was reported, in Mauritius and also in the West Indies, there was a high death rate both on the long sea journey and during the process of acclimatisation in the colonies.⁶⁵ Records for levels of mortality indicate higher death rates among the indentured workers as compared to the free persons or the creoles in the West Indies. In Mauritius the neglect of proper sanitary precautions at quarantine stations was identified as the cause of a frightful mortality rate among the labourers in 1856. This led to the passing of Act No. XIX of 1856, which authorised ‘the Indian government to suspend emigration to any colony on the grounds that proper measures had not been taken for the protection of emigrants on arrival in the colony or during residence therein or for the provision of a return passage’. During part of 1856 and 1857, the Indian government actually suspended emigration to Mauritius until some remedial action had taken place.⁶⁶ It was also reported that due to these unbearably bad working conditions, many ‘coolies’ fled, seeking to return to their native lands, and were imprisoned for desertion. It is possible their names may have been noted in the local Police Gazette. Absence from work and similar offences against the labour law were punishable with fine and imprisonment. ‘Coolies’ were also flogged with the dreaded ‘*cat o’ nine tails*’ whip for running away from the estate.⁶⁷

Problems faced by sugar plantations in connection with the competition faced from other sources of sugar production in West Indies, along with the changes in Britain’s tariff policy vis-a-vis the different plantation islands, led to sharp changes in the level of sugar output and flows.

Was Indenturing Close to Slavery?

Observations as above prompt us to enter the debate among the contemporaries as to whether indentured migration was voluntary or was it forced, as under slavery.

We recall here some aspects of the process of indenturing as took place during the period 1838–1920. As pointed out in the *Overseas Records Information 21 of the National Archives, UK* ‘those coolies were in large measure young, active, able-bodied people, often ignorant of the place they agreed to go or the length of voyage and the problems they were going to face.’ It may be mentioned again here that aspects as above made shipping agents like Arbuthnot Gillanders rather confident that labour as required by Gladstone for his ship and estates can be easily provided.

Looking at the details of the recruitment process we notice here that as per the legislative reforms introduced in 1842, all indentured labourers in Mauritius and elsewhere were to appear before a magistrate to satisfy him

that emigration was by their choice. Prior to embarkation, the labourers were housed at depots with guards so that they would not escape. Here they were fed, clothed and examined by members of the Indian medical service. As for return passage, it was a varied practice for different plantations which has already been mentioned above.⁶⁸ Thus in Mauritius a free return passage was initially provided after ten years of residence. However, in 1851 the government of India changed the condition so that free return passages could be provided for those unable to raise sufficient revenues, whether from sickness or real destitution. Further, on embarkation, the labourers handed in their passes to the master of the vessel. Before embarkation, gratuities amounting to a sum of fifteen rupees were paid to the emigrants. This rate varied for different colonies. As pointed out that all such payments, including wages, were in East Indian Company Rupees which was not convertible to the respective plantation currencies. In the islands, an officer, appointed by the colonial government at each port of embarkation in the islands, was to act as Immigration Agent-General or Protector of Immigrants and Inspector at level of the island colonies. He superintended the arrival, made every preparation for receiving the immigrants, and explained to them the nature of their prospects in the colonies.

As held by one school of thought, the movement of contract labour under indenture was rather different from slavery. In terms of a recent appraisal, the process itself of recruitment under indenturing was indicative of its differences from slavery. As held, there was no 'fraud, deception or kidnapping', especially 'with the precautions both by the Indian authorities and the recruiting agents'.⁶⁹ As argued in support of the system, 'migration must have made the poor workers better off'.⁷⁰ Moreover, the fact that indenturing was done on basis of a contract based on a *voluntary* agreement for a limited period of indenture has often been highlighted to provide important differences from enslavement.

Such positions, however, hardly tallied with reservations such as 'despite the detailed official plans of the British government, much of these were left undone, as indicated by the experiences of the labourers who migrated'.⁷¹ As we point out at the beginning of this paper, there was rather an element of 'unfreedom' in the so called 'voluntary exchange' of 'labour power', the regulation of which was beyond the control of those who offered such labour.

While an argument as above was recognised by those who defended the system, they treated the point as 'imperfect due to lack of information', especially on ground of the 'cultural and religious changes in moving out from India'.⁷² However, given the harsh conditions of work faced by the migrants in the distant and unknown countries where they were taken on basis of a contract which was neither understood by them nor fully implemented in practice, critiques have drawn attention to the underlying

distress for those who moved under duress as well as the deception underlying the legal-contractual process, which according to them was in practice close to slavery.⁷³

The last batch of indentured labourers went to the West Indies in 1916. Repatriation continued for many years after the time limit and the last ship carrying returning emigrants left West Indies for India as late as in 1954.⁷⁴ The so-called 'voluntary' aspect of migration has been further emphasised in the context of the above stoppage of indentures in 1916. As held by them, this was an act which 'injured the interests of both planters and immigrants who never raised any voice' against the system. As held further, while indenturing was a result of the 'push factor' operating within the country, its end can be viewed as an outcome of political pressures by nationalists within the country as well as the tensions related to the World War I which had started in 1914.⁷⁵

It is not difficult to observe that aspects as above in defence of the practice of indenturing do not qualify such immigration as one out of free choice, especially as one relates those movements to the economic hardship faced by the immigrants. Those included the conditions faced by them in their home land, which went through severe famines since 1890s and also the political persecution in North India resulting from the sepoy mutiny in the North during 1857. It thus was a combination of the 'push' factors within the country along with the 'pull' originating from labour demand in plantations which worked to swell indentured migrations to plantations during the period.

In terms of what can be interpreted as a rather charitable interpretation of the indenture system, large scale indenturing of labour from colonies like India has been viewed as a process of 'labour reallocation' across countries.⁷⁶ A similar view was also hinted at in an early reporting of indentures from India in 1893, as a system 'which relieves a country which has surplus population, to supply one that is deficient'.⁷⁷ However, from this angle indenturing (or even slavery) should not be viewed as 'immigration' since these flows were a part of a grand design of British imperialism which dictated policies including 'reallocations' of labour as above.

Finally, as pointed out by critics who viewed indenturing as a continuation of the labour process under slavery, 'commodification of labour in the Atlantic slave trade and colonial plantation were hardly interrupted by the abolition of slave trade and slavery' It was the empire which made available, through subsidies and loans towards the transportation and through legal sanctions, the mobile labour to be indentured and sent to work in the British controlled and owned plantations.⁷⁸

To sum up, parallel to what was under slavery, use of labour in the plantations by the planters remained a process of extracting the maximum surpluses, by cutting down costs of transport, subsistence as was provided and pushing down wages to a bare minimum. Moreover, wages paid were

subject to deductions for absence from work or other negligence in work place, with even convictions and imprisonments against such offences.

Official Supervision by the British Government of the Indenture System After Its Renewal in 1842

With the revival of indenturing from India the British government introduced some changes which aimed to make it sound in terms of the legal procedures. In terms of those measures, the British government in effect took over direct administration of the labour recruitment process. The possible reasons for such official interventions were: (1) to achieve an effective recruitment system in order to ensure the requisite supply of labourers for the plantations (2) to check the malpractices associated with recruitments which included kidnapping, deception, etc. as articulated by the anti-indenture lobby in their campaign for its abolition;⁷⁹ and (3) to avoid bidding wars, especially by non-British colonies, by contracting the delivery of migrants at the plantations at a predetermined price.⁸⁰

The new system of indentures which started under official supervision included appointment of Protectors at each port to oversee that regulations were put in practice for the voyages, which concerned space, food, water, ventilation, medicine, and the likes. Provisions were also laid down for the appointment of responsible emigration agents who were responsible for selecting the ships. The Protector had the further responsibility of ensuring that the emigration agents effectively carried out the regulations as were laid down.⁸¹ Initially the indentured labourers were collected through the agency of *Duffadars*, the locally based agents. This system later changed with charges of corruption, and was followed subsequently with the appointment of licensed recruitment agencies. Every fifty Indian labourers had to be accompanied by a *sirdar* or *chokedar* (supervisor) who was competent to interpret the local dialects of the immigrants.

In framing the formal arrangements for indenturing, the government also made an effort to make for a foolproof contracting process which defined shipboard conditions, the length of contract (five years with first employer then another five with a second), working conditions, wages to be paid, the sex ratio of migrants (insisting on a minimum per centage of females), the financial responsibilities (of planters and of the colonial government), the rights of return passage at the end of 10 years, and the sharing of costs of return passages between planters, governments and immigrants (with passage paid at discretion of individual colonies) and finally, the inspection of the potential immigrants by Protectors before embarkation. Detailed regulations were also there to set out the rules for permissible punishments, health care, food allowances, and housing conditions. Children below 10 years were not allowed to be employed and those between 10–15 years given special protection.⁸²

Board and lodging, in addition to wages, were also to be provided by

the respective employers, but only over the first few months of the contract, and the cost was to be deducted from wages in some islands. As for their return fare to India, Mauritius initially was to offer it free at end of ten years of employment but later in 1851 the practice was discontinued. For West Indies, the practice relied on the local provisions set by the respective governments. Finally, as for wages, the rate which actually prevailed varied since the labourer often had to perform 'tasks' which were often other than uniform. In reality the terms of contract including wages and conditions of work were often decided at levels of the respective governments in the individual plantation islands which often were very differently placed in terms of the viability of their individual estates.

Given the arduousness of the work and the low wages the planters were ready to pay, it soon became apparent that only persons who were too poor to pay passages to the islands were to accept such terms of employment. Though populations around the Atlantic were tapped for the West Indies, the planters' search for an adequate supply of recruits soon turned to the denser populations of Asia which included the poverty and famine-stricken people in India. One recalls at this point the severe famines in India during 1897 and later in 1907.

However, despite the introduction of supervision at an official level the abusive practices continued, causing concern in general, especially for the remnants of the British antislavery movement. A major impetus to end indenturing of Indian labour also came from rising nationalism within India, which regarded these population movements as a symbol of national failure, thus protesting against the placing of their people in an inferior position abroad.⁸³ Voices as above were in part responsible for an end to the indenture system which finally came in 1920. The change was also prompted by the declining worth of sugar plantations as commodity prices plunged at end of World War I.

Fortunes of Sugar Plantations Determine the Changing Flow of Indentured Labour

Large flows of indentured labour from India and China which moved to the plantation islands in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was comparable in numerical terms to the number of slaves from Africa who arrived in the Americas during late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Of the indentured labourers as above two-thirds came from India.⁸⁴ Details, relating to the timing as well as the direction in the such labour flows indicate that those movements were subject to conditions prevailing in both the originating and the receiving areas, thus confirming the relevance of both push and the pull factors which explain migration in the literature.

An explanation of the migrant flows from India in terms of the 'push factors' has to rely on the socio-economic conditions relating to the

domestic economy relying, in particular on conditions in the Eastern and Northern part of India, from where most of the immigration took place, thus contributing to the major part of those flows during the period. The peak flow, between the eight years 1856–1865, reached 36,145 persons per year on an average. The period also witnessed the political and economic dislocations of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in North India and in later years, the distress people experienced with the famine and destitution in India through the 1890s. Both famines and the political disruptions did have an impact on the flow of migration from the country over the subsequent decades, with the flow rising to 74,100 in 1891–92 and 95,616 in 1900–01. On the whole the causal links between migration and the political as well as economic disturbances in India during the nineteenth century were close enough to be interpreted as a push factor to explain the indentured labour flows.

We now look at an alternate perspective, which in literature has been described as a ‘pull factor’. From this angle, the changing flows of migration from India can be related to the shifting demand for such labour in the individual plantations. Immigration as above can thus be linked to the changing scale of cultivation in those islands. The growth in sugar production in the respective plantations provided a major link to the immigrant labour flows from India and their destination to the individual islands. Of the three major factors which in those days determine the scale of cultivation in sugar plantations, one can mention (a) exports of sugar from these islands to Britain, (b) the duty structure in Britain on imports of sugar (raw and processed) and (c) the state of finance faced by the plantation estates.

The flow of indentured labour was both to Mauritius and West Indies in earlier years, while it dropped sharply for Mauritius by the quinquennium 1886–1870.⁸⁵ It can be observed that the peak level of sugar output which was reached in Mauritius by the 1860s overlapped with flow of immigrant labour reaching a peak during 1831–60. In per centage terms, the proportion of migrant labourers which moved to Mauritius was also the highest between 1851–60 (Appendix Charts 1 and 3). The decade also recorded the highest level of immigration from India if one clubbs together the flows to Mauritius and British Carribean (Appendix Chart 2). To look at the pattern and scale of cultivation in the plantation colonies, it was raw sugar which provided the mainstay of these plantations, while simultaneously instituting the major plank in forging the economic and political links of Britain and those islands.

For Mauritius sugar output hit a peak till the 1860s, and then remained at around the same average until a further burst of expansion took place after the 1890s, the latter linked to the rise of cane farming. Tariff duties in Britain on imports of raw sugar, which used to be lower for West Indies, were equalised between Mauritius and West Indies in 1825, thus ending the preferential rates so far enjoyed by the West Indies. Sugar

output in Mauritius shot up, from 11,000 tons in 1825 to 21,000 tons in 1828 and then at 100,000 tons in 1854. However, from the 1860s sugar production in Mauritius started declining, due to availability of sugar from other countries (primarily Brazil), production of beet sugar in Europe, the opening of Suez canal in 1869 which diverted traffic from the Indian ocean and finally with the drop in sugar prices.⁸⁶ Above was matched by a slowing down in the rate of population growth for Mauritius.⁸⁷

As for the plantations in the British Caribbean, their share in the flows of indentured labour from India rose after 1865, while reaching a peak during 1881-90, a decade which also coincided with rising levels of sugar production in those islands. Earlier than that, the end of slavery in 1833 and of apprenticeship in 1840 had caused a drop in the share of British West Indian islands in Indian emigration during 1831-60. On the whole flows of immigrants and the scale of sugarcane production moved together, as in Mauritius. Caribbean turned out as the dominant world producer of cane sugar by the last quarter of nineteenth century, with the British Caribbean as the largest supplier of raw sugar output.

British Tariff Structure to Determine Fortunes of Plantations

As mentioned above, tariff structure in Britain had a bearing on her imports of sugar from different sources. The variations included differential rates of duties, both on different varieties as well as from different sources. As for the varying rates on different varieties, those on refined sugar, usually imported from non-British colonies, had been the higher than those on raw sugar till 1874 when all duties on sugar were completely removed in Britain. As for duties on unrefined sugar (Muscovado), mostly imported from British owned colonies (West Indies and Mauritius), the rates were the lowest. However, rates were different between Mauritius and the West Indies, with higher rates levied on imports from Mauritius (as compared to those from West Indies) till 1846 when the rates were equalised across plantation islands. The preferential duties enjoyed by the West Indies colonies on their exports of sugar to Britain which continued till 1846 (when duties across plantations were equalised), enabled West Indies to get a larger share of sugar imports by Britain compared to those from the Eastern island, Mauritius. The trend continued even after the rates were equalised or even abolished in 1874 (Chart 4).

Relying on imports of raw sugar from the plantation colonies which paid little or no duty, the differential duty structure as above enabled Britain to retain its monopoly power over processing of brown sugar into white sugar for domestic use and for exports. Benefits for Britain, as it was pointed out by a contemporary, was based on the fact that white sugar 'was durable and capable of preservation, and could be easily handled and distributed all over the world'.⁸⁸ We recall here that Britain had a virtual

ban on imports of processed sugar even during the earlier centuries, with duties imposed at nearly four times to those on brown sugar. The aim obviously was the protection of the sugar processing industry in Britain.⁸⁹ Protection as above for industry in the metropole also included further restrictions, this time with a ban on sugar processing in the plantation islands, which obviously suited the interests of the British manufacturers.⁹⁰

Interestingly, the restrictions on processing, did not relate to molasses, a by-product of raw sugar, which always used to be turned into rum within the islands which was then exported to England. As pointed out, 'Rum was indispensable (with) its connection with the triangular trade. Rum was an essential part of the cargo of the slave ship.'⁹¹ While we would deal later with the concept of 'triangular trade' in this context, we just want to draw attention here as to how the discretion relating to Britain's tariff structure was of significance to Britain's maritime commerce, say with plantation islands providing not only the raw sugar for the processing industries of Britain but also rum to be consumed.

Tariff policies pursued by Britain vis. a vis. the plantation colonies were, in large measure, subject to the influence of the strong lobby of the absentee plantation owners resident in England, who had a lot of clout in the British Parliament. Thus with raw sugar prices declining in world markets due to new supplies from Brazil and Cuba, the strategy for the British planters was to maintain profitability in the plantations, by exercising monopoly rights over production and prices. At the same time advantage was taken by them of the differential tariff structure which made raw sugar grown in British colonies competitive as compared to those from other areas.

However, it may, be pointed out here that interests of British plantation-owners in maintaining the financial viability of the estates often remained opposed to those for the sugar processing industry in the country. While industry relied almost exclusively on imports of raw (brown) sugar fetched at lower duties from the plantation colonies, the planters with their monopoly power over their estates wanted to restrain output in order to maintain high prices of raw sugar, which rendered it expensive for the processing industry in England to procure raw material. The rift between the renter absentee owners of plantations and domestic sugar processing industry provides an example of the emerging conflicts between mercantilist interests and the nascent industry in England. As pointed out,

Under the mercantile system the sugar planters had a monopoly of the home market, and foreign imports were prohibited. It was therefore the policy of the planters to restrict production in order to maintain a high price. Their legal monopoly of the home market was a powerful weapon in their hands, and they used it mercilessly, at the expense of the whole population of England.⁹²

Home market here obviously refers to the British Isles. The non-resident

planter community in Britain, however, posed a dilemma in this transition from merchant to industrial capital, by creating hurdles for the nascent sugar industry of Britain with the high price policies for raw sugar from the plantations.

Planters from West Indies ranked high in England as wealthy persons, which started from the beginning of the mercantilist era. To cite Adam Smith, 'Our tobacco colonies send us home no such wealthy planters as we see frequently arrive from our sugar islands.'⁹³ For Smith the sugar planters in the mercantilist epoch were among the richest capitalists in Britain during the period. By mid-nineteenth century, when the century of trade was changing hands to one of production and manufacturing was coming up under the fold of the industrial revolution, foundations were laid for industrial capital to emerge as a powerful lobby. Thus, 'the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the centuries of trade, as the nineteenth century was the century of production'.⁹⁴ But plantations overseas were not authorised to process their wares into white sugar, given the restrictions imposed by the ruling country, Britain.

Plantation owners of West Indies emerged as a set of influential persons in Britain, and had the ability to impact economic policies. The group of course included the John Gladstone of Liverpool who not only owned estates but was also engaged in shipping and trade, dealing with transportation, of labourers from India as well as raw produce from his own estates in West Indies. An earlier protagonist of slaves, Gladstone had received a large sum amounting £86.7 thousand out the total compensation of £20 million which was paid to the planters in terms of the Emancipation Act passed in 1833.⁹⁵ We will discuss aspects of the compensation doled out to plantation owners in West Indies later in the paper.

There emerged in England, by early nineteenth century, a different lobby, of capitalists who were backed by the upcoming industrialists in Britain. They were quite influential in championing the case for 'free trade' which brought in, first, an equalisation of duties in 1846 on sugar imported across the Eastern and Western plantations; and later, in 1871 the complete removal of such duties. Removal of duties on sugar made for such imports available in the country at global prices which was already much lower. The wave of free trade and *laissez faire* which already had ended the era of preferential rates which so far were enjoyed by West Indies on duties on their exports of sugar to Britain, was matched by an end to duties on corn in terms of the repeal of corn laws in 1846. The move for free trade finally culminated in an end to all such duties by 1871, as we mentioned above.

It can be pointed out here that while industry in England was opposed to protection by mid-nineteenth century the surpluses Britain reaped during earlier centuries from what has been described as a pattern of 'triangular trade' in sugar and slaves were mostly used in setting up British industries under protection with mercantilism.⁹⁶ One can interpret the

sequence as a turn to 'Free Trade Imperialism'⁹⁷ practised by Britain at end of industrial revolution in the country.

An end to tariff protection in Britain by 1871 did not, however, mean a rising value of sugar imports from the plantations to Britain, more so, with sugar prices declining from 1884 (Appendix Charts 4 and 5). Above affected the earnings of the sugar estates, and simultaneously, the flow of indentured immigrants which also declined (Appendix Chart 2). Thus a considerable part of the waves in immigrant flows were related to the fortunes of sugar plantations which, in turn, was invariably linked to import demand from Britain, providing for the chief source of demand for the products from the plantations.

As for the plantations in the British Carribean, already affected by the equalisation of import duties on sugar imports in 1846, experienced further economic stress when such duties were altogether abolished, both for imports from Mauritius and West Indies, in 1871. The stress was also due to the competition faced from the non-British plantations of Cuba and Brazil which were still relying on cheap slave labour. The competition was even more as Europe started producing beet sugar as an alternative to cane sugar by 1830s.⁹⁸ Related shifts in sugar production were visible by the second half of the nineteenth century and by end of the nineteenth century one could see some dramatic changes in the world sugar market and in the technology of sugar production. Between changes in technology in the production of white sugar (with use of mechanised processing), alternate sources of production, of beet sugar and with shifts in tariff regimes in Britain, production of raw sugar and its location were considerably affected in the nineteenth century

However, despite all the the competition as above which was faced, British Carribean continued to produce and export increasing amount of sugar all through the 1860s and 1870s (chart 4). But for few exceptions like Jamaica, and the years following the initial declines in production after emancipation in 1833, sugar output in British West Indies as a whole increased consistently throughout the nineteenth century.⁹⁹

It can, however, be noticed that despite the ban on slavery dependence of sugar production in plantation islands on coerced plantation labour persisted throughout most of the nineteenth century. Thus till the 1880s nearly two-thirds of cane production was from locations where production was dependent on either slave or contract labour, using slaves in the non-British-owned plantations.¹⁰⁰ After the emancipation of slave labour sugar production picked up in colonies where Britain possessed her plantations, which, of course, was based on imports of labour from elsewhere, for which the British colony of India was most suited.¹⁰¹

British Finance in the Plantation Colonies

It may be recalled here that the problems experienced by the West Indies plantations did, by the 1840s, generate concerns both for the planters and

the Colonial Office as well. Above led the initiation of two large-scale parliamentary committees in Britain by the 1840s, to inquire into the West Indian distress.¹⁰² The reports stressed the point that while the planters wished to continue the plantation system, at the same time they were facing 'shortages of labour', especially at wages they could afford to pay, given the declining prices for sugar between 1860-70. Moreover, the fact that the ex-slaves were unwilling to offer more than a few hours of labour at end of the apprentice programme often created further shortages of labour in terms of the needs of sugarcane cultivation. One can notice here that the price of raw sugar in the London market was fluctuating throughout the early nineteenth century. Thus the year-to-year fluctuations in sugar prices between 1839 and 1841, for example, varied between £39 a ton in 1839 to £49 in 1840 before falling back again to £40 in 1841.¹⁰³ Aspects as above, clearly, were not conducive for the financial state of the plantations.

As the use of slave labour was stopped with the passing of the Emancipation Act in the British Parliament in 1833, both financiers in the City and colonial planters' were persuading with the government that abolition has affected the viability of the plantations. To this the administrators and members of Parliament conceded, often by using the data reported in Parliamentary Papers.

Commenting on the rather ambiguous intent of those official reports, it was even pointed out that 'dozens of government officers and Parliamentary Committees were appointed between 1837 and 1915 to investigate aspects of indentured migration from India, or conditions of the sugar colonies which in effect were synthetic political projects Indian indentured labour was a site where hierarchies of empire were enunciated, contested and inscribed'.¹⁰⁴ However, with details documented in these reports becoming accessible to the wealthy and influential planters of West Indies like John Gladstone, in effect those also provided a valuable opportunity for the planters 'to shape the opinion of imperial policymakers and legislators, and of the reading public as well'.¹⁰⁵

Responses by the British government to enable the plantations (which included the shippers as well as the planters) to continue along with the related agents in India as well to cope up included, as mentioned earlier, an outright cash compensation of £20 million to planters and second, opening the facilities for continuing the use of the ex-slaves as 'apprentices' over an interim period.

As for the effectiveness of such gestures, it was pointed out that, 'the vast sum of £20 million, paid from the British exchequer was not only to cover the loss of slaves but also to reduce the high debt burden of planters and to enable them compete with colonies outside the British empire which were still using slave labour. Amounting to just under half the market value of the freed slaves, the compensation payments did reduce the planters' massive indebtedness but this increase in their individual credit worthiness

failed in most cases to attract new investment because of well-justified doubts about the ability of British sugar plantations to turn a profit without slavery'.¹⁰⁶

As for the interests of British merchants, financiers and investors in sugar estates of the plantations, their perusal of official policies in the country relating to sugar plantations continued. This was especially apparent in the moves, as mentioned above, of a £20 million grant as compensation to slave owners along with a sanction of the 'apprentice' scheme.¹⁰⁷

Further moves as were there in British official policies to facilitate the financing of the plantations included the temporary suspension of the so-called 'coolie trade' (of indentures) in 1839 and its quick re-opening in 1842. The short-lived lull in immigrations was followed by a large influx of labour to the plantations, and financed by an annual sum of £25,000 from the colonial revenues. Known as the 'Bounty scheme' it contributed £6 to £7 per adult imported on this basis. Additional costs, if any, were to be met by planters while the Colonial government in Mauritius was allowed to impose a consumption duty on all spirits (like rum) manufactured or consumed in Mauritius to meet the costs.¹⁰⁸

As for facilitating borrowings by plantation owners, the expanding production of raw sugar in Mauritius and the plantation owners' sheave borrowings in the earlier part of nineteenth century met little resistance from the British bankers. In this the metropolitan bankers of England had little reluctance to lend further, especially during the initial stages of such lendings. However, between 1844 and 1848 five such British financial houses as had lent to Mauritius along with the Bank Mauritius all collapsed. This was followed by the bankruptcy of several sugar estates in Mauritius. Problems faced by the plantation estates, however, led to a crisis in Britain's financial sector. Thus with the British financial houses having close links with the plantation estates in terms of their investments in plantations, there took place a series of bank crises in Britain during 1840s. As a consequence the British financiers, having no further interest in their investments with the sugar plantations of Mauritius, pulled out their investment from Mauritius between 1839 and 1848. Such acts were also related to some economic, linguistic and legal problems which had already erupted in the island.¹⁰⁹ In Mauritius the British bank Barclays and Blyth already held, between 1811 and 1850, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the sugar estates in the island, having invested a sum which was approximately 1162 thousand British Pounds.¹¹⁰ However, British investors pulled out their investment from Mauritius by 1832, expressing a lack of interest in further investments in the sugar industry due to continuing economics, linguistics and legal problems in the island.¹¹¹

British financial system was also closely linked to investments in the Caribbean. In 1844 the colonial government of the Caribbean passed

an Ordinance to raise money which ostensibly was for promoting 'Immigration of Agricultural Labourers from the British Dominion in India and elsewhere'. In terms of this Ordinance, the agents responsible for importing indentured labour were given an authority to borrow money up to 500,000 sterling pounds from Britain by issuing bonds on the security of the revenue of the colony. The loan with interest were to be paid back by the agents within a stipulated period.¹¹²

Arrangements as above, which included the stake of the British plantation owners, often resident in Britain, as well as that of the City and of British finance as a whole, speaks for the close connections between British finance and the fortunes of the British owned plantation colonies.

A New Web of Triangular Trade and Finance: Britain and Her Colonies in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Triangular trade, as defined earlier for countries in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, spells out a network of trade which involved countries like 'England-France and Colonial America equally (supplying) the exports and the ships; Africa the human merchandise; (and) the plantations the colonial raw materials'. Further,

The slave ship sailed from the home country with a cargo of manufactured goods. These were exchanged *at a profit* on the coast of Africa for Negroes, who were traded on the plantations, *at another profit*, in exchange for a cargo of colonial produce to be taken back to the home country. (Emphasis added)¹¹³

Here 'home' refers to countries in the Northern hemisphere (France, Britain and North America) which were capable of producing and exporting manufactures.

As pointed out, the triangular trade as above gave 'a triple stimulus' to 'home' industry, first by using its wares to buy slaves, second by using those slaves to grow raw materials in the plantation colonies and third, by selling manufactures in the markets in the latter.

Looking closely at the network of transactions in labour (indentured), in commodities (both raw materials and processed) and finance, as analysed in the present paper for late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one can identify a similar triangular network. By this time Britain was in control of her colonies in Asia (especially the Indian subcontinent) which could be used to procure labour on an indentured basis and to ship those to the British owned plantation colonies. The latter aimed to ameliorate the scarcity of labour therein, especially at end of the emancipation of slave labour by 1833. Indentured labour, as procured, was lifted by British ships to distant plantations owned by Britain, thus providing further avenues of profit for the British owned shipping industry. Labour in those plantation islands was used to cultivate raw sugar, to be transferred to Britain to process as white sugar, both for home consumption and exports.

As in the earlier centuries, trade as described above entailed a triangular pattern, operating across Britain's colonies and the metropolis. Triangular trade in this case also provided a triple stimulus to Britain. While slaves were earlier procured from Africa in exchange of British manufactures sold in Africa, a somewhat similar pattern prevailed this time with British ships transporting indentured labour from the Indian soil to plantations which produced sugar and other tropical products including cotton, indigo, molasses etc. It may be mentioned here that under the prevailing Navigation Law of Britain, which was in force till its repeal in 1849, no foreign ship was allowed to carry wares from British colonies. Thus indenturing was also facilitating the British shipping industry by a very large extent.¹¹⁴ As for the raw material produced in the plantations, much of those were carried back and processed in the upcoming sugar processing industries of England. While a similar pattern of trade during the earlier centuries provided profits as one of the main streams of accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution, the new pattern of triangular trade in late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries equally arranged for the ongoing appropriation of surpluses by Britain from the colonies, relying, as in earlier centuries, on movements of commodities as well as labour. In this finance from the City in Britain played a major role, with plantations providing profitable avenues of investments in estates owned by the British planters. As contrasted to the earlier pattern, triangular trade, in this period was relying on high finance rather than maritime commerce alone.

The triangular trade as above thus supported both flows of labour to the plantations and of raw materials therefrom, and being facilitated by British business houses and the government.

The story of triangular trade in the nineteenth century thus remains incomplete in absence of a reference to the active interest of the British finance in sugar plantations. While a large number of the absentee plantation owners were influential enough in London even to the extent of influencing the Parliamentary affairs, the banking industry had big stakes in the financial performance of those estates, with loans advanced to the plantation owners or the colonial governments which ran the islands

Links between British financial interests and the plantations were particularly close with West Indies, which had received large investments from Britain, involving the British government, planters and banks. As mentioned earlier, interests of merchant creditors prevailed even in the compensation to slave owners for the loss of slaves by £20 million, to be paid in London. The payments enabled the financiers to recuperate the loans made to planters. Interested parties, in British Guiana, in Mauritius as well as in London, while vocal in urging a revocation of all barriers to trade in 'the name of Free labour movements',¹¹⁵ were equally keen to be compensated for the change-over from slavery to indenturing in the plantation colonies. Naturally, much of those were offered in the interest

of a continuity in the system, with plantations providing a crucial link in the process.

Investments by British financial interests in the plantation islands proved rewarding for British capital, not only in fetching high returns on the financial flows, and to some extent in making use of its shipping lines at high profits ; but also in stimulating production and exports by British industry. In effect indenturing of labour from within the British empire and transporting those to the plantation islands controlled by Britain proved a lucrative source of earning surpluses which were appropriated by the commercial and financial interests of imperial Britain.

Conclusion

Use of indentured labour from colonies like India to promote Britain's commercial and financial interests in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries unfolds a story of uneven power relations, between labour in the colonies and capital in the ruling country under State patronage. Labour procured by indenturing from old colonies like India provided additional opportunities of extracting surpluses as those were deployed in the plantations where they had a near-slave status. With the recruitment of indentured labour at terms which hardly compensated the latter for the hard and arduous work at the plantations, flow of labour could be treated as the source of one more 'drain' (or unrequited transfers) from colonial India, in addition to the disputed transfers against the 'Home Charges'.¹¹⁶ We have documented in this paper the multiple channels through which such surpluses were appropriated by those who were in power, which included the ruling State of Britain and British capital deployed in industry and finance. British capital, invested in industry as well as finance, seems to have an upper hand in moulding the country's plantations policies in general. Examples include the use of concessional tariff duties to provide protection to raw produce from plantations in Britain (as compared to the rates on similar imports from other sources). One also notices the prohibitory orders on processing of raw sugar in the plantation islands and similar prohibition on use of ships other than those owned by Britain as means of transport, both for carrying labour to plantations and raw material therefrom to Britain. Measures as above were clearly in the interest of the sugar processing industry in Britain and its shipping industry. The measures were evidently beneficial for local capital deployed in industry and the shipping lines.

With finance taking a lead over industry by late nineteenth century, Britain's financial hubs were active in influencing State policies. Instances can be found where the plantation owners of Britain wanted to maintain profitability by exercising their rights to fix prices and output by virtue of having monopoly power there. Policies to keep prices high often conflicted with the interest of the processing industry in Britain which needed the raw

produce at lower prices. In this the interests of the financial community, having a stake in the plantations, often prevailed over concerns of the sugar processing industry in its demand for cheaper sources of raw produce from the plantations at relatively lower tariff rates.

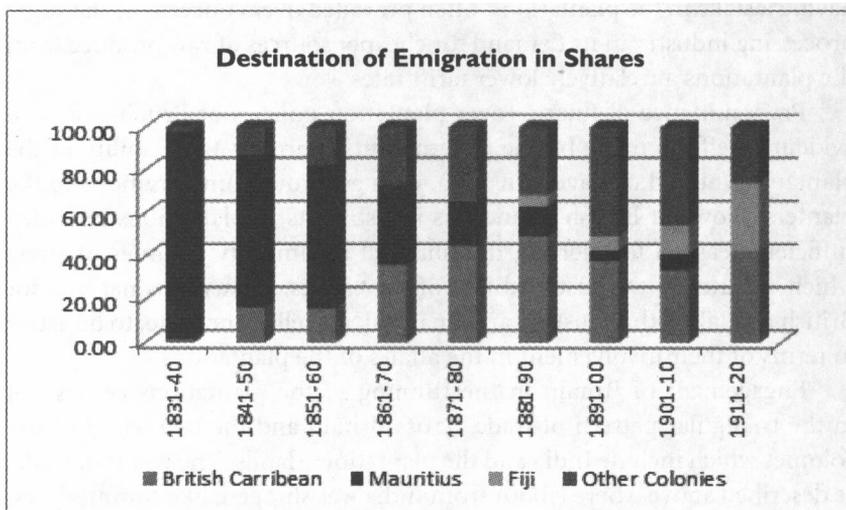
Predominance of finance over plantation policies of Britain was also evident in efforts made by the government to protect the viability of the plantations at end of slavery in 1833, with generous compensations to the planters. Flows of British finance, as investments in plantations provided sufficient reasons for alerting the financial community in times of stress which threatened the sustainability of the estates. It was thus natural, for British capital, both industrial and financial, as well as the State, to be active in terms of their involvement in the affairs of the plantations.

Engagement of Britain in the running of the plantations comes out in the triangular pattern of trade across Britain and the two wings of her colonies which include India and the plantation islands. The nexus of trade, as described above where labour from India was shipped, like commodities, to plantations for forwarding raw materials to Britain, largely by using such labour. Above opened the possibilities of another round of trade, this time of processed sugar to rest of world. As we mention above, triangular trade of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, supplemented by flows of finance, was different from what prevailed in earlier centuries. Above had its origin in the rise of finance by this time, running parallel to flows of trade with investments, subsidies etc. to the plantation estates which provided opportunities of earning surpluses at different levels.

We end this paper with a commentary on the changing form of institutions. The change, which include the transformation of colonial States to nations politically independent, has gone with a continued pattern in terms of the unequal relations, between those wielding economic power and others who do not, which include capital and labour. Thus the analysis of labour in times of indenture during earlier helps to throw light on this continuing scene, both in the developing and in the recession prone advanced regions. The distance in time, nearly a century since indentured labour recruitments stopped in British colonies by 1920, has not altered the pattern of coercion and expropriation of workers, a growing proportion of whom are today employed as casual and temporary workers, engaged by the employers with an informal arrangement. Power here continues to vest with those who own capital, leaving a shrinking space for labour in its capacity to resist.

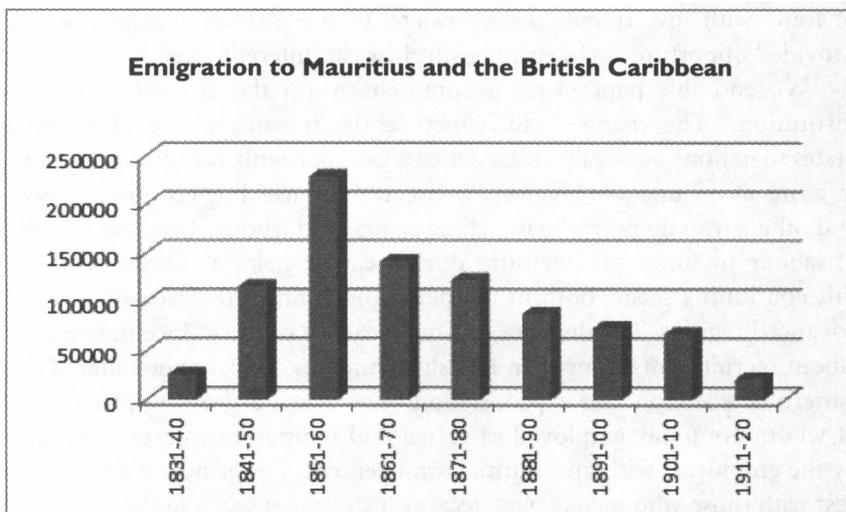
I thank Zico Dasgupta for his help in collecting material used in this paper. This paper was presented at the conference on 'Imperialism: Old and New' held in Delhi between February 10 and 11, 2015. I thank the participants in the conference for valuable comments on the paper.

Chart 1



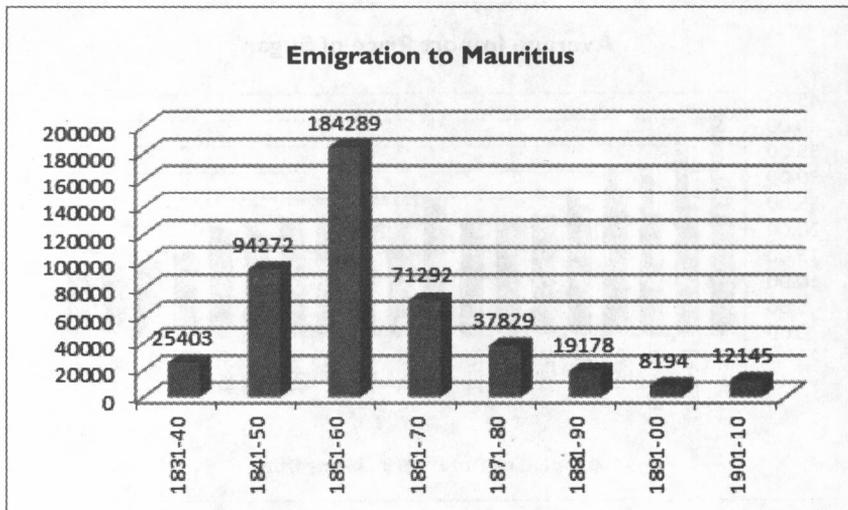
Source: David Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism*, Cambridge University Press, 1955.

Chart 2



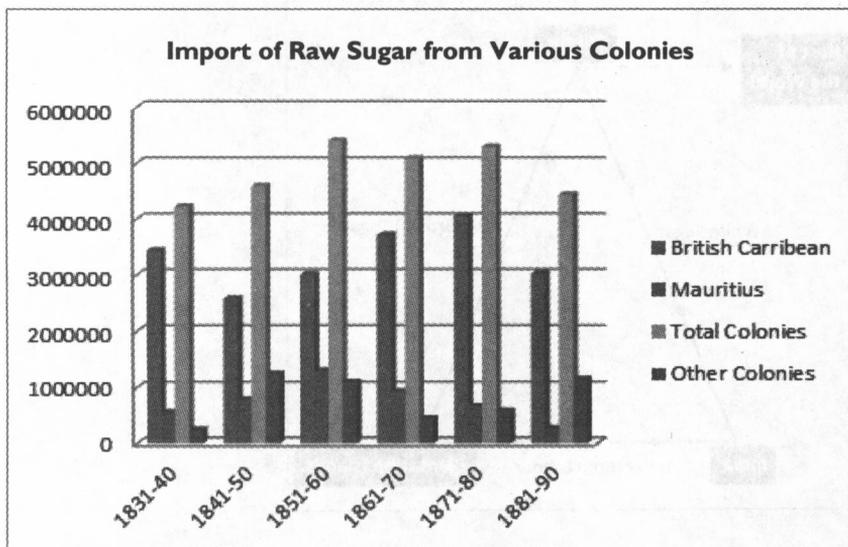
Source: David Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism*, Cambridge University Press, 1955.

Chart 3



Source: David Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism*, Cambridge University Press, 1955.

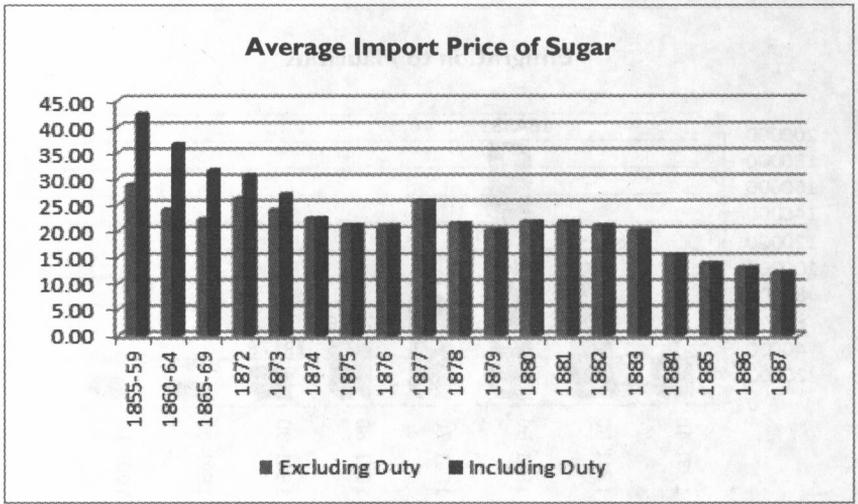
Chart 4



Note: Imports in every decade is the average value of imports in that decade. The decade 1881–90 exclude the years 1888, 1889 and 1890.

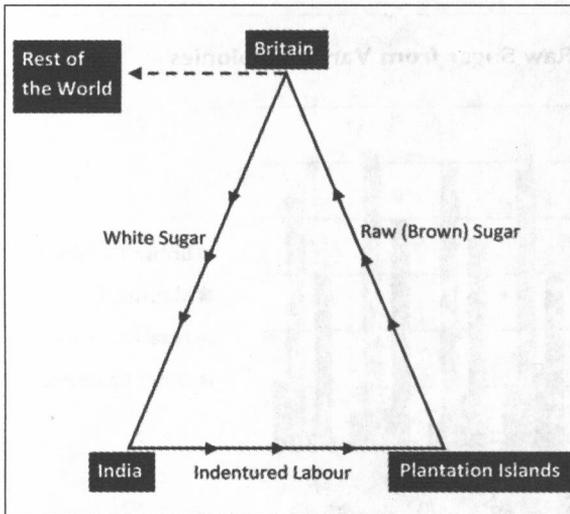
Source: Robert Montgomery Martin, *Statistics of the Colonies of the British Empire*, rare-booksclub.com (14 May 2012).

Chart 5



Source: Robert Montgomery Martin, *Statistics of the Colonies of the British Empire*, rarebooksclub.com (14 May 2012)

Chart 6: Triangular Trade between Britain, India and the Plantation Islands



Indentured Labour from India in the Age of Empire

Sunanda Sen

Table 1: Intercontinental Flows of Labour (mostly under contract) from India and percentage breakdown of Receiving Areas (by quinquennium), 1842–1920

Years	Total Gross Emigration	Indian Ocean (%) Islands	Caribbean	Fiji	Natal and Mombassa	Other
1842-45	1845	60,967	93.5	6.5		
1846-1850	54,595	66.6	33.4			
1851-1855	92,677	83.3	16.7			
1856-1860	148,842	74.7	24.5		0.8	
1861-1865	108,196	65.0	30.7		4.3	
1866-1870	70,600	20.4	78.9		0.8	
1871-72	97,128	30.6	62.5		6.6	
1876-77	91,582	14.7	71.0	0.5%	12.9	0.9%
1881-82	73,312	13.6	62.3	8.6	13.9	1.6
1886-87	61,972	15.0	60.7	4.8	18.4	1.8
1891-92	74,100	5.7	63.0	7.9	23.1	0.2
1896-97	95,616	4.7	29.6	6.9	58.6	0.3
1901-02	88,640	11.4	34.2	12.5	41.5	0.4
1906-07	75,047	2.3	42.5	14.9	38.8	1.0
1911-12	45,498		51.3	32.7	11.4	4.5
1916-17	10,496		29.3	16.7	11.5	42.4

Note: Some rows do not add to 100 per cent due to difficulties in the source. 'Other' means none of the specific locations listed.

Source: Imre Ferenczi and Walter F. Willcox, *International Migrations*, Vol. I, New York, 1929, pp. 904–05, cited in Stanley L. Engerman, 'Contract Labor, Sugar, and Technology in the Nineteenth Century', *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 43, No. 3, September 1983, p. 646.

Table 2: Sources of Imports of Unrefined sugar (cwt) in Britain (in mn)

	1844	1850
British West India	2.45	2.83
Mauritius	0.54	0.89
British East India	1.10	1.40
Total Imports (incl Foreign)	4.88	6.20
Retained for Actual Consumption	4.12	6.09
Revenue from Duty BP	5.20	3.88 (3.57 in 1845)
Exports of British Refined Sugar from Britain	0.20	0.21 (0.21 in 1862)

Source: Sugar: A Tabular Return, May 15, 1863 (Office of the Inspector-General of Imports and Exports, May 15, 1863)

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- 101 *Ibid.*
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- 103 Ibid., p. 652.
- 104 Kale, *Fragments of Empire*, pp. 7, 10.
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- 111 Ibid., p. 22.
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- 113 Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, pp. 50–52.
- 114 'Navigation Acts were a series of laws that restricted the use of foreign ships for trade between Britain and its colonies. They began in 1651 and ended 200 years later. They reflected the policy of mercantilism, which sought to keep all the benefits of trade inside the Empire, and minimise the loss of gold and silver to foreigners.' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navigation_Acts
- 115 Kale, *Fragments of Empire*, p. 54.
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