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Recruiting Indentured Labour for Overseas Colonies, *circa* 1834–1910

Madhwi

[A]fter examination of the Indian emigrants landed from vessel, we have pleasure in reporting that they were a very healthy lot of men and very compact and muscular in build. We have pleasure in stating that none of these men had to be allotted conditionally. We are of opinion that great care had been exercised by the surgeon superintendent in the selection of the immigrants and also in his treatment of them on board ship.¹

The prime focus of the plantation economy was good physique – a crucial element of labour masculinity signifying efficient labour power. The recruiting agent was to recruit ‘able-bodied’ agricultural labourers in ‘good-health’. The focus was more on the physical appearance and body of the indentured. Initially slaves, then convicts, and later indentured labourers were employed in the overseas plantations. Medical knowledge of ‘the Indian body’ was utilised for recruitment.

A. Persaud argued that indentured labourers were recruited not solely on the basis of their physical strength, but also on their ability to work as agricultural labourers.² He substantiates the argument by citing example of recruitment areas and ‘hardly agricultural races’. Comparing slavery and indentured labourers, he further argued that ‘slavery invested the black body with strength; indentured invested it with varying forms of knowledge, such as knowledge of wages and contract, moral uprightness, knowledge of agriculture and then there was ‘knowledge’ carried in their blood in the form of immunity and suitability’. Persaud overemphasised on the stereotypical classification of the ‘black’ and ‘brown’ bodies. All black men were considerably ‘tall’ and ‘big’ with well formed bodies; while the Indian men, on the other hand, were brownish, lean, ill-nourished, and small in stature.³ Though ‘agricultural knowledge’ was the cardinal criterion for the recruitment of an indentured labour, but strong and healthy body was considered equally important.

The present paper is an attempt to showcase the attitudinal shift in the recruitment of indentured during the later period, particularly after 1870s. Persaud’s arguments however, seem relevant to explain initial phases of the recruitment process. This attitudinal shift was due to the development of subtle friction between the ‘British Raj’s knowledge and indentured body’ for their survival. Persaud was of the opinion that labour’s ‘suitability’ made them beneficial for the plantation; but somehow he overlooked a

whole set of the governmental policies that made the labourers' bodies 'suitable' for plantation economy. In accordance to him, the planters and the white doctors adopted a common definition of health which measured an indentured person's worthiness in terms of the market value, and potential for productive and reproductive labour. Objectification of indentured health extended beyond body, it included measures of character and skill. Knowledge of agricultural work was also taken into cognizance.

Recent historiographical works on indentured reveals that the indentured group comprised of larger groups of non-agricultural labourers. The following sections of the paper would deliberate on this process of recruitment of 'suitable' indentured labour for colonies overseas. How modern science, technology, new knowledge, and medicine helped government to fulfil their purpose; how this scientific and medical knowledge affected the recruitment process of indentured labourers. Further, an attempt has been made to enquire migrant's interaction with this scientific knowledge and medicine, and how it affected their lives.

Recruiters: 'Schemers', 'Liars' and 'Kidnappers'

Indentured labour's recruitment was of utmost importance for colonial plantations, in which the recruiter played the key role. They decided the criteria of recruitment. The agent was expected to recruit 'able-bodied' labourers in 'good health'; thus, they focused more on the physical appearance and 'body build' of the recruits. Generally, the chief recruiters were all European officials, but at the local level *arkaties* and *duffadars* were reportedly from the ranks that supplied 'sepoys, *chaprassis*, and domestic servants', they acted as scouts for the regular recruiters. Major Pitcher's report shows that most men employed for the task were bearers, *khidmatgars*, cavalry *sowars*, infantry, police *sepoys*, *cutcherry chaprassis* and others. Very few of them could read or write.⁴

I am (Purtaub Singh) a native of Orissa (together with) my son, we left the country at the same time. At *Balasore* we met with a *duffadar* who promised to procure me pay of 10 rupees per month and I am old and feeble. On our arrival here I got some clothes the same as my son and we lodged 15 days in the *duffadar's* house and not allowed to go out unless the *duffadar* accompanied us; we were told that we would have plenty of money and that if any gentlemen of the bank shall question us as to our willingness to proceed to Mauritius that we were to say yes, also that I was at liberty to leave the place whenever I choose if I did not like this place; I never knew that Mauritius was so far nor would I go to such a distance at the risk of losing my life and my caste.⁵

The ordeal of Purtaub Singh shows the real picture of indentured recruitment process. The recruitment of indentured labourers often took place in circumstances of poverty and humiliation. In 1842, regulations were made to stop all abuses of labour recruitment. According to the

new rule, 'willingness' of the emigrants was to be recorded in front of the magistrate before their embarkation for colonies. The abuses evidently prevailed throughout the indentured period, irrespective of the enforcement of new regulations. There were many like Purtaub Singh who had been victims of misrepresentation. Some recruits were not even aware about the exact location of the colonies, which they took it to be part of, or some land close to, India.

Recruiters were generally imagined by the coolies to be schemers, liars, and even as 'kidnappers' of female recruits. Their job was to inform the emigrants about the nature of work, destination places, and terms of indentured contract. However, in reality they misinformed the recruits. Gaiutra Bahadur in her recent work states: 'they gave recruits the false impression that they could return home from their jobs for the weekend; they promised work as easy as sifting sugar; and they exaggerated the gains to be had, inflating wages and conjuring lands of milk, honey and gold.'⁶

By the 1870s, a well organised recruitment system under the aegis of emigration agent of the colonies had been established. Under the emigration agent the actual recruiting was done by the head recruiters or sub-agent assisted by the recruiter, clerk, food contractor, and several hangers-on.⁷ The emigration agent appointed sub-agents at the headquarters of main recruiting districts, who in turn employed a set of recruiters. Recruiters were broadly of two types viz., licensed and unlicensed. Sub-agents and recruiters were licensed by the Protector of Emigrants. This formal system of recruitment however was buttressed on the proliferating numbers of unlicensed recruiters and sub-contractors who worked under sub-agents and licensed recruiters. The unlicensed recruiters were universally known as *arkaties*. Major Pitcher and Grierson found that licensed recruiter was always a man, while unlicensed recruiter could either be a man or a woman. Licensed recruiters included the head recruiters, commonly known as sub-agents, and ordinary recruiters who may be subordinated either to a head recruiter or to someone working independently.⁸ The recruiters were, either contractual, or salaried. The head recruiters were paid on the contractual basis that is, price per coolie introduced to the emigration depot at port of embarkation (Calcutta or Madras). The price of a coolie varied according to the distance of main depot like Calcutta or Madras to the place of recruitment. Travel expense was the main cause for the difference. The subordinate recruiters were paid by the head recruiter, while independent recruiters were paid by the emigration agent.

The main function of licensed recruiters was to gather intending emigrants, get them medically examined, and register them with the magistrate before sending them off to the main port for embarkation. Unlicensed recruiters were often the main agents for gathering intending emigrants for licensed recruiters. Unlicensed female recruiters were very active in the process of female recruitment. Major Pitcher described the

female recruiters in the following words: 'They are unlicensed, of no character, and entirely beyond Government control, they are without exception degraded specimens of their sex, and the mischief they do can easily be imagined.'⁹ The recruiters favoured labourers from certain castes and regions, and discriminated or rejected some as not good labourers.¹⁰

Recruitment of Hard Hands and Healthy Body

Recruiters were directed to recruit only muscular, healthy and able bodied labourers. They were directed to avoid recruitment of males above forty five years and females over thirty five years, unless they formed part of a family.¹¹ On one hand, certain classes of Indians, such as priests, professional beggars, weavers, ex-policemen, clerks, barbers, tailors, shopkeepers, discharged convicts, goldsmiths, persons suffering from infirmity, *brahmins*, *baniah*, *fakeer* and *kyesths* were not be recruited; on the other hand, for women they ordered the agents 'You may pass all females of eighteen years and over no matter whether Mohammedan or of any caste than the lowest caste, provided, they have reasonably hard hands and are not beggars, devotees, dancing girls or prostitutes.'¹² The reason behind this unquestioned recruitment of women was that they were not considered as a reliable agricultural labour force and therefore, there was no need to weed out the 'disorderly' or 'not suitable' women. During late 1870s, planters preferred '*Madrasee*' labourers over '*kalkatya*' labourers. There was a time, when there were no applications that were filled by the planters for '*kalkatya*' labourers.¹³ Mauritius Emigrant Protector remarked in his annual report that 'as in preceding year the demand for and arrivals of coolies from Calcutta. Planters seem of late to show a preference for Madras coolies. The cost of their introduction is less than that of others'.¹⁴

Women labourers were essential for the plantation's production and reproduction.¹⁵ The sub-agents were paid Rs. 22 per male, and Rs. 33 per female. Higher costs were incurred for recruiting female emigrants, as they were scarce and it was difficult to get them recruited.¹⁶ Apart from this, the emigration agents considered that without women Indian male labourers might refuse to migrate. As Natal emigrant agent, Mr. Firth remarked to his sub-agent that 'whenever men were sent without the proper proportion of females they would be returned'.¹⁷ Therefore, a law was enforced according to which each batch of 100 emigrants had to include forty women though, women were not considered as a desirable labour force by the planters. The impact of this law can be felt from the statement of Dr. Payne, a medical surgeon of Mauritius at the Calcutta depot. He excused the presence of 'aged' persons, physically weak individuals and 'hill men', (among whom death at sea were frequent on Adelaide, as a result required large number of women) 'the latter has left me no choice, but to accept some men, whom I should otherwise have rejected, since they have been accompanied by women who could not be replaced'.¹⁸

Thus, agents were primarily responsible for the quality of the emigrants. Once the medical surgeon declared that the emigrant was medically fit to embark, then the recruiters would be paid two-thirds part of their commission. And, if they were successfully embarked to their destination, then recruiters were eligible for the rest of their commission. If emigrants were medically rejected, then they were sent to their home districts at the recruiter's expense.¹⁹ Recruiters got nothing if the coolies were rejected medically or by the Protector in Calcutta. If a coolie absconded from the depot, changed his/her mind or died, then the recruiters got half the rates. The commission system compelled recruiters to get medically fit and healthy labourers.

The experiences of labour trade and transportation, along with medical knowledge forced the emigration authority to initiate new regulations regarding the recruitment of indentured labour in India. High sickness and mortality rate during sea voyages, along with the agitations by the anti-slavery groups, forced the government to make amendments in the recruitment process. The pressure from the planters to 'maximise the profit' and 'minimise the loss' was also an important motivation. As a result, the Indian Government in 1883 established an enquiry committee under the supervision of Major Pitcher and G. Grierson. This committee came up with instructions for the surgeons, which they had to follow while examining and selecting emigrants for the colonies overseas.

Surgeons were instructed that emigrants must be free from contagious diseases, should be in a fit state to be able to undergo sea voyage of three months, and that they should have ten years of experience in the field work.²⁰ Their chest should be round and well developed; flat-chested men were to be rejected. Their hands should have horns on the palmer base of the finger, showing that the emigrants were accustomed to hard work. Cases of hernia, hydrocele and enlarged testicle were to be discovered and rejected, as these diseases were usually prevalent in the colonies. Serious cases of ophthalmia, or diseased eyelids were to be rejected. Labourers with slight ophthalmia might be retained for treatment until they were cured. If the emigrant had lost an eye from this disease or from any other cause, on no account was he to be accepted.²¹ Further, they were instructed that emigrants with slight anemia, or malarious fever, might be passed if it be considered that a few weeks of good feeding and careful treatment would help them to regaining back their vitality. The cases of enlarged spleen and chronic anaemia were ought to be rejected.²² New recruitment suggestion accepted that dwarfs and scarecrows were to be removed, but short statured or slimness was not a fatal objection if the emigrant was wiry and tough, well able to handle agricultural implements.²³ Finally the height and weight of indentured were also a matter of measure. Recruiters were directed that the weight of male should be nearly proportionate to heights that was 8 stone 3 lbs for 5 feet, and 5 lbs, addition for each inch over 5 feet. It

was a matter of concern that those who were suffering from slight bowel-complaints were to be detained till cured. The abdomen should neither be flat or attenuated from chronic looseness, nor inflated from habitual indigestion. All cases of chronic bowel-diseases were to be carefully sought and rejected. They strictly instructed that opium-eaters, smokers, and *ganja* smokers should also be rejected. Contagious diseases, measles, and small-pox had hitherto proved most troublesome, and every suspicious case was to be carefully examined.²⁴ The slightest signs of leprosy, varicose veins in any part of the body, ulcers on legs or feet, and syphilis in any form were regarded as sufficient reason to justify rejection. Weak children were regarded as troublesome. Not infrequently, a large family was kept back month after month at successive embarkations on account of a weak child. Suggestions were made to reject all such children. Vaccination was made mandatory requisite for the emigrants.²⁵

Here, it is important to note that colonial medical gaze typified and categorised the Indian body to weed out the frail, redundant and the idle. Some of the ex-indentured had to pay their own way when they wanted to leave India again, because they were physically too weak to qualify for a new indenturedship.²⁶ Thus, the legal and scientific idea of healthiness created a definition of health that was remarkably supple and at the same time severely limiting. The definition of health incorporated subtle variations of age, skill, gender, fecundity, physical strength, mental acuity and character.

'Disagreeable, Enormous and Troublesome Duty': Medical Surgeon and Recruitment of Coolies

During the 1840s, a number of missionaries, anti-slavery groups and opponents in the British parliament criticised the condition of labourers on sea and the high mortality and sickness rates. They were against indentured labour system; consequently recruitment of indentured labour from India to Mauritius was stopped in 1842 till further improvement in the coolie law. These agitations forced the government to provide basic medical facilities to the indentured during their voyages. Calcutta Emigrant Protector had proposed that under section VI of Act number XV of 1842, clause 3, before sending emigrants to the Mauritius island, the government needed to regulate their medical examination, medical stores and medical attendant on the voyages.²⁷ Further, under the same Act, in modification of the clause 2, which was related to vaccination, deputy governor suggested that 'it would be the duty of superintendent to fulfil the work of vaccination of intending emigrants in the colony'.²⁸ Marine surgeon, on the salary of 600 per mensem, or his assistant would be responsible for certifying that the work of vaccination was duly performed in the presidencies to the emigrant agent.²⁹ At this point, medical officers raised issues regarding the newly imposed duty on the marine surgeon and his salary. Medical board officers raised the objection that

the situation of marine surgeon even before the recent order did not appear to us by any means over paid and it cannot be denied that they have imposed upon him a great extent of additional duty of the most disagreeable kind...this is very laborious and irksome duties against him as marine surgeon in connection with native emigration to the Mauritius.³⁰

The marine surgeon M. M. Thompson, in his letter to the secretary of Medical Board stated that 'I have been called upon to perform during the whole course of my service independent of the fatigue which I am compelled for several hours to undergo after I return have weary and exhausted from visiting my patients.'³¹ He further stated that: 'I am occupied four or five hours every day except Sunday in examining and granting certificate to the emigrants ... in addition to this I have also to examine the supply of medicine and to grant a certificate to each vessel before it sails.'³²

Medical officers, those who were involved in indentured recruitment, wanted an equal salary to that of the army medical officers. They argued that Calcutta's medical servant salary was not acceptable to them, since it was considerably lesser in comparison to the army medical officers because they had the advantage of private practice. The medical officers who were involved in indentured recruitment could not spare any time for private practice. Medical inspector, Iams Mutchinson in his letter stated: 'I beg to be allowed to point out that I am in a great measure deprived of this advantage, by having so much of my time daily occupied in examining the emigrants.'³³

It can be argued that like British army, indentured labourers too were important for the stability of the British Raj. Army was the basis of British conquest and stability in the colonies, indentured strengthened their rule in the colonies overseas. The colonial government established these indentured populations in colonies as their 'own controlled' people, which in its way was the territorial expansion. The colonisers learned that for systematic economic gain, and strategic security, an organised and controlled manpower was necessary.

Medical practitioners were also aware of the importance of their role in the selection of emigrants. On this basis, they tried to negotiate with the government to get a greater share of profit. This led to the 'professionalisation' of the whole system. Marine surgeon stated:

... from last two month I am doing this disagreeable, enormous and troublesome duty, and the annoyance myself and family are subjected to by my house and premises being eroded by the emigrants for several hours daily where the noise and the effluvium from their persons combine to render it a most so disagreeable office.³⁴

Further, he stated:

I have not yet applied to the government for any remuneration for the onerous and responsible duty I have performed, but I trust that no objection will be

raised to compensation, which the Mauritius merchants are willing to pay, as it is entirely for their own profit and advantage.³⁵

The marine surgeon wrote a letter to the Mauritius government in which he mentioned about the importance and problems of recruitment – selecting an ‘able’, ‘disease free’ labour.

Indentured migrants before their departure had to go through three stages of medical examinations; the first one was in their district, second at their arrival in the depot by a ‘native’ doctor and finally at the board of ship by a European doctor. By 1892, medical examination of the recruited emigrants was made mandatory in the sub-depots before they signed the contract.³⁶ This was done to avoid unnecessary expenses that were spent on returning the rejected emigrants to their homes. The duty of the medical examiner was to examine the emigrants and to ensure the planters that emigrants were suitable for labour and ‘free from all bodily and mental diseases’:

All single men are first examined by the native doctor, to see that they are not suffering from syphilis, gonorrhoea, hernia, or any other disease about the genital organs; those that he considers fit subjects are then marked with a stamp, and brought before me. I usually feel their pluses, look at their tongues, take their general appearance into consideration, examine for pits of small-pox, &c ... married men and women do not undergo the native doctor’s examination alluded to above.³⁷

In order to receive a good physique labour, colonies overseas paid eight *annas* for each emigrant’s medical examination including infants in arms, whether passed or not, to ensure as far as possible selection of eligible people.³⁸ For each coolie, passed by the medical men in Calcutta and Madras, agencies, paid the former two rupees and the latter one rupee for each coolie.³⁹ Those who were suffering from diseases were sent back by agencies. It was believed that they were not fit to emigrate. The government made new legislation according to which no certificate would be considered as authentic if the marine surgeon had not signed it. The Marine surgeon was free to decide if the presenter of the certificate was the real owner of it or not; otherwise he had the right to destroy the certificate.⁴⁰

The emigrants those who had ‘obviously robust health were passed at once’, while those who were suffering from sickness or fatigue were given a chance to recover. They were at times remanded at the depot for future recruitment. Those who were rejected by the medical examiners were permanently declared unfit to work as labourers. In 1894, six people were rejected by the medical inspector in Calcutta because of insanity, epilepsy and excessive opium consumption.⁴¹ These people were regarded as ‘burden’ on the plantations and employers who were not willing to bear the cost of these ‘unfits’. During 1894, fifty to sixty people were rejected as medically unfit by the Natal Emigrant Trust Board, which was responsible

to recruit medically fit people.⁴² Surinam and Trinidad authority recruited these people as indentured labour.⁴³ This shows the relative understanding of health and body in the medical discourse of the day.

The processes involved in medical examination should be examined critically. What were the social, political or economic processes involved in medical recruitment? Was there any compromise on the part of the colonial government related to the medical examination of labourers, especially when there was serious scarcity of labourers? Why did the recruitment rules differ from colony to colony?

Under the new Act XXI of 1883, there was a provision of compensation for the rejected emigrants. Section 50 of the Act, stated that all rejected emigrants were entitled to receive a compensation of eight annas in the case of children to three rupees or more for adult males.⁴⁴ The purpose behind this regulation was, as Dr. Grant stated:

It has also been observed that the colonial migration (sic) officers might with advantage bring some pressure to bear upon their employees in the interior to send down only fit and able-bodied labourers, and if this were done, a great deal of unnecessary harassment would be avoided.⁴⁵

The colonial emigration agencies protested against this new law; they argued that as per the act, the award of compensation was purely optional, while the Emigrant Protector apparently considered all rejected emigrants entitled to compensation. Emigrant agent of British Guiana and Surinam argued that:

the loss accruing from rejection is one of the principal factors in the heavy expenditure now incurred in connection with the recruitment of emigrants, and we are apparently to be called on still further to increase this by paying what in the peasant's native village would be more than a month's wages.⁴⁶

In the answer to these questions, Emigrant Protector J. G. Grant argued that his procedure had been misunderstood. The compensation was meant only for those labourers, who had been irregularly recruited, or had been induced to execute contracts under coercion, under influence, fraud, or misrepresentation; secondly, to those who, by execution of contracts, had been definitively engaged by the agency through its recruiters for service in the colony, but were ultimately rejected by that agency (not by medical inspector) for no fault of theirs, in consequences of the emigration agent having decided for some reason of his own, not to accept them; and to those whose ill-treatment or neglect on the journey to the depot was satisfactorily established.⁴⁷ It was made clear that no compensation would be given to the labourers who may be finally rejected by the medical inspector on medical grounds. Dr. Grant considered that unsatisfactory medical examination was a separate matter. He remarked that the remedy lay with the agents themselves in arranging to hold medical officers, who

were employed as examiners, responsible for the consequences of any neglect or carelessness in the performance of duties for which they were paid. The rule of compensation was an acceptable technique to pressurise the colonial emigration officers to send only fit and able-bodied labourers.

The data shows that around twelve percent of the emigrants every year were rejected at the depot. In 1904, this rejection cost the Mauritius over 13,000 rupees.⁴⁸ Indians wanted to escape from poverty, and their deteriorated condition in India pushed them to migrate. The new medical norms of fitness became an obstacle. Under such circumstances, Indians tried to hide their sickness. They were aware of the fact that if their sickness would be discovered, they would not be allowed to embark. In order to escape from this medical regime and entering in the ship, these medically rejected persons at times took the help of *Duffadars*. The *Duffadars* helped them for extra commission and income. The intending emigrants paid them two to three rupees as bribe for their certificate.⁴⁹ Marine surgeon complained about these rejected emigrants:

as they will present themselves several times in the hope of eluding my attention ... the only remedy I am suggesting for this very serious fraud, is to re-examine the men after they are all on board, but this would be attended with great inconvenience trouble and loss of time.⁵⁰

Increasing sophistication of frauds led to the use of caustic solutions, to mark migrants on the thumb nail or even on the face. Such practices were criticised in the reform press, and caused some distress to recruits. Overseas colonial agencies recommended that the local medical officers in the overseas colonies were better judges of the standard of fitness necessary for the satisfactory performance of the work in colony. They recommended that in order to avoid disappointment and unnecessary expense, greater strictness should be observed in passing intending emigrants as fit at Calcutta and Madras.⁵¹

In order to reduce the proportion of rejected labourers in the main depots, emigration agents showed their interest in getting coolies medically examined in up-country, as rejection at the very first phase saved them the cost of the coolies' return railway fares and other expenditures. But in return of their services, agents were not ready to pay the up-country doctors more than eight *annas*.⁵² This was rejected by the local civil surgeons by saying that no one would be ready to do this troublesome work for such meagre amount of money. The issue of large number of rejections of emigrants on medical grounds at depot became an important matter in 1899 again, when local government dwelt on the large numbers of rejection of emigrants passed as fit on medical examination in the districts of recruitment. Emigrant Protector and agents considered that it was due to careless and perfunctory examinations by up-country civil surgeons.⁵³ Most of these rejected emigrants were from the districts of Allahabad and

Awadh area, thus, the local civil surgeons were held responsible for this carelessness. Further enquiry revealed that these emigrants were rarely brought before civil surgeons in the districts of recruitment, and found that it was not attributed to any neglect or carelessness on the part of the local medical authorities.

The chief secretary of North-Western provinces and Awadh argued that neither the Emigrants Act, no. XXI of 1883, nor the rules imposed upon the civil surgeon the duty of examining the intending emigrants up-country, but provision had been made for it, in section 42 of the Bill.⁵⁴ There was nothing in the Act or rules to prevent a recruiter from passing his coolies straight on to the port of departure. If the agencies had given the recruiter the instructions to secure a medical certificate for the coolies up-country, he was at a liberty to take them either before a civil surgeon who agreed to the terms, or to a private practitioner, as he liked.⁵⁵ Therefore, in order to prevent the large number of rejections, civil surgeons were nominated as the only examiners of emigrants. The inspector-general of the civil hospital of north-west province and Awadh suggested that 'the medical examination of emigrants before proceeding to Calcutta or other port of embarkation was to be conducted by civil surgeons only, and that no responsibility will attach to the district local authorities if the examinations were conducted by private practitioners with or without the requisite recognised medical qualifications'.⁵⁶ The civil surgeon of Allahabad claimed: 'I rejected such a large number of intending emigrants, after which they made some other arrangements for having them examined. ... I believe the certification of emigration is now done here by the private medical practitioners of the L.M.S. class.'⁵⁷ He further argued that:

if the agents of the different colonies will only circulated to the civil surgeons a description of the class of emigrant they require, giving a list of the defects that would cause rejections, I cannot see why the Civil Surgeons of these Provisions should pass men other than those desired.⁵⁸

The agencies circulated the points among the medical examining officers on which a certificate was required; and these were that he (indentured) should be free from any contagious disease, should be able to bear a voyage to the colony, and should be able to work there for ten years.⁵⁹ He argued that in a good harvest season, there were good lot of men, and agents in Calcutta selected the very best of the lot, and returned the remainder as 'rejected'. When there was no space for requirement of labourers, coolies were rejected on the ground of being unfit.

Conclusion

In a plantation economy, each and every body was important. Agents were instructed to recruit only 'fit', 'strong' and 'able' labourers. Those who

did not fit the criteria were discarded and seen as ‘spreading diseases’, and hence, tried to separate the ‘good’ from the ‘bad’. But, there were a lot of people who posed a great threat to the agents’ program of ‘recruitment of hard hands and healthy body’. These fitness criteria had their own compromises and strictness according to their need, demand and supply.

Notes

- 1 Dr. G. P. Stamton (Emigrant Protector of Natal), Annual Report of Natal Emigrant Protector for the year 1898, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, August 1898, Pros. Nos. 8-9. National Archives of India (hereafter NAI).
- 2 Anil Persaud, ‘Transformed Over Seas: “Medical Comforts” aboard Nineteenth-Century Emigrant Ships’, in Marcel van der Linden and Prabhu Mohapatra, eds., *Labour Matters: Towards Global Histories*, Tulika Books, Delhi, 2009, p. 22.
- 3 Hugh Thomas, *The History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440–1870*, Papermac, Great Britain, 1998, p. 57.
- 4 Majors Grierson and Pitcher Report, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, August 1883, Pros. Nos. 16-18, para 42, Part A, NAI. They were appointed by the Indian government to enquire about the malpractices in the indentured recruitment system in northern India. The report prepared by the Majors Pitcher and Grierson provided the information about the depot’s medical facilities, recruitment system, conditions of recruits in the depots, malpractices and kidnapping of recruits, especially women.
- 5 Bengal Public Consultations 13/44 Chief Magistrate of Calcutta to Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 21 October 1843. Also see Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture Experience of Indian Migrants in the British Empire*, Leicester University Press, London, 1996, p. 68.
- 6 Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indentured*, Hurst & Company, London, 2013, p. 38.
- 7 Major Grierson and Pitcher Report, 1883, para 42.
- 8 Deputation of D.G. Pitcher enquiry, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, April 1882, Pros. Nos. 64-73, NAI.
- 9 Major Grierson and Pitcher Report, 1883, para 42.
- 10 Thomas R. Metcalf, *Forging the Raj: Essays on British India in the Heyday of Empire*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2005, p. 223.
- 11 Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *Inside Indenture A South African History, 1860–1914*, Madiba Publishers, Durban, 2007, p. 119.
- 12 Metcalf, *Forging the Raj*, p. 229.
- 13 Mauritius Emigrant Protector in his Annual Report highlighted that there was no requisition received for labourers from Calcutta. Annual Report of Mauritius Emigrant Protector for the year 1886, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch. There was no recruitment from Calcutta for Mauritius during the 1885, 1886, and 1887. NAI.
- 14 Annual Report of Mauritius Emigrant Protector for the year 1879, Home, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, May 1880, Pros. Nos. 20, NAI.
- 15 Major Pitcher Report, Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, February 1883, Pros. Nos. 1–12, NAI. It can be seen in the recruitment process where a sub-agent was receiving Rs 22 per male and Rs 33 per female. Sub-agents were getting higher amount for recruiting female emigrants, because of the scarcity of females and the difficulty in getting them recruited.
- 16 Apart from this, the emigration agents also considered that without women

- Indian males might refuse to migrate to Natal. As Natal Emigrant Agent, Mr Firth remarked to his sub-agent, 'whenever men were sent without the proper proportion of females they would be returned'.
- 17 Ibid.
 - 18 Ibid.
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