

Time-expired Labourers in Indenture Labour Regime

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Abstract

This article examines the position of time-expired labourers within the indenture labour regime, challenging the tendency in existing scholarship to treat them either as indistinguishable from freshly indentured workers or as a simple transition towards free wage labour. Drawing on primary and secondary sources from Assam and overseas colonies, it argues that time-expired labourers constituted a distinct and unstable category whose relative mobility and bargaining power unsettled plantation regimes. The article shows how planters responded through legal extensions of contracts, land policy, indebtedness, surveillance, and recruitment strategies to reassert control. By foregrounding time-expired labourers as historical actors, the article rethinks the dynamics of coercion, autonomy, and control within the indenture system.

Keywords: *Time-expired labourers, Indenture, Plantation labour, Labour control, Colonial political economy*

Introduction

The indenture system emerged in the nineteenth century as a central mechanism through which colonial state organized and mobilized labour after the formal abolition of slavery (Northrup, 1995). Stretching across the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean, and the Pacific worlds, indenture supplied labour to plantations, mines, and infrastructure projects while simultaneously allowing the colonial state to claim moral distance from slavery through the language

of contract, consent, and freedom. As a result, indenture has generated a vast and sophisticated historiography that has debated its coercive character, its relationship to slavery, and the extent to which it represented a form of free or unfree labour. As research on indenture continues to evolve, scholars have increasingly pointed to the need to examine more closely how the system functioned in practice, particularly from the standpoint of labourers lived experiences (Varma, 2016).

One important yet underexplored aspect of this functioning concerns what happened after the expiry of the first indenture contract. In this study, time-expired labourers are defined as labourers who had completed their original indenture term but continued to live and work within plantation economies in various capacities. Much of the existing scholarship approaches contract expiry in one of two ways. Some studies implicitly treat the end of the first contract as the end point of analysis, folding time-expired labourers into the same analytical frame as freshly indentured workers and thereby producing a monolithic image of plantation labour operating under a uniform labour regime (Behal, 2014). Other studies treat contract expiry as a transitional moment, reading time-expired labourers as workers moving increasingly closer to 'free' wage labour. Problematizing both the strands, this article, using primary as well as secondary sources on Assam and various overseas colonies where the indentured migration happened, would attempt to understand whether there was any material difference between freshly indentured and time-expired labourers in plantation complex.

How distinct were time-expired labourers from freshly indentured ones?

Time-expired labourers constituted a qualitatively distinct category within plantation labour regimes. Unlike freshly indentured workers, in many instances they were no longer legally bound by penal contracts, possessed greater mobility, and had the potential to negotiate the terms of their labour. It was precisely this relative autonomy that made them both economically valuable and politically threatening to planters. While there was a continuous importation of freshly indentured labourers on plantation complex, the significance of time-expired labourers for plantation economy can be gauged from the fact that majority of labourers who went to Assam or to overseas colonies on indenture contract

were young. For instance, 86.6% of the emigrant who migrated from Calcutta to Fiji were in the age group of 10-30 and 68.7% between 20 and 30 (Gillion, 1962; Mohapatra, 1995). Hence, even after completing their original indenture, these labourers remained in their prime working age, making them an especially valuable labour force that planters sought to retain, re-bind, and discipline. In fact, planters, in overseas colonies, preferred the majority of Indians to undergo re-indenture, as the cost of replacing labourers whose contracts had expired with new arrivals from India was high (Gillion, 1962). For instance, in Fiji, the CSR Company, which was one of the largest employers of indentured labourers, provided employment to time-expired labourers only when they agreed to re-indenture themselves.

It was also understood that unindentured time-expired labourers, having greater mobility and control over their labour power, were a greater cause of instability on plantations and required to be brought under an indenture contract (Gillion, 1962). Labourers serving their first contract found it easy to desert the estate as they could easily find refuge among unindentured Indians in Fiji, who were often glad to have an extra hand to work on their fields (Gillion, 1962). The plantations were not 'self-contained units,' and despite the constant efforts of the planters to isolate the plantation from the neighboring regions, there were regular exchanges between the estate and the surrounding areas (Jayawardena, 1963). The permeability of plantation boundaries meant that time-expired labourers functioned as conduits through which alternative social relations, economic practices, and norms of autonomy entered the plantation space. This circulation profoundly unsettled planter strategies of isolation and discipline.

At times, individuals classified as 'free' (former indentured) labourers and residing outside the plantation complex faced entry restrictions onto the plantation. In Fiji, for instance, a sugar refining company went to the extent of prohibiting 'free' husbands from visiting their wives who were still under indenture and living on the plantation. In an effort to limit interactions with time-expired labourers residing outside the estate, the company discouraged marriages between indentured labourers and those who had completed their contracts. The company even required indentured labourers to seek permission before getting married (Lal, 1985). In Assam, tea labourers had to obtain the consent of the concerned managers before getting married, even after fifteen years of the abolition of the indenture system. Such regulations were not merely

moral or administrative controls but were aimed at preventing the formation of social ties between indentured and time-expired labourers that could facilitate desertion, shelter, and alternative livelihood strategies. In mid-1940, Mr. Rege reported that outsiders were required to take permission before entering the premises of plantation and visiting labourer lines. The Royal Commission of Labour also noted that lines in which Assam tea labourers lived were not accessible to the public. Labourers living on the lines were also discouraged to go outside as chowkidars were posted on every possible outlet from the labourer-lines (Bose, 1954). These practices acquired renewed urgency with the growing presence of time-expired labourers in and around the plantations, whose mobility posed a constant challenge to managerial authority.

To counter the threat of time-expired labourers, planters relied on several provisions of the act, binding upon the contract, which provided windows to extend the time period of the original indenture contract. The period of absence from work as well as the term of imprisonment provided were added to the time period of the original contract. In 1877, the Government of India expressed objection over sections of laws providing such provision in case of Fiji (Gillion, 1962). The opposing voices from the state, even if it was occasional, implies that the practice of resorting back to these provisions to extend the original contract of labourers by planters were widespread.

There were several other mechanisms related to life and work conditions on plantation which helped planters tie down their labourers for a longer period. For instance, in Fiji, some larger plantations had “company stores” from where the labourers residing there could buy goods required for their survival. These stores were accused of over-charging which might have led to indebtedness among labourers and had deprived them of any savings whatsoever (Gillion, 1962). In Upper Assam, workers received their wages in the form of brass tokens, which they could either redeem weekly at the gardens or use to make purchases at a designated shop (Das, 1931). This practice helped planters in curbing the mobility of labourers, as they couldn’t spend money as they wished. They were obligated to buy basic necessities exclusively from a designated shop, which often charged them higher prices for goods.

In Assam, planters established a system of rice advance to trap labourers in a vicious cycle of indebtedness. Under the system rice was provided to labourers,

the cost of which was recorded on the garden register as an outstanding debt against them. However, since the system of payment was such that labourers received no cash wages; they were unable to settle these outstanding debts. Consequently, the debt burden on the labourers continued to grow with each provision of rice and other necessities. This tactic effectively bound the labourers to the estate, with many remaining in debt from the time they enter the garden until the end. In several instances, labourers faced challenges obtaining discharge certificates from planters due to outstanding debts owed to the estates (Das, 1931). Cotton noted:

Advances were often illegally debited against labourers on account of subsistence allowance or sick diet, as well as on account of reward paid for the arrest of deserters, and coolies were thus bound hand and foot to the garden service (1911, p. 266).

These mechanisms were especially significant in the case of time-expired labourers, as they compensated for the weakening of legal coercion by producing economic dependence and practical immobility. At the end of the original indenture contract, labourers often found themselves with no savings. They were too poor to afford to go back home on their own (Das, 1931). The absence of repatriation clause in Assam ensured that their probability of returning to their villages remained miniscule.

The provision of granting a plot of land to labourers upon the expiry of their original contract was also used to acquire a greater control over time-expired labourers. The proposal to allocate land to time-expired labourers for permanent settlement in the colonies was initially met with strong opposition from planters. They were concerned that providing land to these labourers would disrupt the supply of labour to the plantations (Mohapatra, 1995). However, the planters only reconsidered their position when the plantation economy faced a severe crisis. During this crisis, there was a significant movement of labour away from the plantations. In Trinidad, by 1901, 64,000 Indians were living outside the plantations, compared to 16,000 residents on the plantations. Similarly, in British Guiana, the Indian population outside plantations increased from 17,000 to 57,000 between 1881 and 1901 (Mohapatra, 1995). When land was granted, precautions were taken to ensure that the size of the plots was such that the quantity assigned to each man or family would not exclusively occupy their

time (Mohapatra, 1995). This was done to strike a balance between providing settlers with the means to diversify their subsistence base and ensuring that they could still contribute to the labour force if needed, playing a role as a 'reserve labour force' at the same time. In this way, land grants operated not as a pathway to independence but as a technology of labour retention, producing a semi-autonomous peasantry that could be drawn back into plantation work when required. Mohapatra argues that despite stagnated cane acreage and sugar production in the phase of crisis (1884-1917) the number of new labourers who were brought on indenture remained almost equal to the number of labourers imported during the period of growth (1840s-1880). The 80,000 acres of sugar cane cultivation in British Guiana in 1890 reduced by one fourth to 67,000 acres in 1900 (Mohapatra, 2006). The period of crisis saw reduced wages and irregular jobs as unemployment was rampant. The problem intensified greatly because despite the presence of 'free' time-expired labourers in abundance, planters continued on importing new indentured labourers on the same pace. The continued importation of indentured labourers in this context functioned as a deliberate strategy to undercut the bargaining power of time-expired workers and to prevent the consolidation of a locally rooted, autonomous labour force. During the period of crisis, the nature of labour regime of plantation in Guiana underwent change as the focus shifted on using locally reproduced labour but in order to curb the prospective autonomy and bargaining power of time-expired labourers who were settling down in greater number in the Caribbean and to keep their control over labour market intact, planters felt the need to continue importing new indentured labourers on the same pace which could have acted as a cushion and could be used to counter the increased bargaining power of time-expired labourers.

However, the practice of providing land to time-expired labourers was dependent on the land availability in different colonies. In Trinidad, for example, the system of granting small parcels of land instead of return passages to industrial immigrants was successfully implemented because the island had a considerable expanse of unoccupied and unclaimed land suitable for such allocations. In contrast, Fiji faced challenges in implementing a similar system due to the Crown's lack of available land for settling Indians. Unlike Trinidad, Fiji was already a settled country with every acre of land having a known owner. Therefore, in Fiji, the Crown had to purchase or lease land, similar to private

individuals, as there was no unclaimed land readily available for the settlement of time-expired labourers (Gillion, 1962). In Assam, ex-indentured and time-expired labourers acquired land through various means. Lands obtained from planters often had the condition of providing labour to those planters. On the other hand, many times, labourers also received land from the government. This meant that they were no longer required to tie themselves down to any planter. As a result of this factor, Assam planters witnessed an approximate seven percent reduction in their overall workforce (Mukherjee, 1945).

The level of influence exerted by plantation owners over time-expired and ex-indentured labourers residing outside the plantations varied across different colonies. In the Caribbean Islands, these labourers often sought to distance themselves from the planters' authority by relocating away from the plantations, aiming to escape the restrictive control imposed by the planters. Despite this move, many continued to maintain ties with the plantations even after settling elsewhere, functioning as a reserve labour force (Mohapatra, 1995). However, the degree of control wielded by planters over such labourers notably diminished in the Caribbean. Conversely, in Mauritius, a peasant farmer, known as a *morcellement*, found themselves subject to a level of control similar to that experienced by labourers confined within the labourer lines on the estates. This was evident in the fact that the peasant farmer could only deliver their cane to the nearest factory, highlighting a significant limitation on their autonomy. Planters in Mauritius exercised monopolistic control, compelling small farmers to accept the rates determined by the nearest factory for their cane, thereby illustrating the extent of planters' dominance in this context (Tinker, 1974).

Planters' bid to tie down labourers faced challenges in all those destinations where the indenture contract also provided repatriation clause with right to free return passage after a certain number of years. Indians migrated to overseas colonies with the intention of returning back to India. And when they could not procure lands in the colonies, they invariably returned back to India (Gillion, 1962). They considered the provision for the return passage to be their primary, if not sole, effective safeguard against the mistreatment. This was because if the emigrants were dissatisfied with life in the colonies, they had the option to return to India. For many immigrants, the free return passage functioned almost like insurance. The right to repatriation thus became a crucial resource through which time-expired labourers could negotiate, resist, or exit oppressive

plantation conditions. The flexibility of being able to use the return passage at any time discouraged immigrants from viewing Fiji as their permanent home (Gillion, 1962). However, as the plantation economy faced a downturn and planters increasingly depended on time-expired labourers, adjustments were made to the repatriation provisions, and the right to a return passage was curtailed. For instance, in the Caribbean, it was determined that immigrants should contribute a portion of the cost for their return passage. Similar deliberations arose in Fiji around 1900, reflecting the desire to settle time-expired labourers permanently and to prevent them from asserting autonomy through the repatriation clauses.

The time-expired labourers in several cases asserted their 'free' legal status and enjoyed certain autonomy and bargaining power over their labour. In Fiji, these labourers were not ready to give up their 'newly-acquired freedom' by re-engaging themselves under another indenture contract. In 1893, only 208 labourers decided to renew their contract after the expiry of their original contract. In 1912, this number was 515. Despite inducements such as bonus and a plot of land, time-expired labourers were reluctant to renew their contract in Fiji (Gillion, 1962). This reluctance underscores the extent to which time-expired labourers valued their hard-won legal and social autonomy, even in conditions of economic insecurity. Overall, persuading labourers whose indenture contracts had ended or were about to expire to renew their contracts was not an easy affair. It was particularly more difficult in the case of better-disposed labourers. Planters argued that a growing sense of indispensability of their services, along with their separation from native society and their longing to return to their own country, made the renewal of agreements a "time of suffering" for the planters. Upon re-engagement, time-expired labourers were given three to four days of holiday (Barker, 1884).

The opportunity of alternative employment for time-expired labourers differed in different colonies. For instance, such labourers in Fiji could either re-indenture (until 1912) or could work for a planter as a free labourer. S/he had the option to work under the Master & Servants Ordinance (Gillion, 1962). Similar to the Fijians, unindentured Indians typically engaged in shorter-term work arrangements. They commonly worked as casual labourers or cultivated their own land for most of the year. As free labourers, they had the potential to earn nearly double the amount compared to their earnings during the

indenture period. Such differential earnings further accentuated the distinction between indentured and time-expired labour and heightened planter anxieties regarding labour retention. However, during economic downturns, such as depressions, there could be significant unemployment among these labourers. After the expiration of their indenture terms, many Indian immigrants chose to remain on the land and became independent farmers. They lived alongside indigenous Fijians in communal villages (Gillion, 1962). In Mauritius, day labourers, considered “free” labourers, and peasant farmers residing in hamlets on the outskirts of plantations became prominent as the labour force living upon the estates diminished. During times of crisis, this arrangement became beneficial for sugar companies. With a declining workforce residing directly on the estates, sugar companies began leasing portions of their land to tenant farmers. These farmers, in turn, cultivated their own sugar cane and delivered it to the factory for processing (Tinker, 1974). Jayawardena highlights the inter-plantation mobility among time-expired labourers as these labourers migrated from one plantation to another ‘in search of work and more congenial conditions’ (Jayawardena, 1963).

In Fiji, indentured immigrants did not universally reside on the plantations where they were employed. Some opted to lease a parcel of land and lived in modest accommodations like tin sheds, or they shared living spaces with unindentured Indians. Conversely, the housing lines on plantations were occasionally occupied by unindentured labourers who took advantage of the rent-free accommodations or sought proximity to immigrant women (Gillion, 1962). The estate management exercised a general control over all labourers residing on the plantation, irrespective of whether they were employed on plantation or elsewhere. In his anthropological study of plantation of British Guiana, Jayawardena contends that every adult living on the plantation could be compelled to work for the plantation, given that the management retained the authority to deny accommodation to those who earned their livelihood elsewhere (Jayawardena, 1963). In the context of Assam tea plantations, Das argues that the question of employing labour also involved their residence on the premises. This ensured the availability of women and child labour and had an impact on wage rates and the mental attitudes of all workers. In 1928, 79 percent of the total labour force employed on plantations were residing on its premises (Das, 1931).

Jayawardena's anthropological study explores division among plantation population on the line of 'occupational-cum-social' status hierarchy. He throws light on the existence of vertical divisions, even though limited, among working population on plantations in the British Guiana. There were European managerial groups at the top; clerk, foremen, drivers (foremen of field labour gangs) at the middle; and field workers, artisans and mechanics at the bottom of the status hierarchy. And since the number of individuals engaged in the middle strata were very few, the prospect of upward social mobility was very limited (Jayawardena, 1963). Within certain larger plantations, the intermediate social stratum also comprised individuals such as small business men, shopkeepers, contractors, junior civil servants, shop assistants, teachers, skilled artisans, and farmers with holdings of five acres or more (Jayawardena, 1963). Individuals whom the management deemed trustworthy were granted lucrative positions, privileges, and favours (Jayawardena, 1963). Foremen, overseers of the factory, and drivers, overseers of the fields, were selected from the ranks of the plantation labourers. Likewise, in Assam, garden-sirdars typically belonged to two main categories: they were either the most senior and reliable workers within the plantation, or they were individuals who had successfully recruited and brought up a group of labourers from their native region (Barker, 1884). Jayawardena argues that there was a 'precise sense of rank' on the plantation. Drivers and foremen wore a slouch hat which was a badge of status (Jayawardena, 1963). Clerks and other middle-class men on the plantation tried to keep a distance from labourers. Labourers accused them of 'betraying their origin' (Jayawardena, 1963). In Assam, sirdars enjoyed some authority over men and women working on the estate. He, in a way, became the part of the management. "A sirdar's mode of management was parading up and down between the rows of tea bushes, armed with a small stick and the dignity that his position of authority had given him" (Barker, 1884, p. 135). These positions of upward mobility were very important from planters' point of view to have a control over the estate particularly in the view of increasing number of time-expired labourers. Such positions of higher hierarchy provided them space to accommodate the enhanced autonomy of such time-expired labourers who were in position to assert their autonomy and bargaining power. It also kept large number of labourers interested who found sirdari-ship a potential avenue to get upward in the plantation hierarchy. That was why, planters in

Assam preferred direct management of labourers unlike in the tea districts in Bengal, Madras & Ceylon (Das, 1931).

Conclusion

This article has shown that time-expired labourers were neither simply an extension of freshly indentured workers nor a linear step towards free wage labour, but a distinct and unstable category that unsettled plantation regimes. Their greater mobility, bargaining power, and alternative livelihood options forced planters to devise new strategies of control through land policy, indebtedness, recruitment practices, and everyday surveillance. Yet, despite their structural significance, time-expired labourers have remained marginal in the historiography of indenture, either absorbed into a homogeneous labour category or treated as a transitional residue. Recognizing them as historical actors in their own right is essential to understanding how plantation labour regimes were continually reworked in response to labourers' assertions of autonomy.

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