

Slavery vs indentureship in the caribbean

Countries



Slavery and Indentureship can be described as two of the most horrible historic happenings to occur. They share numerous differences as well as Similarities, which make us, question whether Indentureship was disguised as a form of slavery or not. Chattel slavery, otherwise known as traditional slavery is a system under which people are treated as property and are forced to work. Slaves could be held against their will from the time of their capture, purchase or birth, and deprived of the right to leave, to refuse to work, or to demand compensation. In some historical situations it has been legal for owners to kill slaves.

The conditions in which the slaves resided and worked can be described as horrible. Indentureship, on the other hand, specifically East Indian Indentureship, was the arrival of East Indians from India to the Caribbean to replace African labor under a contract which they open-mindedly agreed to. In theory, as described by some historical references and using the previously stated definitions it can be stated that Indian Indentureship in the British Colonized Caribbean between 1845 -1917 was not a form of chattel slavery but the conditions however were reminiscent of the past system of slavery which it succeeded as a means of labour.

One of the major aspects which differentiated slavery from Indentureship was the legal ownership of the workers involved. Africans were captured from their native homelands and forcefully enslaved via five ways, as prisoners of war, payment of debt, victims of kidnappings and raids, as gifts given to tribal owners and European slave traders alike and through birth. This meant that the human beings being enslaved for their whole lives were

legal properties of the humans and their generations enslaving them, comparative to the ownership of animals.

When immigrants landed in a Caribbean colony they came under the control of the local immigration department which was headed by a protector of immigrants called the Agent-General. In 1837 John Gladstone, father of British Prime Minister & the owner of two plantations in British Guiana, applied to the Secretary Of State for the colonies to import Indian Labourers. In 1838 396 immigrants arrived in British Guiana the great flood on Indian Immigrant Workers begun; it was deemed a success by British Guiana.

The Anti-Slavery Society revealed that many of the immigrants were dying quickly, some were being flogged and wrongly imprisoned while others were not paid what they were owed, therefore in July 1838 the Indian government suspended all emigration while a Commission of Enquiry, made a thorough investigation of the conditions in British Guiana. Immigration resumed officially in 1844, and lasted until 1917. In 1840s the Planter's demand for Indian Immigrant Labour was strong, as was the case British Guiana where the government was spending \$50 000 per year on Immigrant workers the colony was almost bankrupt in 1848 but a loan of \$200 000 from the British government help to keep the scheme alive.

But for this demand to be supplied a large amounts of immigrants were needed, Indian Immigrant Labourers were sourced from the poor streets of Bombay, Calcutta & Madras. These cities were also ports of embarkation. After 1848 they were drawn from the provinces of Agra, Oudh & Bihar which suffered from terrible frequent famine. Many of these immigrants were peasant farmers. Immigrant workers saw immigration as a means of starting

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over to escape from religious tribulation, to end their poverty. Indentured laborers were not by law the property of their employer.

Between indentured laborer and plantation owner was the existence of an employer-employee relationship. Their children were in no way bonded by the contracts signed between parent and employer. The contracts ran usually from 3-5 years and could be renewed later for 5-10 years. The contracts were voluntarily signed but however the circumstances surrounding the signings were not always truthful. Some Indians were fooled or misled and there was miscommunication because of the different tribal tongues. The contracts signed in some cases were misrepresentations of the true situation in the British colonies.

They were misled and received not what they bargained for; this was partly due to their illiteracy. Some Indians may also have been kidnapped from the poorer areas. Both the East Indian Indenturers and the enslaved Africans were shipped from their home lands to various European colonies. They are comparable in that many East Indians were kidnapped and taken against their will just as the enslaved Africans were. Nevertheless, the lengthy journeys these two groups of people embarked on contrasted significantly in terms of treatment and conditions.

For instance, East Indian Indenturers had agents that tried to make certain that the ship had ample crew, sufficient medical personnel, sweepers, cooks and also drugs and warm clothing, they ensured that the crew looked after the welfare of the Indentured the immigrants were given 2 square meters with one adult per bunk. Also, planters paid much attention to the medical

well-being of the emigrants and supplied accommodation and entertainment to make the extensive voyage more endurable for them.

Although at first there were some problems the Immigrants were only allowed 1.5 square meters on deck this was very cramped for a journey which lasted between 93-113 days this led to high death rates for example the Salsette left from Calcutta to Trinidad landed with only 124 passengers 199 had died of Cholera, Dysentery and Sea Sickness. On the other hand, the enslaved Africans were also crammed onto large ships by the hundreds in inhumane conditions which led to a high death rate. The Hannibal was loaded with 200 slaves by the time she shipped had reached American water 320 slaves had died.

The women were victims to rape as well, they were given minimal food, left in their own waste and only given little time on deck to exercise & get some fresh air, because of these poor conditions along the middle passage they were often revolts on board. When immigrants landed in a Caribbean colony they came under control of the local immigration department. It was headed by a protector of immigrants who was also known as the Agent General. Each year planters sent in requests for Labourers and the immigration department divided the immigrants among the estates.

When this was done the Agent General was in charge to ensure the many rules and regulations were enforced such as sound housing, watertight roofing and proper drainage to ensure the laws were enforced he had a staff of clerks, travelling inspectors and interpreters. A special corps of surgeons were also assembled headed by the island's Surgeon General, since it was found that many new immigrants died within the first year. Every three

months the Agent General's staff had to prepare a report on each plantation listing the number of days lost through sickness, all fines on Labourers, and the number of births and deaths.

When African slaves came to the Caribbean upon reaching the port the slaves were prepared for sale. Captains tried to make their cargo as attractive as possible. Slaves were stripped and shaved to remove grey hairs that lowered the selling price. Palm oil was rubbed into muscles to give a healthy firm appearance, some captains tried to hide scars & wounds with cosmetic mixtures which included gunpowder, lime juice and iron rust.

The final sale was carried out in two ways, a 'slave scramble' or an auction. Slaves would be herded into a pen, surrounded by eager buyers, pushing and shoving in order to position themselves to grab hold of the finest specimens. A starting gun would be fired, and the buyers would surge into the pen to try and collect the best individuals. Often, fights broke out among the buyers as well as startled slaves would jump into the water. Following the scramble, buyers lined up with their "captured" slaves and paid for them. A male slave cost about 200 guilders which was about the yearly wage for a sailor, women and children cost less in the 18th century the price went up to about 700 guilders.

After this; slaves would be branded with the initials of their owners. Unlike Indentured servants slaves were seen as property of their owner and therefore had little to no rights. Only those with special skills/talents were given special privileges. They were given insufficient rations and sometimes had to steal to gather enough food as well as food obtained from their own

gardens. They were given inadequate amounts of fresh water. As well as worked long hours with little time for rest.

Their health was a main concern but only because in order not to lose their value as workers through sickness. On large plantations it was a common practice to provide a hospital, and to engage the services of a doctor on a regular basis. Unfortunately slaves were afflicted with many illnesses which the doctors couldn't treat. Indentured Indians life on the plantation was not much different, working day was unduly long, the idea of a rest day inconceivable; the laborers found their movements severely curtailed, and indeed they were caged within the walls of the plantation.

Discipline was enforced with an iron hand, and the whip cracked generously: as a number of Indian laborers in Surinam were to state in a complaint in 1883, " if any coolie fails to work for a single day of the week, he is sent to jail for two or four days, where he is forced to work while day and night kept under chains. We are tortured very much. For this reason two to three persons died by swallowing opium and drowning themselves. " Over the period 1834, when the first batch of indentured Indians arrived in Mauritius, to 1917, when the indentured system was brought to a halt, nearly 1. 5 million Indians had sold themselves into debt-bondage.

About 240, 000 Indians had been sent to British Guiana (now Guyana), 36, 000 to Jamaica, and nearly 144, 000 to Trinidad, to mention only some of the Caribbean nations. As the Barbadian novelist George Lamming put it, " these Indian hands -- whether in British Guiana or Trinidad -- have fed all of us. " These hands were to contribute, as much as the hands of African slaves and their descendants, to the Caribbean experiment of giving shape to a unique

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expression of human civilization, and as Lamming has recognized, " there can be no creative discovery of this civilization without the central and informing influence of the Indian presence.

There can be no history of Trinidad and Guyana that is not also a history of the humanization of those landscapes by Indian Labour. " Indians are apt, like many other people, to associate the phenomenon of slavery solely with Africans, but it is not realized that indentured labor was only, in the words of Hugh Tinker, " a new form of slavery".

If what is most notable about slavery is the fact that it allows the master or the capitalist to extract labor without paying the price of labor that is precisely what was achieved through the system of indentured servitude. There is, in this abominable exercise, a salutary lesson for those who have been the victims of European domination with its characteristically merciless, self-aggrandizing, and malign features, for when Europeans saw fit to bestow 'freedom' upon a certain people, they could only do so by chaining others.

The history of the white race, in this respect, is no fundamentally different today than it was before. But there is also, in the history of Indian indentured migration, something that rekindles hope. From the ashes of the painful and degrading experience of indenture, Indians were able, over the course of the last 150 years, to build anew their lives, and to give themselves an inestimable and indispensable place in the countries to which they had been brought.