



PLANTATION SYSTEM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Surabhi Gupta

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi, New Delhi - 110024, India

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the overview of indentured labour in three geographical regions of the world – guano mining in Peru, plantations in Mauritius and America. It delineates the cultural, social and religious life of the indentured workers in the three systems, outside the control of the planters. Against this backdrop, we will chronicle the intertwined and frequently clashing role of caste, class, race and religion in the life of the workers. We will assess its consequences on plantation society, which can be seen in countries even today.

KEYWORDS: indenture system, plantations, guano mining, caste system

INTRODUCTION

“Plantation society is defined as a society centered on a monoculture meant for export only, and dependent on a cheap, imported, labor-force, residing on the plantation.”
~ Mathieu Claveyrolas

The cornerstone of modern history has been the twin institutions of colonialism and imperialism. Its genesis in the 15th century during ‘Age of Discovery’ reverberated globally with expansive areas in America, Asia and Africa colonized under European hegemony. A prime hallmark of this social and cultural subjugation was its institution of indentured servitude. Constituted primarily to meet the needs of labor demand of plantation society, the system had economic, social and cultural ramifications for the involved parties spanning centuries.

OBJECTIVES

The focal point of this paper is the social and cultural life of the indentured workers, outside the parameters set by the planters. It chronicles how the workers made the most from indenture in spite of all the soul-crushing, continual hardships. This paper endeavors to throw light on the following broad questions with the help of the indentured system experienced in the region mentioned against it.

How plantation workers introduced unanticipated changes in the system which were unprecedented in the history of indenture. – Colonial America.

How they fought back and did not let the tyrannical system break them but held onto their dignity and freedom. – Peru.

How their cultural life worked outside the plantation regime, albeit in a negative way, and had its own dimension. – Mauritius

METHODOLOGY

Against this backdrop, we will chronicle the intertwined and frequently clashing role of caste, class, race and religion in the life of the workers. We will assess its consequences on plantation society, which can be seen in countries even today.

We traverse the chronological history of indenture system, which both predated and postdated slavery with a significant difference. The pre-slavery indenture was imposed on whites, while the post slavery one was applicable to Asians. We examine the differences and commonalities in the two. We outline its inception in the 17th century from the feudal institution of apprenticeship.

The accentuated employment of coercion and force in indenture which manifested as penal contract in post-slavery indenture can be attributed to its feudal roots. Despite its unbridled, all- encompassing element of intimidation, the workers responded with resilience and fortitude. In America, they instituted education as an indispensable trait of indentured servitude. In Peru, they overtly challenged the dominance of planters.

In this repressive plantation milieu, the glamour of the planters was juxtaposed against the grinding penury of the workers. This culture of classism was both a reason and a consequence of the continuance for indenture for such a protracted time. We describe it as being at the heart of all other social stratifications, in particular religion, caste and race. An unrelenting desire to defend one’s economic and social supremacy lies at the heart of the discourses on religion, casteism and racism. This is observed in the case of Mauritius, where the caste system of Hinduism survived, albeit in a milder form, the harsh tide of indenture.

RESULTS

Focusing on the education of indentured servants and apprentices in Colonial America during and after 17th century, Mark R. Snyder takes us on a tour over the century to describe how the role of education varied over the time periods and regions amongst the fore-players of indenture. According to him, apprenticeship was a type of indentured servitude. It combined technical education and labor with the promise of eventual self-employment in addition to the indenture rule of binding with contract. Early indentured servants were not apprentices, since they already knew their trades and needed little training. They had low literacy rates as most of the laborers were young and adult. In fact farmers were demanded in large numbers and training usually in husbandry was the most education that one could likely gain through the system. Self-motivation or any special arrangements were the only source of education. After the initial settlement of migrants, the entry of native-born children of colonists as apprentices changed the attitude and approach towards education. "The colonists of the Middle and New England colonies were primarily Protestants who valued education and would bargain shrewdly so that their children might learn reading, writing, and ciphering along with gaining vocational skills." (Snyder, 2007). Several successive Poor-Laws were enacted in the Massachusetts Bay colonies between 1703 and 1771 to ascertain opportunities for poor apprentices to learn and write. In this system, the master was the primary source for basic education. The growth of schools and educational requirements in 18th century again changed the pattern of education. By the end of the colonial period, the role of master decreased to vocational skills and education became more centralized under the influence of schools. The tuition expenses were borne by parents of the apprentice in contrast to the earlier case of full reliance on masters. According to Quimby (1985), in his study of *Apprenticeship in Colonial Philadelphia*, approximately two-thirds of the indentured contracts that he discovered, dated from 1745-1746 to 1771-1773, indicated provisions for education. Snyder finds that these changes were mainly due to the diversity of the groups that settled in the colonies, the regional differences between the colonies, and the rapidly changing environment within the colonies at this time.

Michael J. Gonzales highlights the evil facet of plantation system in Peru. After Peru's devastation in 1839 because of War of the Confederation (1836-1839) and War of Independence (1822-1825), guano was discovered as a fertilizer in early 1840 on Peru's Chincha Islands. The high quality guano gave an opportunity to the Peruvian government to make huge profits. From the perspective of labour, Peruvian government substituted local wage labor with the cheap alternative of Asian immigrants. Approximately 100,000 indentured servants were transported from China to the hell of mining guano between 1847 and 1874.

Gonzales describes this as a period of political and social chaos when public authority was unreliable and sometimes non-existent. The guano-mining was one of the most foul, dangerous, and degrading jobs. Fresh guano is putrid and noxious. Petrified guano is mined with picks and even dynamite. The sweltering tropical climate made working conditions appalling. Accidents and diseases like malaria, influenza, typhoid, and dysentery were rampant among the overworked laborers. The right of corporal punishment by the Peruvian government encouraged planters to use worst tools for punishment like beating by lashes and clubs, working

with shackles and chains, use of firearms, locking in jail, drugs etc. With the above mentioned atrocities, the Chinese even had to deal with periodic violent confrontations with blacks. In spite of all this, they showed resistance in the form of thefts, fire, runaways, suicides, attacks on mayordomos etc. Their defiance led to fall in production level and contributed to transition to alternative forms of labor. Gonzales shows that the Chinese contractors were the ones who led to the most exploitation of their own people for the sake of money whereas on the other hand Chinese workers showed solidarity in defense of individuals with no personal gain motive.

The paper by Mathieu Claveyrolas helps us to add the flavor of Indian caste system to indentured servitude; which in itself has always been famous over the world for its complexities. In 19th century, with the boom of the sugar industry in Mauritius and the abolition of slavery in 1835, the major chunk of recruitment was done from British India on five-year contracts in order to compensate for the labor force shortage. Claveyrolas analyses the changing India-Mauritius relations and finds that some indentured laborers walked up the ladder of social hierarchical power to become small planters. According to Jean Benoist (1989), some indentured laborers settled in villages outside the plantations and recreated the Indian social context. Mauritian society saw the development of a kind of Hinduism specific to the plantation society which mirrors the dual perspective of its Creolness and Indianess (Benoist 1998, Claveyrolas 2014). According to Kurien (2004: 40) and Burghart (1987: 12) 'castes have survived, but not the 'system.' with regard to the American and British contexts respectively. Claveyrolas discusses the different perspective of the debate on the presence and transition of Hindu cultural dimensions. The study shows that on the surface, caste system is not accepted and is considered as barbaric and invalid since the end of the indenture system; but on deep analysis one finds that, caste system among Hindu Mauritians has not lost its ideological relevance.

CONCLUSION

Despite the shackles and constraints imposed by the indenture system, the plantation workers did find ways to circumvent the system. They did so in a variety of ways, which differed according to their specific locations and conditions.

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