



## THE WORKER'S SIDE: RELIGION, PROTEST AND EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper discusses the forms of protest and the cultural life of indentured workers in the plantations in three geographical regions of the world – Peru, Mauritius and America. They employed myriad forms of protest while seeking succor in their social and cultural life.*

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

### INTRODUCTION

Against the totalitarian regime of indenture, the workers had very little recourse to law or any other medium to ease their suffering. True, they indulged in gambling and opium consumption but by doing this they played right into the planter's hand. It did nothing to actually improve their situation but only served as a coping mechanism. Planters also sought and frequently succeeded in controlling the remaining social and cultural aspects of their lives. But they did lead independent lives, outside the whims and fancies of planters. In this context, we firstly consider how they fought back against this repressive system and were not passive recipients of the injustice meted out to them.

### OBJECTIVES

The focal point of this paper is the social and cultural life of the indentured workers, juxtaposed against the parameters set by the planters. It chronicles how the workers protested against 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 corresponding region.

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

How they protested in both direct and indirect ways and held onto their dignity and freedom. – Peru.

How their cultural life worked outside the plantation regime, in the form of the caste system and its adaptation to a life of indenture. – Mauritius

### METHODOLOGY

Against this backdrop, we will delineate 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. In Peru, Chinese workers indulged in non-violent protests in

the form of feigning illness, talking back, thievery and fire. The second instance of this protest is seen in the case of colonial America. In America, education and clothing became important bargaining chips in the indenture system; laws were instituted to enforce their provisions. This was a way of indentured workers to make the most out of this exploitative system. The third instance of a peek in the lives' of the indentured workers is the survival of the caste system in Mauritius despite indenture. The flexible nature of caste system easily integrated exceptions.

### RESULTS

In Peru, Chinese workers had non-violent protests in the form of feigning illness, talking back, thievery and fire. Thefts were meant to cut into the profits of the planters and to make money. Fire was a traditional form of protest used by workers in sugar plantations. "Managers repeatedly complained that the Chinese were disobedient and talked back. On one occasion a Chinese stole six sacks of cotton and, when caught, explained that he was only 'completing his *tarea* in harvesting.'" (Gonzales, 1989). Violent protests between workers included suicides and murders and uniting to protect their fellow workers and protest low wages and abysmal working conditions. "In 1885 cotton harvesters stopped work and demanded an increase in wages to offset the devaluation in paper currency. The administrator agreed to increase wages from S. /1. 50 paper per *arroba* to S./2.00 per *arroba*. Three years later, ginners and packers complained that their counterparts on neighbouring estates received 10 silver centavos a day more. Once again, the manager consented and increased ginners' wages from 40-50 silver centavos a day, and packers' wages from 30-40 silver centavos a day." (Gonzales, 1989) They also avenged their abuse during the Chilean War by burning and sacking plantations and fighting in the battles of San Juan and Miraflores alongside the Chileans. The falling productivity of the ageing Chinese population can also be seen as an unintentional way of protest.

Such protests were more effective on smaller plantations firstly, because of minimal participation of the owner in the management and less effectiveness of hired staff at social contact. Secondly, they had more non - contracted and thus more mobile workers. This highlights the role of contracts as an instrument of social control. This also delineates the small-scale, strategically simple and disorganized efforts of the workers, which were no match for the nexus between the planters, Chinese contractors, black mayordomos and local administration, who had far superior resources at their disposal than the workers. But nevertheless, the workers fought back. And they were partially successful as the above examples show. Wages did indeed rise due to their protests. Their disruption reduced planter's profits and sped up the switch to Peruvian labor.

Another dimension of this protest is seen in the equality of wages between men and women in Peru. "Among these seasonal workers there were usually several Peruvian women who earned the same wage as men."(Gonzales, 1989). Thus, gender equality in this respect is seen in Peru, something uncommon in the contemporary plantation culture elsewhere.

The profit motive of planters led to their own demise, which indirectly helped the workers. Wages increased in 1883, despite more power in the hand of planters and their mutual agreement to not raise wages. Their profit motive forced them to deviate from the agreement and allowed wages to prevail at competitive rates.

One of the major victories for the workers was the failure of planters to manipulate the emergence of local labor market. Firstly, free Chinese workers earned more wages than contracted workers. And there were quite a few workers who had indeed successfully completed their indentured contracts and become free. This victory was slightly dented by their indirect debt peonage and thus limited mobility since planters did owe them their wages, because of which they were reluctant to leave. Secondly, the planters had to employ Peruvian labor, and they worked for the highest bidder and avoided debt peonage. Thus, they retained their physical and economic freedom and managed to create a 'seller's market' for their labor.

In America, education grew due to a variety of factors. Firstly, earlier labor was the main focus and laborers and young adults were primarily indentured. Education was considered unnecessary for them and only the highly motivated took it. Secondly, as slave labor grew in the Southern colonies, the need for indentured servants as laborers declined. Thirdly, native-born children of the primarily Protestant colonists grew. Fourthly, cities and trade in the New England and Middle colonies grew, so apprenticeship was revived.

Education was promoted under the apprenticeship system of indenture, in huge part because plantation needs were met by slaves and this reduced the need for the indentured laborers. Partly because of this and partly because these earlier workers were permanent settlers, the consequent clout they acquired enabled them to enforce it by law. "The education of apprentices enforced by law was a unique approach."(Snyder, 2007). Thus, they achieved it due to their own efforts and not the planters' efforts; similar to later when planters would not even look after the health of the workers.

In Mauritius, the caste system survived the constraints imposed by indenture. Rural India was an open society, so indenture was not incompatible with leaving the native land. The villagers had contact with outsiders and were aware of

Bihar and Assam plantations and could adapt. Also, the Bhojpuris, who comprised two-thirds of all indentured workers, were famous for their voyages. Sea voyage was a taboo but the Brahmins were more concerned with it, not the Indian peasants who were actually indentured. Depot marriages frequently occurred to meet the needs of planters, and recruiters' quotas for married couples.' (Claveyrolas, 2015) but had no lasting negative impact on endogamy.

There was commensality and promiscuity on ship but there were many cases where higher castes did not eat food or managed to get exempt from the most impure tasks.

Plantation camps had no manipulation of castes by planters. There was absence of professional specialization and spatial segregation. There were sirdars from lower castes. Also, the holistic nature of the caste system made it impossible to replicate it in Mauritius but this argument overestimates the importance of priests in the peasants' life and underestimates religious specialists from lower castes like peasants. Also, marriage makers in plantations ensured endogamy. The relevance of purity in daily life of plantations is seen in the following instance: In plantation camps, river water is shared by all, and all use the same well... 'but not the same *lota* (pot)!' (Claveyrolas, 2015).

The plantations had the same kalimai (shrine) but prayers differed according to caste; prasad distribution and until recently, temples also were decided on caste affiliations. All this shows the preservation of the caste system, its ideology and structure in Mauritius.

## CONCLUSION

The indentured workers were used by elites for making profit and accumulation of capital was achieved by putting the entire burden on workers and working them to the bone. Yet the resistance of the workers created ripples, and its aftermath can still be perceived in modern contemporary societies. In America, and around the world, technology has been recognized as an integral part of modern education. And the importance attributed to the education of the indentured servants led to the proliferation of schools and set up the foundation of the importance of technical instruction in the modern schooling system. It laid the foundation of the indispensable need for "education for all" both on ethical grounds and in the context of human capital formation. In Peru, the workers managed to carve out a niche for themselves. Their protests and dissent created chinks in the absolute dominion of the oligarchic planters. In Mauritius, we see a multicultural society transcending religious barriers. The dilution of the caste system is showcased in the instances of the supplanting of the traditional salute of joined palms, without contact with others by the hand-shake or the relative unawareness of the non-Hindus about the caste system. Therefore, we see that the ostensible differences can be trumped by the *esprit of corps* fundamental to the human spirit.

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