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Indian Indenture at the Centre of World History? A Perspective

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Abstract

This paper will place Indian indentureship in its wider historical context as part of the historically central, long plunder of India by outside forces, and not simply an isolated, peripheral occurrence related to the end of slavery. This gives a different meaning to the presence of the girmitiya diaspora in the various countries where they are found. The paper proposes that Indian indentureship is intimately tied to the opium trade and the East India Company, as impoverished Indians were essentially economic refugees, trafficked to the plantations of Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji, South Africa, and up and down the Caribbean in the aftermath of slavery. This human trafficking was also organized by the rapacious East India Company. Indentureship is also tied to the destruction of the historically central East India Company by its own Sepoys in the 19th century, and also to the beginning of the global decolonisation movement by the Indian nationalist movement in the 20th century.

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Introduction

How important is the history of indentureship to the Caribbean, and to world history? It is treated as a minor, peripheral event, hardly ever mentioned in global history textbooks, and is not even in the histories of the Caribbean. Was it really so marginal?

When one takes a Caribbean-centric view of history – as is the not-surprising case of most West Indian historians – then Indian indentureship is a relatively minor or second-order event. The wiping out of the Amerindian populations and civilization, the establishment of the global sugar industry, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, triangular trade and the economic development of Europe, the many European wars which saw the islands change hands numerous times, the struggle to end slavery, the establishment of the post-emancipation social order, the move to self-government and independence, have been the major points of research for historians. Indian indenture, however, is part of the post-emancipation story, and is of major importance in Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname and numerous other countries. Even so, many historians have paid slight attention to the Indian presence in these countries, concerned as they are with the broader brush of West Indian history.

From a standard Euro-centric view of world history, Indian indentureship is even less acknowledged. Indian indentureship, which in essence was the organised trafficking of roughly two million unfree Indian labourers around the world from 1836 to 1920, is viewed as a minor footnote in world history. To properly understand the importance of Indian indentureship, one has to take a wider view than what the Caribbean and European glasses allow for, and even longer than that of the last 500 years. From this truly global historical perspective, the importance of Indian indenture is far better understood. On doing this, we would see the story of Indian indenture as central to the unfolding of world history itself.

The Centrality of India in World Economic History

The first point of departure is the centrality of India in world economic history. This is quite different from the standard Eurocentric narrative, where Europe, Rome, Egypt and even Mesopotamia and Persia are given the key historical places from ancient times to the present. Global economic history, going back 5,000 years, would show India (and China) at the centre of world economy for the entire period to the 19 century. Angus Maddison's (2013) and Paul Bairoch's (1999) quantitative studies of the world economy from 1AD (illustrated in the following chart) statistically demonstrate India's centrality and dominance in the world economy (along with China's) for almost two

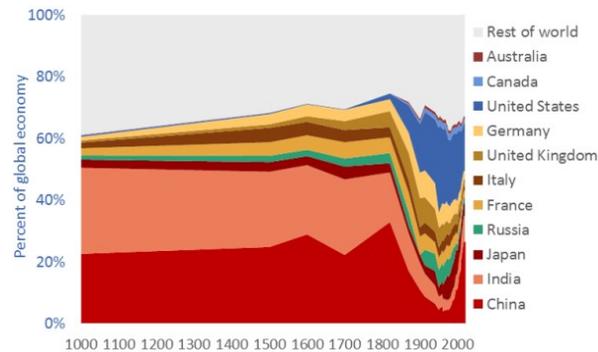
millennia, right up to the 1800s.

There is abundant evidence on this today. India, for example, has been the largest sink of gold for thousands of years, not because it has gold mines (it has none of significance), but because of its world trade. The spice trade is well-known, though under-appreciated. Before 1725, the only place in the world where diamond was found was in the alluvial deposits in Southern India. India was also the main or only source of many other precious stones which they produced and traded internationally. Very important, too, were India's manufactures, from cotton and silk textiles, to steel production, to ink, jute, canvas, yarn, jute, India ink, indigo, woollens, ingots, glassware, mechanical clocks, weapons, particularly blades for swords, and an array of luxury goods.

Indeed, India was the industrial centre of the world before European imperialism and industrialisation. During medieval times, for instance, India produced 25 percent of the world's industrial output up until the mid-18th century, prior to British rule (Clingingsmith & Williamson, 2005; Parthasarathi, 2014). As recently as the early 18th century, India had 22.6 percent share of the world's GDP, which came down to around 16 percent by 1820, closer to its share of world population (Das, 2007).

Confirmation of India's past wealth is still being found in the present day. For example, in 2011 there was a discovery of the fabulous treasure in the Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple at Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala (historically known as Malabar) valued at over US\$15 billion. One vault is still to be opened, but the wealth at that single temple surpasses any religious centre on earth, including the Vatican. Das, in *The Hindu* states:

Among the treasures found was a vast store of gold coins of the Roman Empire, from almost 2,000 years ago; Venetian gold ducats of the 14th and 15th centuries when Venice was a great maritime power; Portuguese currency from its days of glory in the 16th century; 17th century coins of the Dutch East India Company; Napoleon's gold coins from the early 19th century; and much more (Das, 2011).



India's dominance in world trade was common knowledge throughout history, and often complained about. For instance,

Roman senators complained that their women used too many Indian spices and luxuries, which drained the Roman Empire of precious metal. Pliny the Elder, in 77 CE, called India 'the sink of the world's gold!' In the 16th century, Portugal protested that its hard-won silver from South America was being lost to India. The British Parliament echoed this lament in the 17th century and exhorted the East India Company to interest Indians in English goods... Gold thus came to our shores through trade routes, especially to the rich port cities of South India (Das, 2011).

The late Andre Gunder Frank (1993) has convincingly argued that the present global economic system is not just 100 years old, or even 500 years old; it goes back 5,000 years to the international economy developed by the Mohenjo-Dharo/Harrappan Civilisation in India/Bharat, Egypt, Mesopotamia and China. The economies have been connected since then; connected through the Silk Road and other ancient trade routes over sea and land. This continued over the centuries with Rome, the Mediterranean, and Northern and Western Europe, until the whole world was brought into the system after European Imperialism completed the process of (unequal) global integration.

For millennia, most of Europe was outside of this system (or, at best, peripheral to it), because it had nothing to offer India and China during this long period. They were mere purchasers of oriental goods in this international trade. When Spain 'discovered', through Columbus, the vast gold and silver reserves in Mexico, Peru and Bolivia, it could finally enter into trade with India and China more fully. Northern and Western Europe, on the other hand, were even later arrivals to the world economy, participating directly only since the 17th century. When the British first came to India, it was the poorer party.

During this long period India was also the target of regular and persistent efforts to take over ('loot' is the Indian word), its wealth. *India in Cognitive Dissonance* (GGI, 2020) details how for more than 2,000 years, India was under constant attack, as others waged war for the control of India and the access routes connected to it: from Alexander the Great to the many Arab, Turkic and Mongol raiders, followed by the British, French and Portuguese.

The Importance of the Gangetic Plain to India, and as the Source of Indentured labour

The Indian indentureship story in the Caribbean is intimately related to this history, making it far more central to world history than hitherto recognised. The vast majority of indentured Indians came from the Gangetic plain in

India. The Plain for millennia has been at the centre of India’s empires, mythology, economy, culture, philosophy, politics, and military might. It provided the capitals of the Nanda Empire, Maurya Empire, Ashoka’s Empire, and the Gupta Empire. It is the place where the Buddha received his Enlightenment, the land of the Ramayan, and the places of the holiest sites in Hinduism. This area, in particular, was also a global agricultural and industrial centre in the millennia of the world economy before European industrial revolution.

Given this background, for much of human history, many peoples attempted – and sometimes succeeded – in taking over this vast, wealthy and globally important territory of India/Bharat (GGI, 2020). Notably, during Muslim rule of the Gangetic Plain, the productive base was retained, as it was the basis of the wealth which was extracted (cf. Tharoor, 2018).

The real point of economic transformation and degradation came with the arrival in Calcutta of the East India Company (EIC), the English (later, British) eventually taking over administration of the area from the Mughals. There were also the Dutch East India Company, Austrian East India Company, Danish East India Company, French East India Company, Genoese East India Company, Portuguese East India Company and Swedish East India Company, which were all later eclipsed by the British. The EIC, unlike previous rulers, completely destroyed the region’s economic base, eventually reducing India’s share of global GDP from 25-30 percent in the pre-British past, down to 6 percent at the time of Indian independence (Tharoor, 2018; Maddison, 2013).

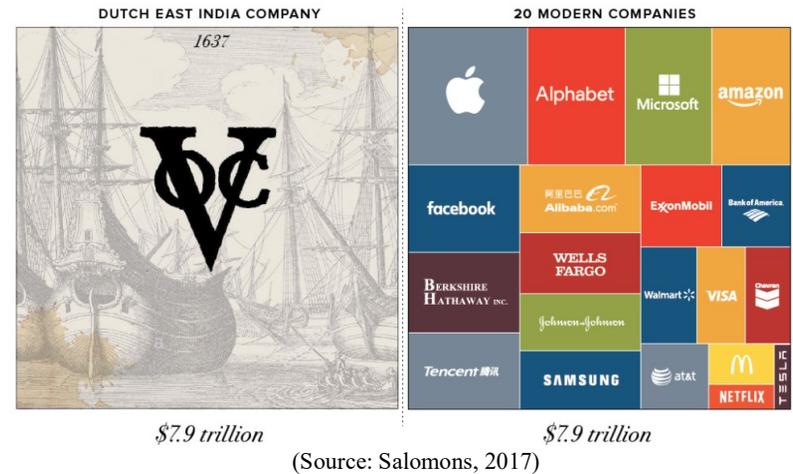
The East India Company and its role in world history

The de-industrialisation and transformation of the Gangetic Plain by the EIC was crucial for indentureship. The EIC destroyed food agriculture in the region for the production of opium. This was hugely profitable for the EIC, which exported it forcibly to China (Dalrymple, 2019). It even fought wars over it, and for which the colony of Hong Kong, along with the Hong Kong-Shanghai Banking Company, which still exists today, was established.

The once wealthy area of India became a land of famines and destitution. Notably, from a Caribbean perspective, it appears that the model of the slave plantation was exported to India for tea and opium production, which entailed the destruction of the local economy in order to produce raw materials for a globally integrated product, financial and distribution chain where the vast profits were kept by international businessmen and financiers. The opium trade became central to the British Empire and the British economy itself, as sugar was in an earlier period (cf. Deming, 2011). It was the EIC, through its ruthless policies, that reversed the historical flow of money from West to East.

The EIC became the largest and most important company in world history. The significance of the fact that the English (later, British) Monarch or Government did not colonise India, has never been sufficiently recognised in history books. The EIC was a private company. It was the most powerful company in the history of the world, richer and more powerful than any corporation today. It bought, owned and corrupted politicians and royalty in Europe and Asia. It funded governments, toppled rulers, and even had its own army and naval force which were larger than that of many countries (Dalrymple, 2019).

To get a historical sense of this power, at its own height, the Dutch East India Company – which was initially more powerful than the English East India Company – was, worth USD7.9t in present day terms, richer than Apple, Facebook, Google and many others combined (Salomons, 2017).



The British East India Company eventually became bigger than its Dutch counterpart. The Boston Tea Party, which began the American Revolution, was a revolt against the EIC. Indeed, the American flag was basically the EIC flag. Many of the largest multinational companies to this day can trace their origins to the East India Company, as their owners were the Rothschilds, Rockefellers, Sassoons, Rhodes, Oppenheims, and others (GGI, 2020).

Impoverished Indians became essentially economic refugees, trafficked to the plantations of Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji, South Africa, and up and down the Caribbean in the aftermath of slavery. This human trafficking

was also organized by the rapacious EIC.¹

One of the most heroic tales in history is the destruction of this enormous Company by the EIC's own army of Indian soldiers in 1857. This is known as the Sepoy Mutiny, the Indian Mutiny, and the First War of Independence. This was a major event in world history. The defeat of the enormous EIC forced the British Government to directly intervene and take control of India, formally establishing the British Empire, with Queen Victoria being the Empress of India.

It took until 1859 for the British Government to take back India from the Sepoys. One of the punishments for the hundreds and thousands of soldiers who took part in the rebellion was to send them to the plantations overseas as indentured workers (Carter & Bates, 2010). Some of our ancestors are part of this epic story.

The End of Indentureship and the Nationalist movement

Indentures' tie to the East India Company isn't the only link to the main current of world history. The end of indentureship was, in fact, a crucial part of history, which 30 years later led to the decolonization movement. Decolonisation was one of the most important movements of the 20 century that changed the course of history.

The place of indentureship in the grand historical movement leading to the end of colonial rule, happened directly through Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who began his political activism in South Africa, where over 150,000 indentured labourers were sent. Gandhi's activism, perhaps single-handedly, put the question of Indian indenture at the forefront of the Indian nationalist movement (Vahed, 2019). It became central to the struggle for pride, dignity and freedom. The official abolition of the indenture system was claimed as one of the first major successes of the Indian nationalist movement.

Conclusion

It can be seen, then, that the story of Indian indenture is a crucial element in the understanding of both imperialism and decolonisation. Far from being a minor event in world history, therefore, indentureship is a crucial part of it. Without understanding the wider contexts in which Indian indentureship occurred and was abolished, we impoverish our understanding of the history of the peoples of Indian origin in the various plantation/Girmit countries. We also misunderstand their possible place in the future of world history.

¹ Recently, Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* trilogy vividly brought to life this intimate connection of Indian indentureship to the opium trade and the EIC.

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