

RESEARCH ARTICLE

**Mahatma Gandhi's Role in the Abolition of Indian Indenture System**

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**Abstract**

Indentured labour system started in British colonies after the abolition of slavery in Europe in the early 19th century. The British plantation owners felt an immediate need of manpower after the emancipation of the black slaves in different colonies. They were in need of cheap and docile workers, who would work in conditions similar to slavery. These plantation owners contacted the imperial government in different parts of the world and brought labours from there particularly from India, China, Africa and South East Asia to work in different plantations like sugarcane, coca and rubber. Approximately two lakh Indians migrated to south Africa as indentured labourers over a period of five decades (1860-1911). These labourers were recruited through an agent who used to deceive the illiterate people through trickery and fanciful tales of luxury. They were promised the land of their dreams in distant country where they hoped to get less tiring work and earn more. It was only after confronting with the reality that these poor creatures find themselves in undesirable circumstances. They were subjected to very cruel and harsh treatment which sometimes led to their death. Though they tried to raise their voice but it was at the individual level and not in an organised manner. It was on April 1893 when Gandhi went to south Africa that a strong and organised agitation started against the cruel and inhuman practices committed against the poor labourers. The present paper will try to depict the miseries of these 'Coolie' workers and the reasons of their migration to overseas territories. It will also try to unveil the role Gandhi played in abolishing this unjust setup. The focus of the study would be on two books of Mahatma Gandhi i.e. My Experiments with Truth(1927) and satyagraha in South Africa(1928).

**Keywords:** Representation, Indentureship, immigration, Slavery, Post-colonial.

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**Indian Immigration to South Africa: A Historical Overview**

The indenture system was an organised and peculiar labour system started in 19th century colonial India. Through this novel phenomenon millions of Indians were recruited to work in different British colonies on a contract which usually used to be of five years. Abolition of slavery in 1833 became the immediate cause for the establishment of this 'evil' system. The plantation owners felt an adequate need of manpower after the abolition of slavery and approached the government of India through imperial powers. Contractors were appointed to recruit more and more people by different deceptive ways on commission basis. The poor folk were promised lot of money and very little work, who being illiterate used to believe every word of the agents. It was only after facing the reality that these labours understood the true nature of their job. Actually, the plantation owners were in search of such labours who would work in conditions similar to slavery and there was no better choice for them than India. Indians were considered as meek and submissive who never rebels against the authority, their "docility and capacity for labouring were welcome" (Cumpston) in the British colonies. The emigration to Natal was sanctioned on 07 April 1860 by the Act XXXIII and the first ship 'The Truro' from Madras arrived at Durban on 16th of November 1860. History provides substantial reasons for the migration of these bonded labours which were also called as girmitiyas. The biggest cause of the emigration was the poverty and unemployment under the British rule. The failure of the harvest frequently due to famine was one of the major causes to sign the bond of indenture ship. Not only men, women also registered themselves to work as bonded labours, the majorities among them were widows and those who were ill-treated by their husbands and in-laws. A large number of people were kidnapped and deported to this continent to work under inhuman conditions.

**Condition of Labourson Plantations**

Initially the indentured labourers were recruited mostly to work on sugar plantations and thereafter they were engaged in every kind of work from domestic servant to industrial worker. The colonial master took advantage of the poverty of these labours and treated them like their property. They were exploited at the plantations by overworking and malnourishment. They were entangled in harsh and cruel rules. Those who used to raise voice against the bitter treatment were crushed to give message to others to remain silent. Many books have been written about the maltreatment of indentured labours both fiction and nonfiction which revisit the historiography of indenture labour and exposed all the ambiguities of this wicked system. This paper will critically analyse the pathetic condition of these unlucky labourers by close textual reading of Mahatma Gandhi's Autobiography and Satyagraha in South Africa. Gandhiji himself witnessed the severe treatment which his fellow countrymen receive in the African continent. He was deeply moved to

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see their pathetic condition. He devoted many chapters of his autobiography describing this unjust treatment. In his autobiography Gandhiji writes that after completing his barrister's degree from England he came back to his motherland where he found himself incompetent for the said profession. On Dada Abdulla's call he went to South Africa to help interpreting a case to the white lawyer from Gujrati language. From the very first day in South Africa Gandhiji observed very minutely how racism was being used to segregate people. Indians were derogatively called as 'Coolies' which means belonging to the lower strata of the society. He himself was labelled as 'coolie barrister'. He presents a vivid description of some pathetic incidents which glimpses on how badly the Indians were treated in African Continent. The horrible condition of Balasundaram, a Tamil indentured labourer which Gandhi mentioned in his autobiography is enough to prove how these poor creatures were subjected to physical violence. The cruel master had beaten him severely and broken two of his teeth, but the principals of non-violence never allowed Gandhi to lead a rebellious movement against this inhumane treatment. Gandhi solved this case by legal procedure and gained lot of fame and support from his people. His depiction of Maritzburg train incident and the futile search for room in hotel for night's stay, also gives faithful representation of discrimination used against the Indians in general and the lower-class labourers in particular. About this situations Romain Rolland records: "He was not familiar with the situation in South Africa but from the very first he met with illuminating experiences..... In Natal and particularly in Dutch Transvaal, he was thrown out of hotels and trams, insulted, beaten and kicked" (Rolland).

**Gandhi's Role from Spokesperson to Political leader of indentured labourers**

In 1893 when Gandhi reached Natal, he observed that Indians were divided into different groups namely Muslims, Hindus, Parsi and clerks etc. Large numbers of people whom he met were Tamil, Telegu and North Indian indentured and free labourers. He was deeply moved by the miserable situation of Indians in South Africa but he did not raised voice against this oppression as he wanted to focus on the assigned case. After winning the case of Dada Abdulla, Gandhi was preparing to go back to his native country when suddenly destiny appointed him to struggle for the ones who were oppressed badly. Gandhiji learned that Indians who have completed their indenture period and have settled there as its citizens were disenfranchised. The rules of indenture contract which allows the ex-indenture labourer the citizenship rights were violated.

Those who completed their contract had started their own small-scale business which the colonizer took as a sign of economic threat. The South African government tried to dispel the ex-indenture labours from Africa or to re-indenture them once they received self-legislation from Britain in 1893. They also imposed a capitulation tax in the year 1895 on non-indentured Indians according to which boys over the age of sixteen and girls older than thirteen have to pay an annual

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tax of \$3. Keeping in view the growing trade of the ex-indentured and free Indians the Natal government curbed the immigration of Indians to Africa. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1897 helped the state to stop the entry of free Indian to Africa for business purposes. According to this law only those who could pass an exam in a European language could be allowed to enter the border and trade there.

In order to start a nationwide movement Gandhi laid the foundation of Natal Indian Congress in 1894. They wanted to fight for their rights constitutionally. They wrote letters to newspapers and long petitions to influential persons and govt. officials seeking redress for their grievances. Gandhi also wanted to get the support from his native country, so he visited India in 1896 and purposefully draw a sombre picture of the situation of Indians in his “Green Pamphlet”. The pamphlet presented the wretched condition of the contracted labour and the human rights violations against them. He also delivered public speeches in Bombay, Poona and Madras for the wide publicity of the issue. After six months propagation Gandhi went back to South Africa and was badly treated in Natal by the White Rulers. About the incident Gandhiji writes, “They pelted me with stones, brickbats and rotten eggs. Someone snatched away my turban, whilst others began to batter and kick me” (p.185). Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya praises Gandhi for highlighting the evils of Indenture system in the nationalist discourse. He writes, “The Indian public was in a state of ignorance about the conditions to which Indians under indenture were subject until the 1890s when Gandhi began to expose its evils” (qtd in Tinker 344).

In order to highlight the unsanitary conditions of the indentured labourers, Gandhi started a newspaper namely Indian Opinion in June 1903. This paper used to publish in four languages namely English, Hindi, Tamil and Gujrati. It played a fundamental role in advocating the rights, needs and issues of Indian community in Africa. Through this, the seeds of satyagraha were sowed into the hearts of the people and the movement of passive resistance became successful. Gandhi writes about the importance of this newspaper in his book Satyagraha in South Africa, he proclaims;

“I believe that a struggle which chiefly relies upon internal strength cannot be wholly carried on without the newspaper- it is also my experience that we could not perhaps have educated the local Indian community, nor kept Indians all over the world in touch with the course of events in South Africa in any other way, with the same ease and success as through the Indian Opinion, which therefore was certainly a most useful and potent weapon in our struggle” (Gandhi 117).

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He was of the view that there should be no racial segregation in South Africa and Indians should not be considered as inferior to anyone. He writes, “If the badge of inferiority is always to be worn by them... any material advantage they will gain by emigrating can therefore be of no consideration” he further writes that, “The system of indenture was one of temporary slavery; it was incapable of being amended and it is to be hoped that India will never consent to its revival in any shape or form” (qtd in Tinker 355).

In 1906 Gandhi started a Satyagraha movement at Transvaal against the Asiatic Ordinance which turned out into Black Act in 1907. According to this law Indians were required to register by offering fingerprints and carry the passes with themselves. They could live and work only at the specified ghettos, without any facility. This law also declares that Asian Immigration into Transvaal would be disallowed. People protested against this cruel Act and took processions with black flags in their hands. Gandhi was arrested and with him hundreds of others, many protesters were deported to India and other colonies as punishment. This infuriated the people in India also and an abolition movement of indentured started throughout the nation. The Natal government wanted to legally subordinate the Indians and to secure their monopoly in the trade. Though the mass movement was suppressed by the state government but it again gained vigour in 1913 by an iconic strike against the non-recognition of Hindu and Muslim marriages and the burden of the \$3 tax. This strike paralyzed the whole economic structure of the Durban and Pietermaritzburg markets. Many of the sugar mills were closed down. Gandhi again was arrested with thousands of others which gave rise to violent protests. The effect of the strike was such that Britain government put pressure on the South African state to make a compromise with Gandhi. The result was the Gandhi-Smuts settlement of 1914, which scrapped the tax and recognized the Hindu and Muslim marriages. The protests against the indenture system started from South Africa and gained support from all the continents where this system prevailed.

**Conclusion**

The indentured labours system which prevailed over a period of five decades (1860-1911) resulted in the migration of more the two-lakh people to the African continent. This immigration was stopped between 1866-1874 because of the mistreatment and withholding of the wages to the labours. The white plantation owners in order to get the cheap manpower from India promised land grants to the labours on the expiry of their indenture ship. But, later on assessing the economic threat from the ex-indentured labourer’s small-scale business, the grant of land was dismissed and these labourers were compelled to go back to their homeland or re-indenture themselves once more. During these crucial decades the migrants constantly opposed the abuses of this cruel labour system. What they lacked was unity and true leader who could have directed their

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struggle to its destination. This void was filled by Mahatma Gandhi, who incessantly battled with the African authorities for their rights. He not only fought for the indentured labourers in Africa but also advocated for the ending of this unjust labours system. It was because of the endless struggle of the bonded labourers under the leadership of Gandhi that this system was eventually abolished in 1917.

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