

Short Summary

Tamil Indenture Labour : Witnesses at Madras Port

(The following text is an extract of my unpublished Ph.D work)

Secondary Literature shows that between 1840-1940, the number of people who crossed the Bay of Bengal alone was 28 million, and most of them after the 1880s went to work in the plantations”¹. The shipping company registers and port registers have shown that they were mostly working-age males and a number of excluded people who paid for their trips. 19th and early 20th century indenture labourers were transported through Chennai port through a recruitment process. Tamils were taken as indentured labourers in British plantations (tea, coffee, rubber estates and rice farming) and later for laying rail tracks to countries like Malaya (1844), Ceylon (1839) Mauritius (1834), Trinidad (1844), Jamaica (1845), Grenada (1856), Saint Lucia (1858), Vincent Island (1861), and Natal in South Africa (1860). The practice of Indenture labour presented ‘a new system of slavery’ (Hugh Tinker: 1974) and was in practice in different parts of the British colonised areas until the end of the 19th century in spite of a ban on slavery by 1807 and 1833 Acts by British Parliament².

In addition *Kanganis* system was followed by the imperial Government. The *Kangani*, a *tamil* word literally means overseer. An overseer usually from a dominant caste group or from the same caste group and from the same geographical location monitored the group of labourers. He would hire, monitor their movement and ensure that workers are bound by the contract in British colonies. The Colonial State controls the entire process by determining the volume (number of people allowed to travel), composition (male or female, type of community) and destination (depending on the need to different geographical regions of British empire). Indentured labourers were bound by a 5-year

¹ <https://www.dtnext.in/Lifestyle/Culture/2016/07/30204117/Untold-theses-of-Tamils-role-in-South-East-Asia.vpf> accessed on 25th May 2019.

² <https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/education/slavery.pdf> accessed on 19th May 2019.

contract; coming back home hardly materialised, as some of them were in the far-away countries. The *Kangani* system, the imperial State was not a party to the contract and it facilitated the process. It is reported that in the '*Kangani*' system, a person from the same caste in the Tamil Nadu villages recruited the labour and supervised the work in the plantations sector. Tamils who emigrated mostly belonged to the lower caste (*Guilmoto, C. 1993:116*).

Rationale for the Study: There is absolutely no photographic / visual literature which captures the recruitment procedure, condition of indenture labour, pamphlets issued during those period and articles written about the indenture labour. The current study using archival sources tries to bring out these historical facts for the reader.

Primary Sources: The Madras Record Office, currently called as Tamil Nadu Archives, The Digital Archives of Tamil Nadu (DigiArchives), Roja Muthiah Library. Published materials from Connimora Library, Anna Centenary Library and Archival sources from Chennai Metropolitan Regulatory Authority are consulted. Images captured from Handouts, Small magazines published in Tamil, Photographs and documents related to Madras Port are part of the data collection.

Secondary Sources: Books, Articles on indenture labour and materials from Internet, Ph.D thesis.

Time period: March 2023 to June 2023.

References

1. Guilmoto, C. (1993). The Tamil Migration Cycle, 1830-1950. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(3/4), 111-120. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4399307>
2. Hugh Tinker (1974): A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920. London: Oxford University Press.