

Bound for the Colonies in 1905

Presently it seems to dawn on one vivacious dame that she is leaving home and country, for with alarming suddenness she gives vent to violent lament, and weeping, in which she is ably seconded by other ladies.

Anonymous observer

In 1905, there were around twenty thousand Indians in Fiji, all descendants of indentured immigrants introduced into the colony since 1879. By the time indentured emigration ceased in 1916, over sixty thousand had arrived to work on the colonial sugarcane plantations. They were a part of more than one million men, women and children who had left the Indo-Gangetic plains of Northern India and crossed the *kala pani*, dark waters, for colonies in the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Indian indenture has been the subject of many studies.¹ Archival sources are rich,² but contemporary account of the system by non-officials are rare. For Fiji, Totaram Sanadhya and J.W. Burton provide tantalising insights into the social and cultural life of the Indian immigrants at the turn of the century,

while Walter Gill, who worked as an overseer in the last days of indenture, describes the brutality of the system for all who were associated with it.³ Other Indian labour receiving colonies are not as well served.

The following article entitled 'The Coolie Emigrant', published anonymously in Edinburgh in Chambers' *Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, Sixth series, Vol. 8, pp. 225-27 under the date 11 March 1905, provides a first-hand account of the recruitment and embarkation of indentured labourers. The account is obviously written by someone resident or travelling in India at the time and with some acquaintance with the system. The broad pattern described in the article will be familiar to the students of the subject, but it is the human detail, the close observation of recruitment and embarkation—'the violent lament and weeping' of women, 'the new comer's inquiries and anxieties', 'the double line of empty plates quickly piled with the savoury mess'—that add texture and colour to a story otherwise well known. It is a period piece in its style and allusions, but it is a rare account and for that reason worth preserving.

The scorching heat of an Indian sun blazes down on Adjudhia's crowded streets, driving the motley throngs to the scant shelter of bazaar or *dharmasala* (travellers' rest).

These are the days of the great bathing-festivals, and the streams of 'damp devout', having washed away the sins of the past year, and satisfied *pro tem*. the pecuniary demands of the priest, leave the ancient temples huddled together in grey piles on the banks of the sacred Gogra stream for the booths and *tamashas* (native shows), the never-failing concomitants of religious display in India. This is the coolie-recruiters' harvest-time. Will not the generous *Sirkar* (Government) pay him in silver rupees for every son of the soil won by his persuasive tongue for service in the far off countries? Well Ramjani knows his 'happy hunting-grounds'. He seldom attempts his arguments in the remoter jungle villages; he values his skin too highly for that, for new ideas do not find favour in these communities. Their depth of ignorance has a corresponding depth of suspicious fear, with an unshaken faith in the efficacy of a stout bamboo for leaders of new movements. Yet Ramjani knows well that it is just these men that, once secured, are the best working article. He patiently waits his opportunity to 'speak him fair' when the great event of his yearly visit to sacred city and holy shrine has removed him from the everyday influences of his life, and rendered his mind more expansive. The 'yokel' has much the same characteristics whether his skin be white or black, his native hamlet embosomed on the green slopes of some remote Yorkshire dale or buried in the tangles of an Indian jungle. It needs very little penetration to spot him, and practice has made it a very easy job to our friend the recruiter. Curiosity aroused and suspicion lulled, courage awakes, and Psulldham is seized with the spirit of enterprise (and cupidity). He and Sukee-Thesa (his almond-eyed wife) are tired of

the old mother's scoldings. Why should not they and the *batcha* (baby) go and become rich like old Ghosé the fat village *bania* (money lender)? So he listens to Ramjani's reasonings. The great *raj* has lands across the sea; not the cold, damp country that the sahib calls 'Home', but rich and beautiful lands, with the warm sun of Hindustan, where the soil is so fertile that the plantations yield abundantly to the toil of the labourer, whose earnings are trebled. 'Five days' work out of the seven, at seven hours a day, and a shilling a day, will soon make a man rich⁴

Presently Psuldham finds himself standing before the great collector *sahib*, who reads to him in his own village tongue the words which bind him to work five years for the *Sirkar*, who in return will be a father to him, giving him house-room in health, medicine in sickness, and warm clothes for the long journey over the dark water. He is duly enlisted, and now becomes a Government article, to be forwarded with all due care and despatch.

In company with other parties of coolies, under charge of 'forwarding agents', he starts for Calcutta. 'Dry food' (the native term for anything eatable that does not come under the category of rice-curry or *chapatti*), that may be eaten by any caste, is supplied by the government to the emigrants, who, after weary days and nights in the train, arrive dazed and travel-worn in Calcutta, which must, indeed, be to them a land of wonders, the 'City of Palaces'. Many have never seen a ship and are now confronted with the varied and crowded shipping of the Hooghly. Dingies carry the new-comers down the river to their first resting-place, the depot of Garden Reach.

A dip from the bathing-steps, followed by a good meal and a night's rest, has made new men of the travellers, and they are able to take stock of their surroundings whilst confabulating with the hundreds of other coolies who are waiting till the numbers are complete for the big steamer lying at the end of the jetty.

A two-storied house with wide, shady verandas contains the offices and residence of the English Government emigration agent. The building, which dates from the days of the old merchant princes, stands back from the river, and is approached by a fine old avenue of the crimson *goldmohur*-tree, with glimpses of a wide green lawn dotted with flowerbeds, in which, during the three comparatively cool months of the Calcutta winter, English flowers run riot. A path from the main avenue leads to the depot where the coolies are lodged, sometimes to the number of a thousand at a time, in neat wooden huts: a big family, for whose health and discipline the English manager is responsible to the Government. So six o'clock every morning sees him moving round the grounds, with an eagle eye for work possibly scamped and an ever-ready ear for the new-comer's inquiries and anxieties. A 'history-sheet' is drawn up for each emigrant, and on the same are entered marks of identification, with names of the next-of-kin, to whom, in the event of an emigrant's death, his earnings and possessions are forwarded.⁵ A little hospital, with an eye-ward and a hospital assistant, provides for cases of sickness or ophthalmia, which are reported to the health-officer at his next visit. The coolies keep their own grounds in order and help in the weeding and watering of the

gardens till eight o'clock brings the breakfast-bell, and the hungry workers sit in orderly rows to enjoy the big helps of curry and rice which are rapidly ladled out by the Brahman cooks from enormous *chatties* mounted on wheels, so that the double lines of empty plates are quickly piled with the savoury mess. A similar meal is served at 5pm, and the emigrants make merry with weird music till 'order' is called, and the *chowkidar* (watchman) keeps watch till dawn.

The week before the boat sails is a busy one. The contractor provisions the vessel with the rice and curry stuffs for the eight hundred odd souls during a voyage of nearly three months. Flour, too, must be provided for the *chapatties* (unleavened cakes), which are the staple food of many of the emigrants. Below decks the 'passengers accommodation' is divided into three sections: married quarters, bachelors, spinsters; a sort of raised platform on either side of the saloons filling the double role of beds and tables.

On the day of departure each emigrant begins operations with an early dip in the river, after which the coolies are presented with a new suite of cotton clothing and head-gear differing in hue according to the districts from which they are recruited—a somewhat important matter for employers of labour, for some men can command a better wage than others, the planters being anxious to secure the hardier and more powerfully built Central Province man. Each coolie has his number embossed on a tin circle suspended round the neck; and the 'ornament' gives unbounded satisfaction to the owner. Some of the grubbier members are presented with a piece of sunlight soap, which oftener than not is tasted before the individual realises that this article is for 'outward application' only. The morning meal finished, the men and women stand in orderly rows near the jetty, waiting for the health-officer's inspection: an anxious time for the Government agent, for a case of fever may be detained till the doctor is satisfied that there is no fear of the dread plague developing; and a delay of this sort, when all the preparation (victualling, &c.) are completed may mean a serious loss to the Government and their contractors.

If all are passed the embarkation commences, the emigrants being sent on board in parties of six at a time. *Place aux dames*: first the spinsters, then the married people with their children, and last the gay bachelors. At the end of the gangway two British tars are stationed, one helping the women and children, whilst the other presents each emigrant with a bright-coloured blanket. New clothes, blankets, &c. put the whole family in excellent good humour; and the scene, as we watch it from the upper deck, where the handsome old Scotch captain dispenses a farewell tea to his friends, is quite a gay one. The coolies, pleased and amused with their novel experience, are decked out in their brightest corals, beads and ornaments; and the women, one arm holding a baby on the hip and the other a small fan or some particular household treasure, make delightfully picturesque groups. Presently it seems to dawn on one vivacious dame that she is leaving home and country, for with alarming suddenness she gives vent to violent laments and weeping, in which she is ably seconded by other excited ladies. The captain takes it very calmly, and assures us that they, like women all the world over, will be relieved by a good

'weep', and that a few hours will see them quite resigned and eager for the privilege which the 'captain *sahib*' affords to little parties of women and children to sun themselves peacefully on his deck.

The last scene is the inspection of the lascars (the native crew), and then the bell goes, and we scramble hastily across the gangway, wishing a good voyage and a happy fortune to the outward-bound emigrants.

This has been a field-day to the emigration agent and his officials, who, the secretary tells me, have been hard at work since 6am, with a hastily snatched interval for lunch, and even now, although the red sun is sinking in the Hooghly, they have yet an hour or more of office-work. The secretary, however, is free to dispense hospitality, and gives us many interesting particulars as to the emigration scheme. The post of doctor on board one of these vessels is eagerly sought for; for, besides liberal pay, the doctor receives a capitation fee for each coolie safely landed, and if he is lucky enough to get a return ship, makes quite a neat little sum.

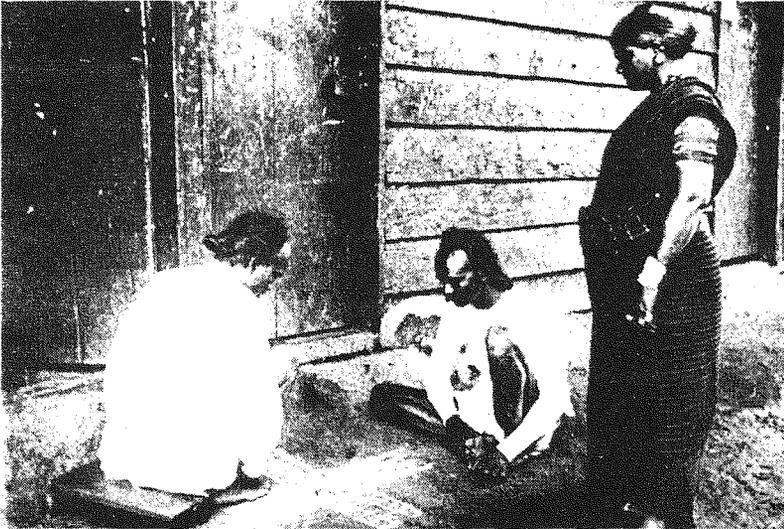
A very fair percentage of the coolies settle down when their five years' contract is concluded, and start little shops on the estates, or even cultivate their own plot of land. A very creditable proportion, too, of their earning is sent home to India to the 'old folk'. In spite of his many faults and failings, the native of India very seldom forgets his family obligation. I remember having this fact very forcibly brought home to me in Calcutta. One Saturday evening, while walking through Bhawanipur, one of the poorest native suburbs, I saw the little post-office fairly besieged by double lines of natives with money-orders in their hands, waiting to send a part of the week's earnings to old homes. Here a ragged coolie and a sleek *baboo*; farther down the line a very youthful clerk was helping a fine-looking old grandfather, who had evidently forgotten his spectacles, to write out his form.

India's affairs and administration are much criticised by those who know least about them; but the implicit trust with which these thousands of emigrants consign themselves to the white man's care gives ample proof that this department is worked with unremitting zeal and an intelligent understanding of the wants of this working-man section of India's toiling millions.

The average trip for sailing ships to Fiji was seventy three days and for steamships thirty. Most of the eighty seven voyages were uneventful, registering a mortality rate of about one per cent. Death occurred mostly from measles, whooping cough and other minor illnesses. But there were exceptions as the next two chapters relate.

Endnotes

1. Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery* (London 1974) is the standard work, though its argument and approach has been severely modified by many recent works. For just two examples, see Clem Seecharan, *Tiger in the Sky: The Anatomy of Indian Achievement in British Guiana, 1919-1929* (London, 1997), and Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983).
2. For a collection of documents on the indenture experience in Fiji, see Brij V. Lal (ed), *Crossing the Kala Pani: A documentary history of Indian indenture in Fiji* (Suva, 1998).
3. J.W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London, 1910), Totaram Sanadhya, *Fiji Dwip Men Mere Ikkis Varsh* (My Twenty One Years in the Fiji Islands)(Kanpur 1919), and Walter Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Adelaide 1970).
4. In fact, it was five and a half days of work, Sundays being free.
5. The history sheet referred to is the 'Emigration Pass'.



Two girmitiyas and a woman outside the line playing a game, probably on a Sunday, the only free day they had during girmit.