

Colonialism, Resource Crisis and Forced Migration

Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty *

“There is no despotism more absolute than the government of India. Mighty, irresponsible, cruel...Money which England takes out of India every year is a serious drain upon the country, and is among the causes of its poverty.”

—John Russell Young, *Around the World with General Grant*¹

“The vision of a tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream...”

—Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*²

The establishment of *de facto* political control by the English East India Company in Bengal after the battle of Plassey in 1757 inaugurated a period of gradual conquest of the subcontinent leading ultimately to the establishment of direct imperial control after the great Revolt of 1857. When Lord Clive entered Murshidabad, the old capital of Bengal in 1757, he wrote of it, ‘This city is as extensive, populous and rich as the city of London, with this difference— that there are individuals in the first possessing infinitely greater prosperity than in the last city.’ The ‘Plassey plunder’ set in motion a process which witnessed a ‘drain’ of resources/ wealth from India. The policies which the metropolitan government would be adopting comes out clearly from the following description: ‘The arrival in the port of London of Indian produce in Indian-built ships created a sensation among the monopolists which could not have been exceeded if a hostile fleet had appeared in the Thames. The ship-builders of the port of London took a lead in raising the cry of alarm; they declared that their business was on the point of ruins, and their families in England were certain to be reduced to starvation’.³ Instead Indians were to be reduced to penury and starvation.

The acquisition of *de jure* power by the Company in the form of the grant of Diwani in 1765 by the Mughal emperor marked the beginning of over-exploitation of the revenue earnings by the state. Experimentation with the revenue policy they inherited generally resulted in higher demand and ruthless collection of land-revenue, without always regard to the capacity of land to pay. The revenue settlements subjugated the peasantry to the local despotism of the moneylenders and the *nouveau-riche* landowners. One result was the famine of 1770 in Bengal, described by the English civilian and historian, W.W. Hunter, in following terms:

The husbandmen sold their cattle; they sold their implements of agriculture; they devoured their seed grain; they sold their sons and daughters till at length no buyer of children could be found; they ate the leaves of trees and the grass of the field; and in June, 1770, the Resident of the Durbar affirmed that the living were feeding off the dead. Day and night a torrent of famished and disease-stricken wretches poured into the great cities...early that year pestilence had broken out ...⁴

* Senior Member of Calcutta Research Group

Famines are also products of natural causes, but the point is that there was no let up in the Company's revenue collection. If there was a five per cent remission in 1770, a ten per cent was added in 1771. George Campbell, Lt. Governor of Bengal, worked on famines in British India. He recorded that the drought in 1769 and the famine of 1770 was accompanied by much suffering and great loss of life. At the same time, he noted, 'The British authorities were early alive to the evil, and *much sympathised with it, but always with an overruling consideration for the revenue.*'⁵ (emphasis added)

This decay and devastation can be set against the splendour of the city of Calcutta, which was witnessing great construction activities. These construction and other labour-intensive activities created a sharp demand for labour in Calcutta. Such a demand for various types of labour provided a strong pull for migration to the city and it was here that one witnessed social dislocation early in the colonial period. The famine pushed up the price of rice to a hitherto unknown peak. The marginal wage increase could not be attractive to the labourers to migrate to the city. Workers, therefore, had to be forcefully recruited and sent to the city. The resentment that the people felt is seen in a contemporary Bengali verse of Dwija Radhamohan:

The tillers left behind their ploughs
In the field
They left their ploughs and fled
To escape the recruitment of bonded labour.⁶

This is an early example of forced migration initiated by the colonial rulers.

Land revenue experimentations, the basic aim of which was the maximisation of revenues, resulted in burden on the peasants in general. The new structures of tenures forced the small peasants/ agricultural labourers to migrate. To this may be added the process of de-industrialisation, commercialisation of agriculture and the introduction of plantation economy— all of which resulted in enhancing the experience of misery of the smallest peasants in particular. More than hundred years later Hunter commented that the number of agricultural labourers nearly doubled between 1891 and 1901 (according to census reports). Even in normal times the ordinary agricultural labourers in some tracts earned a poor and precarious livelihood. They were employed on the land only during the busy seasons of the year and in slack times a few were attracted to large trade centres for temporary work. As trade and industries developed, this attraction to towns would increase. At the same time, it was noticed that the peasant in India worked on borrowed capital and that in certain parts of the country the indebtedness of the peasant was economically excessive. 'This feature of the agricultural situation was the product of the last half century' (i.e. the middle decades of the nineteenth century)⁷. Commercialisation of agricultural and de-industrialisation added to the woes of the rural populace at large.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the situation thus was probably worse than at the end of the eighteenth. William Digby wrote an open letter to Lord George Hamilton, Secretary of State for India. He reproduced the letter in his book in which he quoted Hamilton's speech made in August 1900 when he was presenting the financial statement on India in Parliament. Hamilton said that there was a school in India as well as in England which believed that British rule had 'bled India'. He claimed to have searched for, but not found, any fact or figure to support this. The hypocrisy of the statement was exposed by Digby by reference to an earlier statement of Hamilton made in 1875 where he urged that 'as India must be bled, the bleeding should be done judiciously'. Digby wrote the letter 'of my own poor volition, possessing no power or influence...moved wholly by feelings of our common humanity on behalf of a silent, helpless, too-patient, always long-suffering people'. He also challenged Lord Hamilton to 'disproof' the wealth of data about the true impact of British rule that he cited in the book. His conclusion was that India in 1901 was worse off than in 1801.⁸

Famines

A second major and recurrent phenomenon that caused resources to be scarce was famine. While famines were certainly not unknown in the earlier periods, 'we know that they have become frequent since the British came to India'.⁹ The great famines are 'the missing pages—the absent defining moments—if you prefer—in virtually every overview of the Victorian era. Yet there are compelling, even urgent, reasons for revisiting this secret history'.¹⁰

The Famine Commission of 1880 and 1898 noted the recuperative power of the country; It is, we believe, demonstrable that the effects produced by the famine of 1867-8 on the general prosperity of the country have been less disastrous than those of former calamities...The famine of 1770 resulted in widespread desolation of the most affected districts, so that we read of depopulation and ruin, the thinness of inhabitants, many hundreds of villages entirely depopulated... and a complete disorganisation among the landed classes which lasted for many years. The famine of 1803 struck such a blow at the prosperity of Khandesh and Ahmednagar that even in 1867 traces of its ravages were still visible in the ruins of deserted villages which had been repopulated. In the famine of 1833 so much land went out of cultivation in the Guntur district that even in 1850 the land revenue was only three-fourth of what it had been in 1832. In 1837, in the north western provinces the pressure was so great that the ordinary bonds of society seemed to be broken by it. In 1841 the still deserted lands and abandoned houses in the Etawah district bore evidence to the devastation and waste of life.¹¹

One class which necessarily suffered the most had been the agricultural labourers. Even in the late nineteenth century it was noted by the officials that wages were low and agricultural progress had done little to improve their position. Emigration, it was noted, would temporarily postpone the pressure on soil. There were grain riots in Kurnool, Cuddapah and Bellary in 1876. Popular outbursts against impossibly high grain prices were likewise occurring in the Deccan districts, especially in Ahmednagar and Sholapur. Having tried to survive on roots, while waiting for the rains, multitudes of peasants and labourers were now on the move, fleeing a slowly dying countryside.¹² The Famine Commissioners of 1880 concluded that the remedy for the present ills was the introduction of diversity of occupations through which the surplus population could be absorbed. What the Commission did not mention was the fact that road blocks were hastily established to stem the stick-thin country people from Bombay and Pune, while in Madras the police forcibly evicted about 25,000 famine refugees. Plainly, the movement of large numbers of people was occasioned by the famines in which the role of the free-market policies of the colonial government was quite clear. Some of the major famines in the nineteenth century were:

- 1837 and 1861— affecting North Western Provinces and 13 million people
- 1866-67— Orissa famine and a turning point in the history of Indian famines in the sense that relief was addressed seriously after this. 25 per cent of population died.
- 1873— North Bihar
- 1876-8— Hyderabad, Madras, Mysore, Bombay, Deccan; later it spread to North Western Provinces, Awadh and the Punjab
- 1896-7— North Western Provinces, Bihar, Awadh, Madras, Bombay.
- 1899-1900— Bombay, Madras.

Stated roughly, famines and scarcities have been four times as numerous during the last three decades of the nineteenth century as they were hundred years earlier and four times as widespread.

A commission was appointed under Baird Smith after the famine of 1837. A committee of Enquiry was set up after the severe Orissa famine of 1867. Another Commission under Richard Strachey in 1880 led to the adoption of the Provincial Famine Code of 1883. Yet another Commission was instituted in 1900 under Sir Anthony MacDonnell. MacDonnell noted that people died like flies. The reports of these enquiries reveal the utter miseries the people suffered from in the affected areas. The causes of the famines were attributed to natural phenomena like drought, but it was noted that people suffered more because of excessive land-revenue demands and export of food grains. This export rose from £858,000 in 1849 to £9.3 million by 1901. The death-toll of the famines were as follows:

1800-25— 1 million

1825-50— 400,000

1850-75— 5million

1876-1900— 15 million.

Some estimates would put the death in the last quarter to between 11.2 and 29.3 millions. William Digby, a radical journalist, puts the death toll of the famine of 1876-9 at 10.3 millions and that of the famine of 1896-1902 at 19 millions.¹³ It may be interesting to note that the approximate number of deaths owing to war between 1793 and 1900 was 5 million (an estimate supported by *Friend of India*, May 16, 1901). The total ascertained and estimated cost of the Madras famine was £82,736,500. ‘When the part played by the British empire in the nineteenth century is regarded by the historian fifty years hence... the most striking... of all incidents for comment will be the steady sinking of India and its population into a state of chronic famine-strickenness’¹⁴. It was reflected in the figures of the census. In 1891, the population was 287,223,431. It was projected to become 330,300,945 in 1901, but actually was 294,000,000 thus indicating a loss of more than three million.¹⁵

The improvement in communications, it would appear, did not allow relief to be more effective. One impact of the recurrent and devastating famines was migration to areas of relative surplus or to the urban centres. Indeed, there is contemporary European observation to indicate that there had been a continuous famine for 15 years owing to high prices. Inadequacy of the measures adopted by the government to provide relief meant people had to resort to their own escape routes. This is how the impact of impoverishment was linked to the process of migrations. Indeed, the newly constructed rail-roads, deemed as an institutional safeguard against famines, were, instead, used by merchants to ship grain inventories from outlying drought-stricken districts to central depots for hoarding (as well as protection from rioters).¹⁶ The detailed history of such migration needs to be recorded. Indeed, in order to explain tenets of out-migration, correlations between years of famine and volume of labour exported have frequently been cited.¹⁷

A recent work on the famine of 1896/7 in Bengal has discussed the incidence of movements of people away from the areas of famine¹⁸. Migration relieved pressure in certain areas by preventing a further fall in wage rates. For example, the author, Malabika Chakraborty, notices large-scale migration in Khulna (now in Bangladesh) to the districts to the south-west and the newly reclaimed areas in the Sunderbans. In these areas sufficient number of labourers could not be found for such works as embankments. Almost all the professional labourers in the affected tracts of Nadia had migrated by January, 1797, to Calcutta, Burdwan, to Malda-Dinajpur and the Sunderbans in search for work. From Jessore (now in Bangladesh), a large number of men migrated to cut paddy in the Sunderbans, and also to serve as coolies and hawkers in Calcutta. The exodus from Midnapur to new settlements in the Sunderbans was abnormally large in that particular year (1896-7). Parts of Bankura experienced large number of Santhals migrating freely to other districts to work on railways

and agriculture. In other parts of Bankura, the Bauri population refused to move and added to the local beggar class.

In Saran, Muzaffarpur, Shahbad and Champaran it was feared that a large proportion of adult male population migrated to lower Bengal and elsewhere earlier than usual. Their families, particularly the weak and infirm, were left without support and were to be dependent only on government relief. This migration left a large number of men and women on relief. The remittance did increase, but it was too small to meet the needs of the families.

The influx from the North-West Provinces into Patna Division was great. Owing to the pressure of population, the Santhals in the Santhal Paraganas were more ready to emigrate in 1896 than in the earlier years. The annual Kol migration from Lohardanga to Burdwan, Hooghly and the 24 Paraganas in Bengal increased greatly during the scarcity of 1896-7. There was also a large volume of migration from Orissa to Calcutta and elsewhere.

The migration of labourers in a way relieved the pressure of population in the affected areas and prevented a further fall in the wages in those areas. But where the proportion of adult male labourers declined sharply their dependants were left without support while people from other districts crowded the local relief works.

Writing on the causes of famines, Rev. J.T. Sutherland argued that the failure of rain or overpopulation was not the cause. 'The real cause [of the famines] is the extreme, abject, the awful poverty of the Indian people.' India is a land rich in resources and her people should have lived in plenty. But, he argued, the cause of its misery was not difficult to find. 'John Stuart Mill saw the answer plainly in his days. John Bright saw in his. The real friends of India in England see it now. The intelligent classes in India see it. It is found in the simple fact that India is a subject land, ruled by a foreign power, which keeps her tributary to itself, not only politically, but economically, financially and industrially and drains away her wealth in a steady stream that is all the while enriching the English people'. The British government, in his opinion, was also the most expensive government with big salaries and big pensions for the bureaucracy.

He concluded, 'America stands appalled at the magnitude and tyranny of her Standard Oil Company. But the standard Oil monopoly is a pigmy compared with England's monopoly in India...It is the stronger nation sucking that of the weaker. It is "Imperialism".'¹⁹

The obscene extravagance of the Indian government under Lord Lytton (called the Indian 'Nero' by an Indian historian recently) at a time when hundreds of thousands were dying had, in fact, been noted by contemporary English observers as well. Sir W.W. Hunter noted in 1880 that there were about forty million people in India who 'go through life on insufficient food'. While the vital kharif crop was withering in the parched fields of southern India, Lytton was absorbed in organising the absurdly expensive Imperial Durbar at Delhi. Digby estimated that 100,000 of the Queen's subjects starved to death in Madras and Mysore in the course of Lytton's spectacular Durbar. Digby further states:

When the part played by the British Empire in the 19th century is regarded by the historians fifty years hence, the unnecessary death of millions of Indians would be its principal and most notorious monument.²⁰

The famines were, in a way, the product of the world capitalist system. Karl Polanyi believed that the actual source of the famines was the free marketing of grain combined with local failures of income.²¹

Millions died not outside the 'modern world system', but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures. 'They died in the golden age of

liberal capitalism; indeed many were murdered...by the theological application of the sacred principles of Smith, Bentham and Mill.²²

Forest, Environment

Rapid changes in social relations were accompanied by equally sweeping ecological transformations. The impact of colonialism on ecology engendered a great debate which, in dealing with the history of forests in particular, generally focussed on the period after 1858 as the heyday of British colonialism. From the records of the forest department, these historians tried to reconstruct the history of the forests, the techniques of forest use as they gradually evolved, and the changing pattern of plants etc. With customary use representing a threat to commercialisation of the forests, the state, the records show, was obliged to study and monitor some aspects of agrarian life. Until 1870, as A. Murali says, all forests (twenty per cent of India's land area) had been communally managed; by the end of the decade, they were completely enclosed by the armed agents of the state. British rule, it has been suggested, introduced rapid, widespread and in some respects, irreversible changes which had both ecological and social dimensions. Some historians paid particular attention to the transformation of the existing patterns of resource use and how it might have produced alterations in natural environment. A strong critique of colonial environment policies would show how the British policies were 'socially unjust, ecologically insensitive, and legally without a basis in past practice.' Colonialism, it was argued, constituted an 'ecological watershed' in the history of India.²³ This argument has been contested on the ground that the British were not necessarily breaking new grounds in allowing the state to exploit forest resources. State intervention and environmental destruction has an early history even during the pre-colonial period and British forest officials were not 'as vulgarly commercial' as some historians suggest.²⁴ But, as David Arnold puts it, 'it is all too easy to exaggerate the degree of autonomy scientists enjoyed or to attribute to them present day values and thereby ignore the almost overwhelming power of imperial ethos.'²⁵

A reasonably secure relationship was established from ancient times between arable land which produced the crops and the pasture and woodland which provided so much of the input for food production. British rule, through an interventionist policy, undermined this relationship. Earlier there was a balance between state and subject with regard to access to the fruits of nature, but the British introduced 'new technologies of social control and resource extraction' that altered this balance. Now the peasantry and the forest tribes faced shortages of forest resources. The discomfort was acute, as is evident from the numerous popular struggles against forest management. Contemporary government observations note the radical break that colonial rule made. 'The forests are and always have been subject to commercial and tribal rights which have existed from time immemorial and which are as difficult to define as they are necessary to the rural population.'²⁶

The basis on which Indian forest laws proceeded was that all uncultivated tracts in which private rights had not been acquired, either by the individual or by a local community, were the property of the state. The first Forest Act of 1865 was followed by the Act VII of 1878. The first step in applying law was to discriminate between forest land which is absolutely the property of the government, forests which were state property but burdened with private rights and forests which were the property of private individuals or communities but over which it was expedient to exercise a measure of control.

The Report of the Forest Department in 1874 noted the breaches in forest rules. In 1873-74, only eight cases were detected in which ten persons were involved. These cases were brought

before the Magistrates, but only in two cases were convictions obtained. Two further cases were pending.²⁷

Another report noted the 'devastation and waste going on without restriction from firing, cutting, jooming and other causes in the sal and pine forests of Assam, and in the sal and lower mixed forests of Chhoto Nagpur...and the manner in which the Chittagong forests are being denuded by unlimited cutting and jooming, show the necessity which exists for a careful consideration of some practicable schemes for their protection'. What was asked for was an increase in the personnel in the forest establishment so that adequate preventive measures could be undertaken. It would also enable the local officials to exercise better control over the forest resources.²⁸

It thus became necessary to define the limits of the areas to be controlled, and to prepare a settlement record to prevent future encroachment, 'illegal' rights or the growth of new rights. The result was the classification of forests into Reserved, Protected and Unclassed. However, in the areas where the Act of 1878 was introduced, there were only two categories of forests— Reserved and Protected. The major, perhaps the only, consideration was the collection of revenue and forests were to be used for the sake of economic exploitation. The result, however, was that people lost grazing grounds, dead wood for fuel, gathering of roots and other privileges they traditionally enjoyed. These forest laws created considerable dissatisfaction among the forest tribes in the hills that bound the Godavari Valley. This led to the Rompa rebellion which had to be suppressed by the dispatch of military force from Madras.

Statistics setting forth the results of the application of forest law and regulations are interesting. In 1900 forest cases decided by magistrates numbered 11,270 of which nearly 87 per cent resulted in convictions. These are mostly petty depredations. The forest officers decided most of the other cases which were not brought to the court at all. In 1900, 32,803 cases were so dealt with. These included illegal felling of trees or illicit grazing etc.

On the other hand, the state was now exploiting the commercial possibilities of the forests. In 1901, a total 232 million cubic feet of timber was collected by the government. Big players in the business, like the Bombay-Burma Trading Company of Burma had to sign a contract and pay royalty; small purchasers acted under a licence. Gross revenue in 1901 amounted to Rs1,97,70,000; value of grants to rights-holders and others was estimated at Rs33,70,000.

Hunter noted: 'In the creation of state forests the forester comes in contact with forest tribes who, whether timid or ferocious, simple or cunning, all possess the common characteristic of viewing with immense jealousy any interference with the habits and customs of their primitive life.'²⁹ Most of the forest tribes in fact depend on, in addition to agriculture, hunting, fishing and the collection of forest products. It is evident that with restrictions of large areas over which the tribes are wont to roam, their entitlement to the supply of food which forests could supply was substantially reduced. Thus forests of South Asia have a wide variety of historical meanings and usages. They served as homes and resources for their inhabitants, as well as of fuel, building materials, famine foods and medicines for neighbourhood people. To the colonial state, they provided a primary source of raw materials and a site for state regulation on a massive scale. While governmental intervention was not unknown in the pre-colonial period, these resources have increasingly been brought under state control. The 'period from 1870 to 1900, in particular, was a remarkably interventionist time, an age of high imperialism.'³⁰

The denial of resources to which people were traditionally entitled often caused eviction from their own habitat and migration, in order to look for new sources of livelihood, became one outlet. This is seen in the context of the labour force for the plantations, particularly tea in Assam

and the Dooars area. A large number of men were recruited from the forest regions in the Santhal Parganas and Chhoto Nagpur areas. Recently there have been attempts to understand labour migration from the ecological point of view. Environmental crises in the forest belts, inhabited by the indigenous people, make survival extremely difficult and encourage migration. A recent study of such migration in the district of Purulia makes this point forcefully.³¹ The forest environment here during the pre-colonial period was capable of supporting many plants and animals and there was 'close relationship between the nature and the *adivasi* (indigenous and tribal people of India) people. With the colonial intervention, from the late eighteenth century onwards a process of transformation started in Purulia. Ecological intervention was the prime factor of this transformation.' There was change in the water management, in the land tenure systems and the forest resources became the prime target by the mid-nineteenth century. Extension of cultivation led to deforestation and also led to killing of wild animals. The growing demand of the railway system created a huge demand for logs for sleepers and resulted in pressure on the forests of *Jungle Mahal*. 'The opening of the main line of Bengal Nagpur Railway through Kharagpur, Jhargram (1898) had a profound impact upon the forests of the region. Interior places became more accessible with the introduction of railways. As the forest products could be transported to distant places by the railway there was a sudden increase of commoditisation.'³²

The control of forests by the colonial government deprived the local people of their moral economy, as it were. Food supplements were denied, sources of medicine were lost. New management of hydrological sources also led to frequent droughts. 'Thus in Purulia ...the Savars and Birhors became "ecological refugees" due to the destruction of forest ecology. ...They had no alternative but migrate'.³³ Between 1866 and 1906-7, there were recurrent famines, which made the situation worse.

Population & Migration

The volume of migration is uncertain in the pre-census era. It was probably not very large in the eighteenth century. In any case a reliable estimate is difficult to make as there are no systematic records of people who crossed the national border or those who moved from one region to the other. Gail Omvedt has suggested that an examination of colonial migration reveals both the specific characteristics of the colonial working class it produced and the continuing existence of feudal ties of dependence in agriculture. The situation is best conceptualised in terms of the existence within the Indian social formation of feudal (agrarian) and proto-capitalist (mines, plantations, factories) modes of production, articulated in such a way that the main costs of reproduction of labour power that was sold in the capitalist sector were borne by the non-capitalist agrarian sector.³⁴

There is an old tradition of migration from India to the countries of South-East Asia as well as to Sri Lanka. By the end of the eighteenth century, Indian labourers were found in all parts of South-East Asia, wherever there were British traders.³⁵ The exodus of Tamils to the Straits Settlements started before the beginning of the nineteenth century. Emigration to Mauritius started, according to some reports, as early as 1819, but it certainly started between 1826 and 1830.

Early 1830s in a way mark a turning point. When slavery was abolished in the British colonies in 1834, a new system of slavery, as it were, was inaugurated. This was the system of indentured labour. Indenture has generally been defined as an economically induced migration combined with coercive contractual obligations. Quite plainly this system started with significant recruitment, forcible as it was at the beginning, of labour sent to Mauritius to work in the plantations. Recruitment was through *arkatis*, *duffadars* etc. Coolies were recruited on payment per head. The

coercive character of this merchant-controlled 'coolie trade' did produce serious protests leading to temporary suspension in 1839. A second method used later was to use the returnees to entice new recruits. This was increasingly prevalent after the 1840s.

It was part of Britain's general policy to indenture Indian labour, with the approval of the government of India, to her different colonies where labour for the plantations was scarce but in great demand. T. Geoghegan, Under-Secretary to Government of India, Department of Agriculture, Revenue and Communications, wrote a report on migration. The earliest labour recruits, according to him, came from south India. There was a migration to Malaya before the end of the nineteenth century. Tamil immigration to Sri Lanka must have begun quite early. It was probably a continuous process, but a fresh impetus was given to it by the extension of coffee plantations in 1842/3.³⁶

The sugar plantations of Mauritius were not slow to perceive this source of cheap labour. This became systematic after 1834 when slavery was abolished in the British colonies. The main port from where the indentured labour was sent was Calcutta. In the first four years, several thousand were sent to Mauritius. The system of coercive 'coolie trade' was denounced in British parliament by Buxton, Brougham and others. Lord John Russell wrote on February 15, 1840:

I should be unwilling to adopt any measure to favour the transfer of labourers from British India to Guiana...I am not prepared to encounter the responsibility of a measure which may lead to a dreadful loss of life on the one hand, or, on the other, to a *new system of slavery*.³⁷ (emphasis added)

As a result emigration was temporarily suspended in 1839. A committee was appointed to enquire into the system. The members included T. Dickens, J. Charles and Russomoy Dutt (secretary of the Hindu College, Calcutta). They took a serious view of the matter and suggested that either emigration should be suspended or the entire process from embarkation to their arrival in Mauritius should be supervised by the colonial government. Sir J.P. Grant, a member of the committee, did not put his signature to the report. He suggested modalities like appointing a protector for Indian immigrants to eliminate the element of force on unwilling emigrants. British parliament in 1842 rejected the report and approved the proposal of Grant. The ban on indentured labourers being sent to Mauritius was lifted in that year.

This encouraged other colonies also to indenture Indian labourers. Permission was gradually granted to the following colonies:

1844— Jamaica, Trinidad, British Guyana

1856— Santa Lucia

1856— Granada

By the 1870s these labourers were taken to Seychelles, the Dutch colony of Surinam, Fiji, Reunion, Honduras, Martinique and French Guyana among others.

It is difficult to make exact estimates of people sent as coolies. One estimate is that between 1834 and 1876, 9.8 million people left Indian shores, but about 7.8 million returned. One estimate suggests that the net emigration to Sri Lanka alone was 600000.³⁸

The main port of embarkation during the period 1830-70 was Calcutta with emigrants drawn from Chhoto Nagpur, eastern U.P. and western Bihar. A total of about 342,575 were sent from Calcutta, while Madras and French ports in south India accounted for 159,259. Bombay's share was only 31,761.³⁹ But another estimate would put the total net migration between 1842 and 1870 from Madras and the French ports in south India to 420,000. The magnitude of the outflow was probably affected by such factors as famines. A significant portion of the natural increase in some of the districts was siphoned off through migration.

British official observations in late nineteenth century did mention the incidence of emigration. Hunter, for example, did not believe migration to be excessive. The exceptions he noted were with regard to tea gardens in Assam and north Bengal.

We may look at some of the figures. The 1901 census noted that Indian immigrants in Sri Lanka were 436,662 in 1901 as against 264,580 in 1891. Hunter found it difficult to enumerate Indians in Nepal, Afghanistan, Tibet and Bhutan. The Census estimate of 208,000 is merely a guess. The figures from other colonies were:

British Guyana— 125,875
Trinidad— 86,615
Mauritius— 265,163
Natal— 65,925
Fiji— 15,368
Jamaica— 15,278
Surinam— 18,000
St. Lucia— 1,200
Martinique— 3,764
Guadeloupe— 15,276
Transvaal— 5,000
Cape Colony, Bantuland and southern Rhodesia— 4,000
Zanzibar— 10,000⁴⁰

The 1921 census of Ceylon shows that 95 per cent of the India-born were born in the Madras Presidency. In Malay, according to the 1957 census, ninety per cent of Indians were from south India (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam speaking). The proportion of south Indians was small in Fiji and the West Indies, where people from Bihar and UP predominated.

The urgency of continuing the process of importing coolies from India was often seen in the official correspondence. L.H. Mason, Assistant protector of Immigrants, Natal, wrote to the Secretary, Government of Bengal, 'Owing to abundant harvests, the competition in the labour market by the tea plantations and other Indian industries, the number of emigrants despatched from Calcutta during 1876 fell far short of the requirements of this colony, and much injury has resulted to the planting interest'. The nexus between plantation interests and the emigration of coolies is clear. He requested steps to be taken to appoint a new agent in Calcutta for recruitment for Natal. As a result, three ships left Calcutta in 1876. While a total number of 1154 embarked, fifteen people died during the journey. The protector took satisfaction that the number of death was small and indicated the care taken by the agents. There was plainly little interest in the well-being of the immigrants. The main point was to serve the interest of the plantations. It seemed that the coolies were given land in lieu of the money granted for return passage, thus limiting their option of returning to India.⁴¹

Between 1871 and 1930, an annual average of between 240,000 and 660,000 migrated from India. In spite of sizeable return of people, the net migration was probably between 140,000 or 160,000 per annum during the period of 1891-1900 and between 44 and 51 thousand during the lean periods of 1866-90 and 1916-20. The net emigration between 1870 and 1937 was probably 4.3 million (20.4 m emigrant; 16.1 m returnees).

Early years of the indentured system saw a sizeable population of migrants to the British colonies in the West Indies or to Mauritius. After 1866, however, the volume of migration to distant regions in Africa and South America appeared to decline. By the turn of the century, the British colonies in Asia (Ceylon, Burma, and Malaysia) and Oceania (the Fiji Islands) became major receivers of Indian labourers.

Beginning with the 1860s or even earlier alternative to emigration was internal migration within the subcontinent. Labour was required for road and then for the construction of the railway system. More important, however, were the plantations in Assam and North Bengal and Darjeeling. This attracted between 700,000 and 850,000 recruits between 1870 and 1900. Labour recruited from Chhoto Nagpur and the Santhal Parganas was many times larger than those taken overseas under the indenture system. Faced with an acute shortage of labour and following the failure to depeasantise Assam, the planters had to have recourse to seek labour from hundreds of miles away. They adopted a policy of organised recruitment of labour from tribal/ semi-tribal as well as non-tribal low-caste peasant communities inhabiting an extensive area spread over the Bengal Presidency. These included, in particular, Chhoto Nagpur and the Santhal Parganas, but also the eastern UP, Ganjam, parts of Madhya Pradesh and even Vizag. These recruits belonged to various peasant, labouring, artisan and service groups. Because of the operation of a host of socio-economic forces, they were subjected to 'a complex process of depeasantisation, deskilling and proletarianisation by which this extensive region was reduced to a vast reservoir of cheap labour or labour catchment area'⁴². The result was forced migration. A statement shows the number of men imported as labour under contract under Act VII of 1877. They were sent to various areas of Assam like Nowgong, Cachar, Seeksagar, Durrang, Lakhimpur, Kamrup etc. The total number sent in the first half of 1877 was 46,687 and the total number sent in the second half of the year was 44,594.⁴³

On January 3, 1878, C.H. Jourbert, Officiating Superintendent of Emigration, Bengal, wrote to the Secretary, Government of Bengal, expressing his worry about the fate of the coolies recruited in Madras and brought to Midnapur and Calcutta for sending them to the tea gardens of Assam. Those who were rejected on medical examination were not provided with return passage as per Act VII of 1878. The fact of the case was that in 1878, sixty coolies were brought from Madras to the Calcutta depot of Hira Lal Mukherjee. Of them 37 were passed as fit and five were rejected. These five and another 18 dependent on them had to be deported back. The gardens of Dibrugarh wanted them as 'free labourers', but the act forbade such procedure. Joubert noted, 'It would undoubtedly be better to allow this than to send these persons back to a famine-stricken country'. His statement is a clear pointer to the link between famine conditions and encouragement given to migration. The Under-Secretary of the Government of Bengal, Colmar Macaulay, replied that the recruiters from Bengal were violating the terms of the Act as the persons recruited in Madras were forbidden to be taken beyond the boundaries of Madras. The Act provided for the return of these coolies to the place of their recruitment. He wanted to know the fate of the five Madras coolies.

On March 11, Major R. Beadon informed the Under-Secretary that the five men were kept in the depot of Hira Lal Mukherjee until January 14. They were unwilling to remain in the depot and were discharged as 'unwilling to emigrate'. They were then engaged with M/S Barry & Co. to proceed to Assam as free emigrants.⁴⁴

On August 4, 1896, the district officer in charge of emigration had a detailed correspondence with superiors about the best way to bring the coolies from Bihar to Assam, the route to be followed, and the resting places to be chosen.⁴⁵ The anxiety is to be seen more clearly in the letter that M/S Sanderson & Co., solicitors, wrote on behalf of M/S John Elliott and co. who were the agents for several tea gardens in Assam, to the Secretary, Government of Bengal, General (Emigration) Department.

We have the honour to address you upon the subject of the recent notification of the Bengal government no. 873, 25 Ultimo (February) prohibiting temporary emigration of all natives of India from the districts of Bengal to Assam owing to the presence of cholera among the coolies in the steamer emigration route from Goalundo to Assam. ...

The serious daily loss which this prohibition inflicts upon those interested in free labour garden sirdiri recruiting has induced our clients ...to go very carefully into the subject , with a view to ascertaining whether this measure for entire prohibition temporarily of emigration to Assam really affords a remedy to the evil.

It then went on suggest measures which would be likely to mitigate the problem of cholera.⁴⁶ The solicitor's letter would seem to indicate that recruitment was indeed a very lucrative business. Mortality rate was rather high in some years. In 1888, out of a total number of 31,217 immigrants passing through Dhubri 771 died either at Dhubri, or in the steamer or at the depot. The rate per 1000 was 24.6. This rate fluctuated over the next decade between 10.8 (per 1000) in 1889 to 1.2 (per 1000) in 1890.⁴⁷ A review, it seems, was made in 1897 and a medical officer, Surgeon-Major Campbell was appointed by the Lt. Governor.⁴⁸ The anxiety was probably to ensure that the coolies reached the gardens in good nick.

The hapless tribals in the Manbhum district were forced to look for work and found it either in the garden of Assam or in the coalfields nearby. They were also often duped by the recruiters. In 1900, a year of near famine conditions, the number of emigrants was 65,190. But in other years it could be less. This region became 'the best known gateway of Chotanagpur for the travellers, the push-push (*arkati* or agent) and the coolie'⁴⁹.

The coolies, as the labourers in the Assam tea gardens were known, were ignorant, poor, but free men originally, who were tricked by force and fraud to leave his/ her home and to register as labourers under contract in the tea gardens. Once this was done, the labourers were in absolute clutches of the manager. There, far away from the public gaze, they lived virtually as *slaves*. Agents, induced by lucrative remunerations, often kidnapped them or persuaded them to leave their villages under false pretences and brought them to the recruiting depots. The Act XIII of 1859, with a view to eliminate these acts of fraudulence, provided for an agreement or contract with the coolies. But, as the report of the chief Commissioner of Assam indicated, the agreement was of little value to the labourers.

A contract may be enforced under this Act, though it is not in writing, though it is not stamped, though it is not registered ... though there is no proof that the labourer understood the terms of the engagement, though the terms may be manifestly unfair. A labourer cannot free himself by redemption, nor can he plead any misconduct of his employer as an excuse for non-performance...⁵⁰

The grave abuses of the Act obliged Ripon to enact the Inland Emigration Act I of 1882. The Act, however, failed to realise the hopes of Ripon and forced recruitment continued. The horrible condition in which the labourers lived has been chronicled by Ram Kumar Vidyaratna in his *Coolie-Kabini* and by Dwarakanath Ganguly, the Assistant Secretary of the Indian Association, in his reports. Indeed, the report of the Deputy Surgeon-General and the Sanitary Commissioner recorded in 1884 that the death rate was 37.8 per thousand in 1882, but rose to 41.3 in 1883 and 432 in 1884. Infant mortality rose from 19.7 per thousand in 1882 to 44 per thousand in 1884.

A rough idea of the incidence of internal migration can be obtained from the census figures of 1901.⁵¹

Province	Population at census in millions	Immigrants (Persons born elsewhere but enumerated in the state)	Emigrants (Persons born in the state but enumerated in other states)
Assam	6.1	775,844	51,481
Bengal	78.5	915,158	870,551
Bombay	25.5	858,799	626,799
Madras	38.63	269,688	713,069
CP	14.62	898,769	570,125
UP	48.5	695,956	1.5 million
Rajputana States	9.7	234,446	900,224

Overall, the available data do not indicate the socioeconomic groups from which the emigrants were drawn, but the observations of a number of district collectors suggest that many ‘disbanded sepoys’, weavers, agricultural labourers and others engaged in low-caste service occupations were among them. A majority of emigrants were from rural areas and from ‘overcrowded agricultural districts’, where ‘crop failure could plunge sections of the village community into near-starvation’. In fact, there was a strong correlation between emigration and harvest conditions. Acute scarcity during 1873-75 in Bihar, Oudh and NW Provinces provoked large-scale emigration through the port of Calcutta. The famine in south India during 1874-8 also resulted in heavy emigration. Conversely, in good agricultural years recruits were not easily available.⁵² It has been reported that road blocks were hastily established to stem the flood of ‘stick-thin country people’ into Bombay and Pune, while in Madras the police forcibly expelled some 25,000 famine refugees. There is little doubt about the correlation between scarcity and forced migration.⁵³

Most of the emigrants probably left their villages for the first time in their lives, and they were not fully aware of the hardships involved in long voyages and in living abroad. Diseases—cholera, typhoid, dysentery—were often rampant in the depots. Mortality among the emigrants was consequently high. Mortality at sea was alarmingly high. Before 1870, about 17 to twenty per cent of the labourers deported from the port of Calcutta died before they reached their destination. The data for the years 1871-90 of voyages to British Guyana suggest that the death rate on board was about 15 per 1000.⁵⁴

The overall impact of colonialism was indeed negative. There was no increase in per capita income between 1757 and 1947; income probably declined in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is an abiding irony that the cash crop boom accompanied a decline in agrarian productivity and food security. The great export boom of cash crops benefited the money lenders, absentee landlords, urban merchants and a handful of Indian industrialists. During what constituted, in the imagination of the likes of Kipling and Curzon, the ‘the glorious imperial half century’ (1872-1921), life expectancy of ordinary Indians fell by a staggering twenty per cent.⁵⁵ Pax Britannica, it would appear, had more victims than long centuries of war.

India was now a part of the capitalist ‘world system’, but India’s increasing integration with world trade produced, in effect, increasing pauperisation. Already in the nineteenth century, liberal and nationalist economists like R.C. Dutt and Dadabhai Naoroji noticed that the benefits of the export boom did not flow to the direct producers. It has been noted by some economic historians that the ‘colonial state’s spending on public works [was] at a lower rate than underdeveloped countries.’⁵⁶

As Hugh Tinker puts it, the whole indentured labour system and the Indian Diasporas were the consequences of British exploitation. The majority of Indians who emigrated gained little from their emigration; they exchanged the situation of casual, intermittent, poorly paid labour for a similar situation in the new country.⁵⁷ Massive movements of people, then, were more often than not the product of denial of entitlement to livelihood in the rural areas to the majority of the people.

Notes

¹ John Russell Young, *Around the World With General Grant*, (New York, 1878-9), quoted in Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocaust, El Nino, Famines and the Making of the third World* (London-New York, 2002), p. 4

² Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New Delhi, 2008)

³ Philip Meadows Taylor, *A History of India* (London, 1870), p. 216

⁴ W.W.Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (Calcutta, 1965), pp. 21-2

⁵ William Digby, *Prosperous British India: A Revelation from Official Records* (London, 1901), p. 123

⁶ Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itibas*, quoted in Atis Dasgupta and Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty, 'The Growth of Calcutta: A Profile of Social Dislocations in the Early Colonial Period', *Social Scientist*, Volume 20, Nos.3-4, March-April,1992, p. 45

⁷ W.W. Hunter, *India and the Indians*, ed. Herbert Risley (New Delhi, 2004, Vol. I, 2, 90)

⁸ William Digby, *Prosperous British India: A Revelation from Official Records* (London, 1901, Frontispiece). William Digby was a British author, journalist and humanitarian (born in 1849). He moved to South Asia in the 1870s, working first in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and later in Madras as a journalist. In India he witnessed the famine of 1876-78 and participated in the work of famine relief. He even wrote a book, *The Famine Campaign in Southern India* (2 Vols, 1878). His other books included *Indian Problems for English Consideration* (1881), *India for Indians—and for England* (1885) and *Prosperous British India: A Revelation from Official Records* (1901). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Digby_\(writer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Digby_(writer)) (Accessed on August 2, 2011)

⁹ Hunter, op.cit., Vol. III, p. 475

¹⁰ Mike Davis, op.cit., p. 8

¹¹ Report of the Commission of 1880, para 84

¹² William Digby, *The Famine Campaign in Southern India,1876-78* (London, 1900, Vol.I, 7,13) quoted in Mike Davis, op.cit., p. 26

¹³ William Digby, "Prosperous" *British India*, (London, 1901), p. 118

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 122

¹⁵ Census figures quoted and analysed by W. Digby. op.cit., p. 137

¹⁶ Mike Davis,op.cit., p. 2

¹⁷ Marina Carter, "Strategies of Labour Mobilisation in Colonial India: The Recruitment of Indentured Workers for Mauritius" in E. Valentine Daniel, Henry Bernstein, Tom Brass (eds.), *Plantations, Proletarians, and Peasants in Colonial Asia* (London, 1992)

¹⁸ Malabika Chakraborty, *The Famine of 1896-1897 in Bengal: Availability or Entitlement Crisis?* (New Delhi, 2004), p. 88, 385ff

¹⁹ *The New England Magazine*, September, 1900, Vol. xxiii, no.1, Boston, Massachusetts, quoted in Digby, op.cit., pp. 162-170

²⁰ W. Digby, "Prosperous" *British India*, (London, 1901), p. 118.

²¹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston,1944), p. 160

²² Mike Davis, op.cit., p. 9

²³ Madhav Gadgil and Ramchandra Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (New Delhi, & Berkeley, 1992,Ch.V-VIII)

²⁴ Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism,1600-1800* (Cambridge, 1995)

²⁵ David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment,Culture and European Expansion* (Oxford,1996), p. 168.

²⁶ Remarks by the Board of Revenue, Madras, August 5,1871, quoted in Gadgil and Guha, op.cit., p. 131

- ²⁷ Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, June, 1874. Annual Administrative Report of the Forest Department by Dr. W. Schlich, Para 136. West Bengal State Archives (Hereafter WBSA)
- ²⁸ Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, June, 1874. Resolution, Agricultural Department Para 8, March 31, 1874, WBSA
- ²⁹ W.W. Hunter, *India and Indians*, Vol.3, p. 124
- ³⁰ David Arnold and Ramchandra Guha, *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia* (New Delhi, 1997), 9ff
- ³¹ Nirmal Kumar Mahato, *Environment and Migration, Purulia, West Bengal* (MCRG research Paper Series, Policies and Practices, Kolkata, 2010), pp. 1-3
- ³² Mahato, *ibid.*, p. 2; also see Mark Proffenberger and B.MacGeen (eds.), *Village Voices, Forest Choices* (New Delhi, 1999)
- ³³ Mahato, *ibid.*, p. 3
- ³⁴ Gail Omvedt, "Migration in Colonial India: The Articulation of Feudalism and Capitalism by the Colonial State", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol,7, Issue 2, Jan,1980, pp. 185-212
- ³⁵ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas,1830-1920* (London, New York, Bomba,1974), p. 43
- ³⁶ Geoghegan's report, quoted in Haraprasad Chattopadhyay, *Indians in Africa: A Socio-Economic Study* (Calcutta,1970), p. 15
- ³⁷ Hugh Tinker, *op.cit.*, frontispiece
- ³⁸ Leela Visaria and Pravin Visaria, "Population", in *Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol.II, ed. Dharma Kumar (Indian Edition, 1984), pp. 485-6
- ³⁹ Geoghegan's report
- ⁴⁰ W.W. Hunter, *op.cit.*, vol. I, pp. 489-99
- ⁴¹ Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, March, 1878, File No. 25 (1-2), WBSA
- ⁴² Ranajit Dasgupta, "Plantation Labour in Colonial India", in Valentine Daniel, Bernstein and Brass (eds.), *op.cit.*
- ⁴³ Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, March,1878, File No. 22 (1-3);WBSA
- ⁴⁴ Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, 1878, Emigration Branch, File No. 26-1. WBSA
- ⁴⁵ Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, January, 1897. File No. 3/H No.118M & 1/3-H,2,No. 2669-70,WBSA
- ⁴⁶Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, January, 1897, File No. 1-C,1,No. 275, Calcutta, March 16,1896. WBSA
- ⁴⁷ Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Revenue Department, No.5261, December 14, 1876. WBSA
- ⁴⁸Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, January, 1897, File No. 1-C,6, No.2, January 5, 1897, WBSA
- ⁴⁹ F.B. Bradley Birt, *Chotanagpur, A Little Known Province of the Empire*, (London, 1910), p. 172; Nirmal Kumar Mahato, *op.cit.*, pp. 4-7
- ⁵⁰ J.C. Bagal, *History of the Indian Association*, quoted in R.C. Majumdar (ed.), *British Paramountcy and the Indian Renaissance*, Part II,(Bombay, 1965), pp. 596-7
- ⁵¹ W.W. Hunter, *op.cit.*, Vol.I, p. 497
- ⁵² Visaria and Visaria, "Population", in *CEHI*, Vol.II, p. 515
- ⁵³ Mike Davis, *op.cit.*, pp. 26-7
- ⁵⁴ Hugh Tinker, *op.cit.*, pp.161-6
- ⁵⁵ Mike Davis, *op.cit.*, 311ff
- ⁵⁶ Lance Davis and Richard Huttenback, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire: The Economy of British Imperialism* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 110
- ⁵⁷ Hugh Tinker, *op. cit.*, p. xiii