



The Legacy of Indenture

Acknowledgement, Apology or Reparation

In early 2022, there has been a shift in focus from the death and devastation being wreaked in Ukraine to the visit of Prince William and Kate to the West Indies. The press has been reporting on the one hand about the 'amazing' experience of the islanders interacting with the royal couple, the display of the rich Caribbean cultural heritage while on the other, there is coverage of the protests, the demand for a 'royal apology' for slavery and the process of removing the Queen from the position of head of state in Jamaica. Barbados has already completed this separation in [2021](#) with Dame Sandra Mason becoming the new President. These are important political matters and as responsible citizens of the world, we (even healthcare professionals) have a reason to be aware and care. For many healthcare workers in the UK, the legacy of the Empire and its many seemingly unresolved issues still affects their psyche and clouds their aspirations.

In 2017, the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health held a [symposium on the legacy of slavery on health and medicine](#) which recognised that in the 18th through early 20th centuries, white physicians studied black slaves and their descendants in an attempt to identify characteristics that were distinctive of their race. They believed that all questions about health could be answered in the body; therefore, if black people had poorer health outcomes than those that were white, the differences must be due to inherent racial weaknesses (not the legacy of oppression, the deeply embedded disparities in economic circumstance stemming from a denial or exclusion from opportunity). It was their conclusion that medical research played a significant role in constructing a narrative of race in the United States, the repercussions of which are still being felt in the lives and health of African Americans. The story is no different to the indentured labourers brought from the Indian subcontinent by their Colonial masters to the plantations of the West Indies and Americas.

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The [UK National Archives](#) describes, *'Many Indians agreed to become indentured labourers to escape the widespread poverty and famine in the 19th century. Some travelled alone; others brought their families to settle in the colonies they worked in.'*

The demand for Indian indentured labourers increased dramatically after the abolition of slavery in 1834. They were sent, sometimes in large numbers, to plantation colonies producing high value crops such as sugar in Africa and the Caribbean. The labourers were mostly young, active, able-bodied people used to demanding labour, but they were often ignorant of the places they 'agreed' to go to or the challenges they were going to face. These indentured servants 'chose' to work in the Caribbean mainly for socioeconomic reasons brought about by their own internal oppressive social system and the impact of Western colonialism and the promise of a better life - which was sadly never to be realised.

The main aspects of their labour contracts were basic "free" housing, fringe medical care, a right to return passage, a fixed daily wage, and continuous employment with one employer. When their five year contracts expired, [Indian indentured](#) labourers were given an option to re-indenture and receive small parcels of land in lieu of their return passage.

Before 1840 a large proportion of the labourers were so-called 'Hill coolies', aboriginal people from the foothills of the Himalayas and those from the plains of the Ganges. Later many others signed indentured labour contracts, including Hindus, Brahmins, high castes, agriculturists, artisans, Mussulmans, low castes (untouchables) and Christians. Over 41,000 Bengali labourers were sent to Mauritius in 1834.

The Indian government banned 'coolie' shipments in 1838 because there were reports of repression and abuse. In 1842 the British Prime Minister, Robert Peel directed the Indian government to re-open these lines of emigration under proper safeguards. A Protector of

Emigrants was appointed to ensure that the labourers had adequate space, food, water and ventilation on the journey. Emigration was legalised from 1844 and the last indentured labourers went to the West Indies in 1916.

The state of the indentured labourers remained unaffected by these seemingly robust safeguards. There are numerous untold stories of repression and inhuman abuse while the plantation owners and the colonial masters gained incomprehensible wealth at the expense of basic human rights and dignity. There was also dissonance and ways in which dominance and oppression was [contested](#) in everyday life and the levels of organisation, which were visible in the plantation societies.

[Hugh Tinker's](#) book 'A New System of Slavery' (1974) established the paradigm that the system of Indian [indentured labour](#) witnessed the institutionalisation of a [new labour system](#) that incorporated most of the repressive features of slavery. Essentially, this indentured '[labour power](#)' was owned by the 'employers', traded easily without the need for acceptance, or consent by the concerned labourers. Thus indentured labour was a clever, politically acceptable form of 'unfree labour' which replaced the labour shortage following the abolition of slavery.

Labourers endured extremely heavy workloads, long working days and poor housing, usually living in overcrowded former slave barracks, where food was scarce and medical attention was basic or lacking. Those under indenture were subjugated to the absolute authority of the Colonial upper class masters who used their power to starve, [beat and cheat](#) indentured labourers out of their wages. Many workers tried to escape their harsh life, [were recaptured, and imprisoned](#). Sometimes their initial five year contract was doubled to ten years for attempted desertion.

Health of Indentured Labourers

In 1856-57, the average death rate for Indians travelling to the Caribbean was 17% due to diseases like dysentery, cholera and measles. After they disembarked, there were further deaths in the holding depot and during the process of acclimatisation in the colonies. Potential [emigrants](#) were carefully chosen to be of the right body type to demonstrate their ability to work hard and to be free of ailments. Although there were rules for the regular medical check up of the coolies, most of the accommodation was unfit for human occupation and none had any toilet facilities. Anyone found to have untreatable conditions including senility, syphilis, heart, liver disease or bronchitis were transported back to their villages in India.

Most people believed the indentured labourers to be from bad stock, from the wretched and lowly segments of Indian society, commonly from the lower castes, picked up like cattle and despatched to the colonies. The truth was different. Indentured labourers were from all castes and with a variety of skills. People who had become destitute due to the harsh British revenue policy or during the famine. They remained voiceless and mute and were blamed for most of the misfortune that fell on them.

[Women were blamed](#) for the high infant mortality (estimated to be 25%) as they tended to lack the maternal instinct, promiscuity and poor hygiene. This absolved the Plantation owners from the duty to provide appropriate living conditions, the compulsion of returning to back breaking work after childbirth and the prevalence of anaemia due to hookworm infestations. Sexual disparity of 40 women to 100 men in the indentured population led to sexual jealousy and a high rate of suicides. [Suicides](#) were also due to loss of family support, cultural domination of the minorities, despair, hopelessness and depression.

At all points of the indenture system—the Emigration Depot, on ships, the Immigration Depot, the estates—medical provisions for labourers were dismal and much below the

standards of care for the time. The ratio of doctors to patients, the amount of medicines and the numbers of beds for patients were insufficient. All of this was in the context of psychological stress as a result of homesickness, new experiences, the demanding life of plantation labour and the occupational hazards of the job. The quality of facilities provided for indentured Indians was influenced by British colonial perceptions of India, and what was '[adequate for Indians](#)'. As a result, overcrowding and poor hygiene contributed to the substandard sanitation throughout the system.

The crew onboard these ships shifted the blame to uncontrollable circumstances and the Indians themselves. In the early phase of the system mortality was mainly the result of the lack of regulations governing the system. Provisions for personal hygiene on emigrant ships were limited so it was a fertile situation for contagious diseases to spread. In the 20th century the chances of survival increased as mortality on voyages declined. The issues on ships included overcrowding, poor quality of food; and a lack of proper hygiene as there were only one or two toilets for all passengers; bad odours or miasma below deck and diseases. This resulted in the prevalence of diseases which reduced labourers' chances of survival, and their capacity to work.

The Surgeon Superintendent

There were some rules that stipulated guidelines on diet, clothing, medicines, ventilation, cleanliness, hospital records and more. Each ship was required to have a Surgeon Superintendent who was in charge of the welfare of the passengers. This position was filled by a man, usually recruited in England. He was paid according to how many immigrants landed in the West Indies alive. If neglect or misconduct could be proven on his account, a portion or all of his salary could be withheld. The Surgeon Superintendent was appointed by the Protector of Emigrants in India. His duties included medical inspection of the Indians, rejection of unfit persons; inspection of the ship and report on ventilation of the vessel. He was also responsible

for the arrangements for cooking; setting up a hospital in the deckhouse and checking supplies to put on the ship for the Indians.

Acknowledgement & Apology

In 1807, British parliament [passed](#) the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, which banned the practice of transporting enslaved African people to the Americas to be sold there. This brought to an end to Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, which [began in 1562](#). It's estimated that British ships transported 3.4 million slaves across the Atlantic Ocean. Initially, British slave traders supplied Portuguese and Spanish colonies in the Americas. But later, with British colonial expansion, slave traders supplied British colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean. The use of slave labour was abolished throughout the British Empire when the [Slavery Abolition Act](#) was passed in 1833. At that time, there were 46,000 British slave owners, and the majority of their slaves were working on sugar plantations in British colonies in the Caribbean.

Under the provisions of the Act, the Slave Compensation Commission [was established](#) to oversee the distribution of £20 million in compensation to the slave owners for the loss of their "property."

The liberated slaves were also required to provide 45 hours of unpaid labour a week to their former masters for the period of four years after the practice of slavery had been outlawed.

They were first of [2 million](#) Indian indentured labourers that were sent to work in 19 British colonies, including Fiji, Ceylon, Trinidad, Guyana, Uganda, Kenya and Natal. And to a lesser extent, indentured labourers were also recruited from China, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Indentured labourers worked mainly on sugar plantations, tea and cotton industries as well as in rail construction in southeast Africa. While to the best of our knowledge, there has never been an official apology or acknowledgement of the fate

of indentured labourers from India, there have been attempts to express deep regret.

In 2007, [Prime Minister Tony Blair](#) said sorry for Britain's role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

"I have said we are sorry and I say it again ... [It is important] to remember what happened in the past, to condemn it and say why it was entirely unacceptable,"

In 2021, quite distinct from the legacy of predecessors, the the descendants of the South Sea Islanders forced or duped into a form of slavery on Australian plantations received a historic apology from the mayor of Bundaberg setting a national precedent and provide the catalyst for atonement at the highest reaches of government. [Jack Dempsey](#) became Australia's first elected leader to formally say sorry to Pacific Islanders for the indentured labour trade – known as "blackbirding" – that from the second half of the 19th century until 1904 helped enrich the fledgling Queensland region and its sugarcane barons.

There are early voices of empowered descendents of slaves or indentured labourers being raised in the UK Parliament. Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP in her first speech in Parliament, reflecting the future of global Britain, demanded that old injustices and their links to current problems be acknowledged.

"Not only will this country, my country, not apologise—by apologise I mean properly apologise; not 'expressing deep regret,'" she said, ["It has not once offered a form of reparations."](#)

In 2018, the British government [apologised](#) after dozens of descendants of the Windrush generation—many born and raised in Britain—were wrongly detained, denied legal rights, and even deported from the UK over citizenship issues. Anti-Slavery International has been calling on the UK Government to make a formal apology for Britain's role in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and to take action to address its legacies, which continue to affect communities in Africa, the Americas and Caribbean.

Moving to Reparations

Following the campaign by the #BlackLivesMatter movement, since the unlawful killing of George Floyd in the USA, there have been increasing public protests against the ongoing legacy of slavery. The toppling of the statue of Coulson in Bristol and defacing of many of the other prominent individuals/ families who benefited from the exploitation of humans is a beginning. However, there is little or no acknowledgement of the exploitation of over 3 million indentured labourers from India.

A [project by University College London](#) has published the identities of 47,000 slave-owners who, at the abolition of slavery in 1833, claimed compensation of £20m for the loss of their “property”. The sum, around £2.6bn in today’s money, was 40 percent of Britain’s national budget at the time and it took until 2015 to pay off the debt. There are calls for reparation monies to be paid to the countries whose generations were ripped apart by slavery. A similar call will need to be raised for the exploitation of indentured labourers and perhaps a day will come when imperialist countries will acknowledge and offer due compensation to the countries of origin, which continue to suffer the socio-economic consequences of centuries of oppression and exploitation.