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# The Political Economy of Indian Indentured Labour in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

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# The Political Economy of Indian Indentured Labour in the 19th Century

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## Abstract

Abolition of slavery in British Colonies led to the facilitation of Indian indentured migration by the British Government. This form of migration came about when the discourse of economic freedom and individual liberty strongly resonated in British political-economy circles, following the work of Smith and Mill. We analyse how unfreedom in indentured labour was rationalised when the rhetoric of freedom was essential to the dominant intellectual milieu. We argue that indentured labour was a compromise between slavery and free labour because it facilitated free trade and some freedom of movement but was harder to justify in terms of individual liberty.

**Keywords:** Classical political economy; Economic freedom; Individual liberty; Indentured labour; Slavery; Migration; Adam Smith; JS Mill

**JEL codes:** B12, B13, J61, J70, N43, N36

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## 1. Introduction

Political economic thought of the 19<sup>th</sup> century faced a contradiction between various freedoms (free trade, freedom of movement of labour across and within countries and freedom to enter and exit labour contracts). Economic freedom at the level of individual agents implied free movement and the capacity to buy and sell labour power. At the macro level it meant free trade and mobility of workers across borders. The institution of indentured labour soon set these freedoms at odds: while workers were mobile across colonies, they could not move across jobs within the colonies. Similarly, while indentured labour helped facilitate free trade between European countries, the colonies could not benefit from this, as they were not sovereign. Thus, the freedoms that were espoused were heavily circumscribed by the historical context. In this paper, we consider how the system of indentured labour was rationalised by political economic thinkers, who were opposed to slavery.

The system of Indian indentured or coolie labour migration was established after the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1834 as an attempt to replace slave labour in the British Plantation Colonies. While coolie labour migration started in the 1820s, it grew significantly in the 1830s with the first stream of migrants being shipped to Mauritius (Tinker, 1993), and further with the legalisation of indentured migration to the West Indies in 1844. 'Indentured' or 'coolie' migration constituted a contractual agreement, which the migrant workers signed at their place of origin. These contracts defined the duration and terms of employment including the estate that the labourer would be working on. Labourers could not change the terms of the contracts and, since the cost of the individual passage was a sunk cost to the employers, it was not in their interests to terminate the contract. This rigidity in the contracts often resulted in coercion, which was seen as the only way to extract worker effort.

The dominant intellectual tradition of the time saw such unfreedom as incompatible with capitalism because unfree labour suffocated the incentive for improvements. Smith himself, though he predated indentured labour migration from India, saw slavery as expensive and unproductive. Other political economists, like Mill, Marshall and Jevons saw unfree labour as economically inefficient. Furthermore, there was considerable evidence even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that indentured workers worked under conditions characterised by asymmetric information and low bargaining power, which led to violence and abuse. Despite this, indentured labour was accepted, even embraced by the political circles of the time. How and

why was this possible? How was indentured or coolie labour rationalised amongst the policy makers and the intelligentsia when slavery could not be?

This paper contributes to the growing literature on unfree labour within capitalism (see Barrientos, Kothari and Phillips, 2013 for review). We argue in this paper that indentured labour gained acceptability because it was a compromise between free labour and slavery. In the context of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain, free labour in the colonies was not feasible for a range of reasons, which we will discuss. At the same time, slavery was not considered acceptable for both moral and economic reasons, which will also be discussed. Indentured labour was therefore seen as a constrained compromise between these extremes.

In this paper, we will rely on a close reading of the works of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century British political economists including Smith, Mill and the marginalist political economists (Marshall and Jevons) in the context of economic and individual liberty. We also use original archival material from the British Library and the National Archives including India Office Records, Colonial Office Records and Parliamentary Papers to understand the policy contentions related to this form of labour. Hansard notes, which are available online, help us to analyse the parliamentary debate on indentured labour, and the moral and practical position that the political class held on this form of labour in the context of political economy discourse.

In the following section, we will set out the political context within which indentured labour became a reality. We discuss why slavery was problematic as well as why free labour was not seen to be practicable. We then consider three basic problems with the system of indenture as it developed – asymmetric information, asymmetric bargaining power and inefficiency. We conclude, using a stylized representation in Section 5, that indenture labour was somewhere in-between slavery and free labour in a spectrum of freedom and was therefore seen as acceptable to the political economists. We conclude in Section 6.

## **2. The Context**

Two Acts of the British Parliament are particularly relevant for understanding the political-economic discourse on indentured labour. These were the Emancipation Act of 1833 that made slavery illegal in the British Colonies and the Sugar Duties Equalisation Act of 1846, which removed preferential tariff protection for sugar from British colonies. Both these Acts were seen as facilitating freedom, the former in terms of individual liberty, and the latter in

terms of free trade. They were therefore supported wholeheartedly by the Liberal thinkers of the time. However, the impact that these Acts had on the economic interests of West Indian plantation owners could not be ignored.

The passing of the Emancipation Act in 1833, not surprisingly, had a significant impact on the labour markets in the plantation colonies. John Gladstone<sup>3</sup> voiced the concerns of the Plantation owners when he argued that the increased bargaining power of workers in the colonies, following their emancipation would “compel the planters to pay them wages, at rates much above their means or ability to comply with; and whilst their property would be thus under [the] power [of free workers], they [the planters] having no means of competition or resource within their power, they would in such case be forced to submit to dictation, however injurious, if not ruinous.”<sup>4</sup> The immediate impact of the Act was cushioned by the system of apprenticeships within which adult former slaves were required to work as ‘apprentices’ for a period of up to eight years. During this period, they had to provide free services for three quarters of the time and were allowed to work for a wage in the rest. While this allowed time for adjustment, it was not a long-term solution. The system of indenture was proposed to provide labour to the plantations by facilitating the migration of large numbers of workers first from China and later India into the Caribbean.

The Sugar Duties Act of 1846 put further pressure on British colonial sugar plantations forcing them to compete on equal terms with sugar from non-British plantations, which were still using slave labour. The Act sought to equalize tariffs between sugar imported from the British colonies and from non-British territories and was passed with the intention of decreasing the price of sugar for consumers in Britain. The Bill posed a moral and intellectual conundrum to the British parliament: it encouraged trade but also allowed the import of slave sugar from non-British colonies into Britain. William Gladstone<sup>5</sup> (who later went on to become the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom) vehemently opposed the Bill arguing that “it was a question of free labour against slave labour” and that “the clear effect of the present motion [i.e. the

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<sup>3</sup> John Gladstone was a West Indian merchant, plantation owner and a Member of Parliament. At the time of abolition of slavery, he was a slave owner who received a compensation of £106,769 (modern equivalent £83m) for the 2,508 slaves he owned across nine plantations in the West Indies.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from J Gladstone to Sir G Grey, Date 1837

<sup>5</sup> A proprietor in the West Indies and the son of John Gladstone

Sugar Duties Bill] would be to encourage slave labour and the slave trade”<sup>6</sup>. The Bill was supported in Parliament by Whig politicians for whom, at least in this case, the support for free trade, lower sugar prices and increased welfare of domestic consumers superseded both the interests of the plantation owners as well as those of the labourers on the plantations.

Whig politicians argued that the burden of supporting free labour through tariffs on sugar should not fall on consumers in Britain, who would effectively be paying a tax to support the West Indian plantation interests. The Whig politician Milner Gibson argued, for instance, that “(it is) in the mode of imposing this tax that I object—namely, by imposing a different rate of duty on Foreign and Colonial Sugar, to divert the amount of the tax paid by the consumer from the Exchequer to the Colonial proprietors”<sup>7</sup>. Similarly Robert Peel, one of the chief architects of the Sugar Act, argued that “the planters have no right to demand, and, moreover, to expect, that the British nation can permanently or long continue the payment of the enormous prices which have of late been charged for two<sup>8</sup> of the most indispensable articles of general consumption, and that the welfare of our own population as well as that of the negro population, requires some alteration in this respect.”<sup>9</sup>

The free trade supporting Whig members of Parliament further argued that the manufacturing class in Great Britain would benefit from cheap raw materials from abroad, whether it was sugar or cotton, making tariffs on either of these unacceptable. The Whig politician, Mr Macaulay, argued that slave produced cotton, provided the backbone for the manufacturing industry in Great Britain. He concluded that, for the benefit of the British consumers and manufacturing interests, free trade of sugar was essential<sup>10</sup>. Robert Peel, who as Prime Minister had overseen the repeal of the Corn Law, similarly argued that the reduction in tariffs on sugar was necessary for reciprocity in trade relations with slave owning colonies. Brazil, for instance, was an exporter of slave produced cotton and sugar and a major importer of British fabric. If Britain operated a tariff regime that disadvantaged its slave-produced sugar, then Brazil was likely to retaliate by imposing tariffs on its import of British fabric, thereby hurting British manufacturing. Peel argued that “with relation to the interests

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<sup>6</sup> Sugar Duties Bill, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1840, Hansard vol 55

<sup>7</sup> Sugar Duties Bill, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1840, Hansard vol 55

<sup>8</sup> Indicating sugar and cotton

<sup>9</sup> 06 May 1841, Hansard vol 57

<sup>10</sup> 11 May 1841, Hansard vol 58

of our manufacturers, we ought to consider that the Brazils were large consumers of our fabrics, but would not long remain so if this country continued to refuse the reception of their principal articles of produce in exchange; and that we ought not to endanger the interests of one class [i.e. the manufacturing class] of the community to promote those of another [the plantation class]"<sup>11</sup>.

British colonies producing sugar were therefore squeezed both with regard to labour costs and with regard to the prices of their produce. This led to calls for indentured labour: "Mr Colville, Mr Davidson and myself (*John Gladstone*), are deeply impressed with a sense of the risks to which our properties will be exposed, when the expiration of the apprenticeship takes place". In this context, indentured labour would provide "a system of regular continuous labour" when free workers "formed combinations for the purpose of restricting the ordinary and necessary periods of labour"<sup>12</sup>. Gladstone used the language of competition and collusion to argue in favour of indentured labour. In a letter to Lord Glenelg, he argued that "[a]fter the Emancipation Act was passed a great reduction in the value of labour took place". Consequently, he and other plantation owners hoped to obtain "additional labourers from other quarters, to influence the conduct of the apprentices"<sup>13</sup>. Neither policy makers nor liberal thinkers could ignore these pressures.

The Colonial Government of India passed an ordinance in 1837 to allow recruitment of indentured labour first in the depots of Calcutta (Act V of 1837) and later in Bombay and Madras (Act XXXII of 1837). Indentured workers were introduced to Mauritius in 1838 and to Jamaica, British Guiana and Trinidad in 1844. Immigration to Grenada was made legal in 1856, to St Lucia in 1858, to Natal in 1860, and to Fiji in 1878. About 2 million Indians emigrated to the colonies in the period between 1834 and 1917. The terms of the indenture were clear and limited. The workers were paid a modest wage<sup>14</sup> varying by location between 5s to 8s a week, between 1830-1900. This wage was fixed over the period of their indenture and they were also given provisions (accommodation and supplies to cook food) and promised a return

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<sup>11</sup> 06 May 1841 Hansard vol 57

<sup>12</sup> Letter from J Gladstone to Sir G Grey, Date 1837

<sup>13</sup> Letter from J Gladstone Esq to Lord Glenelg, 29 April 1837

<sup>14</sup> In the West Indies, for example, the wages were theoretically fixed at 5s a week in the period from the 1830s to 1900, while in Mauritius it started at 8s a month and was subsequently raised to 10s a month. However, reported wages were often below this level. Plantations would often cut the wages as punitive measures as well as in times of sugar price fluctuation (Tinker, 1993).

passage at the end of their indenture period. During the period of indenture, they were tied to a single employer with no freedom to move between employers or locations. The recruitment and passage for the workers was initially paid by the colonial government through colonial revenue and debt funding, and later through borrowing from the British Treasury<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the operation of the system required private agents (the workers, recruitment agents, ship operators and plantation owners) to work with the government (both of Britain and of the sending and receiving colonies).

Even while accepting the considerations that led to indentured labour, a number of thinkers put forward alternatives. Liberal politician and abolitionist Milner Gibson suggested<sup>16</sup> that it was “more advisable ... to expend part of ... Colonial income in purchasing steam-engines, and in importing new machines from England, than in promoting the immigration of fresh labourers”. Similarly, Robert Peel “viewed the indenture system with great apprehension” as it was “a situation very little removed from that of slavery”<sup>17</sup>. Even John Russell, while encouraging migration including that of Indian workers to the colonies, had earlier cautioned Parliament regarding the ill-treatment of Indian workers in the West Indies. He had insisted that the immigration of Indian workers should be facilitated as long as “they should be free to make such contracts as they should think fit for their own benefit.”<sup>18</sup> It is to be noted here that there was no specification of the conditions of immigration. If anything, the assumption was that this immigration was of free labour and was “qualitatively different” from slave migration (Major, 2017).

### **3. The Debate**

In this section, we will consider the arguments surrounding indenture in more detail. As already indicated above, this system was seen to be a compromise between the previous unacceptable system of slave labour and free labour, which would place plantation interests at risk. Several arguments were put forward to argue against both slave labour and the free labour in the colonies, as we will see in this section.

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<sup>15</sup> see Connolly, 2019 for details on financing of indentured labour migration.

<sup>16</sup> Sugar Duties Bill, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1840, Hansard vol 55

<sup>17</sup> 22 June 1840, Hansard vol 54

<sup>18</sup> 4 June 1840, Hansard vol 54



To begin with, there was concern that the emancipated slaves, instead of working hard and increasing their prosperity and that of the plantations they worked on, had a tendency to be satisfied with the bounties of nature. This lifestyle was considered uncivilised and indolent and as problematic from both a Christian and a political economy (growth/prosperity) perspective. The Christian view extolled hard work for the sake of the human spirit, while the political economy perspective prized hard work because of its benefits for growth and development. From both points of view, therefore, the emancipation experiment was seen to have significant shortcomings. A number of writers noted that in Britain, people had to work hard to survive because nature was less bountiful. In the West Indies, former slaves could survive with little effort because they had few demands and nature was bountiful. John Gladstone wrote, for instance, that labour “would be in a great measure exempt from pressure, as vegetable food, particularly plantains, are abundant in the colony.” Similarly, *The Economist* wrote “[t]he Negroes in most of the West Indian islands... wanted nothing in fact but the plantains they could grow without labour, and the huts which they could build on any waste mountain land without paying rent for it.”<sup>19</sup> They concluded that “[w]e do not rest the case (for coolie labour) on the low ground of increasing the sugar and coffee crops, but rather on the clear *moral* advantages to the local population of a *necessity for competition*.” (emphasis added). These writers therefore did not see the free labour of these colonies as a viable alternative to slave labour.

This view was endorsed by John Ramsay McCulloch (1789-1864), a Ricardian economist and newspaper editor, who argued that “in the end, the culture of the sugar-cane, on a large scale, will have to be abandoned in all these parts of the New World in which slavery, or compulsory labour, is suppressed.” While McCulloch argued (like the other political economists) that in ordinary circumstances when free and slave labour belong to the same country, the former is cheaper, this was not necessarily true in the colonies. For the inhabitants of West Indies, the “necessities and desires are of very limited description; and are generally indeed fully satisfied by the produce of a small patch of land, requiring but little labour in its cultivation: and such being the case it would be contradictory to suppose that they should voluntarily employ themselves in the hard labour necessary to produce sugar” (Page 354). In these

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<sup>19</sup> *The Economist*, July 16<sup>th</sup> 1859, Issue 829

circumstances, natives could not be expected to labour hard on a voluntary basis, and the production process needed some alternative form of unfree labour.

In addition to the above argument, European workers were seen to be ineffective as they could not work in the heat and dust in these regions. These arguments were especially potent because European capital was seen to have better returns on colonial plantations than back in Europe and this was in large part because “in our sugar colonies... the whole work is done by slaves, and in our tobacco colonies a very great part of it” (Smith, 1776: p 383).. Smith noted that “the profits of a sugar-plantation in any of our West Indian colonies are generally much greater than those of any other cultivation that is known either in Europe or America: And the profits of a tobacco plantation, though inferior to those of sugar, are superior to those of corn”(ibid). Substituting slaves with European free workers would erode these profits.

An argument that is likely to have reconciled many liberals to indentured labour was its facilitation of free trade and freer movement of labour at the macro level. It was often argued that the indentured system sponsored by Britain was superior to the forms of unfree labour that other colonies practiced. For example, in 1868 the Liberal MP WE Forester requested the government “to induce the Portuguese Government to stop the Slave Trade carried on between Macao and Cuba and Peru, under the name of Coolie Emigration”<sup>20</sup>. To this Lord Stanley responded that the Government chose not to interfere in the matters of the colonies. The “abuses attending on the practice of Coolie emigration from Macao are grave and notorious. We have from time to time brought the matter under the notice of the Portuguese Government, and we have invited Portugal to co-operate with France, England, and other Powers in endeavouring to come to some satisfactory arrangement with the Chinese Government on the question of Coolie emigration generally...” In the case of the slave trade, he argued, “wherever it is carried on, we have the right to interfere by treaty either with Portugal or with any other Power that may be concerned. In the case of the Coolie emigration, we have no right of interference whatever, except that right which every Government has to give such friendly advice to any other Government as it thinks fit. But beyond that we have no power.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 25 June 1868, Hansard Vol 192

<sup>21</sup> 25 June 1868, Hansard Vol 192

Indenture was also seen as enabling freedom of movement from low to high-wage regions. Lord Glenelg, a supporter of the East India Company and of the immigration of Indian workers, argued, that “it was somewhat premature, when it was not proved that any approach towards a slave trade had taken place, to condemn the policy of the Government simply because it did not prohibit Indian labourers from going from one part of her Majesty's dominions to the other”. He stated further that, “unless it was clearly shown that the danger was imminent, and that they even ran a risk of incurring it, they would not be justified ... in presenting a barrier to the circulation of voluntary labour.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Mr Dowson, one of six delegates appointed<sup>23</sup> to look at the conditions relating to recruitment of workers from India to Mauritius argued that such migration increased economic freedom because it provided the migrants with the choice of escaping poverty at home<sup>24</sup>. He claimed that no legislature could forbid immigration and compel poverty struck individuals to live in “the most wretched manner” subject to “almost annual visitation of famine and disease”.

Given that indenture was associated with more freedom rather than less, it was not surprising that it was increasingly accepted, even in liberal circles that had opposed the slave trade. In fact, many argued that problems arose not because the system itself was wrong but because it was misused. For example, in a parliamentary debate regarding whether to stop Indian immigration to the French colonies on account of the high mortality of workers on Réunion Island, Henry Seymour argued that, he “always looked upon emigration from the over-peopled regions of the East as the real way of putting an end to the slavery and the slave trade; and... saw no difficulty in their ascertaining the actual condition of these labourers while living in French colonies<sup>25</sup>. When immigration of Indian workers to French colonies was eventually discontinued in 1888, it was because the French Government did not prevent the

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<sup>22</sup> Hansard, Volume 41, March 6<sup>th</sup> 1838

<sup>23</sup> In August 1838, in an attempt to reconcile the demand for cheap labour to the outcry over the revival of slave labour, the Secretary to the Government of Bengal HT Prinsep appointed a committee of six members with Mr T Dickens as the chair to look at the conditions relating to recruitment of workers from India to Mauritius. The committee's membership was significantly diverse, with one Indian member on board. Notably, the committee failed to reach a consensus on their recommendation to the government. Eventually three different reports were present to the Government. The majority view of Mr Dickens, James Charles and Russomoy Dutt was presented as the Report of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Abuses Alleged to Exist in the Exports of Coolies (Henceforth called Dicken's committee report) . Two members W Dowson and JP Grant disagreed and presented their own reports and the sixth member Major Archer was absent at the end of the investigation.

<sup>24</sup> Minute of Mr Dowson, Page 17 (IOR/V/6/820/1)

<sup>25</sup> 24 March 1863, Hansard Vol 169

abuse of workers in the colonies of Réunion, Martinique and Guadeloupe, or ensure their punctual repatriation (Northrup, 2000).

The Economist, though strongly opposed to the slave trade, advocated Indian indentured labour migration: "We have always been warm advocates of the Coolie immigration into the West Indies. We are convinced that by no other plan the population of these fertile islands be increased up to the high pressure point at which alone Africans can be induced to labour hard"<sup>26</sup>. The supporters of indentured labour migration used the vocabulary of docility and reliability for the Indian labour force, as against the "slow and indolent temperament of the African Race"<sup>27</sup> residing in the islands claiming that "the mild temper and cautious habits of the Hindoo, with the increased energy which the fine climate produces, renders him much superior character to the African Negro"<sup>28</sup>.

The movement of workers (once it began) had to take into account the costs of travel, cost of wages and maintenance and the cost of uncertainty associated with mortality, ability and willingness to work so far from home. Since these costs were sunk, Galenson (1984) argued that the system of indenture was a rational response. Analysing migration from Britain and Ireland to the USA from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, he argued that when people wished to travel from one country to another for work, they usually did not have funds to pay for the passage. This meant that their passage was paid for by their future employers who recouped these costs through their subsequent labour on the mines in America. In the absence of the 'indenture' contract, there would be no incentive for the labourers to stay with the employer who had paid their fare. In fact, says Galenson, as countries providing labour to the USA became richer (eg. UK, and Germany), so also indenture was less necessary because workers could pay their fare themselves and travel as free workers. This was the most benign view of the development of indenture. Deer (1949) calculated that the per unit cost for indentured labour migration from the Indian subcontinent to the West Indies was about £20, and to Mauritius was £7. This aggregated to a cost of £20,000,000 for the immigration of Indian workers from the period of 1838 to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This cost was borne in part by the planter and in part by the receiving colony.

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<sup>26</sup> The Economist, Saturday, March 2, 1861, Vol. 019, Issue 914, p.227.

<sup>27</sup> The Economist, Saturday, July 16, 1859. Vol 017, Issue 827, p 785

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Thomas A Wise, MD, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1838

In the next section, we will consider the problems with the system of indenture in more detail. These relate to asymmetric information, asymmetric bargaining power and impact on efficiency.

#### 4. Problems with the System

At a macroeconomic level, the issue of indenture brought together free trade and free movement of people, both of which were seen as 'good' by liberals. At the individual level, indenture was deemed superior to slavery because within it, labour power continued to be owned by the individual, a distinguishing aspect of capitalism (Rao, 1999). The commodification of *labour power* was maintained within the system of indenture, even though 'ownership' of this labour power was limited during the period of the indenture.

Liberal thinkers had been unhappy about the "uncivility" of slavery in the form of unfree labour (Ince, 2017). The concept of civility arose from Smith's metaphor of the 'impartial spectator' who invokes a sense of fairness and justice against wrongs of the world which included slavery (especially in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759)). In the context of ancient Greece, Smith referred to the states with domestic slavery that "sell.. man, woman, and child, like so many herds of cattle, to the highest bidder in the market" as the "vilest of all states" (Smith, 1759: p333). J. S. Mill was opposed to both slavery as well as the voluntary loss of freedom, as in indenture. Mill was born a year before the abolition of slave trade (1807) and by the time *On Liberty* was published in 1859, the system of indentured migration had become widespread. He was fundamentally opposed to the loss of liberty, even voluntary. In *On Liberty* he argues that "an engagement by which a person should sell himself, or allow himself to be sold, as a slave, would be null and void; neither enforced by law nor by opinion..... His voluntary choice is evidence that what he so chooses is desirable, or at the least endurable, to him, .....but by selling himself for a slave, he abdicates his liberty; he foregoes any future use of it, beyond that single act. He therefore defeats, in his own case, the very purpose which is the justification of allowing him to dispose of himself. He is no longer free; but is thenceforth in a position which has no longer the presumption in its favour, that would be afforded by his voluntarily remaining in it. The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free. It is not, to be allowed to alienate his freedom" (Mill, 1859). On these grounds, Mill objected to voluntary Chinese 'coolie' labour in the United

States (Schawn, 2013). Marshall also argued that economic freedom required agents to have the ability to make 'deliberate and free choice'. He wrote that "human agents of production are not bought and sold as machinery and other material agents of production are. The worker sells his work, but he himself remains his own property" (Marshall, 1890: p466).

The system of indentured labour migration contradicted this freedom in many ways. It was associated with lack of informed consent, coercion and mistreatment of workers during the process of recruitment in India, the high mortality of workers during the passage to the Caribbean, abuses on the plantations and their inability to live and move freely on the islands. Individual freedom was undermined because the decision to migrate was often forced by circumstances. In fact, many political economists argued that the notion of freedom to work was contradictory because in the context of poverty, there was no freedom and workers were forced to work. Marshall contended that "When a workman is in fear of hunger, his need of money [its marginal utility to him] is very great; and, if at starting, he gets the worst of the bargaining, and is employed at low wages, it remains great, and he may go on selling his labour at a low rate." (ibid, p 279) In this section, we will consider some of the issues that were raised as problems with the system in greater detail.

#### 4.1 Asymmetric Information

One of the major problems of the system of indenture was the lack of information that the migrants had when they were recruited. They had no information about the place they would be travelling to, how far it was, how long they would be gone for etc. In addition, various reports commissioned by the Governments of Great Britain and India pointed towards deceit and coercion at the point of entry, so that even when information was provided, it was often inaccurate and deceitful. For example, the Dicken's committee report quotes a witness to coolie migration: "Did they know that they were to be separated for five years from their families? — No; they thought they were going only for two months, as it was stated to them... The duffadars told them that they were engaged only for two months, so they expected to return to Calcutta in four or five months."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Geoghegan's Report<sup>30</sup> of 1875 stated

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<sup>29</sup> *Abdoolah Khan*, doctor in ship conveying Coolies to the Mauritius. Quoted in Dicken's committee minutes:35-36

<sup>30</sup> Mr Geoghegan's report (1875) "Coolie Emigration from India". Hence forth referred to as Geoghegan's report.

“In February 1871 a flagrant case of kidnapping by recruiters and others was brought to light at Allahabad, and attracted a good deal of attention both in India and in England”. Evidence of kidnapping for recruitment was also given by witnesses like David Hare, a Scottish businessman based in Kolkata and JH Patton esq, magistrate of 24 Pergunnahs who stated “ The charges were for kidnapping and imprisoning the Coolies, and ill-treating them, and were substantiated; the depositions were taken in Bengalee and Hindoostanee; the system appeared to be this: the duffadars go up the country, and meet with people in the country, and entice them down by promises of service, promising to up-country men the services of porter (durwans); to others, labour at Calcutta.”<sup>31</sup>

In an independent enquiry by the Government of India in 1919 on conditions of indentured workers, CF Andrews and WW Pearson<sup>32</sup> reported multiple instances of duping and coercion. For example, the authors noted that many individuals, especially women, were tricked into migration in the name of pilgrimage: “(many women) were recruited at the pilgrim centres. The common narrative was that the recruiting agent came up, offering to take the woman to her relations, or to show her some sacred shrine, and then took her to the depot instead.” ( p7) The reports also claimed abuse and high mortality<sup>33</sup>.

Given both asymmetric information and misinformation, it could no longer be argued that entry into the indenture contract was freely undertaken.

#### 4.2 Asymmetric Bargaining Power

A second issue that caused problems for the system of indenture was the asymmetric bargaining power between the workers and the employers. While this is often the case, the distance of workers from home and the relative bargaining advantage of the plantation owner implied that the system of indenture became more problematic in application. Adam Smith argued that the collective bargaining power of landlords or capitalists (the ‘masters’) is greater than that of the workers: “... wages of labour, depends everywhere upon contract usually made between the two parties [workmen and masters], whose interests are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little, as possible.

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Dicken’s Committee Minutes:58

<sup>32</sup> Andrews C F and WW Pearson (1916) “Indentured Labour in Fiji: An Independent Enquiry”

<sup>33</sup> For example, Geoghegan’s Report spoke of the “terrible mortality which had attended emigration from Calcutta to the West Indies during the season 1856-57”

The former are disposed to combine in order to raise, the latter in order to lower the wages of labour. It is not, however, difficult to foresee which of the two parties must, upon all ordinary occasions, have the advantage in dispute, and force the other into a compliance with their terms. The masters, being fewer in number, can combine much more easily: the law, besides, authorises, or at least does not prohibit, their combination, while it prohibits those of the workmen" (Smith, 1776:p71).

Marshall, in turn, argued that the disadvantage in bargaining comes about because labour power is "perishable" and, as the workers are "commonly poor and have no reserve fund, they cannot easily withhold it from the market" (1890: p326). It was therefore not possible for them to effectively bargain on wages and conditions. The workers' 'disadvantage in bargaining' resulted in wages being lower than the 'real value of labour' or the marginal productivity of labour, which was seen as particularly problematic by the Classical Political Economists for whom wage isn't just an incentive for work, but is also a mode to reproduce labour power by providing for a future generation of workers. Marshall believed that slavery could not reproduce the working class and the reproduction of the working class happens only as a consequence of wages "in paying his work people high wages and in caring for their happiness and culture, the liberal employer confers benefits which do not end with his own generation. For the children of his workpeople share in them, and grow up stronger in body and in character than otherwise they would have done. The price which he has paid for labour will have borne the expenses of production of an increased supply of high industrial faculties in the next generation" (ibid: p325). Since the system relied on a continuous stream of new entrants into the labour market, employers were not responsible for providing a survival wage that covered the reproductive costs of labour.

These differences in bargaining power were apparent in the indentured workers' experiences. Andrews and Pearson argued in their report that "Contracts for personal service, which are made, with ignorance on the one hand and intelligence on the other; or contracts which are brought about by the exploitation of the weak: or contracts which are engaged in for an excessively long period of years — these all tend to reproduce servile features. In these cases the new word 'indenture' is nearly equivalent to the old word 'slavery'... It is neither a free, nor an intelligent contract. It is not what a businessman would call a 'square deal'. It is also fixed for a dangerously long period of years, and thus is liable to lead to the abuse of individual



liberty" (P2). Though there were legal systems in place, purportedly to ensure that workers were not abused, they were biased towards the plantation owners. Geohegan noted in his reports that in British Guiana, of the complaints made by the planters against workers (for complaints like shirking of work), and workers against planters (for complaints regarding payment of wages) "the planter won 91 per cent, of his cases; the Indian only 38 per cent"<sup>34</sup>. Geohegan noted this position of disadvantage of the Indian worker because "he is ignorant of the language of the court", "he is unacquainted with the forms of English law", "the magistrates, unacquainted with Asiatics, are too apt to reject *en masse* the evidence of fellow-labourers of the immigrant in court, instead of trying to sift out what truth there may be amidst much exaggeration" and "the great majority of cases are cases in which the immigrant is a defendant. Yet, since even if the charge be for breach of contract, the case is treated as a criminal case, the immigrant's mouth is shut."

The disadvantage in bargaining position was reflected both in the abuse that the worker received, but also in terms of monetary compensation for work and the spreading out of risks between the plantation owner and the worker. Dicken's committee noted that, in principal the indentured worker was supposed to receive 6 months advance at the time of recruitment, which was usually not paid. Furthermore, to ensure that the plantation did not suffer a loss because of death of the indentured workers, they imposed a "stoppage of one rupee a month out of five, for the expense of his return passage" once the indentured worker arrived at the host colony. The expense of the return passage, according to the committee members was 10 Rupees per head, which effectively meant that "the Coolie pays, during his servitude, about 54 rupees for the risk to the master, who can but pay 10 for that risk; and, even supposing the money thus stopped out of the Coolie's wages to be refunded to him on going away (which there is great room for doubting), he is a great loser, and insures the master at an exorbitant rate."<sup>35</sup>

Such power asymmetries also resulted in coercion during employment on the plantations. Abdoolah Khan, a doctor on the ship conveying Coolies to Mauritius said "I heard they were punished in this manner; as they were working in a stooping posture, nothing was done to them, but as soon as they stood erect, the sirdar or overseer beat them with rattans... [they

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<sup>34</sup> Geoghegan's Report: Page 88

<sup>35</sup> Dicken's report: 7

were punished] for standing erect and not working; this was when they stood up to take rest from working.” Captain Alexander Garioch Mackenzie, Captain of a ship carrying indentured workers ordered workers “to be beaten with a rattan” and Sheik Manick a Sirdar stated that his master used to tell him to “Work the Coolies as hard as possible.” Sirdar carried on “I said, “ If they were put to such hardship they would die;” he said, “ Never mind, I will get others to supply their places if they die” I was never beaten by him but once, when I applied to him for pay, and an additional quantity of food; on that occasion he commenced beating the Coolies with his own hand, and on my remonstrating with him for this, he gave me a blow with his fist, which knocked me down; he then sent for a policeman, and my hands were tied with a rope, and I was taken to the police.”<sup>36</sup> Other sources also note coercion. For example a former slave, was quoted in a dispatch from the Governor of British Guyana “The Coolies were locked up in the sickhouse, and next morning they were flogged with a cat-o’-nine-tails; Mr. Jacobs applied the cat with his own hands... The Coolies who were flogged were tied to the post of the gallery of the manager’s house; the post was under the balcony, not under the stairs. I saw Mr. Jacobs lick them, but I can’t tell how many licks he gave any one of them; he gave them enough; I saw the marks on the backs of some of them, marks across the back; they were cut, and I saw blood.”<sup>37</sup> Erickson (1934) noted that in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of indenture in the West Indies (in 1839) there were 53 deaths among 405 coolies, which included 8 deaths among 70 coolies on the Vreed-en-Hoop plantation which was owned by Gladstone.

#### 4.3 Inefficiency

In addition to these problems from the workers’ point of view, many liberal economists argued that unfree labour was more expensive because the system was inefficient. Adam Smith argued in the *Wealth of Nations* that “from the experience of all ages and nations, I believe, that the work done by freemen comes cheaper in the end than that performed by slaves”. The latter didn’t encourage innovation: “the wages of labour are the encouragement of industry, which, like every other human quality, improves in proportion to the encouragement it receives” (1776: p 85) Therefore, Smith argued “the experience of all ages

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Dicken’s committee minutes: Pages 36, 37 and 48

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Caesar, labourer, of Vreed-en-Hoop quoted in Despatch from Governor Light to the Marquess of Normandy (1840)

and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any. A person who can acquire no property can have no other interest but to eat as much and to labour as little as possible. Whatever work he does beyond what is sufficient to purchase his own maintenance, can be squeezed out of him by violence only, not by any interest of his own" (ibid: p 86).

Alfred Marshall<sup>38</sup>, who started working on *The Principles of Political Economy* in 1881, about 36 years after indentured labour migration commenced between the Indian subcontinent and the West Indies, also argued that freedom was essential to production, and unfreedom was inefficient. "All history," he says, "is full of the record of inefficiency caused in varying degrees by slavery, serfdom, and other forms of civil and political oppression and repression." (Marshall, 1890: p 164). He adds that, "Freedom and hope increase not only man's willingness but also his power for work".

Inefficiency was built into the system of indenture. Indenture contracts paid the workers a flat rate and did not allow them to change employers. Fixed wages of this kind provided very little incentive for voluntary effort and this meant that workers had to be closely monitored and coerced to work. In fact, the marginalists were clear that it wasn't wages so much as variable wages that were essential for efficiency. Marshall argued that "(the) tendency (of equalisation of efficiency-earnings) will be stronger, the greater is the mobility of labour, the less strictly specialised it is.."(ibid, p:261). He goes on to suggest that a standard wage is not efficient and "it would be to the advantage of the employer to raise the time-earnings of the more efficient workers more than in proportion to their efficiency". (ibid, p:316) Thus, from the perspective of efficiency and incentives, indentured labour could be deemed

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<sup>38</sup> Alfred Marshall was aware of the influence that political economists had on policy making, and was concerned that they were heavily misunderstood " The general principles which they laid down were almost all true; but their way of expressing them was coloured by the peculiar character of the facts among which they lived. It required a great mental effort to grasp the principles of their reasoning; and the effort was made by but few of their followers. But it was easy to take hold of isolated sentences and to repeat them without the conditions implied in the context. And this was done. Political Economy became fashionable. In Parliament and the counting house, in the pulpit and the press, the authority of Political Economy was invoked for all kinds of purposes; but before all and above all, for the purpose of keeping the working-man in his place. Nearly all the greatest economists have been earnest and fearless friends of the working classes; they have been impelled to the study of economics chiefly by a desire to see how far it was possible to diminish the evils of poverty. But Ricardo had very little sympathy one way or the other; and many of those who made themselves a reputation by the confidence with which they misunderstood parts of what he said, were partisans of capital. The reputation of Economic Science has suffered and is suffering for the misdoings of its camp followers."

superior to slavery, as the individuals were provided an incentive through the wage but it was still inefficient from a marginalist point of view because it was pre-determined and fixed and could not be changed once production was observed.

These problems with the system of indenture – asymmetric information, asymmetric bargaining power and inefficiency - were clear to many thinkers from the start. In a Parliamentary debate about the importation of Hindu workers into the West Indies, the Scottish abolitionist Lord Brougham argued that, despite what the West-Indian confederates may claim, the indenture system was “nothing but slave trading is, and that nothing but slave trading can be, the meaning and the result of all that is thus doing.”<sup>39</sup> This sentiment of the abolitionists was also reflected in the *Manchester Times* in 1838: “while most of the colonial legislatures resolve terminating the apprenticeship system on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, A NEW SLAVE TRADE between the East and West Indies is sanctioned by our professedly liberal ministry”. Similarly, the *British Emancipator*, a newspaper dedicated to the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, wrote in detail of forced recruitments in Calcutta and of high mortalities of coolies in the West Indian plantations. Charles H Allen, the secretary stated that the society opposed the importation of the British Indian subjects into the colonies of any foreign country. “... [I]n British colonies where slavery had once existed - such as Guiana, the West Indian Islands, and the Mauritius - it was found that the proper protection of free immigrants was almost a matter of impossibility.” He argued that “in consequence of the reports of the cruel treatment of the coolies... there arose a considerable agitation on the part of the Anti-slavery society... against what was deemed to be a revival of slave trade.”

##### 5. Indenture: A Compromise between freedom and Unfreedom?

We have seen the constraints that pushed for a flow of workers into the West Indies. We have also discussed what made this system problematic. We will now consider how the system of indenture might have been rationalised as a compromise between free labour and the slave trade. The system of indentured labour provided workers with some economic freedom and

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<sup>39</sup> March 6<sup>th</sup> 1838, Hansard, Volume 41

incentives because workers were paid a standard wage over the period of indenture and, at least theoretically, had the freedom to enter the contract and after some time (5 years), to exit the contract. We will discuss this compromise along four parameters - incentives, flexibility of contract, voluntary entry and absence of punishment – in this final section.

### 5.1 Incentives:

A free worker was paid a wage for her labour, while a slave was not. Wages can include cash and benefits in kind. Free workers were paid the vast majority of their wages in cash and were then free to spend them in whatever way they pleased. Slaves, on the other hand, received no cash wages and only very minimal benefits in kind. These benefits in kind would normally include survival board and lodgings, with the quantity being at the whim of the master. Indentured labourers fell between these extremes with more cash wages than slaves but less than free workers and more benefits in kind than free workers (usually food, board, and possibly a free passage home). Liberal political economists might well have seen this as a compromise. The wages provided more incentive to work than in the case of slavery but, by being fixed, they were not especially effective in bringing forth increased effort. Archival evidence indicates that the wages paid to Indian indentured labour, though lower than would be paid to free labour in the colony, were positive. In the case of Mauritius in 1838, Dicken's committee reported that average wages of free labour ranged from 2s to 4s a day, while net wages for the coolie labourer was 8s a month<sup>40</sup>. The gap between free worker wages and coolie wages varied over time and according to location, and even as late as 1875 Geoghegan documented in his report that "The class of Indian immigrants at present in the Colony cannot, as a rule, earn more than half as much in the same time as the negro"<sup>41</sup>.

### 5.2 Mobility:

As we have seen earlier, the marginalist theories would have hypothesised a wage being equal to the marginal product of labour in competitive labour markets. This, of course, could not be tested but in the context of free labour, it was expected that labour would exit if wage was less than its marginal product, and would be made redundant if wage was greater than the marginal product. Mobility in labour markets generally implies flexibility of contract and the ability to smoothly exit from the existing contract. Indentured labourers, at the time of entry

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<sup>40</sup> Dicken's committee report: Page 8

<sup>41</sup> Geoghegan's report; page 104

into the contract, entered into a five-year bonded contract to work on a plantation. Neither the worker nor the plantation owner had the option to exit the contract early. In addition, since employment was usually far from home in an unfamiliar country, mobility was further constrained. Many also considered a five-year contract too long and argued for a shorter indenture period. For example, Whig Politician Lord J Russell argued that immigration of Indian workers to the Caribbean could be acceptable on condition that they were “for periods of one year, and no longer”<sup>42</sup>. However, for the plantation interests the period of one year was not long enough to ensure return on the investments made in recruitment and transportation of the workers. John Gladstone argued “the period of five years for which we propose to engage these labourers is the shortest that circumstances will admit of... In estimating the value of their services for five years, it is to be taken into consideration that as they would be altogether ignorant of the usages, and unaccustomed to such work as their services would be required for, a considerable time would be necessary for their instruction, probably six to twelve months, and during that time their services would be of little comparative use or value, whilst the same expense [of transportation and subsistence] would be incurred”<sup>43</sup>.

The contract was to work for the period in a particular plantation, and the workers had no input into deciding which plantation they would work in. In addition, there was no opportunity for the worker to change plantations in case of disagreement or complaints or for plantations to get rid of workers when their individual situations changed or when market conditions changed. The costs of the labourers had to be borne for the fixed period, though workers could be rented out to other plantations. This latter might have been possible when a single plantation faced difficulties but was less easy when macroeconomic conditions worsened for example if sugar price fluctuated or in case of weather changes. Overall, it was clear that indentured workers had more freedom to move (after 5 years) than slaves but less than free workers. This inflexibility bred significant inefficiencies into the system of indenture both for the workers as well as for the employers, though less than would be the case in the employment of slaves.

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<sup>42</sup> June 4<sup>th</sup> 1840, Hansard vol 54

<sup>43</sup> letter to Lord Glenelg (1837)

### 5.3 Voluntary Entry:

Another feature of free labour is that workers can enter a contract voluntarily without coercion. Evidence indicates that while slaves had no choice in entering their contract, indentured workers theoretically did have this choice. In theory, therefore, indentured labour was a constrained compromise between slavery and free labour. The reality, however, as we have already seen, was that entry into the contracts was often not entirely voluntary. The Dicken's committee reported that "We conceive it to be distinctly proved beyond dispute that the Coolies and other Natives exported to Mauritius and elsewhere were induced to come to Calcutta by gross misrepresentation and deceit...". They also found that workers were "really incapable of understanding the nature of the contracts they were said to have entered into even when an opportunity of explanation had been afforded..." Similarly, while workers were to be given six month's advance payment, they often received little or none of it. All these abuses happened, in spite of the Legislative Enactments and Regulations of Police that were meant to safeguard workers.

### 5.4 Punishment (Coercion):

The last aspect of employment is how effort is extracted. In a system where wages are not sufficiently high to provide incentives for effort, there is a significant likelihood of shirking. Preventing this requires the close monitoring of effort and harsh punishments of shirkers. Brass (2009) argued that the existence of coercion and violence become necessary to extract effort when unfree workers do not have positive incentives in the form of reward (wages/payments). In the system of slavery, such coercion was usually physical because, in the absence of wages, there were no other instruments that could be used. Within indenture, two types of punishment – monetary and physical – were possible. We have already discussed the physical coercion of workers but in addition, monetary penalties were also used. For example, most plantations had the system of "double cut" whereby workers were fined an amount equivalent to two days wages if they missed one day of work<sup>44</sup>. Additionally, plantations were able to deduct part of the worker's monthly wage as security for 'good conduct' (Mishra, 2009). Similarly, unlawful absence from plantations was punishable with fines and imprisonment. Most colonies also had strict vagrancy laws whereby immigrant

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<sup>44</sup> Dicken's committee report

workers were expected to carry permission slips to leave their plantations and identity cards, failing which they were liable to be arrested or fined<sup>45</sup>.

(Table 1 here)

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper we attempted to understand how unfree labour in the form of indentured labour migration was justified within the political economy discourse of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. The post-emancipation Indian indentured labour migration came about at a time when the British political and intellectual class upheld the ideas of macro and micro freedom.

To some extent, this was because this kind of labour migration was felt essential to ensure profitability of West Indian plantations following two Acts in the British Parliament that were themselves central to the idea of freedom - The Emancipation Act of 1838 and The Sugar Duties Act of 1846. Following the emancipation of slaves, indentured labourers provided an alternative source of labour in which the workers were compensated and - at least theoretically - voluntarily entered a contract. In addition, the restriction of mobility within the contract and the distance from their home ensured their docility.

This paper discusses the constraints under which policy makers and thinkers were functioning during this period. In particular, the need to provide a sustained flow of workers to the plantations once slavery was abolished, a flow that would continue to maintain the profits of European capital invested in these plantations, maintain low costs both for consumers and manufacturers, were all important. Indentured labour migration was therefore a compromise between slavery and free labour. It ensured free trade and free international mobility of workers. The workers were notionally free as they were voluntarily selling their labour power. While these aspects of the migration were rationalized in the liberal discourse, some other aspects were harder to justify. The workers had very limited local mobility and the pre-determined wage was less than what the free worker earned. There was significant evidence of high mortality, low bargaining power, coercion, kidnapping, physical punishment and monetary penalties which far exceeded what a free worker would face. Thus, though this form of migration measured up to considerations of macro freedom and partial micro

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<sup>45</sup> For example, an 1864 ordinance in British Guiana made it a criminal offence for an Indian indentured worker to be found outside a two-mile radius of the plantation where he or she was employed and made him or her liable to fines and imprisonment.



freedom, it did not meet standards of individual liberty. Overall, while the constraints helped rationalise the system of indenture, it was clear that the system in practice was problematic because workers lacked information when they made the decision to migrate, they were significantly weaker than the employers and the migration agents and because the inflexibility of the system bred inefficiencies.

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