

# The Illusion of Freedom: Indentured Servitudes Impact on Labor Reforms

Vanshika Jain

Mt. Lebanon Senior High School, USA

## ABSTRACT

The essay explores the origins and impacts of indentured servitude, focusing on British colonial policies implemented in India and China. The findings indicate that the servants originated in India and were contracted by British masters. Beginning with the British influence in India in the 1600s, the essay examines how economic and legal changes under British rule, such as the Permanent Settlement of Bengal and the shift to cash crop cultivation, worsened by severe droughts and famines, created a vulnerable population due to uncontrollable circumstances. Similarly, the aftermath of the Opium War in China and the economic consequences of British trade policies led to widespread poverty, pushing many towards indentured labor. These factors combined to produce a large-scale migration of Indian and Chinese laborers under harsh and exploitative conditions. Moreover, the essay compares indentured servitude to slavery, noting the differences in voluntariness and legal status but highlighting similar abuses and dehumanization. It discusses the severe working conditions, manipulation through contracts, and the socio-economic impacts on global migration patterns, with millions of Indians and Chinese forming significant diasporas. The abolition of indentured servitude, driven by labor movements and legal reforms like the *Robin v. Hardaway* case, marked a significant shift that promoted economic development, social mobility, and labor rights. The essay emphasizes the resilience of these laborers and their enduring struggle for justice and equality.

## Introduction

After the abolition of slavery in America in 1865, plantation owners and companies faced a need to find alternatives to replace slave labor with economically viable options. Consequently, in a post-slavery landscape, America turned to the system of Asian indentured servitude. Although America had gained independence from British rule in 1783, American plantation owners still used Britain as a source for indentured servants. Britain emerged as the primary trafficker of indentured servants due to its dominance in trade and its foothold on almost every continent. Indentured servitude was practiced in various British-controlled colonies in Africa and the islands bordering South America.

While both slavery and indentured servitude are forms of labor exploitation, a crucial distinction exists between the two. Indentured servitude operated on the premise of contractual agreements willingly acknowledged by individuals. These contracts typically spanned five to seven years, during which servants exchanged their labor for financial compensation. This contractual framework fundamentally set indentured servitude apart from the involuntary institution of chattel slavery. Indentured servitude is often portrayed in historical narratives as a more humane alternative to slavery, characterized by relatively better treatment of individuals. However, many indentured servants were misled about the provisions of the contract and the provisions were often not honored. The treatment of slaves and indentured servants were similar in many cases, with the distinction being that slaves were bound for life. Indentured servants could look forward to an end date if they survived. Also, their children would be free should they choose to stay. The prevalence of indentured servitude wielded significant transformative power over the economy, development, immigration, and demographics of present-day

California, Virginia, and the Caribbean Islands. This essay delves into the socio-economic conditions in India and China that led to mass migration, including the impact of British-imposed economic structures, natural calamities, and internal conflicts. Additionally, it examines the comparative experiences of indentured laborers in different regions, assessing the long-term consequences on their communities and the development of the colonies. The legacy of indentured servitude highlights the cultural and demographic shifts resulting from the people's mass exodus. Therefore, investigating these dimensions provides a comprehensive understanding of how indentured servitude shaped the modern world and influenced migration patterns, labor laws, and socio-economic development across continents.

## Origins of Indentured Servitude

### Early British Involvement in India

Most indentured servants originated in India, contracted by British masters. The roots of this migration can be traced back to the early days of British influence on the Indian subcontinent. British involvement in India commenced in the 1600s with the initiation of trade and ultimately culminated in the establishment of political control over the Bengal Delta in 1617. Over the ensuing centuries, British dominion expanded westward, leading to full control over India in 1858.<sup>1</sup>

### Economic and Legal Changes

The transformation brought about by British rule was not merely political; it altered the legal and economic fabric of India. In 1786 Lord Cornwallis removed the option of taxes being paid with crops. This compelled farmers to cultivate cash crops like tobacco, cotton, and indigo to maximize profitability. By the late 1700s and early 1800s, 78% of cash crops, including commodities like cotton originated in India.<sup>2</sup>

### Influence of Droughts and Famines on Migration

Beginning in 1876 India began to experience the worst droughts recorded in Indian history. This dramatically decreased the number of crops being harvested. Farmers were also planting fewer edible crops because of the Permanent Settlement of Bengal, started by Lord Cornwallis a century before, which worsened the famines. Britain also refused to lower the tax rates and continued to ship Indian commodities like tea overseas. These tax rates further put the lower classes into debt. This debt grew the disparities between the castes more. These castes were so rooted in the social structure of India, that individual mobility was nearly impossible. The caste system became further recognized by the lack of food, which led to the starvation of over fifty million people.<sup>3</sup> The intersection of British policies, environmental challenges, and the inflexible social hierarchy created an ideal environment for exploitation. The lack of money and food made Indians susceptible to the promises of a better life offered by indentured servitude.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dutt, Romesh C. *The economic history of India under early British rule, from the rise of the British power in 1757 to the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Blyn, G. 1966. *Agricultural trends in India, 1600–1861: Output, availability, and productivity*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>3</sup> Hill, Christopher V. "Philosophy and Reality in Riparian South Asia: British Famine Policy and Migration in Colonial North India." *Modern Asian Studies* 25.2 (1991): 263–279.

## British Influence in China

### Background of the Opium War

Policy changes in China also lead to indentured servitude gaining prevalence. A dispute over trading ports between Britain and China triggered an economic crisis that pushed individuals towards indentured servitude. Britain wanted China to be open for trade, while China wanted to continue to be an isolated economy and prevent the illegal spread of opium. This led to the Opium War of 1839-1842. The war ended on August 17, 1842, with the Treaty of Nanking. The treaty gave present-day Hong Kong to Britain. It also gave 21 million dollars in fines to Britain for the destroyed opium as well as opening the ports for British trade.<sup>4</sup>

### Economic Consequences

The opening of ports moved the markets away from inland China to the coasts, heavily straining the economy of China. Furthermore, seceding Hong Kong to Britain broke the Chinese monopoly on certain cash crops like the opium that started the war. The import duties decreased drastically from 65 to 5 percent, leaving less money in the Chinese economy.<sup>5</sup> This decay in the Chinese economy resembled that in India, where an economic crisis created by British policies led to famines and armed revolts, and to poverty rates that incentivized individuals to migrate abroad. British intervention in China created economic adversities that spurred migration to the Americas.

### Similarities with Indian Indentured Servitude

The economic downturn induced by the famines created a desperation ripe for recruitment, where promises of a better life in a new world were used as bait. In both India and China, recruitment tactics employed by the British officers capitalized on the widespread illiteracy prevalent among the lower class. Knowing that a significant portion of the population could not read or comprehend written contracts, officers resorted to oral conveyance of the terms, thereby deceiving prospective indentured servants, and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>6</sup> China became the second largest supplier of indentured labor in the world after India, with approximately half a million migrants leaving for work elsewhere. India had a recorded 2 million individuals in the practice of indentured servitude. Indentured servants were shipped to British-controlled islands, colonies, and the Americas.<sup>7</sup>

The contractual agreements typically bound individuals to employers for 5-7 years, during which their earnings were intended to support their families back in India and China. Historical records reveal that the

---

<sup>4</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Key Facts of the Opium Wars." Encyclopedia Britannica, October 5, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Key-Facts-of-the-Opium-Wars>.

<sup>5</sup> San Juan Island National Historical Park, ed., "The Opium War and The Royal Marines," National Park Service, last modified Jul 7, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/places/the-second-opium-war-and-the-royal-marines.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Galenson, D. "Literacy and the Social Origins of Some Early Americans." *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 1 (1979): 75–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639012>.

<sup>7</sup> Mintz, S., & McNeil, S. (2018). Contract Labor. *Digital History*. [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp\\_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3294](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3294)

promised financial support seldom materialized.<sup>8</sup> The contracts, often presented in a language and format unfamiliar to the illiterate workers, were a tool of manipulation.

## Comparisons of Slavery and Indentured Servitude

### Legal and Policy Changes

Although the practices of slavery and indentured servitude both entailed abuses, they have distinct characteristics that show that indentured servitude was better for the workers. The core difference between slavery and indentured servitude is the voluntariness of entering these labor systems and the duration of service. Slavery, an involuntary and hereditary condition, rendered individuals as property with no agency over their destiny. In contrast, indentured servitude represented a contractual agreement, a voluntary exchange where individuals somewhat willingly entered service for a predetermined period. The critical distinction lies in the element of choice—slaves were thrust into their condition without recourse, while indentured servants made a conscious decision to enter into a binding agreement. The legal frameworks surrounding these labor systems further illuminate their disparities.<sup>9</sup> Slaves were legally regarded as property, devoid of inherent rights, and their offspring were automatically consigned to the same enslaved status. In contrast, indentured servants were contractual workers, possessing legal rights within the confines of their agreements. The biggest difference between the two practices is that the children of indentured servants did not inherit their parents' status automatically, opening avenues for a more diverse range of life outcomes.

In a paper for the *Fiji Sun* in 1979, ex-indentured servant Hausildar illustrated the treatment of indentured servants. “We were whipped for small mistakes. If you woke up late, i.e. later than 3 am, you got whipped. No matter what happened, whether there was rain or thunder you had to work - we were here to work and work we had to do, otherwise we were abused and beaten up.”<sup>10</sup> The toll on their physical well-being was substantial, with some ending up disabled or disfigured from the abuse suffered.<sup>11</sup> While comparing the level of abuse suffered between indentured servants and slaves is impossible, accounts of indentured servitude and slavery mirror similar abuse tactics. The mortality rate among indentured servants was thirty-three percent due to abuse and maltreatment.<sup>12</sup> Due to the absence of specified working hours in their contracts, indentured servants frequently toiled from the early hours of dawn until dusk. Failure to meet productivity quotas or causing damage to crops compelled them to borrow money from plantation owners, plunging them into debt and invariably extending their terms of service.

In more parallels to slavery, indentured servants were housed in the same small barracks as formerly enslaved individuals. Most barracks measured 10 square feet (about the area of a bathtub) to 8-10 feet tall. The walls between the barracks were not completely sealed to allow for ventilation, so it resulted in a complete lack of privacy.<sup>13</sup> Regularly, there were up to 5 individuals housed in each room.

---

<sup>8</sup> Lal, Brij V. "Understanding the Indian indenture experience." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 21.s1 (1998): 215-237.

<sup>9</sup> Donoghue, J. (2013). Indentured servitude in the 17th century English Atlantic: A brief survey of the literature. *History Compass*, 11(10), 893-902.

<sup>10</sup> Pearson, R., Anitha, S. and McDowell, L. (2010) 'Striking Issues: From labor process to industrial dispute at Grunwick and Gate Gourmet', *Industrial Relations Journal* 41(5): 415.

<sup>11</sup> Galenson, David W. "British servants and the colonial indenture system in the eighteenth century." *The Journal of Southern History* 44.1 (1978): 41-66.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* 420-428.

<sup>13</sup> Brereton, B. "A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962". Heinemann International, 1981.

In another connection to slavery, plantation owners engaged in a form of gender exploitation by often assigning one woman to every four men.<sup>14</sup> This disturbing practice aimed to address the significant gender imbalance among the indentured servants, with women being treated as mere reproductive assets. The men assigned could be of different races, creating mixed-race children. The women were told they had no 'motherly instinct' and were blamed for the high infant mortality rate. Andrews, a close friend to Sushil Rudra, the man in charge of spearheading the Ghadar movement: "I had been feeling for weeks the misery of the indenture system having to go on... after all this terrible exposure which has proved it to be legalized prostitution, and I could not bear to think of chaste and pure Indian woman inveigled out."<sup>15</sup> Forced reproduction further highlighted the dehumanizing nature of the system, as individuals were commodified, stripped of their agency, and subjected to a life of exploitation. Time did not work because pregnancy was tacked on to the end of the contract. Those who attempted to escape their owners were sentenced to up to six months of jail time. These 6 months spent in jail likewise did not count toward the contract term.<sup>16</sup>

The notion that offspring born to indentured servants were considered free resulted in numerous instances where individuals of mixed heritage strategically invoked their ancestral backgrounds to secure their freedom. One pivotal event in this movement occurred in May 1772 with the initiation of the *Robin v. Hardaway* case in Virginia, a legal proceeding that marked a significant step towards the recognition of freedom for such individuals. Notably, George Mason, a key figure in the formulation of the Bill of Rights, served as the legal representative for Robin, a person of mixed ancestry. He was a child that resulted due to forced sexual assault. His mother was an Indian indentured servant, while his father was a slave. He argued that because his mother was free and completed her contract by the time he was born, he should be free as well unlike his slave father.<sup>17</sup>

The Virginia court's decision in the *Robin v. Hardaway* case established the precedent that individuals of Indian descent were "prima facie free,"<sup>18</sup> thereby challenging the institution of slavery for Native Americans and Indians. This gave children of mixed race who were a result of forced reproduction the ability to leverage their Indian heritage to be free. This ruling had a ripple effect, extending its influence on other states such as Connecticut, Louisiana, Missouri, New Jersey, South Carolina, and Tennessee.<sup>19</sup>

## Changes in Indentured Servitude

The *Robin v. Hardaway* case set into motion the fight against the indentured system. The European abolitionist movement, gaining momentum in the wake of the *Robin v. Hardaway* ruling, drew inspiration from the precedent set in recognizing the freedom of individuals with mixed heritage.<sup>20</sup> This recognition challenged the norms surrounding indentured servitude.

Simultaneously, concerns arose in the Caribbean Islands as the Indian population appeared to outnumber the white population. In response, there was an 1833 initiative to revise the contracts of indentured servants,

---

<sup>14</sup>Wolfe, B. Indentured Servants in Colonial Virginia. (2020, December 07). In *Encyclopedia Virginia*. <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/indentured-servants-in-colonial-virginia>.

<sup>15</sup> Anitha, S., Pearson, R. and McDowell, L. (2012) Striking lives: Multiple narratives of South Asian Women's Employment, Identity and Protest in the UK, *Ethnicities* 12 (6): 654-775.

<sup>16</sup> Laurence, K.O. "A Question Of Labour: Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana 1875-1917". Ian Randle Publishers, 1994.

<sup>17</sup>*Robi, et al v. Hardaway*. Manuscript. RG 104, Virginia General Court 2 May 1777. State Government Records Collection.

<sup>18</sup> Ablavsky, G. (2010). Making Indians White: The judicial abolition of native slavery in revolutionary Virginia and its racial legacy. *U. Pa. L. Rev.*, 159, 1457.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.* 167.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

eliminating the option for laborers to receive land and tools, and restricting them solely to the alternative of returning to India.<sup>21</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi, a prominent figure began his advocacy journey in Africa as a journalist. He wrote *The Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa* in a document published in 1896. As this document gained popularity, the Europeans began to despise it. Gandhi was nearly lynched by a mob of angry Europeans who wanted to remove the document from the hands of the Indian subcontinent. The document was also quoted in a South African newspaper, *Indian Opinion*. This newspaper was a large whistleblower on the true treatment of indentured servants.<sup>22</sup> Gandhi viewed and wrote in his document that removing the ability to stay in the land they were working was a contractual violation. Because the death toll aboard the ships was so high, taking a trip back to India was a life risk considering the conditions most indentured servants were in. He also believed that the opportunity to permanently settle inside the British-controlled colonies was a major point for the advancement of the lower-class individuals in the indentured servant movement. The removal of the option for land and tools was viewed by Gandhi as not only an infringement on the rights of indentured servants but also as a hindrance to their progress.<sup>23</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi's views on the policy changes for indentured servants paired with the *Robin v. Hardy* case caused tensions between plantation owners and workers. In one recorded case on the Leonara plantation in 1939, a dispute over unpaid wages exacerbated by a drought led to an uprising of forty servants. Facing the prospect of starvation due to delayed wages, the servants resorted to drastic measures, killing two plantation owners.<sup>24</sup> This incident, far from being an isolated event, had far-reaching consequences.

Plantation owners and their property became frequent targets: homes were set on fire, and plantation owners were attacked and often killed. Another frequently used technique by indentured servants was suicide weaponized as rebellion. The largest uprising in the British Islands was recorded in Trinidad. At the Hosea festival, an uprising of protest resulted in 12 Chinese immigrants killed, and 100 left in critical condition.<sup>25</sup> The unrest compelled British India's Imperial Legislative Council to take decisive action. In 1917, responding to the escalating tensions and widespread resistance, the council outlawed the indentured servant system.<sup>26</sup>

Following the British Council's decision in 1917, surviving indentured servants were presented with a critical choice: either opt for a free passage back to India or accept their "freedom dues," which were usually a set of tools and a small piece of land. Only a third of these survivors chose to return to their homeland, primarily due to fear of the harrowing experience of the sea voyage. The ships were overcrowded, and conditions were

---

<sup>21</sup> Kaarsholm, P. (2016). Indian Ocean networks and the transmutations of servitude: the protector of Indian immigrants and the administration of freed slaves and indentured labourers in Durban in the 1870s. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42(3), 443-461.

<sup>22</sup> Bulla, D. W. (2016). "Gandhi and the Indian Indentured Servants in South Africa". In *Slavery Past, Present and Future*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848883994\\_002](https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848883994_002)

<sup>23</sup> "Mahatma Gandhi's Move for the Abolition of the Indentured Labour System – the Gimit". *Mauritius Times*, 4 Nov, 2019.

[www.mauritiustimes.com/mt/mahatma-gandhis-move-for-the-abolition-of-the-indentured-labour-system-the-gimit/](http://www.mauritiustimes.com/mt/mahatma-gandhis-move-for-the-abolition-of-the-indentured-labour-system-the-gimit/).

<sup>24</sup> Shefelveland, K. Indian Enslavement in Virginia. (2020, December 07). In *Encyclopedia Virginia*. <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/indian-enslavement-in-virginia>.

<sup>25</sup> "The Coolie Disturbances In Trinidad." *The Times*, 15th April 1885, p. 11. *The Times Digital Archive*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS186042511/GDCS?u=gale&sid=GDCS&xid=deec8a96>

<sup>26</sup> Union League Club & African American Pamphlet Collection. (1865) Report of the Special Committee on the passage by the House of Representatives of the constitutional amendment for the abolition of slavery, January 31st. New York. <https://www.loc.gov/item/12003495/>.



deplorable, with seventeen percent of the servants losing their lives during the arduous journey. However, staying was not always a good option, as, for instance, British policies enacted by Natal included a tax on freed indentured servants, creating substantial barriers to building wealth and escaping poverty.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, discriminatory policies on the islands of Tobago and Trinidad prevented the children of indentured servants from attending school unless they converted to Christianity. Generations elapsed before these individuals could amass enough resources to break free from the plantation system.

## Racial Impacts

The slow societal progression of indentured servants is also a result of the classification of indentured servants by race. In America, Native Americans and Indians were both identified as "Indians" in official documents. Because of this grouping, Indians were assumed to be skilled in agriculture like Native Americans. Negatively, they were perceived as "untruthful" and "filthy."<sup>28</sup>

Chinese indentured servants were selectively praised for traits perceived as advantageous to the exploitative system. The qualities of "docility," familiarity with agriculture, and an alleged "respect for authority" were lauded, though often with the ulterior motive of justifying the continuation of indentured servitude while obscuring its exploitative nature.<sup>29</sup>

To keep indentured servants from progressing and creating a community together, plantation owners would complement Chinese indentured servants over Indian individuals to create a superiority complex. These fractious complexes would prevent the colored groups from operating in solidarity against the plantation owners.<sup>30</sup>

Employing stereotypes as strategic tools, these tactics were employed to maintain the motivation and loyalty of the servants toward the plantation owners. Even upon achieving freedom, the lingering effects of these divisive tactics persisted, contributing to the isolation of different ethnic groups and impeding collective progress. Today, this racial bias and stereotype is what leads to microaggressions and delayed cultural or social progress of ethnic groups.

## Demographical Impact

The conclusion of indentured servitude marked a transformative period in global immigration, particularly characterized by the massive influx of Asians, notably Indians and Chinese, shaping the world's largest diaspora. By 2020, an estimated 18 million Indians and 10.5 million Chinese had established vibrant communities beyond their homelands, leaving indelible demographic imprints across continents.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Dow, L. "Indentured Workers and Anti-Colonial Resistance in the British Empire." *Review.gale.com*, 25 May 2021, [review.gale.com/2021/05/25/indentured-workers-and-anti-colonial-resistance-in-the-british-empire/](https://review.gale.com/2021/05/25/indentured-workers-and-anti-colonial-resistance-in-the-british-empire/).

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, C. "Convicts and coolies: Rethinking indentured labour in the nineteenth century." *Slavery and Abolition* 30.1 (2009): 93-109.

<sup>29</sup> Yun, L. (2008). *The coolie speaks: Chinese indentured laborers and African slaves in Cuba*. Temple University Press.

<sup>30</sup> Kiley, G. "Colonial Enslavement of Native Americans Included Those Who Surrendered, Too." *Brown University*, 15 Feb. 2017, [www.brown.edu/news/2017-02-15/enslavement](http://www.brown.edu/news/2017-02-15/enslavement)

<sup>31</sup> The Economist. "India's Diaspora Is Bigger and More Influential than Any in History." *The Economist*, 12 June 2023, [www.economist.com/international/2023/06/12/indias-diaspora-is-bigger-and-more-influential-than-any-in-history](https://www.economist.com/international/2023/06/12/indias-diaspora-is-bigger-and-more-influential-than-any-in-history).

In Trinidad and Tobago, the legacy of indentured labor is deeply embedded in the fabric of society, with Indo-Trinidadians and Tobagonians constituting the largest ethnic group. The process of transitioning from indentured servants to advocating and contributing members to society was slow, spanning generations beyond the expiration of labor contracts. British policies further hindered progress with imposed taxes, yet the community's resilience shone through as they actively engaged in anti-apartheid movements, forging alliances with Africans, and ultimately ascending to positions of power through democratic channels. As of 2020, the economic and social stature of Indians in Trinidad and Tobago remains significant, with Indo-Trinidadians and Tobagonians asserting their presence as the nation's predominant ethnic group.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, Durban, South Africa stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Indian indentured labor. Boasting the largest Indian population outside of India, Durban's cultural landscape is enriched by the vibrant tapestry of Indian cuisine, music, and dance. As of 2020, the Indian community continues to thrive, catalyzing economic diversity and cultural vibrancy. Indian-owned enterprises have emerged as pivotal drivers of entrepreneurship and innovation, contributing substantially to the city's dynamism and prosperity.

Alongside the Indian diaspora, Chinese indentured servants also played a significant role in shaping global demographics and cultures during the era of indentured servitude. Their migration patterns have left lasting impacts on the demographics and cultural landscapes of countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and countries in Southeast Asia. Despite their relatively small numbers today, Chinese indentured servants played a crucial role in Cuba's history, actively participating in the country's struggles for independence against British colonial rule. Their contributions serve as a testament to the enduring resilience and transformative influence of migrant communities in shaping the course of history.

As of 2020, the descendants of Chinese indentured servants form substantial communities outside of China, with approximately 10.5 million Chinese living abroad. Their contributions to labor forces, economies, and cultures are evident in various aspects of daily life, from fusion cuisines to vibrant Chinatowns in major cities worldwide.<sup>33</sup>

The experiences of both Indian and Chinese indentured servants underscore the complexities and interconnectedness of global migration patterns and the enduring impact they have on societies across continents.

## Comparative Study of Labor Movements Globally

The separation of workers based on ethnicity, paired with the abuse and shared struggle between workers, resulted in labor movements and union formations across the globe. The exploitative system of indentured servitude served as the foundation for these movements. Indentured laborers, frequently subjected to harsh and exploitative working circumstances, aimed to improve their working conditions, salaries, and overall treatment.

They formed unions and staged strikes to oppose exploitative employers. Indian indentured workers in the Caribbean coordinated plantation strikes to demand higher wages and better living circumstances. The tactic of plantation strikes came from the initial strikes to outlaw indentured servitude. They also established groups in almost every place where Asian indentured servitude was prominent. In Trinidad, the formation of the All-Trinidad Sugar Estates and Factory Workers Trade Union in 1937 drew attention to the Imperial Government to fix its policy towards the West Indian sugar industries.<sup>34</sup> In South Africa, an Indian Congress (SAIC)

---

<sup>32</sup> Kowalczyk, C. Hancock, P. "Mahatma Gandhi's Descendants Thrive in South Africa." *CNN*, 25 Sept. 2015, [www.cnn.com/travel/article/gandhi-descendants-durban-south-africa/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/travel/article/gandhi-descendants-durban-south-africa/index.html). Accessed 13 Apr. 2024.

"As Chinese-Cuban Population Dwindles, Traditions Die."

*Www.rutgers.edu*, [www.rutgers.edu/news/chinese-cuban-population-dwindles-traditions](http://www.rutgers.edu/news/chinese-cuban-population-dwindles-traditions)

<sup>34</sup> Basdeo, S. (1986). Indian Participation In Labour Politics In Trinidad, 1919–1939. *Caribbean Quarterly*, 32(3/4), 50–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40653664>



was formed giving former indentured servants a place in government.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese indentured servants in the Americas also staged strikes and protests to demand equitable treatment. They launched strikes in industries like mining and railroad construction, protesting unsafe working conditions and salary discrepancies. One of the work strikes lasted a week before the Central Pacific Railroad cut off all food and supplies to their camp. Although this strike was not successful, it marked the first real protest against unfair work conditions for Chinese workers in America.<sup>36</sup>

The results of these movements differed. In the instance of Indian indentured workers in the Caribbean, their efforts led to better working conditions and wages. Many finally obtained the ability to own land and established permanent residency in their host nations. For Chinese workers in the Americas, the results were more varied. While they were successful in raising awareness about labor exploitation and discrimination, they frequently encountered violent opposition from employers and anti-Chinese sentiment.<sup>37</sup> Over time, these groups contributed to larger labor and civil rights movements in their respective countries.

The impact of these movements can be seen in modern labor rights debates and the continuous battle against labor exploitation. The experiences of Indian indentured laborers and Chinese laborers emphasize the importance of workers' rights and the need for organized labor movements to combat exploitation and discrimination.

## The Economic and Social Impact of Labor Reforms

The broader social implications of labor changes include better family lives and urbanization. One significant influence is the alteration of family structures. As labor conditions improved, workers' employment and income became more stable, resulting in enhanced family cohesiveness. Furthermore, having access to greater education and professional prospects boosted families' socioeconomic standing, which positively impacted household well-being.<sup>38</sup>

Labor changes have also affected urbanization patterns. The transition from rural economies to manufacturing and services has resulted in the expansion of urban areas as workers relocate in pursuit of work. This population change has accelerated urban development, resulting in better infrastructure, education, and healthcare facilities for cities.

Urbanization, in turn, has boosted economic growth in cities and helped diversify economies. Consider the economic consequences of post-indentured labor reforms in Africa. The implementation of labor laws and regulations has resulted in an expansion of industrial and service industries. Before indentured servitude, the Caribbean and African areas were very isolated, with more goods being imported than exported. Indentured servitude gave rise to construction, railroad building, and textiles. The commerce from Africa also grew as more goods began to be shipped on indentured ships. This in turn helped Africa's Agrarian economy diversify and flourish.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Desai, A., & Vahed, G. (2021). *Colour, Class and Community-The Natal Indian Congress, 1971-1994*. NYU Press.

<sup>36</sup> Chinese Labor and the Iron Road - Golden Spike National Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service). (n.d.). Retrieved from - <https://www.nps.gov/gosp/learn/historyculture/chinese-labor-and-the-iron-road.htm#:~:text=At%20the%20time%20it%20was,and%20supplies%20to%20the%20camps>.

<sup>37</sup> Allen, Richard B. "Walton Look Lai." Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies". *The Historian*. 582.

<sup>38</sup> Galenson, D. W. (1981). The market evaluation of human capital: The case of indentured servitude. *Journal of Political Economy*, 89(3), 446-467.

<sup>39</sup> Department of Geography, Cambridge » Agrarian change and rural transformations in India. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/ruraltransformations/>

The implementation of labor rights and anti-discrimination laws in the United States has enabled individuals from underprivileged communities, including descendants of indentured laborers, to pursue opportunity and achieve social mobility. They have leveled the playing field for workers from various origins by addressing exploitation issues and improving working conditions. These legal safeguards have helped to eliminate financial disparities and improve access to education, resulting in a fairer society.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

The abolition of indentured servitude marked a significant turning point in labor history, ushering in a cascade of economic and social transformations. These changes were not merely confined to the workplace, but rippled throughout society, shaping the fabric of nations and profoundly impacting the lives of individuals.

Economically, the transition away from indentured labor led to fundamental shifts in production and industry. With the removal of this exploitative system, there emerged a greater emphasis on fair wages, improved working conditions, and increased productivity. The elimination of indentured servitude spurred innovation and efficiency as employers sought to attract and retain skilled workers through better treatment and compensation. This, in turn, contributed to overall economic growth and laid the groundwork for the emergence of modern labor practices.

Moreover, the abolition of indentured servitude played a pivotal role in promoting social mobility and dismantling entrenched socioeconomic barriers. By offering individuals the opportunity to earn fair wages and pursue educational and professional opportunities, labor reforms fostered a more equitable society. The removal of indentured servitude as a barrier to upward mobility allowed individuals from diverse backgrounds to aspire to higher positions and contribute to the development of their communities.

Furthermore, the eradication of indentured labor contributed to a more egalitarian and fair society by reducing exploitation and improving working conditions. Workers gained greater autonomy and bargaining power, leading to a more balanced employer-employee relationship. This shift towards fair labor practices not only improved the lives of workers but also strengthened the social fabric by fostering a sense of justice and equity.

The impact of these labor reforms extended beyond the workplace, influencing changes in family structures, urbanization, and demographic transitions. As individuals gained greater economic independence and social mobility, family dynamics evolved, leading to changes in household roles and responsibilities. Urbanization accelerated as workers migrated to cities in search of employment opportunities, driving economic growth and cultural exchange. Demographic transitions occurred as access to education and healthcare improved, leading to healthier and more prosperous communities.

It is important to acknowledge that the history of indentured servitude, while often overshadowed by the more infamous institution of slavery, reveals a dark legacy of exploitation and discrimination. Despite offering some degree of choice and hope for a better future, indentured labor subjected individuals to harsh and dehumanizing conditions. The economic prosperity fueled by this system came at a significant human cost, as generations of workers endured hardship and suffering in the pursuit of a better life.

The abolition of indentured servitude marked a critical juncture in labor history, catalyzing economic development, promoting social mobility, and fostering a more equitable society. While the legacy of exploitation and injustice persists, the enduring struggle for labor rights serves as a reminder of the resilience and perseverance of individuals in the face of adversity.

---

<sup>40</sup> Feiveson, L. "Labor Unions and the U.S. Economy." *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 28 Aug. 2023, [home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/labor-unions-and-the-us-economy](https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/labor-unions-and-the-us-economy).

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

## References

- Ablavsky, G. (2010). Making Indians White: The judicial abolition of native slavery in revolutionary Virginia and its racial legacy. *U. Pa. L. Rev.*, 159, 1457.
- Ablavsky, G. (2010). Making Indians White: The judicial abolition of native slavery in revolutionary Virginia and its racial legacy. *U. Pa. L. Rev.*, 167, 1457.
- Ablavsky, G. (2010). Making Indians White: The judicial abolition of native slavery in revolutionary Virginia and its racial legacy. *U. Pa. L. Rev.*, 163, 1457.
- Allen, Richard B. "Walton Look Lai." Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies". *The Historian*. 582.
- Anderson, C. "Convicts and coolies: Rethinking indentured labor in the nineteenth century." *Slavery and Abolition* 30.1 (2009): 93-109.
- Anitha, S., Pearson, R. and McDowell, L. (2012) Striking lives: Multiple narratives of South Asian Women's Employment, Identity and Protest in the UK, *Ethnicities* 12 (6): 654-775.
- "As Chinese-Cuban Population Dwindles, Traditions Die." *Www.rutgers.edu*, cuban-population-dwindles-traditiondie#:~:text=Although%20only%20about%20150%20native.
- Basdeo, S. (1986). Indian Participation in Labor Politics In Trinidad, 1919–1939. *Caribbean Quarterly*, 32(3/4), 50–65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40653664>
- Blyn, G. 1966. *Agricultural trends in India, 1600–1861: Output, availability, and productivity*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Brereton, B. "A History of Modern Trinidad 1783-1962". Heinemann International, 1981.
- Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopedia. "Key Facts of the Opium Wars." Encyclopedia Britannica, October 5, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/summary/Key-Facts-of-the-Opium-Wars>.
- Bulla, D. W. (2016). "Gandhi and the Indian Indentured Servants in South Africa". In *Slavery Past, Present and Future*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848883994\\_](https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848883994_)
- Chinese Labor and the Iron Road - Golden Spike National Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service). (n.d.). Retrieved from - <https://www.nps.gov/gosp/learn/historyculture/chinese-labor-and-the-iron-road.htm#:~:text=At%20the%20time%20it%20was,and%20supplies%20to%20the%20camps>.
- De Caux, L. *Labor radical; from the Wobblies to CIO, a personal history* (1970)
- Department of Geography, Cambridge » Agrarian change and rural transformations in India. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/ruraltransformations/>
- Desai, A., & Vahed, G. (2021). *Colour, Class and Community-The Natal Indian Congress, 1971-1994*. NYU Press.
- Donoghue, J. (2013). Indentured servitude in the 17th century English Atlantic: A brief survey of the literature. *History Compass*, 11(10), 893-902.
- Dow, L. "Indentured Workers and Anti-Colonial Resistance in the British Empire." *Review.gale.com*, 25 May 2021, [review.gale.com/2021/05/25/indentured-workers-and-anti-colonial-resistance-in-the-british-empire/](https://review.gale.com/2021/05/25/indentured-workers-and-anti-colonial-resistance-in-the-british-empire/).

- Dowlah, C. (2020). Indentured Servitude: The Saga of the Indians and the Chinese. *Cross-Border Labor Mobility: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, 119-140.
- Dutt, Romesh C. *The economic history of India under early British rule, from the rise of the British power in 1757 to the accession of Queen Victoria in 1837*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956.
- Feiveson, L. "Labor Unions and the U.S. Economy." *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 28 Aug. 2023, [home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/labor-unions-and-the-us-economy](https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/labor-unions-and-the-us-economy).
- Galenson, W. "British servants and the colonial indenture system in the eighteenth century." *The Journal of Southern History* 44.1 (1978): 41-66.
- Galenson, D. "Literacy and the Social Origins of Some Early Americans." *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 1 (1979): 75–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639012>.
- Galenson, D. (1981). The market evaluation of human capital: The case of indentured servitude. *Journal of Political Economy*, 89(3), 446-467.
- Harris, R., & Lewis, R. (2001). The geography of North American cities and suburbs, 1900-1950: A new synthesis. *Journal of Urban History*, 27(3). (15-17)
- Hill, Christopher V. "Philosophy and Reality in Riparian South Asia: British Famine Policy and Migration in Colonial North India." *Modern Asian Studies* 25.2 (1991): 263–279.
- Kaarsholm, P. (2016). Indian Ocean networks and the transmutations of servitude: the protector of Indian immigrants and the administration of freed slaves and indentured labourers in Durban in the 1870s. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42(3), 443-461.
- Kiley, G. "Colonial Enslavement of Native Americans Included Those Who Surrendered, Too." *Brown University*, 15 Feb. 2017, [www.brown.edu/news/2017-02-15/enslavement](http://www.brown.edu/news/2017-02-15/enslavement)
- Kowalczyk, C. Hancock, P. "Mahatma Gandhi's Descendants Thrive in South Africa." *CNN*, 25 Sept. 2015, [www.cnn.com/travel/article/gandhi-descendants-durban-south-africa/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/travel/article/gandhi-descendants-durban-south-africa/index.html). Accessed 13 Apr. 2024.
- Lal, Brij V. "Understanding the Indian indenture experience." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 21.s1 (1998): 215-237.
- Laurence, K.O. "A Question Of Labour: Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana 1875-1917". Ian Randle Publishers, 1994.
- "Mahatma Gandhi's Move for the Abolition of the Indentured Labour System – the Girit". *Mauritius Times*, 4 Nov, 2019.  
[www.mauritiustimes.com/mt/mahatma-gandhis-move-for-the-abolition-of-the-indentured-labour-system-the-girit/](http://www.mauritiustimes.com/mt/mahatma-gandhis-move-for-the-abolition-of-the-indentured-labour-system-the-girit/).
- Mintz, S., & McNeil, S. (2018). Contract Labor. *Digital History*.  
[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/dispatch\\_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3294](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/dispatch_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3294)
- Parfitt, S. *Knights across the Atlantic: The Knights of Labor* Liverpool University Press, 2016. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. [www.loc.gov/item/2020715048/](http://www.loc.gov/item/2020715048/).
- Pearson, R., Anitha, S. and McDowell, L. (2010) 'Striking Issues: From labor process to industrial dispute at Grunwick and Gate Gourmet', *Industrial Relations Journal* 41(5): 415.
- Pearson, R., Anitha, S. and McDowell, L. (2010) 'Striking Issues: From labor process to industrial dispute at Grunwick and Gate Gourmet', *Industrial Relations Journal* 41(5): 420-428.
- Robi, et al v. Hardaway. Manuscript. RG 104, Virginia General Court 2 May 1777. State Government Records Collection.
- Salinger, S. "Labor, markets, and opportunity: Indentured servitude in early America." *Labor History* 38.2-3 (1997): 311-338.
- Sanders, H. (2006). Indentured servitude and the abolition of prostitution in postwar Japan. *USJP Occasional Paper*. Cambridge, MA: Program on US-Japan Relations.

- San Juan Island National Historical Park, ed., "The Opium War and The Royal Marines," National Park Service, last modified Jul 7, 2022, <https://www.nps.gov/places/the-second-opium-war-and-the-royal-marines.htm>.
- Shefveland, Kristalyn K. Indian Enslavement in Virginia. (2020, December 07). In *Encyclopedia Virginia*. <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/indian-enslavement-in-virginia>.
- "The Coolie Disturbances In Trinidad." *The Times*, 15th April 1885, p. 11. *The Times Digital Archive*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS186042511/GDCS?u=gale&sid=GDCS&xid=deec8a96>
- The Economist. "India's Diaspora Is Bigger and More Influential than Any in History." June 12, 2023 [www.economist.com/international/2023/06/12/indias-diaspora-is-bigger-and-more-influential-than-any-in-history](http://www.economist.com/international/2023/06/12/indias-diaspora-is-bigger-and-more-influential-than-any-in-history).
- Union League Club & African American Pamphlet Collection. (1865) Report of the Special Committee on the passage by the House of Representatives of the constitutional amendment for the abolition of slavery, January 31st. New York. <https://www.loc.gov/item/12003495/>.
- United States Congress. Senate. Committee On Education and Labor & Black, H. L. (1937) Fair labor standards act ... Report. [Washington, U. S. Govt. print. Off] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/37026762/>. (3-4)
- United States Congress. Senate. Committee On Education and Labor & Black, H. L. (1937) Fair labor standards act ... Report. [Washington, U. S. Govt. print. Off] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/37026762/>. (7-8)
- Wolfe, B. Indentured Servants in Colonial Virginia. (2020, December 07). In *Encyclopedia Virginia*. <https://encyclopediaivirginia.org/entries/indentured-servants-in-colonial-virginia>
- Yun, L. (2008). *The coolie speaks: Chinese indentured laborers and African slaves in Cuba*. Temple University Press.