Speech on the Abolition of Indentured Labour

Madan Mohan Malaviyaji’s speeches were always based on assimilation of facts, analysis of various viewpoints and a rationale leading to his own conclusions, which could hardly be refuted by others. His speech in the Imperial Legislature Council on the abolition of the indentured labour system is one such example. Excerpts are quoted here to show the depth of his study and analysis, which narrate the heart-rending effects of the utterly degrading and immoral system of indentured labour. Headings are given by the present authors.

The Indentured Labour System – A Fraud

My Lord, I beg to move ‘That this Council recommend to the Governor-General-in-Council that early steps be taken for the abolition of the system of Indian Indentured Labour’. It is now nearly eighty years since the system of indentured labour was first introduced in India. It followed in the wake of the abolition of slavery by the British Parliament in British Colonies. That happened in 1834, and at that time the planters in British Colonies, who severely suffered from the total abolition of slavery, tried to get labour from India in order to carry on their work. They could not reconcile themselves to the loss of slave labour, and the object that they had in view was to get persons who would work for them under conditions as favourable to them as they could establish. The Sanderson Committee, which was appointed a few years ago, said that the object of these planters was to re-establish the conditions of labour, so far as they could, which existed when slavery had not been abolished. ‘The aim of the planters who had suffered so severely from the entire discontinuance of slave labour,’ said the Committee, ‘was too often to acquire complete control over the labour market by means of regulations and measures which aimed at compelling the coolie to re-engage himself on the expiry of his indenture rather than encouraging free settlers.’ In consequence of this feeling, the laws relating to Indian immigrants, introduced into several colonies, ‘gradually assumed a complexion less and less favourable to freedom, and, as the report of subsequent Commissions show, they were framed and administered in a spirit of substantial injustice to Indian immigrants.’ Various serious abuses naturally cropped up under this system in different Colonies, and Commissions were appointed in Mauritius, British Guiana and Natal, and some of the most flagrant abuses were remedied. In the meantime, the establishment of recruiting depots in India at various centres gave rise to complaints of kidnapping and other objectionable practices, and the question of revising the existing enactments relating to emigration was taken up for consideration in 1882, and an Act was passed in 1883. The aim of the new Emigration Act, Act XXI of
1883, was to ensure prompt and careful registration of emigrants, so as to enable them to be easily traced, and to provide for magisterial supervision of up-country depots. But as the Resolution of the Government of India, issued in 1883, and the speech of Mr. Ilbert showed, the object also was to make recruitment more popular: and in his evidence before the Sanderson Committee, Sir Edward Buck, who was for fifteen years Secretary to the Government of India in the Department of Revenue and Agriculture, said that the Legislation of 1883 did make recruitment much easier.

In 1908, the Emigration Acts were consolidated, and up to that time the Government of India were not much perturbed in mind as to the treatment which Indian received in the Colonies. In 1909, Lord Crewe appointed a Committee “to consider (1) the general question of emigration from India to the Crown Colonies; (2) the particular Colonies in which Indian immigration may be most usefully encouraged; and (3) the general advantages to be reaped by India itself and each Colony.

During all this time the Government of India put their trust exclusively in the Colonial Governments and laws for the fair treatment of Indians during the period of indenture there. As the Hon’ble Mr. Ilbert stated, in presenting the Report of the Select Committee on the Indian Emigration Bill, in 1883, every precaution had been taken which our law could enforce “that the emigrant should be properly treated from the time when he leaves the place where he is recruited to the time when he lands in the Colony for which he is bound. Further than this our law cannot follow him, and after this point we can only provide for his welfare by such influence as we can bring to bear on the Government of the country in which he has established himself.

The Council will remember that, in 1910, our late lamented friend, Mr. Gokhale, moved a resolution urging the prohibition of the recruitment of indentured labour for the Colony of Natal. He was convinced even then, as he said, that the system should be done away with altogether. But he was content with urging, at the time, as a prudential measure, the prohibition of indentured labour to Natal, and the Government of India was pleased to accept that recommendation, and prohibited the supply of indentured labour so far as Natal was concerned. Two years later, he brought forward another resolution urging the total abolition of the system, the evils of which he graphically described, and which he rightly characterized as ‘a monstrous system, iniquitous in itself, based on fraud and maintained by force, a system so wholly opposed to modern sentiments of justice and humanity as to be a grave blot on the civilization of any country that tolerates it.’
It was a matter of deep disappointment to the public that the Government of India were not convinced till then that the system was one which must be ended. They still hoped that it might be mended, and in that hope that they appointed a Committee to visit the Colonies and to report on the actual working of the system. The report of Messrs. McNeill and Chimman Lal was submitted to Government more than a year ago, and I regret to say that the report was received by the public with great dissatisfaction and disappointment, as it unmistakably showed a tendency to underrate the evils of the system and even to apologise for it. The facts, however, which the Committee have recorded tell their own plain tale, and supply abundant evidence to enable every impartial man to form his own judgment. That judgment is entirely against the system. For what in essence is the system? It is one under which simple, illiterate, ignorant village people, belonging largely to the poorest classes, are inveigled into entering into a very solemn agreement which compels them to leave their homes, to leave their kith and kin, and to go to a distant country of the conditions of existence in which they are entirely ignorant, to work in circumstances in which they are practically at the mercy of their employers, for a continuous period of five years, to work under men who do not understand their language, custom and manners, who have no sympathy with them, under conditions in settling which they have no voice without being informed that they will be liable to be punished criminally, the punishment extending sometimes to two or three months’ hard labour, if they fail to perform the tasks which are assigned to them, tasks, in the fixing of which they have no voice and in making complaints against which they find but little support.

**Indentured Labour – Inhuman, a Curse**

In the admirable report which Mr Andrews and Mr Pearson have published on indentured labour in Fiji, they say:

We found, further, on examination that the agreement, which the coolie signs before going out, does not truly represent the faces of coolie life in Fiji. It is a misleading document. Not a word, for instance, is said concerning the penalties which await the coolie, if, for any reason (which he may regard as valid) he refuses to work. Another serious omission from the agreement (seeing that those who sign it are for the most part ignorant and illiterate people) is the failure to record the fact that food-rates in Fiji differ materially from those in India. The coolie is told in the agreement that he will be paid at the minimum rate of twelve annas a day. But he is not told that the purchasing power of twelve annas in Fiji is scarcely equal to that of five annas in India. He is not told, also, that more is required in the way of clothing and
other necessaries of life in Fiji than in India. So that the bare living expenses are nearly three times as high in Fiji as in India itself.

I should add that he is also not told that the twelve annas which is promised will not be paid to him unless he is able to finish the full task that will be set to him. He is also not told that he will be liable to lose in the shape of fines a good portion of the twelve annas. And, as I have said before, he is also not told that there will be any interference with his religion. Apart from all other considerations I am certain that if be was informed that there would be a violent interference with his religion, few of the recruits, however humble their caste, would consent to go to the Colonies.

Let us, my Lord, now consider the nature of the service which the emigrant is to render. That service is described in the printed form of agreement as agricultural work or domestic service. But Messrs. Andrews and Pearson state it as a fact that some of these coolies, as they are called, have been compelled to perform the hateful task of cutting up meat in butchery. My Lord, it would be utterly repugnant to all sense of fairness to suggest that domestic service can include the cutting up of meat in butchery, and yet this has been forced upon our people. The results have been very sad as Mr Andrews says:

A low caste Hindu, who was brought out under indenture for ‘agricultural work ’ was set to cut up meat in butchery. When asked by us how he, a Hindu, could engage in such work, he replied that he could not help it, as he was ordered to do it.
A Kabir Panthi, now out of indenture, had been originally obliged to do the same kind of work. He told us that he had continually refused and had been imprisoned. We looked up his record on the estate and found he had been given 692 days’ imprisonment while under indenture.

My Lord, the Kabir Panthis are a sect who have a deep-rooted horror of injuring life. That a man like that should be forced to cut up meat under compulsion in a place where he is utterly helpless is a matter which is very sad to reflect upon.

My Lord, let us now see who the recruiters are, and what are the devices that they resort to in dealing with the emigrants? In his evidence before the Sanderson Committee, Mr. J.A. C. Brown, G.S.I., a Commissioner of my Province, stated as follows:
My impression is that the recruiting staff is very bad; the recruiters are the worst kind of men they could possibly have. They are generally very low class men, and as far as I understand, they are paid by the results, by the number of emigrants that they get. The consequence is that they very often try to entice married women away from their husbands and try to get anybody they can.

In the western districts of the United Provinces the recruiter gets Rs. 45 per head for every male and Rs. 55 per head for every female whom he can induce to emigrate. In the eastern districts, he gets less; and so also in Madras. My Lord, the temptation is strong enough to induce low class people to practise every fraud and deception they can for their selfish gain. The Sanderson Committee admits that a fair proportion of the emigrants leave India without having any clear idea of the duties they have to perform. ‘They are uncomfortable it may be and welcome any change of circumstances, or they have quarrelled with their families, with their parents and leave their home in search of work and have not been able to find it.’ But that is not all. Several of them are actually deceived and most unscrupulously so. Say Mr Andrews and Mr Pearson:

In a very large number of cases the coolie’s own home people knew nothing about his recruitment. Very possibly many such coolies were escaping from justice, or running away from some family quarrel at the time. But others were clearly quite simple village people, involved in no such trouble.

They had lost perhaps their relations in a crowded railway station. They were on a pilgrimage and did not know the way. They were merely going from one village to another, when the recruiting agent came along and tempted them with his story. It was noticeable among the women how many 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. The evidence given of such practices was far too circumstantial in detail, and far too frequently given with fresh detail and fresh names of places, to allow of any doubt concerning its substantial accuracy.

...After speaking of other cases, Mr Andrews goes on to say:

We then went to see a Gaur Brahmin who had gone mad on account of his wife being taken away by the recruiting agent. The whole neighborhood collected, showing their sympathy and pity. The madman was a pathetic sight to witness. Then a respectable Jat came up to us. His brother was blind and had an only
son who was taken by the recruiters. A Hindu, by caste a Bania, spoke to us concerning his wife. She had been taken by the recruiters, and he was very bitter against them. We asked him if he had made any attempt to get her back. He said he could not.

My Lord, I have personal knowledge of several cases of deception practised by recruiters which have happened during the last few years in my Province. Many a time have I or some of my friends tried to get a woman rescued from the depots. None but a magistrate or a person who has obtained a permit from a magistrate can enter any such depots. When we enter them we ask for the woman who, we have been informed, has been induced by false pretences to go there. Either she is not produced, or she is produced after being tutored to say exactly what the recruiter wishes her to say. If she says anything different, she knows she will be dealt with harshly by the recruiters. Mr Andrews truly observes that the recruiting agent is able to stupefy these victims of his fraud with fear; he is able to coach them in the questions they will have to answer, and they very rarely refuse to reply according to his directions when the time comes.

When the emigrant has embarked on board the steamer, he is confronted with the state of things which I have already mentioned. In addition to that there is absolutely NO privacy for the modesty of women. Altogether the conditions in which emigrants find themselves are so hard that, as Mr Andrews points out there have been lamentable and tragic cases of Indians, both men and women, who have thrown themselves into the Hugli in order to escape from the emigrant ships, and also of actual suicides occurring on the high seas.

When the emigrants get to the Colonies, they are confronted with trouble of different characters. The hours of work fixed are about seven hours in British and Dutch Guiana, and nine hours in the remaining three Colonies. Including intervals for meals, the labourers have to be out for about ten hours. This, my Lord, is too long, and in the case of women it is harder still. They have to get up between 3 and 4 in the morning to cook their food, and to be at the farm at about 5 and to remain there the whole day. What is worse, in the case of those who have children, they have to leave their children behind in order that work should not be interfered with. This is cruel enough. But to show that it is worse still in practice, we have a case mentioned by Mr. Andrews in which an overseer actually whipped a woman who was taking her child with her because it was ill, and compelled her to leave it behind...
In every Colony an adult male is paid, roughly speaking, at the rate of twelve annas per day, while the women receive eight or nine annas a day. But it would be a great mistake to think that their daily earnings amount to twelve or nine annas. On the contrary their average earnings are very much less...

The observations of the Sanderson Committee states that during the first one or two years, the labourers can hardly be expected to save anything. That they are unable to lay by anything even in subsequent years is also clear from the facts mentioned by it. In British Guiana an attempt was made to introduce the ex-indentured labourers to settle in the colony by enabling them to commute the right to a return passage for a grant of land. But the attempt proved unsuccessful, and in Sir Charles Bruce’s opinion “The cause of failure was that the immigrants, when they became entitled to the return passage, were hardly yet in a sufficiently independent position to make their living entirely by the produce of their own land.”

Then, my Lord, as to the nature of the tasks imposed and the hardships of the conditions under which these immigrants work, the number of prosecutions gives very remarkable evidence.

This is the cruelest part of the story. That the number is excessive has been admitted by the Sanderson Committee and the Committee appointed by the Government of India, and both have referred pointedly to it in their reports. It reveals the true nature of the indenture system, and shows that it is perilously akin to slavery. Men can be prosecuted not only for desertion or criminal conduct, but even for using insulting words or gestures. The whole of the evidence before the Committees of 1909 and 1913 was to the effect that Indians are very docile and lawabiding and very easy to manage. Why should there be such a large number of prosecutions then? ‘Obviously, the system places too much power in the hands of overseers who seem to regard everything but silent and unquestioning obedience as a crime. In order to give an adequate idea of the extent of the evil, it is necessary to mention a few figures. There has been some improvement in recent years, but the position is still intolerable. In 1911-12, the indentured population in Trinidad was about 9,600, and of the number of prosecutions about 2,000! The percentage of prosecutions to the indentured population was, therefore, 21%! The Committee appointed by the Government of India recommends that prosecutions should be reduced by the direct interference of the Immigration Department, and remarks that reliance on the Courts seems to have become ‘a habit of mind with the majority of the managers.’ In British Guiana, the number of
indentured labourers was about 9,600 in 1912-13, and the percentage of prosecutions, which was much higher in previous years, was 18. On large estates the percentage varied from to 32 per cent.

My Lord, the most degrading feature of the indenture system is the immorality associated with it. The law requires that the number of female immigrants must be 40 per cent of that of the male immigrants, and the women need not be the relations of the male labourers.

The consequent paucity of women and the character of the women recruited have been a fruitful source of immorality. With the exception of Trinidad, the number of adult males in every colony is about twice that of the adult females. In Fiji and Dutch Guiana, the males are almost exactly twice as numerous as the females. In Jamaica, the number of men is two times that of women.

The evil results of this outrageous system are too easily discernible in the lives of the people. We have fuller material to judge of them in the case of Fiji than in the case of other colonies. It will therefore be more profitable to discuss the state of things in Fiji. Mr. J.W. Burton denounced the immorality prevalent in the estate population some years ago in scathing terms, and Messrs.

Andrews and Pearson’s experience confirms the accuracy of his statements: We cannot forget our first sight of the coolie lines in Fiji. The looks on the faces of the men and the women alike told one unmistakable tale of vice. The sight of young children in such surroundings was unbearable. And again and again, as we went from one plantation to another, we saw the same unmistakable look. It told us of a moral disease which was eating into the heart and life of the people… Though we were no novices to conditions such as these, yet what we met with in Fiji was far worse than we had ever anticipated. There seemed to be some new and undefinable factor added, some strange unaccountable epidemic of vice. The sanctity of the marriage tie is utterly disregarded and bestiality reigns supreme. Women exchange their husbands as often as they like, and girls are practically bought and sold. And the marriage law has made things worse. Religious marriages have no validity, and the children of unregistered unions are regarded as illegitimate. As the majority of Indian marriages are unregistered, one has not even to take the trouble of applying to the Courts for dissolving a union.

Sexual jealousy has inevitably led to a great increase in suicides and murders. A good proportion of the suicides must be attributed to the conditions of life on plantations, but the disproportion between the
sexes is also partly responsible for it. The rate of suicide during 1908-1912 among the indentured Indians stood at the appallingly high figure of 926 per million and among the nonindentured population at 117, while the rates for Madras and the United Provinces the provinces from which the immigrants largely come, are only 45 and 63, respectively. As for murder, Messrs. Andrews and Pearson state that “There has been one conviction for murder each year in every 300 persons, or 333 per million per annum.”

“It is noticeable”, they add, “that the greater portion of the people murdered are women. On the other hand, almost all the suicides in Fiji are those of men. In India, what few suicides exist are generally those of women.” My Lord, what a horrifying record of shame and crime is unfolded here? One hopes that the other colonies are not subject to the same curse, but one fears that they are unfortunately no better.

“There is no doubt,” wrote the Committee of 1913, “that the morality of an estate population compares very unfavourably with that of an Indian village, and that the trouble originates in the class of women who emigrate.” If anything were wanting to complete this picture of human degradation and misery, it might be stated that 90 per cent of the violent crime in Fiji is committed by Indians, according to an Indian doctor of British Guiana. The last census showed that 90 per cent of the beggars and 78 per cent of the lunatics were Indians. Even if all that is said about the financial prosperity of the indentured labourers is true, it is a matter of no consideration, when we reflect on the broken hearts and the blasted lives that are the outcome of the indenture system. Can any amount of wealth ever compensate for the utter loss of character that it necessarily entails? Of what use can such moral wrecks be to themselves or their fellow-men? What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his own soul?

Conclusions
My Lord, it has been shown that the indenture system is thoroughly indefensible. It begins, as Mr. Gokhale observed, in fraud and maintained by force. It does not benefit the labourer. He can earn as much at home as abroad. On the contrary, it is a curse to him. And it lowers the status and wages of the free population and brings the name of India into contempt. It is a source of advantage to the capitalist only who uses the labourer as a tool, and the sooner a system like this, which permits of such heartless exploitation of human beings, is put an end, the better will it be for all concerned.
My Lord, no reforms will prove sufficient; tinkering will not do; the system must be abolished root and branch. During the last three-quarters of a century a policy of tinkering has been tried and has failed. Commissions have been appointed to inquire into abuses, deputations have been sent to other countries, and changes have been made in the law to safeguard the interests of the labourers, but they have failed to combat the evil. On the contrary, the complaints are growing louder and louder and its victims are crying to us for deliverance. Nothing short of a complete abolition of the system will meet the requirements of the case, and it is the duty of the Government of India to take that step unhesitatingly.

My Lord, wherever the indenture system has been tried it has failed. It was tried in Natal, the period of indenture being five years, and we know how miserably it failed there. The introduction of Chinese labour under contract for five years led in the Transvaal to equally undesirable results, and it had to be abandoned. In the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, the agreement is for 600 days only, but indentured labour is being steadily replaced by free labour, and the change has been attended with beneficial results.

My Lord, human reason and experience alike show that indentured labour is an unmitigated curse, and the greater the inequality between the contracting parties and the longer the period of contract, the greater is the extent of the evil. And both humanitarian and political considerations – humanitarian far more than political – demand that it should be abolished as early as possible and replaced by free labour, which is, after all, the most efficient form of labour. Indian indentured labourers have too long been denied their birthright as human beings, and it is high time that the yoke of slavery was removed from their necks.

My Lord, I shall now conclude. I feel I have sufficiently pointed out the evils which are inseparable from the system of indentured labour. It is a system which cannot be mended; it is therefore necessary that it should be ended. My Lord, since it was announced that the Government of India had recommended the abolition of this system to the Secretary of State, there has been a great feeling of relief and thankfulness. The system has worked enough moral havoc during 75 years. We cannot think, my Lord, without intense pain and humiliation of the blasted lives of its victims, of the anguish of soul to which our numerous brothers and sisters have been subjected by this system. It is high time that this should be abolished. My Lord, the British Government abolished slavery and paid down 25 million for
emancipating the slaves. The Government of India has sacrificed their opium revenue in order to save the Chinese people from its demoralising effects. It is to such a Government that we appeal against the utterly degrading and immoral system of indentured labour, and, I am sure, we do not appeal in vain. I feel confident that Your Excellency’s Government will be pleased, as we humbly beg to recommend, to put an end to this system at as early a date as possible.