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AN UNDER-DISCUSSED FACET OF COLONIAL HISTORY

Relevant for: Modern India | Topic: Brief on some aspects of British Rule

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In this 2003 photo, Indian origin Tamil plantation workers wait to process the papers to get Sri Lankan citizenship. | Photo Credit: The Hindu

This year marks the bicentenary of the arrival of Tamil indentured labourers in Sri Lanka (in November 1823), a milestone recently commemorated in Colombo at an event called “Naam 200”, where I delivered an address on this woefully under-discussed facet of our colonial history. I have often said that history belongs in the past, but understanding it is the duty of the present. There are still millions of Indians and Sri Lankans alive who remember — and lament — the depredations of the British Empire in our countries. The United Kingdom may have lapsed into imperial amnesia, but the former colonies cannot: so we ought to remember, time and again, the forces that made and nearly unmade us.

The British imperial project began as licensed looting in service of the crudest form of capitalism. Britain avariciously drained its colonies, depriving them of their resources, economic strength and political freedom, until they were reduced to a state of poverty and desolation. In India they decimated our textile industries, rendering millions unemployed, and hurled thousands of Indian farmers into indigence by purloining their lands for opium cultivation. Their policies created legions of poor, landless and hungry people in need of work to survive.

Ironically, as the British went about pillaging India, a wave of liberal humanism wafted through Europe. Slavery, at long last, came to be considered reprehensible, and the British duly banned it in their colonies, only to replace it with another kind of bonded servitude, euphemistically christened “indentured labour”. The economies of most British domains had thus far run on slavery; and the labour crisis that followed Abolition led to a soaring demand for workers from India to work on plantations and infrastructure projects in the Caribbean, Fiji, Réunion, Natal, Malaysia, Singapore and, of course, Sri Lanka. Press-ganged indentured labour was the answer.

The destitute Indians dispatched to these distant lands could scarcely imagine the fates awaiting them, misled as they were about the work they would undertake, the wages they would receive, the quarters where they would dwell, and — shockingly — even the countries they were sailing to. Having survived a perilous sea voyage, most labourers reached their destination mired in debt, for they had to pay for their own exorbitant fare — under a fiendish rule not changed till 1922.

As soon as they reached those unfamiliar lands, they were confined to massive plantations and construction sites. Many Tamils arriving in Sri Lanka perished on the arduous trek from the coast to the Central highlands. Those who made it were compelled to reside in agonising squalor, with no access to sanitation, running water, medical facilities or schools for their children. It was not without reason that the British historian Hugh Tinker called indentured labour “a new kind of slavery.”

Sri Lanka today is a redoubtable producer and exporter of tea, but its first plantations were not of tea but of coffee. In the 1870s, the rapid spread of a fungal disease led to a blight that caused the disappearance of coffee from Sri Lankan plantations, paving the way for the more fecund and profitable crop, whose estates increased manifold. While coffee requires only three workers for every 10 hectares of cultivation, tea requires at least eight, and as such, demands far more intensive, and perennial field labour. This augmented requirement of workers, compounded with the shortfall caused by the abolition of slavery, sparked a massive organised transfer of Indian Tamils to Sri Lanka.

Of course, the migration of the first Tamils to the island nation far preceded the arrival of the Plantation Tamils in Ceylon in the 19th century. However, what distinguished the Plantation Tamils from Tamil migrants of antiquity was the fact that the British denied them even the most basic rights and services. They were subjected to discrimination soon after setting foot in Sri Lanka. Like earlier communities of South Indian origin, Plantation Tamils forged a distinct Sri Lankan identity, but colonial practices and policies deemed them “foreigners”, thus rendering them stateless and blocking well-trodden paths to assimilation. By placing Plantation Tamils under the categories of “aliens and resident strangers” and subsequently calling them “Indian Tamils”, the colonial state made it arduous for them to assimilate into Sri Lankan society. Independence was no better: the Citizenship Act of 1948 rendered them stateless. Few were paid a fair wage or ever knew the privacy of their own room. Women tea-pluckers toiled all day in the plantations without any toilet facilities. Displacement and disenfranchisement were their lot.

Exacerbating their travails, moreover, was the deleterious system of sub-contractors called kanganies, labour recruiters and overseers who played a dominant role in the recruitment, management — and exploitation — of Indian labourers on plantations. Once recruited, the worker unwittingly forfeited his autonomy to the kangani, who accompanied him on the voyage to the plantations, and acted as the intermediary between him and estate managers once he began working on the estates.

Unlike indentured workers who were technically entitled to demand passage home after the end of the indenture period, the Plantation Tamils had no deliverance from the horrors of the kangani system — even after their service period elapsed. Their contracts with the kanganies were vague, allowing for their greater abuse at the hands of the recruiter, who — being someone they knew— would often persuade them to borrow money, plunging them in debt they could never afford to pay off. Nor could the Plantation Tamils buy land and build houses, for colonial laws restricted landholding to those “domiciled” in Ceylon, which the British planters and officers construed as excluding them.

The Plantation Tamils found the local conditions in Sri Lanka conducive to the creation of an identity anchored in Tamil linguistic and literary traditions, and Tamil values and ideals. They identified themselves more with who they were linguistically and regionally than with a pan-Indian nationality or religion. Over a span of several generations, though, they strove towards greater integration with the mainstream of Sri Lankan society, encountering several man-made obstacles such as the Citizenship Act of 1948, which rendered them stateless in the process.

With commendable fortitude, the Plantation Tamils grappled with the challenges besetting them, carving a place for themselves in Sri Lankan society. Thanks to the efforts of democratic parties such as the Ceylon Workers' Congress, they are now all citizens with the democratic right to vote, and the government speaks of dividing the plantations so as to make workers the owners of the land they work on — a project still in the planning stage but with immense potential. In reaffirming their identity as the descendants of those who were dispatched to Sri Lanka from India, they have reclaimed their heritage as the Plantation Tamils who are also equal and prominent citizens of Sri Lanka. Theirs has been a valorous, subaltern struggle for equality and self-determination, and merely thinking of it fills me with admiration.

It is important that post-colonial countries take effective steps to de-colonise themselves from the practices, laws and attitudes of our imperial masters. Too often, post-colonial nations adopt the same tools introduced by the colonisers to continue the practices of systematic oppression. Sometimes there is little difference between the two systems, only the skin colour and names of the rulers change. As Sri Lanka looks forward to economic and social revival and the integration of all its communities, decolonisation must be at the heart of it. Forging a post-colonial, inclusive identity for all its people remains the unfulfilled task of nation-building in Sri Lanka.

Shashi Tharoor, the third term Lok Sabha Member of Parliament (Congress) for Thiruvananthapuram, is the award-winning author of 25 books, including* An Era of Darkness: the British Empire in India*, and most recently,* The Less You Preach, The More You Learn: Aphorisms for Our Age*. The writer acknowledges the assistance of Bawa Sayan Bajaj in the preparation of this article