

The industrial Plantation under Colonialism in South Asia: Finance Capital Price Takers and Labour Regimes

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One of the distinct characteristics of plantation is the incorporation of several 'foreign' categories in the production process, with capital, management, land and labour from different regions being combined for the cultivation of cash crops, which were exported to yet 'foreign' consumers. The form and nature of plantations have stimulated different interpretations of their role in imperial history and economic growth, in addition to conceptual debate on the nature of colonial agricultural capital and its contribution to modernity in the colonies. Some have argued that plantations were 'enclave units' isolated from the broader society that inhibited local economic development through not stimulating viable domestic agriculture and regional markets.¹ Others have focused on the controls within the plantation regime characterising them as 'total institutions' with little freedom for 'inmates'.² There has also been debate on whether plantations were feudal, semi-feudal or capitalist forms of production.³ This paper argues that the nature of specific plantations or plantation systems need to be historically situated within the context of (a) the prevailing modes of production in the West and state policies under colonialism (b) the linkages that existed between the international commodity markets and prices, global corporate interests and local entrepreneurs, (c) the availability of land, labour and capital and (d) the implications this configuration of forces held for the nature of class formation and social control on the plantations themselves.

This paper focuses on the plantations in South Asia under British colonialism that were developed after the abolition of slavery in the 19th century. It reflects on the legacy of compulsion was retained in the labour regime on these modern plantations. It shows how the industrial and transport and financial revolutions in the West affected the nature of plantations, through demands for cheap primary produce and wage goods, by opening up possibilities for cultivation in the peasant hinterland and by the increasing dominance of finance capital in the global capitalism. The high competition for capital also meant that production had to be lucrative enough to attract the necessary investment. As local plantation producers were essentially price-takers and had little control over prices set in the international market, they concentrated on controlling the labour costs of production, and ensuring an elastic and cheap labour force.

¹ The New World Group of Caribbean scholars persons associated in this analysis include Best, Beckford, Girvan, Thomas, Brewster and Jefferson who argued that the structural links between the metropole and the colonies in the eighteenth century (closely linked with the ideas put forward in Eric Williams' classic study of capitalism and slavery) created underdevelopment in the region.

² The concept of a 'total institution' was coined by Erving Goffman in his analysis of asylums, but has been used to analyse the attributes of plantations as 'total institutions' (Knottnerus, Monk and Jones 1999; Bryce-Laporte 1968).

³ S.B. D de Silva (1982) has argued that the retention of semi-feudal labour relations is not in line with the logic of classical capitalism.

A labour regime was developed under these pressures which had distinctive features; it relied increasingly on migrant labour, it was characterised by a management style that was brutal and concentrated on the short-term profits, and was supported by colonial state that played an increasing interventionist role through supporting planters with favourable legislation and subsidies, while penalising workers who tried to move away from the plantations. It incorporated social hierarchies and gender biases linked with colonialism, race, caste, ethnicity, religion and culture into the work and living arrangements as a means of dividing and controlling the workers. Women workers experienced multiple patriarchies associated with these different domains of power. As a result women were involved in the labour-intensive, time-consuming and repetitive in the field and in the household, were usually placed under male control in all spaces, and were regularly exposed to sexual abuse and violence by men at all levels. Their (unpaid) work in the household also subsidised the wages paid all workers. Jan Breman has suggested the labour regime on the Asian plantations relied on “tried means of exerting pressure in combination with resort to new forms of legal coercion” (1987:69). This paper suggests that in addition, this form of colonial capitalism prioritised increasing absolute surplus value over relative surplus value⁴ largely through extensions of the working day and through intensifying the labour process by enhancing skills through repetition, accompanied by close supervision and intimidation. The paper argues that the modern or ‘industrial plantation’⁵ in colonial South Asia relied on historically effective methods of labour control stemming from the slave plantations, and combined it with new forms of legal and extra-legal coercion, to promote the profitability of finance capital.

The Legacies and economic costs of Slave Plantations

The Portuguese were the first colonial power to experiment in the 15th century to experiment with the large-scale production of sugar in a region where there was not adequate supply of labour. They used the form and structure of the main institution of social organisation in the prevailing feudal system in the Iberian Peninsula – the extended household – and adapted it for coordinating the cultivation of sugar. The extended household was a hierarchical unit headed by a patriarch, who had undisputed authority over all who resided within the boundaries of the unit, including other family members, domestic workers and most importantly African slaves, the latter being a Roman legacy from the seventh century in the Iberian Peninsula.⁶ Racialist segregation and patriarchal norms were embedded in the working and living arrangements within the households. Slaves, and particularly female slaves occupied the lowest rung of the social order, with the patriarch, and sometimes by extension other men in the household, viewing it as a right to use them for sexual services. A key characteristic was that the slave was her/his complete dependence for survival on the will of the patriarch and was integrated into society through his or her position within the household⁷

⁴ Absolute surplus value is associated with increasing the working day and or intensifying the labour process. Relative surplus value is generated through technical innovations resulting in increased labour productivity. Relative surplus value, through increasing the organic composition of capital, is according to Karl Marx, the essential characteristic of classical capitalism.

⁵ The term was coined by Courtenay (1980)

⁶ J.A. Sac: Historia de la esclavitud de la raza Africana en el Nuevo mundo (Barcelona, 1879), Vol.1, pp.35-36).

⁷ S.M. Greenfield: “Slavery and the plantation in the New World “ in Journal of inter-American Studies (Gainesville, University of Miami, January 1969, Vol. II, No. 1.

The extended household provided a structure of labour organisation that allowed for the incorporation and control of larger numbers of slaves/worker for production of sugar. This 'model' of plantation production was used by the Portuguese in the cultivation of sugar along the Atlantic coast in Brazil in the early decades of the 16th century. The Spanish, who shared this common heritage, also used this form of production in their colonies in the Caribbean and slave labour, as native Indian labour was either not available or destroyed. The Dutch East India Company, which had seized some of the region from the Portuguese by 1630, and were important players in the slave trade, developed the industry in Brazil although they were forced to leave the region. They introduced sugar plantations to the island of Barbados in the 1640s, where it was developed by yeoman farmers who had settled in Barbados from 1627 in the aftermath of English Civil under Cromwell. While the yeoman farmers were not accustomed to slaves, they were aware of the lucrateness of sugar cultivation, and given the lack of indentured and other forms of available labour, increased the number of slaves as plantation workers.

A typical slave plantation had the following characteristics. The slaves were restricted within the geographical boundary of the estate and a high degree of physical coercion was necessary in order to control and to extract work from them.⁸ They were under the complete authority of the planter who was generally somebody who had been born on the plantation and whose family had owned the plantations over generations. In some ways, therefore, the slave planter had a long-term stake in the plantation and in the workforce. Hierarchy was manifested at all levels, and racist and patriarchal norms were embedded in all spheres of lives. The planter and his family resided in a palatial manor while the African slaves, who formed the bulk of the workforce living in separate 'slave huts', placing the 'white' planter in superior position over his 'black' workers while women were viewed as 'inferior' to men, with hierarchies of mixed colours in between (Kurian 1982:4). As long as slave trade was cheap, women and men were treated as equipment that could be disposed off and replaced, leading the high degree of exploitation of workers, and high mortality rates (ibid). In addition, the planters were a powerful group, influencing government policies and societal relations, facilitated by the European state and even the Church. Philip Curtin has argued that many of these features could be seen as the development of the "plantation complex" was a distinct historical entity, reflecting interactions between the West and non-Western countries on economic, political, social and demographic, cultural aspects, in addition to the organisation on the fields (Curtin 1969).

While there was importance given to the number of slaves for the feudal head of household, the use of slaves for plantation work and maintaining the profitability of production became increasingly problematic for economic and political reasons. There were costs associated with slave labour. There were costs of recruitment and transport of slaves, of maintaining a permanent workforce, controlling and ensuring

⁸ The notion that plantations were essentially enclave units is of importance in the literature on plantations. The New World Group of Caribbean scholars has used it to show the way in which plantation development inhibited local economic development in terms of a viable domestic agriculture and also production for a regional market. Persons associated in this analysis include Best, Beckford, Girvan, Thomas, Brewster and Jefferson who argued that the structural links between the metropole and the colonies in the eighteenth century (closely linked with the ideas put forward in Eric Williams' classic study of capitalism and slavery) created underdevelopment in the region (for a review of their theories see Benn 1974:249- 260).

that they did not run away, extracting maximum work from them during their lifetime, providing subsistence for the during her/his work life and the expense (however minor) of taking care of them for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, (and this became more important as the slave trade became expensive) the reproduction of the workforce on the plantations had to be ensured sometimes through violence.⁹ The plantation was, in effect, ...an instrument of force, wielded to create and to maintain a class structure of workers and owners, connected hierarchically by a staff line of overseers and managers (Wolf 1959:136). The Dutch ethnologist Nieboer put forward the need for compulsion on plantations. He distinguished between 'open' and "closed" resource situations using this as a criterion for assessing whether compulsion was necessary (or unnecessary) for procuring labour for production. An 'open' resource situation was one in which more land was available for agricultural production than labour available to cultivate it (the opposite being a situation of 'closed' resources). In the former case, it was not likely that adequate labour could be secured for the purposes of cultivation. As plantations developed in a context of open resources it had to rely on slavery (an extreme form of compulsion) to meet the labour requirements of production (1900:389). This legacy of high degree of compulsion was retained even in post-slavery plantations and accompanied by other methods of control to reduce the labour costs of production.

Thus, while the number of slaves could be an indicator of the worth and wealth of a feudal unit of organisation, the economics of the slave plantations (Metzer 1975, Genovese 1966, Williams 1944, Gray 1930, Govan 1942) suggest that while they were, on the whole, viable enterprises, the degree of profitability has been questioned. In looking at the issue of plantation slavery, Govan reached the conclusion that 'the students who have stated that slavery was profitable are more nearly correct than those who deny its profitableness' (Govan 1942:535).¹⁰ Wallerstein argued that According to Wallerstein, the total recurrent cost of labour was higher if one used slave labour than if one used coerced cash-crop labour (Wallerstein 1980:172-174). Slavery was however adopted even if was not necessarily the cheapest or the most efficient mode of operating the sugar plantations, but it was a "pis aller", the only one available when white servants could not be attracted to work on the plantations. (Wallerstein 1980:174).

Political and Economic Pressures

Political and economic pressures were important in bring about in changing the nature of labour relations on the plantations. There were increasing protests and rebellions by the slaves themselves in the United States and the Caribbean that took the violent form of uprisings, killings, and destruction of equipment, as well as desertions (Jayawardena and Kurian 2015: 15). These actions inspired and spurred the anti-slavery movement in Britain and increased pressure on the government. Slavery

⁹ Kloosterboer used the notion of closed and open resources to analyse the need for 'forced labour' in post-slave situations and concluded that 'compulsory' or 'forced' labour" existed in a situation of 'open resources' even after the abolition of slavery (Kloosterboer 1969).

¹⁰ For a review of the literature on the institution of slavery in the British Caribbean see Michael Craton, 'A Cresting Wave? Recent Trends in the Historiography of Slavery, with Special Reference to the British Caribbean', in *Collected Seminar Papers No. 34, Caribbean Societies, Volume 2*, University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1985.

was also an anathema to the ideals of emergent laissez-faire capitalism and its accompanying ideology of liberty and individual. At the same time, slave trade and buying and retaining slaves became more expensive, and attempts by planters to promote the reproduction of slaves was often countered by female slaves who refused to bear children (Tinker 1974:11; Reddock 1985).). These different factors were important in leading to the abolition of slavery in the British territories in 1833, in the French territories in 1848, in the Dutch and American in 1863, in the Spanish in 1885 and in the Brazilian in 1888. Plantations could no longer rely on slave labour to meet the needs of cultivation.

The development spread of plantations in South Asia were also linked to the changes in the global economy. As part of the Industrial Revolution in the West, the second half of the 18th century witnessed technical innovations and increased productivity in manufacturing. These changes created a demand for cheap inputs and wage goods for the Western industry and colonies were viewed by the state as important sources of such products. The link between such commercial enterprises to the industrial expansion in the West gave rise to what Courtenay has labelled as the 'industrial plantation', the chief distinguishing feature of which was the high involvement of risk capital. Plantations had now to compete for resources with alternative forms of investment and were successful only if investors could expect a sufficiently high return after the costs of clearing the land and buying the necessary labour and capital were taken into account (Courtenay 1980:55-56). Both these factors gave rise to specific features of the labour regime, as will be discussed in the subsequent section.

The 'transport revolution' that accompanied industrial development also influenced the labour regime on the plantations of the nineteenth century. It shortened the lines of communication and made goods and services more easily, and thus more cheaply, accessible. During the first decades of the nineteenth century colonial policy had relied on peasant labour for the cultivation of crops and for the building of infrastructural works. This meant that export-oriented crop production had to be developed close to the villagers so that the necessary labour was available. At the same time, adequate pressure had to be applied in order to mobilise labour and get the work done, resulting in 'forced deliveries' by the peasantry to the colonial authorities (Breman 1987:15-20). This was done either by taxing the villagers or by using a system of compulsory labour. This was the basis of the so-called Cultivation System introduced in Java in the 1830s (although forced deliveries had existed in the 17th and 18th centuries for the cultivation of sugar-cane and coffee) and the principle of *rajakariya* in Ceylon (abolished in 1833). Similar methods prevailed in the case of the Negros in the Philippines, Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies and Assam and Nilgiris in India. The government strove to create a tight bond between the peasants and their land in order to be able to tax agrarian production to the utmost. Attachment of the rural population in their villages was a suitable means to this end, permitting direct control over the total labour power available (Breman 1987:15).

The development of new technology, particularly that which improved the transport of goods and services (roads, railways, shipping, etc), was however important in making labour more available. Production no longer had to rely on locally available labour and necessary labour could be brought from outside the local economy. At the same time, more natural resources (particularly land) situated at a distance from the peasant villages could be included in the economy. The development of railways

allowed food and other necessities to be transported inland. Railways were also important for transporting the products to the ports. This facilitated the development of commercial enclaves in the peasant hinterland. These possibilities resulted in an important shift in colonial policy. A significant feature of this shift was that the emphasis moved from the exaction of labour from the peasant to the more direct exploitation of natural resources. Thus, land and other resources could be developed in areas of scarce labour by transporting labour from outside the local economy. Food supplies for this labour could be transported inland and the goods produced in remote areas could be forwarded for shipping and sales. The plantations operating in the Asian context were to avail themselves of this formula in the nineteenth century.

The earliest spread of the new industrial plantation system outside the Americas was in the British Indian territories. They were to spring up in India where tea had been grown in Assam from the 1840s. Tea and coffee plantations were important in the southern regions in the Wynaad and Niligiri Hills from the 1850s. Coffee, and subsequently tea, rubber and coconut plantations were to dominate the economic development of Sri Lanka from around this period. Other colonial powers were also involved with plantation development in the Asian region. The Netherlands East Indies cultivated sugar-cane, coffee, tobacco, cinchona and tea from the mid-nineteenth century and the number of rubber, sisal and oil palm plantations expanded in the beginning of the twentieth century. Industrial plantations growing sugar, and subsequently coffee and rubber, were also to develop in Malaya. Sugar plantations developed in the Philippines under the Spanish and then under the United States, while the French were important in the stimulation of coffee and rubber plantations in Indo-China.

Features of the Labour Regime

There were three distinguishing features of the labour regime on the industrial plantations in Asia. The first was the significant role of migrant labour - a sharp contrast to the permanent workforce in the slave plantations. The second was the management style which, while retaining some of the methods of labour control of the slave plantations, was influenced also by the shifting nature of management dominated by finance capital. The third was the interventionist role of the state. Each of these features will be discussed below:

I Migrant Labour

The circulatory migration of labour was historically characteristic of industrial development in India from the middle of the 19th century. The industrial worker had a base in the village and typically moved to the towns on a temporary basis, in time returning home. The Whitley Commission discusses this phenomenon in the following way:

It is here that we strike perhaps the most fundamental difference between the Indian factory workers and the corresponding class in the West. The latter is drawn mainly from persons brought up in the towns, and partly from those who have abandoned the country for the towns. The Indian factory operatives are nearly all migrants. But the difference does not end here. In India the migration from the rural areas to the factories is not in the main a permanent exodus; it is, in the minds of those who undertake it and to a large extent in fact, a temporary transfer, and the recruit to industry continues to regard as his home the place from which he has come (Report of the Royal Commission 1931:11-12).

This pattern of migration was distinguished from the European settler emigration and the African slave migration which took on a more permanent form.

From the middle of the nineteenth century Indian migration was increasing confined to Burma, Ceylon and British Malaya. Davis has attributed this to the fact that this region remained, for climatic reasons, more profitable for commercial agriculture. These countries, relatively close to the region of recruitment, could more easily use Indian labour on a seasonal basis (Davis 1951:99). It has been estimated that 92.2 % of the emigrants between 1834 and 1900 went to this region and between 1901 and 1937 they accounted for 98.4% of the emigration. The average annual volume of emigration was 186,000 between 1834 and 1900 and this rose to 443,000 between 1901 and 1937 (Davis 1951:100). The main supply of labour for the plantations, particularly to Malaya and Ceylon, came from the Tamil districts in the Madras Presidency. Kumar has estimated that 90% of the emigration as estate labour to Ceylon was from Madras (Kumar 1965:129).

There has been some debate regarding the reasons for this migration. Some people have argued that internal 'push' factors played a significant role. While considering some of these arguments, we will show that the pattern of migration was more directly the result of 'pull' factors, that is the result of spread of finance capitalism from the 1880s. Internal push factors which influenced the emigration process, according to Kondapi, included the decline of the local handicraft industry in the wake of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, the increase in state revenue from land with disastrous implications for the agriculturalist, the famines and the caste exclusiveness of tasks which allowed only some castes to take up agricultural work. These factors were adversely to affect those persons dependent on agriculture and thus stimulate a process of emigration of people in search of alternative possibilities of employment (Kondapi 1951:2-4). These people were particularly vulnerable during periods when agricultural harvests were inadequate and they faced extreme poverty (Kumar 1965:75).

Another important internal factor stimulating migration was a series of famines that led to significant increases in migration following famines (Kumar 1965:13). The Madras Presidency was affected by famines in 1812, 1824-25, 1832-33, 1853-55, 1876-78, 1889-90, 1890-92, 1896-97, and 1907-08 (Bhatia 1963:309). There was substantial distress experienced in these periods by the lower classes and castes. While the most immediate causes for the famine were traceable to drought or unseasonable rain, the resulting shortage of food and the lack of purchasing power of those suffering the most were linked, according to Bhatia, to a combination of factors. This included the destruction of indigenous industry and changes in land tenure which led to the impoverishment of the peasantry. The situation was further exacerbated by rising prices which were unmatched by rising wages (Bhatia 1963:16-21). At the same time, there was a fall in emigration when the conditions in the local economy were favourable, particularly when there was a continuation of good harvests and a subsequent decrease in the price of food grains, and there was local demand for labour (Banks 1910:4). There was little doubt that these were important factors in influencing emigration from the area.

The famine between 1876 and 1878 was particularly important in the southern Indian region as it coincided with significant changes in the agrarian relations in the plains. Moore has argued that the system of slavery and bonded labour that had characterised the region ceased to exist during the famine as landlords found it increasingly difficult to maintain the workers, something they were bound to do in the previous feudal set-up. Thus, patronage networks 'disintegrated' at the height of the famine and the coffee plantations were able to attract these 'freed' workers. This change in the master-servant relationship led to what he calls a 'new phase of agrarian relations' where workers 'entered a cyclical process of out- and immigration, leaving the village for extended periods to work, then returning to their social and economic roles in the village' (Moore 1978:4). While these facts might have played a role in stimulating emigration, it can be argued that they explain less the pattern of migration in the context of the development of capitalism. Famines had occurred historically in India without creating a specific structural pattern of migration. In fact, evidence has shown that emigration in the light of unprecedented calamity was usually to the nearest available territory where there were opportunities for temporary relief (Sundaram 1930:744). The sections below illustrate the cost-effectiveness of circulatory migration as part of the broader scenario of plantation capitalism in South Asia.

Indentured Labour

Some of the economic disadvantages of slavery have been discussed earlier. These were to have some influence in the shift away from this form of labour. In fact, the 'superior cheapness of free labour over that of the slave' had been a 'burning issue' in the debates on how to deal with the deficiency of labour in some West Indian colonies (Cumpston 1953:53). Immediately after the abolition of slavery, labour requirements for these plantations were met through the importation of workers from other areas through a system of indentureship. This 'new form of slavery' (Lord John Russell's observation subsequently made famous in Tinker's book on indentureship) provided the necessary labour for many plantations. The bulk of this labour came from China, Java and the Indian sub-continent (Campbell 1923; Horton 1942; Tinker 1974).

Under indenture a worker was obliged to work for a specified period of time, usually five years, under the same employer and in the same work. The initial recruitment was usually done with the help of a recruiter or jobber who would go to the villages and persuade persons to migrate to work on the plantations. This usually led to a concentration of men working on indenture although there were systematic efforts made to equalise the gender ratio. The functioning and abuses of this system of labour recruitment have been well documented; there was a great deal of coercion and compulsion involved in the conditions of work and life of these workers (Tinker 1974, particularly chapter 6).

Indentured labour was, to a large extent, temporary migration. Studies have indicated that these emigrants did not tend to discriminate between colonies and their expectations did not normally extend beyond high wages and an eventual return to India (Gillion 1956:139-157). However, the indenture system involved some transportation costs. There were also economic considerations of supervision and control which had to be met by the estate management as the abolition of slavery did not imply an end to forced labour. Kloosterboer tested Nieboer's theses in non-slave circumstances and concluded that, with some codification, the need for compulsion was equally applicable in the post-slavery period (1960:206-215). The degree to

which compulsion changed was dependent on how much it could be transferred away from the costs on the estate. Thus, 'although ethical considerations can be seen to have played a role in the abolition of compulsory labour, this influence has only been secondary. The most important motives have been of an economic-commercial nature' (Kloosterboer 1960:215).

The development of sugar, coffee and rubber plantations in Malaya during the nineteenth and early twentieth century created a demand for labour that was initially met through indenture contracts with labour from South India. Sugar had been cultivated under British colonial rule in Province Wellesley during the 1830s but it did not become important until 1846. The impetus for this cultivation was the reduction of duty on Penang sugar imported into England to bring it on the same footing with sugar grown in Bengal. Important also was the granting of land in perpetuity instead of on lease (Mills 1925:186), which led to the steady growth of the area under sugar cultivation. Although Indian labour migration had started as early as 1787 (Sandhu 1969:47), its demand was to pick up only with the spread of the sugar plantations. The labour required for this cultivation could not be satisfied by slavery (as it had been abolished by 1838) and attempts were made to import Javanese, Chinese and Indian labour for this purpose (Parmer 1960:27-37). Chinese-owned sugar estates were opened up from 1878 (in the Perak region immediately south of Province Wellesley), with the workers generally being Teochews recruited from the Swatou area of China (Jackson 1961:92). However, the Chinese labour tended to be concentrated in the mining industries and the importation of Javanese labour was relatively expensive (Sandhu 1969:55-56). It was, therefore, Indian labour which was to form the backbone of the plantation industry in Malaya.

Labour from India was initially brought across on an indentured basis. It was estimated that 122,000 workers came to Malaya between 1866 and 1910, making an average flow of 2,700 workers per annum (Sandhu 1969:81). However, the numbers recruited in this manner proved to be insufficient. Apart from the inadequate supply of labour, the costs of recruitment were seen by the employers to be high and there were also complaints that the quality of the workers was often poor (Jackson 1961:96). The reluctance of workers to come across was also due to the fact that Malaya had to compete with the other countries which needed labour, notably Burma and Ceylon which were offering cheaper passages, higher wages and more attractive conditions. Moreover, the monopoly enjoyed by the few recruiting firms apparently hindered migration through a blatant misrepresentation of facts (Jackson 1961:97-99).

Direct recruitment through the jobber

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, indenture gave way to apparently 'free' wage labour which was directly recruited by an intermediary - the jobber. While in both systems the costs of recruitment and the expenses of the journey were recovered from the worker, under indenture this meant separate transactions between the plantation manager and each worker whereas, under a 'free' labour regime the plantation only dealt with the intermediary. The second distinction was that while under indenture the labourer was bound to serve on the plantation to which he was recruited for typically a five-year period, no such restriction applied under a regime of 'free' labour. In the latter situation the worker would typically serve on a specific plantation (the one for which he had been recruited) for whatever period it would take

for his debt to be cleared through deductions from his wages. Thus, the system of advances in turn was a means of regular payment, often assuming the same function as the wage. This was owing to the fact that as there existed an initial debt, continual advances had to be forwarded to meet the workers day-to-day expenses. In many ways, therefore, a system of advances actually replaced the payment of wages. Even when the debt was 'brought' by a planter from a different estate who needed the labour and was willing to take over the 'debt' it had little effect on the worker. As observed by Kondapi:

...whether the higher or additional advance was obtained from the old or the new estate the effect invariably was to increase the debt of the labourer to the extent of the higher or additional advance in the estate books (Kondapi 1951:33)

In fact, Wesumperuma has indicated that those who quit or bolted did not do so directly due to the debt burden but their inability to obtain further cash advances in addition to their heavy debts (Wesumperuma 1986:193). All transactions took place solely with the intermediary or the jobber. Labour mobility was secured in a 'free' labour regime by the intermediary taking his whole 'gang' from one plantation to another, redeeming his debt on account of his labour gang to one employer by getting the necessary payment from the new employer. Unless this happened, the debt functioned as a means of keeping the worker tied to a particular plantation; and to the extent that there was room for a falsification of the account between the intermediary and a particular worker, the debt burden accumulated thus intensifying the 'debt bondage' between the worker and the planter. In contrasting this with the problems of indenture Omvedt noted that the formal debt bondage to planters under indenture was now replaced by an informal debt bondage to intermediary labour contractors (Omvedt 1980:192). Additionally, the contractor (kangany, maistry, sardar, jobber) travelled with the workers, conducted dealings on their behalf with the estate management, and had a strong control over their economic and social existence. She argued that plantation owners preferred this system as it provided better control over labour.

..the labour-contractor took over most of the employers' functions of control and supervision, and the labour force - often recruited from the same village and family group - worked as a more tightly knit unit. In addition, it appears that the open, widespread recruiting associated with the indenture system could not (at the level of wages paid to the workers) produce sufficient labourers in the way the labour-contractors could through their links with the village areas of recruitment (Omvedt 1980:193).

The recruitment of labour for plantations in British India was, by and large, done through the use of kanganies or maistries who received from the planters interest-free loans to advance to workers in their villages who were willing to work on the estates (Whitley Commission 1931:355). The advances were debited against the workers' wages and paid off in time. While there were also penal clauses to protect the planter in case he lost his advances, their repeal in 1929 did not, in the opinion of the Commission, add to the difficulties of the planter, but, in fact, promoted a more regular flow of labour to the plantations (ibid).

It was clear that this direct recruitment (that is, bypassing official authorities) was a preferred mode. In Assam by the 1880s, two systems of recruitment were in operation. The first was through the official government agents in Calcutta. The second was direct recruitment using a 'sirdar' or 'sardar'. In the latter case, recruiters went to their villages and persuaded their kinsmen and friends to come along and work on the plantation, the recruiter or the 'sirdar' getting an amount of money for the labour so recruited from the planter. This was essentially a short term or seasonal migration and there were often problems of getting an adequate labour supply, via either the government agents or the 'sirdars', when there was a good rice harvest and people were, therefore, unwilling to migrate (or were 'bonded' through ties of indebtedness to the village landlord who required the labour) to the plantations. By the 1880s, most planters preferred to use the 'sirdar' system of recruitment as it was considerably cheaper than going through the government agents. (Barker 1884:153-182). Using this method, the estates were able to get labour from Bihar, Orissa, the Central Provinces and Madras (Courtenay 1980:65) and even from some Telugu districts (Kumar 1965:133).

The plantations in Malaya also recruited migrant labour from India on a similar system called the kangany system. An employer seeking labour would send a recruiter, the kangany, to India advancing him expenses for the journey. The latter would return in due course and repay the money owed to the planters, while getting a payment on the number of workers he had managed to bring across. As the workers in most cases owed the passage money to the kangany (which they had to return from their wages), it was possible for the latter to establish a debt-bondage among his recruits (Jain 1970:199).

From indentured to 'free' labour

When Indian indenture was abolished in 1919, it was observed that no serious opposition was raised largely because the majority of planters had, by this time, found the kangany system of recruitment more effective and had switched to this method to furnish their labour needs (Parmer 1960:50). In 1902 the proportion of unindentured labourers in the Straits Settlement had reached two-fifths and by 1907 it had risen to five-sixths of the migrant workers. Thus, within twenty years the kangany system had 'virtually replaced' indenture in British Malaya (Davis 1951:104).

One of the important reasons for this displacement was the set of difficult conditions associated with indentureship which made it unattractive to the Indian workers who needed to be induced to migrate. In spite of various amendments, the indentured labour system was unable to provide an adequate supply of labour. Even the limited quantity of free tickets provided from 1904 at Madras and Negapatnam did not solve the problem. A commission set up in 1910 found that under indenture the wages were low, the task work required led to abuses, the accommodation was not always satisfactory and there was pressure put on workers to do long hours of work and to work even on Sundays. Moreover, there was a high death rate with indentured labour and a high rate of desertion. Given this situation, it was "out of the question" that indentured labour could respond to the attempts to increase the labour supply (Jackson 1961:113). At the same time, it was clear that most of the non-sugar planters felt that the recruitment of free workers was more efficient and cheaper (Sandhu 1969:87). And even some of the sugar planters in the Perak region found the kangany system more favourable from the 1860s. They had two objections to indenture. In the first

place, they found that many of the indentured labourers were what they considered to be an unselected, poor lot and secondly, they found that the high incidence of 'bolting' meant they often lost on the dues owed to them by the worker (Jain 1970:198-99).

It is important to note the temporary nature of the pattern of migration of the plantation workers to Malaya. First of all, most of the labour comprised adult males, with women and children rarely exceeding 20% of the total migration (Sandhu 1969: Appendix 2). Secondly, it was generally the case that they returned home after a temporary sojourn in Malaya (Andrews 1930:432). In the period between 1904 and 1913, it was observed that the Indian population in Malaya was to a very large extent transitory, with the number of departures being of nearly the same order as the number of arrivals (Jackson 1961:139). A Report on Indian Labour in Malaya in 1917, using the estimates provided by the Labour Department, concluded that the majority of Indian workers returned to India after a stay of not more than two years. (Majoribanks et al 1917:41). Between 1925 and 1957, those returning exceeded 80% of total immigration (Sandhu 1969:158 and Davis 1951:106). Furthermore, the workers who emigrated maintained strong links with their villages while the nature of marriages and regular visits to their families in India clearly underscored the temporary quality of this migratory pattern (Jain 1970 and Arasaratnam 1970:27).

An important economic rationalisation in the recruitment of free labour was that the mechanisms involved allowed an adjustment of the supply to its demand. It was observed that unlike the flow of indentured labour, the number of arrivals in any one year under the kangany system appeared to be more influenced by such factors as demand in Malaya and the number of kangany licences issued than by conditions in India; and that the movement of assisted labour was not on an unlimited scale, but rather that the volume was controlled to accommodate the prevailing demand (Sandhu 1969:97 and 155).

The importance of distance

It was clear that distance played an important role in the seasonal pattern of migration. The closer the plantation was to the village, the more seasonally adjusted was the workforce. This can be seen by studying the recruitment of estate workers in the south western region of India. In the first place, as the estates were often located in more populated regions they were able to draw upon local labour for their requirements (Davis 1951:117). Even workers who migrated from a distance were able to return regularly to their own villages. Fay noted that by 1936 the majority of workers came and returned once a year as the tea work period was concentrated over ten months and they could return to their villages for the remaining two months (Fay 1936:638). The Whitley Commission noted that this return was even twice or three times a year, with a marked tendency observed of workers returning to the same estate. It cited the estimates provided by the United Planters' Association of South India, indicating the 60% to 90% of the workers returned to the same estate. (Report of the Royal Commission 1931:35).

The coffee plantations of Mysore were largely serviced by immigrant workers from neighbouring areas. Located in the hill Taluks of the Hassan and Kadur districts, the industry was developed with the help of European capital. Moore has studied the origin of these estate workers and the temporal and spatial patterns of their migration between 1871 and 1941. While in the initial stage of planting (1840-1875) labour had

been recruited from the immediately surrounding areas, this proved inadequate in the subsequent period. The main recruitment source was from the western coastal districts of South Canara and Malabar, areas of close proximity to the estates. The peak periods of labour demand for the coffee plantations were complementary with the cultivation needs on the plains, giving rise to a 'cyclical' or 'chain' pattern of migration, which was to a large extent determined by the demands of the plantation industry (Moore 1978). Many workers also came from Malabar to work on the coffee plantations in Wynaad and Coorg (Kumar 1965:132). Migratory labour has also been important on estates and constituted 59% of all immigrants to Travancore. An indication of the high mobility of the workforce is represented by the fact that 48% of workers had been on the estate for only one year or less, 29% for one to three years and 23% for three years or longer (Study quoted in Davis 1951:115). Davis consequently concluded that the large majority of immigrants were only temporary or semi-permanent, although there was a small contingent who brought their families and settled permanently (Davis 1951:115).

Female Labour

Distance was an important factor in promoting the migration of women as plantation workers as greater the distance, the less likely were women to participate in the migration process (Bremner 1987:89). There were however clear economic advantages in the employment of migrant women workers, the most important being that they were paid less than their male counterparts. In 1859 a male worker in Tinnevely and Madurai, important centres of recruitment, male workers received three pence per day, while a woman received about one penny and three farthings with recruiting agents suggesting that more women would result in more "steady and regular labourers" (Kurian 1989:66). The planters were keen to stimulate female migration as they were able to pay women workers (and child labour) lower wages than men) and employed them mainly in the field under male supervision (Report of the Royal Commission 1931:350; 77). They felt that the male workforce would be more "settled" if women travelled with them (Dawson 1860). It was clear therefore that women were subject to a higher degree of exploitation of both their labour and their bodies. Furthermore, these female "coolies" were often used to service the sexual and other domestic needs of the male workers and management. Ann Stoler in her study on Sumatran plantation agriculture both married and unmarried women prostituted themselves, cooked for the unmarried workforce and became the "bedservants" of the colonial staff (Stoler n.d.)

Kurian and Jayawardena have used the concept of 'plantation patriarchy' to analyse the incorporation of gender prejudices and patriarchal norms stemming from colonialism, race, caste, ethnicity, religion and culture in the labour regime and living arrangements on the plantations in Sri Lanka justifying and normalising the subordinate status of women workers (2015). In the case of Ceylon this was reflected in the women being placed under male authority at all (a) placed under male authority at all levels (b) exposed to physical and sexual violence (b) paid lower wages and worked longer hours than their male counterparts (c) largely responsible for the reproductive chores in the household (e) denied equal access to education, health and other welfare services and (f) excluded from political leadership. They also noted that plantation patriarchy was directly linked to the profitability of production, and it was

in the interests of those in power to sustain norms and practices that promoted the low status and therefore the lesser entitlements for women workers.

II Expatriate Management, Company Formation and Management Practices

The industrial plantation in Asia was promoted by 'sterling' companies which raised capital on the London market. These companies, operating in a competitive economic environment, had an important influence on the organisation of production. As the companies developed, they often turned to agency houses to 'manage' their plantations on a commission basis rather than handle their affairs from a distance. Thus, in some ways, merchant capital had increasing domination over the management of industrial plantations as the agency houses not only 'managed' the plantations but also often took care of the brokering and shipping of the commodities. Expatriate managers until very recently, also ran the Asian plantations. According to a Royal Commission in 1931, European managed about 90% of the plantations in North India and nearly all those in Madras and Burma. The province of Coorg was an exception. Furthermore, the plantations managed by Indians were not only much fewer but generally smaller in size (Report of the Royal Commission 1931:349). This was also the case with Malaya, Indo-China, Philippines and Ceylon.

Expatriate managers were, by and large, interested in making their fortune during their stay on the plantation and returning home as soon as possible. They were hence little concerned with the longer-term interests of the plantation and, in particular, of its workforce. The typical profile of the expatriate planter was that of the second son of a family of moderate means without much prospects at home - and sometimes indeed the black sheep of the family. He would be determined to succeed abroad and in his quest for short-term profit maximization would have little compunction about exploiting his labour ruthlessly (Breman 1989). The typical remuneration package combined a relatively modest basic monthly salary with an invariably larger supplement determined as a percentage of annual profits. Total remuneration was therefore largely a function of short term profits (Jayawardena, L.R., 1960). As managements responded to the demands of the new capitalist environment, they placed greater emphasis on increasing the efficiency of production through cutting costs of production. This reflected in part the 'capitalist' rationale. But it also reflected the fact that this was an area over which they had some degree of control. In these circumstances and particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, plantation production took on a more clearly 'industrialised' nature and methods were instituted to change management perspectives in line with this emphasis on rationalisation.

From a management perspective, this shift brought to agriculture 'the corpus of skills typical of modern industry' where the management, methods and specialised technology were far more efficient. The modern plantation was now a 'laboratory' in which methods of increasing agricultural efficiency were 'developed and tested' (Graham 1984:1) Survival, in competition with rural concerns and increasingly, in some cases, with small holders, required efficient operation. Specialization, especially when processing machinery was required, became the norm, land came to be managed more scientifically.... and efforts were made to seek improved crop varieties, better

cultural practices and more efficient processing techniques. The industrial plantation was thus a segment of the industrial world economy of the period, operating in the expanding world periphery, as well as, in many cases, replacing the traditional plantation in the older "inner periphery" of tropical America (Courtenay 1980:76).

It is important to note that this drive for efficiency in an increasingly competitive environment did not imply investment in labour-saving techniques of production, as was characteristic of manufacturing industry in Western Europe. The initial emphasis was to acquire an elastic supply of labour at a low wage rate, which when seasonally (and annually) adjusted to the demands of production would have the effect of lowering average cost per unit of production (thus effectively increasing the rate of profitability). Thus, in some ways, the absence of labour-saving innovations per se did not imply a degree of economic inefficiency in production, so long as the increase of production could be met by a proportional increase in the labour input. In fact, one could argue that such a perspective was in line with the rationale of market-oriented production operating in an environment characterised by fluctuating prices beyond the control of management. Basically, planters opted for a strategy that minimised capital outlay in order to cushion themselves against price volatility. Commenting on this feature in the case of the European rubber planters in Malaya, Selvaratnam was to observe:

The basic philosophy was in consonance with the aim of the capitalist mode of production which was to utilise all its factors of production as effectively and efficiently as possible. None of the current capital intensive mechanical aids for clearing land and transporting equipment and produce were available. The obvious strategy for the early pioneer planters was to minimise the utilisation of the limited capital in all aspects of the development of rubber cultivation and in its production. In other words, they sought to limit the utilisation of their limited capital outlay in the direction of productive investment and to substitute it with cheap land and labour (Selvaratnam 1988:1083)

However, there were some limits imposed on the total quantity of production by (a) the extent to which labour was available and (b) the wage rate at which it was available. It was clearly in the interests of increasing profits if labour productivity could be increased without recourse to expensive capital investment. One way in which this was possible was to increase the degree of supervision over the work process and to increase the 'skill' of labour in this process. The basis of the plantation's operation was now the 'expert direction and training of its workforce by the use of a technology of detailed routine, working and supervision' (Graham 1984:15). The latter was even seen as a form of technology which, in itself, increased productivity:

Its secret lies in continuity and planned repetition in the performance of well-defined and skilled tasks at the right time. The objective is to bring consistency of treatment to all agricultural operations at all times through a programme which can take into account all the factors agronomic and economic. Such a programme must cover each estate, each division, each field and indeed each plant and tree regularly, with specific operations which incorporate the best practice, whether it be of clearing, planting, weeding, fertilising or harvesting. Moreover, each individual operation is the subject of constant study to improve its efficiency - to do it better and in less time, while simultaneously preserving and striving to improve the quantity and quality of the crop (Graham 1984:19).

These perceptions are very similar to those propounded by Taylor - often cited as the pioneer of 'scientific management' - as methods of increasing efficiency in industry.¹¹ In fact, the changes in terms of investment, economic rationalisation and innovations have led some to argue that there was a considerable narrowing of the gap between the plantation and its industrial counterpart, the factory (Gregor 1965:221-238). However, as mentioned earlier, there is a striking difference in terms of labour utilisation. Whereas Western manufacturing had brought about considerable technological innovations, particularly in the area of labour-saving techniques of production, such an emphasis was not viewed as fundamental to plantation production. The priority was more geared to supervision and skill development through repetition. Thus, productivity increases were essentially connected with increasing land productivity (through fertilisers and crop betterment) and the intensification of the labour process.

Management also used non-economic forms of coercion to maximise control over labour. It has been argued that several Asian plantations were influenced by the slave plantation methods which were to survive through the geographical movement of the planters. According to Tinker, the decline of the sugar plantations in the West Indies in the 1830s and the 1840s caused planters to move elsewhere. Some of them stayed on in sugar while others went in for coffee production. Planters from the West Indies were employed in Natal and Ceylon, while others went to Malaya to the sugar and coffee estates of Wellesley Province. Again, the difficulties experienced with coffee in the 1850s caused some of the Ceylon planters to go to Malaya, and when Fiji began sugar plantations, it attracted experienced sugar planters from Mauritius and Ceylon (although many of the Fiji planters also came from Queensland in Australia). When coffee growing in Ceylon faced a disaster, many planters switched to tea and a few went to Assam. In the twentieth century, many sugar and coffee planters switched to rubber and this attracted British, Dutch, French and Australian planters who had worked in the British colonies or in Java or in the plantations in Queensland and the Pacific islands (Tinker 1974:177). Thus, management methods reminiscent of the slave period were to survive until later in the course of plantation development:

The world of slavery still survived; the plantation was a world apart, on its own, subject to the laws – or whims - of those in charge: the overseers and the manager or the proprietor (Tinker 1974:177).

Thus, the abolition of slavery did not imply an end to forced labour. According to Kloosterboer, other forms of compulsory labour evolved 'whenever this seemed necessary or advantageous from an economic point of view' (1960:191). She studied

¹¹ The American engineer F.W. Taylor (1856-1915) had an important influence on the way in which work is organised in society. Concerned primarily with increasing labour productivity (which he saw as an index of the state of civilization) his work *Scientific Management* emphasised the distinction between conception and execution. The tasks of scientific management involved, among other things, the development of a science for each element of the labour process, which would replace the old 'rule-of-thumb' methods and increase the productivity of workers. In practical terms, this meant setting a 'scientific' standard for each task and encouraging the workers to reach this norm through repetition and knowledge of the task. Braverman has used these ideas to assert that what essentially happened in this process was a 'de-skilling' of the worker (Braverman 1974).

the various forms of compulsory labour that existed in the post-slavery era in the British Indies, the Netherlands East Indies, the United States of America, the Portuguese colonies in Africa, Latin America, Madagascar, Belgian Congo, Kenya, Haiti, Liberia and Soviet Russia. She found that the range of compulsion included debt bondage, decrees against vagrancy (a vagrant if unable to pay a fine was forced to work on the plantation) and penal sanctions of various sorts. All these were more or less directly connected with the need to ensure an adequate supply of labour for cultivation. As in the case of the slave plantations, there were severe penalties sanctioned by the state to deal with workers who 'bolted' from the estates. Breman's study on labour migration and rural transformation in colonial Asia has shown that, in most cases, planters had the right to arrest and even criminally punish those who did not meet the terms of the contract. This was true of the British colonies, the Dutch East Indies and in French Indo-China. In many instances sanctions went beyond prosecution but also resulted in physical punishment and even laziness or refusal to perform certain tasks received the same treatment. It was reported that besides the system of loans, standard practices in the recruitment of labour in Java in the early 20th century included 'deception, trickery, intimidation and if need be, forcible abduction' (Breman 1987:40-48).

An important method of controlling labour was the use of the recruiter to oversee the workers in the fields. The workers were generally recruited in gangs, and were conducted under the supervision of the recruiter to the estates. An important feature of this method was that the recruiter was often the overseer of the workforce and the management could rely on him to supervise the labour. The following description by a tea planter in Assam illustrates the control that the recruiter had over labour.

A sirdar's mode of management is of the simplest. He parades up and down between the rows of the tea bushes, armed with a small stick and the dignity that his position of authority gives him, in and out amongst his pluckers, yelling at the top of his voice, encouraging or swearing at them, and always exciting them to make haste and get along faster (che lao! che lao!). A sirdar attains his proud position through being one of the oldest and most trusted workers on the estate, or for having successfully recruited and brought up a party of coolies from his own country. They are held in respect by the rest of the coolies, for they have the ear of the sahib, and have it in their power to make it decidedly uncomfortable for any individual who sets their authority at defiance (Barker 1884:135-136).

The recruiter was more than the overseer on the estates. He was the intermediary between the plantation management and the workers he recruited. This gave him a powerful role in the labour management on the estates. According to de Silva:

The plantation system vested in the kangany authority far beyond that of recruiter and foreman. The labourer's lack of access to the estate manager made the kangany the link between the estate management and the labourers; in the early years he even distributed wages on behalf of the employer, and till recently a labourer's notice of resignation required the kangany's endorsement. His ties of caste and kinship with those whom he recruited gave a moral basis to his authority. He mediated in their family affairs and was their representative and spokesman in labour disputes. Combined with this patron-client relationship between the kangany and labour gang was a creditor-debtor relationship, which

placed the labourers in financial bondage to him, and consolidated his leadership. As an intermediary the kangany was not a neutral element but a prop in the power structure of the estate community. In the eyes of the labourers he was effectively their employer (de Silva 1982:329).

Such notions have caused many modern scholars to view plantations as 'enclaves' and 'total institutions' (Smith 1967; Mandle 1973:14-15; Jain 1970:xviii). However, such explanations underestimate the specific historical context of plantation capitalism, its links with the external markets as well as the relative mobility of the workforce (as compared to the slave plantations). Selvaratnam has contested the complete 'isolation' of the Malaysian plantations. According to him, plantation economies and societies were, in social reality, 'imperial assets' that, over a period of time, became an integral part of the larger economic system, and it was important, therefore, to recognise the role of external factors in shaping the internal structures of the plantation systems, particularly the role of labour within these societies. It was important, therefore, to visualise:

... the overall social processes that have taken place ... reflecting the social processes that have emerged within plantation economies and societies ... In particular, the extra economic measures and processes that this mode of production found necessary to use with the support of the colonial state in order to initiate a continuous supply of south Indian workers and incorporate them into the plantation system has received very little detailed treatment (Selvaratnam 1988:1080).

Debates have also taken place on the nature of the labour relations on the Asian estates. De Silva has argued that the retention of 'feudal' types of social relations and the systematic use of non-economic forms of coercion appear to be in contradiction of the classical dynamic associated with capitalism. Capitalist development implies a 'free' wage labour class, the disappearance of 'feudal' forms of exploitation and the existence of a bourgeoisie that would be interested in increasing the rate of profits in production by developing the techniques of production. In fact, the increasing organic composition of capital and the resulting increase in (relative) surplus value were considered by classical Marxists to be the essence of capitalist production. Taking this viewpoint de Silva has argued that the pattern of employer-employee relations on the plantations was of a semi-feudal nature (de Silva 1982:326).

This characterisation of plantation labour relations as being essentially pre-capitalist is questionable. Methodologically two aspects need to be considered. The first is that non-capitalist forms of coercion are not necessarily incompatible with the capitalist dynamic of increasing the rate of profits. In fact, given the history and nature of capitalism in the Third World, which went through extensive periods under colonialism, it was often in the interests of capital to retain such forms of coercion. In this new setting, such forms of coercion, while perhaps being feudal in form and origin could be argued to be in fact 'capitalistic' in content. The use of such means have to be placed within the context of the overall social and economic dynamic and analysed to see if they fit the rationale of the production process. Secondly, we have seen that while there was little technological innovation in order to increase the 'relative' surplus value, labour productivity was increased through increased repetition and supervision. Hence, there was some increase in the relative surplus value,

although this was achieved not through a 'revolutionisation' of the technical conditions of the labour process, but rather through intensifying the labour process (Marx 1887: 296-304). Such a perspective, in the light of the need to minimise capital outlay, reflected what one might consider to be 'sound' economic judgement on the part of the planters. In this 'new' mode of production absolute surplus was created through the elastic labour supply at constant wage rate while the relative surplus value was the outcome of stricter supervision and the resulting labour productivity. This was conceptually and historically different from the feudal mode of production. As observed by Breman:

The essence of the emerging labour regime was reliance on tried means of exerting pressure in combination with resort to new forms of legal coercion. Interpreting this as a combination of old and new elements does insufficient justice to the social dynamic. The organisation of control over labour towards the end of the 19th century can only be understood by postulating the rupture, rather than the continuity with the past (Breman 1987:69).

III The Role of the State

The colonial state played an important role in the development of the plantations in Asia. Financial assistance was often provided for scientific research on the plantation crops while infrastructural costs, particularly in the building of roads and railways, were subsidised, if not completely met, and land was often provided to European planters in the form of grants or at low rates to encourage plantation enterprise. However, an important area where the state also clearly helped the plantation industry was in the recruitment and control of labour. This was done often through penal sanctions preventing workers from leaving, by assuming a lenient attitude towards abuses by planters of their workers and in time by taking a more direct role in the recruitment of labour. Behal has shown that the assistance of the colonial state had been very important in developing the tea plantations in Assam (Behal 1984:88-131). Experimental plantations and the services of experts were provided in order to promote the industry, as also were some rent-free concessions to the companies. The government tried to make labour available by increasing land revenue on peasant holdings so that the peasants would seek employment on the tea gardens but this was not successful. After accepting the licence system of recruitment it enacted Act VI (Bengal Council) in 1865 which granted the planters the right to arrest workers without warrant who had run away from the estates. At the same time, provisions of this Act which might have served to protect the workers were seldom invoked nor did the state take steps to enforce them. Act I of 1882 raised the terms of contract duration from three to five years and also fixed rates of pay according to the work performed. Again it has been shown that this merely enhanced the control of the planters over the workforce as the fixing of the schedule of tasks was left to the discretion of the planters (Behal 1985:20).

All this created a situation where the workers were at the mercy of the planters who were intent on maximising their profits from agriculture and had little qualms about exploiting labour for this purpose. Some of the cruelty employed was highlighted in the Chief Commissioner's Annual Report on Labour Immigration into Assam in 1900. This Report, by the Commissioner Henry Cotton showed amongst other things, an increase in the mortality rate, payment of wages below the legal minimum level, numerous instances of non-payment of wages, cases where rice had not been provided

at the statutory rate and a subsistence allowance not paid to sick labourers. It also gave instances where rigorous punishment had been given to labourers by magistrates for minor offences while a European planter was acquitted in a case involving the murder of a labourer (Behal 1984: 92-93). In fact, the so-called 'Cotton controversy' stemming from the report by Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner, would suggest that the harshness of the labour regime as well as the unfair treatment meted out to the workers was well known by many at the highest levels of the government. The following quotations illustrate that the colonial state viewed this exploitation as a necessary evil in order to support European plantation enterprise. The Chief Secretary to the Government of India, J.B. Fuller, made the following observations on the conditions of labour in the tea gardens in Assam in

1900:

The truth is of course that serious abuses must occur under a labour system which is something of the nature of slavery, for an employee who can be arrested and forcibly detained by his master is more of a slave than a servant and that these abuses are the price which has to be paid for the great advantages which has resulted from the establishment and growth of the tea industry in Assam (quoted in Behal 1984:94).

Even the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, accepted that labour had to suffer in order to promote plantation agriculture. According to him

It is an arbitrary system, an abnormal system....But it has been devised not in the main in our interests but in the interests of an enterprise with which the Government of India could but but sympathise, namely, the effort to open up by capital and industry the resources of a distant and backward province (quoted in Behal 1984:95).

Our discussions on Malaya in the previous section highlighted the relatively high incidence of circulatory labour in plantation production. This, as we have seen, was an attractive alternative to permanent labour as far as the planters were concerned, justified both in terms of costs and control. Methods in line with this perspective were also given state support. In Malaya, as early as 1890, the European planters requested an official commission to inquire into the state of labour in Malaya and to come up with suggestions for encouraging immigration. This commission was dominated by planting interests whose intent was 'less to improve indentured labour conditions than to obtain the government's participation in importing labour' (Parmer 1960:20). Although its recommendations were not immediately endorsed, another commission set up in 1896 reiterated them and a bill was passed in 1897 whereby these were enforced.

In 1907 the Indian Immigration Committee was set up. One of its immediate tasks was to 'devise a comprehensive scheme to import labour on a large-scale' (Parmer 1960:39). In reality, this meant the setting up of 'quasi-official legal instruments for the centralised control of labour supply on the estates' (Jain 1970:200). A Tamil Immigration Fund was also set up, the proceeds of which were to meet the cost of importing labour. The fund consisted of levies on employers but also contributions by the government (Parmer 1960:42). By 1913, it was estimated that the fund had taken care of all the costs of recruitment, including the kangany's recruiting allowance (Parmer 1960:44). By 1914 the use of licences was significant in regulating the flow of workers (the kangany being given a licence indicating the minimum number of

workers he could bring across to Malaya). The expenses of his journey as well as the allowance were given to him, the expenses for the recruits being paid out of the Fund by various officers during the course of the journey (For details see Sandhu 1969:92 and Parmer 1960:51f).

An important element in this new situation was that, by law, all immigrant labour had to be imported under the direct supervision of the Committee. By 1908, the kangany could collect free passages for all the people he wanted to recruit if he had been provided with a licence from the Immigration Committee. The licence was signed also by the planter who agreed not to make deductions on account of the costs incurred through recruitment beyond a specified amount (Jackson 1961:117). By 1908, free passages were granted from the Immigration Fund for independent workers applying for them and later this provision was extended to cover expenses in India as well. By mid-1909, the recruiting allowance was increased and it was made obligatory for workers to be brought to their place of work free of debt to either the employer or kangany (Jackson 1961:117-118).

All these measures helped to ease the migration of workers from India for the growing plantation industry, and various issues taken into account reflect the concern of the state and the management with increasing the labour supply. Such a role indicated 'that the colonial state was not a "night watchman" laissez-faire state even though its own ideology usually stressed that it was neutral and unconcerned to interfere in such "commercial transactions" as labour migration' (Omvedt 1980:204). It was keen to maintain the supply of labour for the industrial plantations (which were, in any case, linked to the interests of the colonial powers in terms of ownership) and in order to supply cheap inputs for the industrial revolution in Europe with the minimum costs possible. It passed legislation that was favourable to the planting industry, set up a large number of labour inquiry commissions from the 1890s, and took an even more direct role in the recruitment process with the evolution of the labour-contracting system. Bureaucrats were involved in overseeing the process and a system of stringent control over the numbers of recruits evolved. The state also passed medical ordinances, which, by and large, reflected a concern to maintain the labour force. It was clear however, that an important motivation was to promote plantation capitalism and the emphasis was more on helping the planters increase the profitability of production than on protecting the workers. Omvedt has even argued that

...there is no evidence that any such responses of the colonial state - or any legislation resulting from them - at any point contradicted the needs of plantation owners and factory owners for cheap labour. Thus, for example, however strong the nationalist agitation may have appeared, the indenture system in fact ended when it was outmoded and relatively useless for the changing needs of the plantations, while legislation which went contrary to such needs (for example the requirement for a certain proportion of women migrants to Malaya) was simply unenforced. The main role of the colonial state thus was clear: even when it was not directly and obviously visible to the migrants, it maintained their conditions of work and travel as much as it served to hamper the development of native industry or to extract funds from agriculture (Omvedt 1980:206).

Concluding comments:

With the rise of the industrial plantation in the nineteenth century, managements were under increased pressure to devise ways in which the wage and supervision costs could be minimised while at the same time productivity and the use of skills were maximised. Measures in line with this objective had to take into account (a) problems of labour supply, (b) the possibilities of fine-tuning the supply of labour with its demand, (c) maximising labour productivity through a repetition and intensification of the labour process and (d) minimising costs of supervision. This order of priorities formed the basis for efficiency in plantation production. This paper also showed that the industrial plantations in South Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries increasingly found temporary or circulatory labour more efficient than a permanent workforce. Once adequate labour could be ensured, then it was economically advantageous for this supply to be in line with the demand and prices, so that problems of under-employment and an underutilisation of capacity could be avoided. The drive to lower costs of production was further supported by increasing labour productivity through intensifying the labour process. Apart from doing away with the cost of maintaining a workforce when it was not needed for production, this form of revolving or circulatory migration had the additional advantage of transferring some of the supervision costs (and by definition coercion costs) on to the jobber. While he was paid for these services in most cases, the fact that he had control over the workers through essentially non-wage ties made his work easier.

A further important economic advantage of this system was this: there was a unit, spatially separate and not within the purview of the plantation, which catered to the production and reproduction of labour power during the periods labour was not needed on the plantations - and the costs of this was not borne by the plantation management. The wage paid was for the single worker for the specified time of employment. Whenever it was possible, women were encouraged to work on the plantations as the existing wage could be additionally subsidised through their 'invisible' labour done in the household, which did not have to be remunerated monetarily. This implied, in reality, that as more members of the family participated in wage work, the planter had the possibility of paying an effectively 'lower' wage. This was in addition to the fact that women were paid less even if they did the same task as the men.

The above analysis brings into question the validity of understanding industrial capitalism as characterised by increasing organic composition of capital associated with increasing productivity through the evolvment of labour-saving techniques of production. This anomaly can be explained, to some extent, by the nature of modern plantations under colonialism, which could not be easily categorised as part of the rural, feudal, industrial or capitalist sectors. While being geographically located in the peasant hinterland and involved in agricultural cultivation, the industrial form of labour deployment and the enclave nature of plantations meant these workers constituted neither rural labour nor peasants. At the same time, the retention of slave-like and feudal means of labour control meant that, while they were deployed as wage labour, they could not be classified either as part of the capitalist proletariat. These features and dynamics make it difficult to categorise these plantations easily as either (a) 'traditional' and 'feudal' or (b) 'modern' and 'capitalist'. While being geographically located in the peasant hinterland and involved in agricultural cultivation, they could not be classified as rural labour or peasants, as they were 'enclave units' involved in form of labour deployment that was more closely linked to

industrial capitalism. At the same time, they retained slave-like and feudal means of labour control, while officially been classified by the colonial state 'free labour'. In many ways, the industrial plantation reflected the innovative nature of capitalism by combining forms of economic and extra-economic forms of coercion to develop a super-exploitative form of production.

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