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THE MIGRATION AND CONDITIONS OF

IMMIGRANT LABOUR IN CEYLON

1880-1910

By

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant labourers in Ceylon were wholly Indian and were predominantly plantation workers. The rapid expansion of plantation agriculture in our period, which was spearheaded by British capital and enterprise, took place under a supply of immigrant labour, which was on the whole favourable to the industry. The planters were tapping a free labour market in South India, for India did not impose restrictions on migration to Ceylon so long as the immigrants were on monthly contracts with the facility to return to their villages periodically. The planters preferred free as against indenture labour, for it opened up a chronic surplus of labour in a poverty-stricken condition to the free market forces of supply and demand. They, on the whole, concentrated on improving the methods of recruitment and transportation of labour so as to increase the inflow. The planters' problem was not so much the inadequacy of the labour supply as the problem of labour instability--of keeping the labourers on the estate for long periods. The coffee planter's technique was to withhold part of the wages until the end of the crop season. But the tea planter, with a year round demand for labour, required a longer hold. His technique was to place the labourer under a dead-weight of indebtedness to the estate. This was done by giving out indiscriminate cash advances, with a low wage scale where the wages were inadequate to work off the debt. The planters preferred to compete for labour on advances than on the wage scale. The cash advances, therefore, came to play the role which the wages play in a present-day labour market. With a low and a stagnant wage scale, the labourers turned to the advances to meet the gap between inadequate wages and the rising cost of living, but in the process got steeped

in indebtedness. Being familiar with indebtedness in South India, the immigrant acquiesced. The system brought about little economic progress for the labourer. The migratory nature of the labour population and the kanganiés' hold over the labour gangs contributed to the overall poverty. Government policy was one of non-interference into planter-labour industrial relations. However, in those other spheres in which the Colonial Government opted to interfere, viz., in providing transport facilities for the immigrants and also labour welfare schemes, labour conditions saw some improvement. But these measures did not bring about a striking progress in labour life partly because these schemes were not sufficiently far reaching in a period of rapid expansion of the immigrant labour population and more important, because of the overall impoverished and debt-ridden state of the labour community.