Chapter Four
The Voyage

Prior to the introduction of Indian indentured labourers in British plantation colonies, the large scale human transportation overseas was primarily limited to transportation of slaves and convicts and had gained an ill repute because of horrific tells of ill-treatment, unhygienic conditions and numerous deaths on board. The anti-slavery lobby used these voyage associated abuses to strengthen their anti-slavery arguments and question the moral authority of the empire.¹ In this backdrop, when large scale overseas transportation of indentured labourers became necessary in the post abolition period, the imperial authorities were overtly cautious in regulating every aspect of this traffic – from embarkation on port to the supplies and accommodation on board, medical attendance for emigrants etc. because they could not afford to lose in the moral argumentation and stop the indentured emigration at this juncture.

Another reason why the voyage of Indian labourers to the plantation colonies merits a detailed study is that it was the point at which their lives were on the brink, in the allegoric as well as real sense. This chapter describes the attempts made by the administrators to regulate the embarkation and voyage of the labourers and the experience these labourers had on board.

Emigration Depot

Emigration depots functioned as the place where the intending emigrants, were housed before the actual departure and various embarkation related formalities

¹ High mortality during voyage and no medical attendance on ships were enumerated as two evils associated with the slavery and continued in indenture system in Anti Slavery Reporter, the mouthpiece of the British and Foreign Anti Slavery Society of England. Cited in Tredgold, J.H., Emigration from India: The Export of Coolies and Other Labourers from India, BFASS, London, 1842.
Plate V

Mauritius Emigration Depot, Calcutta

PLAN
of the
Mauritius Emigration
DEPOT,
Bhowanipore,
1861.

The Mauritius Coolie Depot at Calcutta
like registration, medical examination etc. were conducted. During the initial phase of emigration to Mauritius, i.e. between 1834 and 1839, there was no specific place or depot and intending emigrants were generally housed in the recruiting agent’s houses. Inspection of the recruits and depot arrangements were necessary under the Emigration Act of 1837 but it was an exercise seldom performed by the officials. Recruits were kept confined and not allowed to go around for the imminent fear among the recruiters that the recruited people might run away if they are allowed to interact with the people around or would be lured away by the rival recruiters. This led the Calcutta Committee to conclude that ‘coolies’, while kept in Calcutta, were actually in a state of close imprisonment\(^2\) and it recommended a stricter supervision of the port procedures.

When emigration was recommenced in 1842, the Indian government took the responsibility of overall supervision of the system and officials decided to introduce series of reformative measures in order to ensure proper housing for intending emigrants and fair depot procedures like registration and embarkation. In post 1842 period, the phenomenal rise in the quantum of emigration to various colonies, especially Mauritius, also made it indispensable for the agencies involved in the process to maintain a large depot establishment.

Since Calcutta was the main port of embarkation for Mauritius, the Emigration Depot at Calcutta was very important for Mauritian Agency and therefore it was maintained permanently and with utmost care. In 1844, a larger depot was set up, in Bhowanipur.\(^3\) The most vivid description of the Mauritian emigration depot at Calcutta was given by H.N.D. Beyts, Protector of Immigrants in Mauritius, who visited India in 1861 to report on the establishment of emigration depots and to

\(^2\) *Report of Dickens Committee*, p. 3.
\(^3\) Emigration Agent, Calcutta to Colonial Secretary, dt. 20 May 1844, RA 777, MA.
suggest remedies for the malpractices existent in the depot arrangements and procedures.\(^4\) As per Beyts’ description, coolies were lodged in three straw covered bungalows in Calcutta depot. Depot was surrounded by a high wall with only one guarded entrance. Within the depot premises, cooking sheds were built where emigrants did their own cooking and water was supplied through a tank placed inside the depot. To provide medical attendance to sick emigrants, a hospital and dispensary was also built within the boundaries of depot.\(^5\)

At Madras port, emigrants were lodged in the godowns of contractors till 1857 when an independent depot was set up in Vepery. This depot was also designed on a pattern very similar to the Calcutta depot with three large sheds to lodge emigrants and a hospital building. In Bombay, an emigration depot was established only in 1861 and that too was a temporary establishment. Since Bombay sent the least number of emigrants to Mauritius, Mauritian government was not very keen on spending large sums of money in maintaining a permanent depot and associated paraphernalia and finally this temporary depot was abandoned after the suspension of emigration from Bombay in 1865.

Despite the arrangement of depots at the ports of embarkation to house all the intending emigrants, recruiters continued to keep emigrants in their private accommodation and transfer them to depot only a few days before embarkation. Describing the reasons for running private establishments to lodge emigrants, Protector of Emigrants at Calcutta port, Thomas Caird wrote to the Secretary of Bengal Government,

\(^4\) *Report of HND Beyts, 1861, BU/ A, MA.*

\(^5\) *ibid. Act VII of 1871 made it necessary to have two hospitals in every depot – one for ordinary cases and the other for communicable diseases. Rules relating to Emigration from the port of Calcutta under the provision of Act VII of 1871, Calcutta, 1873, NL.*
'during the busy season.. every recruiting duffadars’ dwelling of any kind is converted into a depot until the time arrives for the departure of a ship, when new arrivals from the recruiting districts take the place of those who have embarked.'

Apart from this official explanation, another and more pragmatic reason for maintaining private accommodation was purely economic. These private accommodations were beyond the purview of the Protector of Emigrants and other officials and therefore recruiters were not bound to provide the provisions and facilities to the intending emigrants which they would be otherwise compulsorily providing the inmates of the official depots.

Emigration depot was managed by the Emigration Agent who was representative of the Government of Mauritius. Emigration Agent was at the helm of the entire indenture system – from the recruitment till the embarkation and he was entrusted to ensure that the emigrants become well aware of the terms and condition of the emigration and they haven’t been recruited by misrepresentation or deceit. In the depot, he had to make sure that all lodged emigrants get proper accommodation, food, clothing, water, medical attendance etc. and finally he was authorised to issue the certificate for emigration. Emigration agent continued to enjoy this uncontested control over every aspect of the system till the time Indian government realized that the Emigration Agents actually represented the Mauritian government and planters’ interests and therefore would often tend to compromise in protecting the interests of Indian emigrants. Therefore, in order to check the Emigration Agent’s authority, a Protector of Emigrants was appointed at the ports of embarkation through Act XXI of

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6 Caird to Secretary, Government of Bengal, dt. 17 February 1862, Prog. No. 17, Gen. (Emi.), March 1862, WBSA.
1843. However, Thomas Caird who held the charge of Emigration Agent for Mauritius, was dispensed with the duties of Protector of Emigrants by the Government of India; going against the very spirit of the office of Protector of Emigrants which was to check the irregularities of Emigration Agent.

To take care of the ailing emigrants' it was necessary to have a doctor in the depot whose primary job was also to examine all the emigrants on their arrival in the depot for any communicable or venereal disease. Since all the inmates were supposed to be spending on an average of 10-15 days in depot, maintaining a hospital within the emigration depot to provide medical attendance was made a necessity. The apprehension of spread of communicable diseases was so momentous among the officials that the Emigration Act of 1871 provided for maintaining of two hospitals in depots – one for ordinary cases and the other for communicable diseases. Despite all these regulatory measures to ensure disease free stay for emigrants in the depot, cases of outbreaks of cholera and malaria and even death of emigrants continued to occur very frequently. A variety of factors were responsible for this – the unhygienic living conditions in the depot and laxity in duties of the officials assigned to ensure proper and clean accommodation for the emigrants, admission of sick and physically unfit people as intending emigrants by the recruiters merely to increase the number and fulfil their quota; overcrowding of depots in ‘busy reasons’ when the number of emigrants lodged was many times the capacity of the depot, etc.

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7 PP, Vol. xxx, No. 530, 1844.
8 Cumpston, op.cit. p. 70.
9 Rules relating to Emigration from the port of Calcutta under the provision of Act VII of 1871, Calcutta, 1873, NL.
Embarkation Process

When the emigration of Indian labourers to Mauritius began under the indenture system in 1834, recruits were being taken before a magistrate whose job was only to ascertain that the emigrants were going on their own will and they had been engaged under a contract mentioning the details of service.¹⁰

This process of embarkation in its simplest form soon began to prove ineffective in putting a check on the fraudulent methods used for engaging the emigrants and embarking unfit, sick persons. To bypass the police enquiry, the recruiters began to embark the emigrants on the ship while it was at sea and not from the port. On ship Sophia, which left for Mauritius in October 1836, out of 336 emigrants, 196 were embarked on the ship far away from the port, without any permit from Calcutta police.¹¹ T.C. Scott, who visited Mauritius in 1836, emphasized the need for police provision in Calcutta to check the identity of emigrants, the engagements and suggested the appointment of an official for carrying out the embarkation procedure.¹² The first initiative to regulate the embarkation process was taken by the Government of India through Act V of 1837 under which all the intending emigrants must appear before an officer designated by the Government of India along with the Emigration Agent with a written contract. This contract was to be explained in Hindustani to the emigrant in the presence of the said officer who would than grant permit for emigration. Captain Birch, the Superintendent of Calcutta Police, was assigned the duty to supervise the embarkation process.¹³ Subsequently provisions of Act V of 1837 to regulate the embarkation were extended to the all the ports through Act XXXII of 1837.

These initiatives remained cursory in practice and would very often be bypassed by the recruiters and Emigration Agents who would take the emigrants by boat and embark them on the ship far from the depot, without being taken to doctor or police and without any permit.\textsuperscript{14} In addition to the emigration from Indian Ports (Calcutta, Madras, Bombay) British officials noted another stream of emigration from eastern ports under French possession, especially Pondicherry. This was completely unregulated and therefore consisted of all possible abuses associated with recruitment and embarkation. British officials took a serious note of this and in all further regulations related to overseas emigration, they always made a point not only to assert that emigration would be allowed only from Indian ports (under British control) but also specifically mentioned the names of ports.

When emigration was resumed in 1842, regulating the embarkation process was among the primary concerns of the administrators. Responding to the allegations of unapproved embarkation of emigrants, embarkation of physically unfit or sick emigrants which resulted in outbreaks of diseases and high mortality on board, Government of India passed Act XXI of 1843 which strictly made it clear that no emigrant would be allowed to embark without a certificate from Emigration Agent, countersigned by the Protector of Emigrants.\textsuperscript{15} This was an attempt to involve both the governments in the embarkation process as the Emigration Agent was appointed by the Government of Mauritius while Protector of Emigrants was appointed by the Government of India.

Various abuses associated with the embarkation of emigrants were being reported in the media and captured the public attention in India as well as in Britain.

\textsuperscript{14} Evidence of Bibec Zuhoorun, Finniss to Captain Birch, dt. 5 February 1838, \textit{Report of Dickens Committee}.

\textsuperscript{15} Act XXI of 1843.
These incidents augmented the public discontent against the entire system and to pacify these voices demanding the abolition of indenture system and to defend the benevolent, humanitarian image of the empire, Government of India tried to evolve a standardized system of embarkation in which all the possible issues and abuses associated with the indenture system, e.g. deceit and frauds in recruitment, ignorance about the terms and conditions of service, physical fitness and health of emigrants etc. would be rectified. However, these regulations could weed out the embarkation related irregularities only in a limited manner and several instances of violations of these regulations continued to pop up from time to time. These instances underlined the very futility of the supervisory vote played so far by the Government of India and necessitated more pro-active role with direct control over the embarkation process. This exercise was carried out by assigning more powers to the Protector of Emigrants, introducing punitive measures like fines or imprisonment and establishing their direct control over Emigration Agents in case of any violation. Duties of Protector of Emigrants were legally defined for the first time in Act XIII of 1864\textsuperscript{16} which was a landmark pronouncement in the working of indenture system because it completely changed the texture of intervention by the Government of India from circumlocutory supervisory role to a direct, assertive control at the helm of all the emigration related issues.

As a result of these administrative legislative endeavours, a standardized though complex procedure of embarkation was evolved in 1860s which continued for rest of the period without any major alteration. Under this procedure, when a ship was ready, recruits were taken to the port, examined by the Protector of Emigration in presence of Emigration Agent and after the satisfactory examination emigrants were

\textsuperscript{16} Geoghegan Report, pp. 39-66.
given a tin ticket as a permit certifying that they were going by their own will and fully understand the terms of contract. After this, emigrants were finally examined by the Medical Inspector or Surgeon Superintendent of the ship who would single out physically unfit, or very old recruits. After this rigorous medical examination, emigrants were allowed to embark the ship and now they were ready to begin an exploratory journey towards their future lives to be traversed through astonishingly new locations, socio-cultural milieu and societal norms.

**Voyage Regulations**

To ensure a ‘safe conveyance’ for the labourers embarking from different Indian ports on their voyage to Mauritius, Indian and Mauritian — both the governments initiated various laws to regulate the shipping. In the initial departures, inadequate supplies and high proportions of sickness and mortality among the immigrants on board were reported by all the official enquiries.\(^\text{17}\)

Since the inception, elaborate shipping rules were promulgated to regulate three basics necessities of the life of immigrants on board, i.e. accommodation, food, drinking water and clothes, and medical attendance. After initial reluctance, the Government of India made its very first attempt to regulate the voyage only after three years of the commencement of the system. Act XXXII of 1837 made the inspection of vessels mandatory if it carried more than twenty passengers. The arrangements to be checked were about accommodation, food and medical attendance on board. It also provided penalties for the Captains of the ships found violating the laid provisions.\(^\text{18}\)

Since most of the ships transporting Indian immigrants were cargo ships which carry rice and other goods from Indian ports, immigrants were provided insufficient

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18 *Act XXXII of 1837, Papers Respecting the East India Labourers Bill, 1838, OIOC.*
accommodation on board and often lodged on deck, in open.\textsuperscript{19} J.P. Woodcock, who went to Mauritius in March 1836, expressed his discontent with the accommodation of immigrants on board, ‘Coolies were disposed of in the waste, between the gangways and the forecastle’.\textsuperscript{20}

Taking this problem into account, more elaborate shipping regulations were passed next year. According to this Act of 1838, not more than three passengers were allowed to board for every five tons burden of ship and fifteen superficial feet of lower deck or platform, not to be occupied by goods or luggage, had to be provided for each passenger. Responding to the high figures for sickness and mortality on board, this Act also made it mandatory to employ ‘one doctor with proper supply of medicines’ on each ship. According to this Act, all the immigrants on board had to be provided with five gallons of water and fourteen pounds of rice every week.\textsuperscript{21} This Act, for the first time, tried to regulate every essential aspect of voyage – accommodation, food, and medical attendance and thus provided a comprehensive regulatory structure around which all the further regulations evolved.

However, these regulations were not very effective in ensuring Indian immigrants a safe passage to Mauritius and complaints relating to inadequate accommodation and high rates of mortality and sickness continued. Immigrants returning from Mauritius complained about ill-treatment by Captain of ships and scarcity of water and food stuff on board.\textsuperscript{22} On ship Adelaide which arrived in Mauritius on 21 April 1837, 24 immigrants, out of a total of 72 who embarked from

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] Statement of Ramdeen and six others, Examination of the Coolies Returned from Mauritius, 1841, OIOC.
\end{footnotes}
Calcutta, died during the passage.\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, when the system was resumed in 1842, authorities were extra cautious in their efforts to regulate the immigrants' passage. Act XV was passed in 1842, which described the provisions of 1838 act in more precise terms. Apart from specifying the space and rations for immigrants on board, under this Act, the condition of ships, arrangements for accommodation and stock of rations and water to be distributed among immigrants was to be verified at the port of embarkation. To enforce the compliance of these regulations, Act XV fixed Rupees 10000 as guarantee money to be deposited by the master of every ship carrying immigrants.\textsuperscript{24} In addition to accommodation and medical attendance, scales of rations and provisions for cooking by the immigrants who would not eat the food prepared in the kitchen of ships were also fixed subsequently. Self cooking later became an established norm and all immigrants on board were provided rations which were then cooked by them in groups. As a precautionary measure against possibilities of fire, cooking was allowed only on open deck. Because of this regulation, cooking was not possible in inclement weather and therefore dry provisions like Chura, Gram, and sugar were also included in the food stuff to be distributed on board. Dry rations were also provided to the immigrants who would not eat cooked food because of caste prejudices or other social stigma.

Since Indian labourers were imported by planters overseas to further commercial activities, the most obvious solitary interest of planters was to maximise their profits and reduce the costs involved to the lowest possible levels. They started shipping emigrant labourers on cargo ships because their commanders would charge

\textsuperscript{23} Report of the Medical Board to examine and report upon the state of health of the crew and passengers of the ship Adelaide, No. XLII, \textit{Papers Respecting the East India Labourers Bill, 1838}.

\textsuperscript{24} Act XV of 1842, PP, Vol. xxxv, No. 148, 1843.
very little to ‘take 150 or 200 passengers’ who would be housed on deck.25 When the Mauritian state took the responsibility of exporting Indian labourers, ‘the commercial interest in indenture shifted from private agents to the colonial state’.26 The colonial state in Mauritius assumed a delicate task of balancing the commercial interests of the colony with the satisfactory arrangements for the transportation which tend to increase the costs of transportation and thus work contrariwise for the commercial interests. The elaborate shipping regulations of 1840s led to escalation of transportation costs of Indian emigrants to Mauritius because the ships could carry less cargo now in order to provide the prescribed space to the emigrants. In this mêlée between the conflicting interests, the commercial interests were preferred by the Mauritian government over the humanistic concerns and joined hands together with planters in reducing the costs of shipping by regressive relaxations in the provisions for space, carrying capacity in terms of passengers per tonnage, etc. Representations made by Mauritian planters for reduction of shipping costs were affirmatively attended by the Governor and finally at the initiation of Governor of Mauritius, the height between decks and the superficial space allotted to emigrants were reduced in 184727, and the Indian government (Board of East India Company) also endorsed this.28 Colonial Office, which used to take firm positions for maintaining certain minimum standards of protection and care, too found the prescribed space unnecessary. This reduction of space provided to Indian emigrants on board was validated by Act IV of 1852.29 All this regressive efforts were rolled up during a period when Indian immigrants were arriving in phenomenally high numbers. Relaxations in shipping regulation at the one hand and high frequency of

26 Carter, Marina, Servants, p.122.
27 Gomm to Grey, dt. 27 May 1847, CO/ 167/ 318, PRO.
28 CO/ 167/ 325, PRO.
29 Geoghegan Report, p.18.
shipments collectively led to a system of shipping of Indian emigrants which was concerned only with sourcing the maximum number of labourers for sugar plantations at the lowest costs. In this chaotic regime of transportation, proper accommodation, maintenance of hygiene and medical attendance to emigrants on board was a matter of least concern for colonial authorities and planters both and emigrants were left to suffer the adversities of the voyage. Majority of emigrants were experiencing the harshness for the first time, which made them more vulnerable.

The outcome of such callous shipping arrangements was obvious – high mortality on voyage. In 1852, the mortality rate during voyages from Calcutta to Mauritius was 1.5 per cent, which shot up to 5.3 percent in 1856 and though it reduced next year, still the average mortality rate per annum was about 3 percent between 1858 and 1863.30 In 1859 – 60, a total of 6382 emigrants embarked for Mauritius, of whom 209 died during passage.31 The worst outcome of the callous shipping arrangements were tragic deaths of immigrants who arrived on ships Futtay Mubarak and Hyderee in 1856. These ships arrived from Calcutta in January 1856, and after some cases of sickness or ‘some epidemic disease’ were reported among immigrants on board, they were sent in quarantine on uninhabited Gabriel island. There was no place to house the immigrants on the island and they were accommodated in makeshift tents for about five months. With meagre supplies of food and medicines and poor shelters, immigrants were virtually left by the colonial government to die. As a result, 284 immigrants out of 697 died during this inhuman ‘quarantine.’

This incident was a big blemish for the Mauritian administrators and should be taken into consideration by the historians who claim that most of the legislative

30 Shlomowitz, Ralph and John McDonald, ‘Mortality of Indian Labour on Ocean Voyages, 1843 – 1917’, Studies in History, Vol.6, No. 1, 1990. Figure calculated from Table 3, p.46.
31 Gen. (Emi.), Prog. No. 52, dt. May 1860, WBSA.
initiatives to protect the Indian immigrant labourers emanated at the behest of Mauritian government. The Indian government, taking a strong note of this unfortunate incident, temporarily suspended the emigration for Mauritius. Since high mortality rates were reported for voyages to other labour importing colonies also, Indian government constituted committees to find the reasons for such high mortality. One such committee was set up under Dr. F.J. Mouat, the Inspector of jails and dispensaries in Calcutta who reported the neglect of proper sanitary precautions on vessels, inadequate provisions of food for sick and children, paucity of drinking water etc.\textsuperscript{32} Subsequently as a reform measure and to increase the effect of scattered shipping regulation, the government of India passed a Consolidating Shipping Act in 1864. It introduced detailed reforms related to accommodation, rations and medical attendance. Provision of drinking water was increased, separate accommodation was to be provided for women, and sick emigrants on board.\textsuperscript{33} Mauritian planters tried to resist the reforms proposed by Act of 1864 resorting to the usual woes of heavy costs of shipping. After losing face for the initial pro-planter negligence, Mauritian government was more careful this time. It carefully observed the process of inspections and supervision. Protector of Immigrants had to visit all the arriving ships before the immigrants disembark and check the observation of various regulations during the voyage. Ship Surgeons were now under direct control of Mauritian authorities who had to present a detailed report of general condition of immigrants on board, sanitary conditions, and occurrences of any sickness. The Indian government enacted another set of regulations in 1871 to regulate the voyage. It was a more comprehensive and descriptive Act which continued to regulate the passage of Indian emigrants to overseas plantation settlements with slight relaxations for Mauritius upto

\textsuperscript{32} Prog.No. 25-29, Home (Public), dt 1 October, 1858, NAI.

\textsuperscript{33} Geoghegan Report, pp. 36-41.
1883. According to Act of 1871, the accommodation of the emigrants must not be encroached upon; in any case, men, women, families and the sick should be provided separate accommodation, and female emigrants should not be employed in work. It also described the details of the food and clothing allowances to be given to emigrants on board. All emigrants were to be provided rice, dhol, onions and potatoes, mutton or dried fish, spices, salt, oil etc. During the voyage all men were provided with two dhoties, one jacket, one blanket, and all women had to be supplied two sarees, one flannel banian and one blanket. Various scholars have argued that in the wake of introduction of steam ships which reduced the time of voyage, costs for introduction of labourers was subsequently reduced because supplies on board were provided for a shorter time. This argument is valid for the voyage to Trinidad, Fiji or other distant colonies but does not hold much weight for voyage to Mauritius because the estimated time of voyage to Mauritius remained the same between 1844 and 1883.

Table 4.1

Average Length of Voyage to Mauritius from Indian Ports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Port of Embarkation</th>
<th>Duration 1844</th>
<th>Duration 1883</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>10 Weeks (April to October) 8 Weeks</td>
<td>10 Weeks (April to October) 8 Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(November to March)</td>
<td>(November to March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>7 Weeks (April to October) 6 Weeks</td>
<td>7 Weeks (April to October) 6 Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(November to March)</td>
<td>(November to March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>5 Weeks (April to September) 6 Weeks</td>
<td>5 Weeks (April to September) 6 Weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(October to March)</td>
<td>(October to March)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Act XV of 1842; Indian Immigration Act, 1883.

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34 Rules Relating to Emigration from Calcutta under the Provisions of Act VII of 1871. NL; Prog. No. 1-3, Gen.(Emi.), November 1874, WBSA.
Hugh Tinker, who was otherwise fiercely critical of the indentured immigration and condemned it as 'a new system of slavery', expressed his satisfaction with the shipping regulations from 1870s onwards. He argues, 'From the 1870s, the rules aboard the coolie ships were more comprehensive, and more effectively enforced, than on most other passenger ships.'\textsuperscript{36} The essential motive, as claimed by the authorities, of these elaborate regulations was to provide the emigrants a safe passage to overseas settlements and to reduce the risks of voyage in terms of sickness and death. As we shall discuss the sickness and mortality on board and emigrants’ experiences of ill-treatment in subsequent sections of this chapter, Tinker’s approval appears to be only partially true.

**Medical Care and Mortality on Board**

The main focus of shipping arrangements was to transport immigrant labourers to their destinations in sound physical condition. Arrival of physically weak or sick immigrants, unable to perform arduous work in estates, meant heavy losses for the plantation economy. For this practical consideration, proper medical care of emigrants on board was a matter of foremost concern for the regulators. The other impetus for explicit attention to medical care on board was the reporting of high mortality en route which question marks on the benevolent assertions of the empire.

The Act passed in 1838 to regulate overseas emigration made it compulsory for all ships carrying emigrants to take ‘one doctor with a medicine chest with proper supply of medicines and instruments’.\textsuperscript{37} Apart from the one main doctor or ‘Surgeon Superintendent’, female nurses were to be appointed on each ship to take care of the specific health care of female emigrants. Initially the doctors were appointed by the Indian government but in 1860s the Mauritian government took charge of appointing

\textsuperscript{36} Tinker, Hugh, *A New System of Slavery*, p.145.

\textsuperscript{37} PP, Vol. iii, No.559, 1837-38.
Ship Surgeons under its direct control. Ship Surgeons had to maintain medical casebooks for the voyage, recording every minute detail of sickness, hygiene and general conditions of immigrants during the voyage, and submit it to the Protector upon disembarkation.

Setting up a structure to provide medical attendance for emigrants on board alone was not sufficient to ensure good health and reduce the mortality on board. It needed proper follow up of hygienic measures, proper supply of drinking water, healthy food, sufficient accommodation, and, above all, a resolve among the people who were assigned the task of taking care of emigrants on board to dutifully execute their responsibilities. All this was often missing during the voyages. Doctors were often found neglecting their duties and immigrants often complained against doctors for not paying proper attention to their problems, ill-treatment and misconduct. An enquiry into the causes of high mortality on ships from Bombay in 1864 attributed its reasons to the 'misconduct and inefficiency of the surgeons, who are said to have been constantly intoxicated'\textsuperscript{38}. In 1866, Surgeon and Assistant Surgeon of the ship Fateh Alam were found guilty of assaulting emigrants on board while Surgeon of ship Canning was fined for not issuing sufficient quantities of rations to emigrants.\textsuperscript{39} Some surgeons were involved in even more heinous offences like sexual assault.\textsuperscript{40}

The mortality on board was an indispensable concomitant of the transportation of emigrant labourers. In a comparative perspective, mortality rate of Indian emigrants during voyage was much higher than 19\textsuperscript{th} century voyages of European immigrants to North America and Australia (average less than 10 per thousand)\textsuperscript{41}. High rates of mortality among Indian emigrants on board were reported from the very

\textsuperscript{39} ARPI, 1866.
\textsuperscript{40} Prog. No. 6-8, Rev., Ag. Com.(Emi.), May 1873, NAI.
beginning of the system and was one of the most propagated evils of the system by the anti-indenture humanitarians. The first official recognition of the high mortality rate came in 1837-38 when 24 emigrants out of 72 died on board ship Adelaide which arrived in April 1837. On another ship, William Wilson which arrived in February 1837, 26 emigrants out of 224 died during voyage. According to one estimate, out of 25,468 emigrants who embarked from all Indian ports for Mauritius between 1834 and 1839, 3820 or about 15 per cent died during voyage. When emigration resumed in 1842, stringent regulations were adopted by the Indian government to control the high mortality rates. But after some time, commercial interests of colonies predominated and concern for maintenance of proper sanitations, medical care and general health of emigrants on board subsided, leading to high mortality rates on board.

Table 4.2
Mortality Rates during Voyage to Mauritius from Indian Ports, 1856-64

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mortality Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<td>1859</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<td>1861</td>
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<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ARPI, 1859 - 1864, Figures for 1856-58 are extracted from Shlomowitz, Ralph and John McDonald, 'Mortality of Indian Labour on Ocean Voyages, 1843 - 1917', Studies in History; Vol.6, No. 1, 1990, table:3, p.46.

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42 Reports of the Medical Board to examine and report upon the state of health of the crew and passengers of the ship Adelaide and William Wilson, No. XLII, Papers Respecting the East India Labourers Bill, 1838. OIOC.

43 Prog. No. 20, Gen.(Emi.), dt. 17 November 1841, WBSA.
Chapter 4

The Official narratives had tried to explain the poor health and high mortality rate in terms of their racist perceptions about the general physical condition and unsanitary habits of Indians and the general starvation of the Indian population in the wake of frequent famines. Dr. Bakewell, who was Ship Surgeon, attribute the deterioration of Indian race as the reason for their poor health and deaths during voyage, ‘on the vast plain of Hindoostan amid miasmatic poisons,. must in the course of ages, have greatly deteriorated the race’.

Explaining the high mortality rates of Indian emigrants compared to the European emigrants, Colonial land and Emigration Commission opined that ‘India had a much more epidemiologically hostile environment than Europe (and) was much less nutritionally secure than Europe’. Ralph Shlomowitz, who is one of the very few scholars who have studied the mortality on board in detailed manner, also expresses his agreement with this perception. He further uses the proportional correlation between famine and levels of migration to derive the poor health of emigrants: since emigrants came from regions of famine and general scarcity of foodstuff, they were in poor physical strength and therefore more vulnerable to illness and death during voyages. In another essay, Shlomowitz attributes the high mortality to the epidemics broke out among the emigrants on board.

What the official narratives and Shlomowitz fail to notice is the failure of the official structure to regulate embarkation and passage – checks at the port of embarkation and provisions of medical care at the depot and on board. If the emigrants were not in good physical shape, how were they allowed to embark because

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the embarkation laws made the pre-embarkation medical check up mandatory and only those emigrants deemed fit to bear the difficulties of long voyages were to be allowed to embark. Likewise, the negligence in medical attendance, cluttered and improper accommodation, supply of insufficient and spoilt rations, inadequacy of drinking water appear to be more responsible for the outbreak of epidemics than the unsanitary habits of emigrants. Emigrants were often accommodated on decks where they had to face the austerity of weather, there was no separate accommodation for those who fell sick, and emigrants often complained about lackadaisical attitude of Ship Surgeons in attending sick emigrants, distribution of rotten rice and other foodstuff and shortage of drinking water. All these deficiencies in the arrangements, combined with the natural upshots of long voyage like nausea, were sufficient enough for the mass sickness and high mortality among the emigrants on board.

The other explanation offered by the colonial reports on high mortality has discussed the causal factors in terms of their sense of loss and psychological-cultural factors. During the voyage, Indian emigrants had to face many disheartening experiences – alienation in unfamiliar surroundings, breaking of many religious and cultural taboos regarding dining, diet, interpersonal relations etc. which increased their anguish and many would just jump in the sea to end their lives or would fell sick under extreme distress.

As above table shows, there was a great deal of difference in the mortality rates in voyages commencing from different Indian ports. Voyage emanating from Calcutta port had a much higher mortality rate than Madras or Bombay. Calcutta originated voyages were reported to have five to six times higher mortality rates.

Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners ascribe the ‘physical inferiority of the

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48 Carter, Marina, Servants, p.127.
49 Letter of Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners, dt. 20 November 1858, SA 621/ 34, MA; Geoghegan Report.
Bengal coolies (especially of tribal regions like Dhangars) and the ‘unhealthy passage along the Hooghly river’ as the factors responsible for the heavy mortality rates among Calcutta emigrants.\(^{50}\) This perception of Calcutta coolies being in an unsatisfactory health condition remained a primary concern even in 1880s.\(^{51}\) Since Shlomowitz’s analysis of mortality of Indian immigrant labourers is based on the empirical evidence of the General Reports of Colonial Land and Emigration Commission, he again accepts their logic: ‘the explanation for the higher average death rate of voyagers from Calcutta appears to be that Calcutta was a more epidemiologically hostile environment than Madras and Bombay.’\(^{52}\) This assertion also holds only partial validity for the initial phase of emigration. As reported by contemporary observers like Geoghegan and which we have discussed at length in chapter two to this work, the regional origin of emigrants gradually shifted from the tribal areas of Chota Nagpur region (considered to be physically more vulnerable) to the more settled regions of Bihar and United Provinces. The high mortality among Calcutta emigrants had more attributes than their physical condition and climate. Calcutta emigrants were shipped in Cargo ships while the quantum of emigration was much higher than from Madras and Bombay. The obvious implication of this was the reduced and improper accommodation for emigrants on board. Saha has established that emigrants from Calcutta were provided less rations and water than the emigrants from Madras and Bombay. Calcutta emigrants were provided 12 oz. of rice and 1 gallon of water while the emigrants from Madras received 24 oz. of rice and five

\(^{50}\) Letter of Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners, dt. 20 November 1858, SA 621/ 34, MA; ARPI, 1859.


gallon of water. The general sanitary conditions in Calcutta depot were poor and its location was also very conducive for eruption of epidemics. It was located near Tolly Nala which was the main sewerage of Calcutta city. The filth and waste of entire city was disposed in that nala making it a breeding place for epidemics. The depot was also very poorly maintained. It had no proper ventilation and cleanliness was not maintained especially in the coolie shelters. Because of poor hygiene and specific location of Mauritius depot in Calcutta, epidemics like cholera, diarrhoea tended to strike the emigrants very often resulting in the poor health of the Calcutta emigrants and made them more vulnerable.

Experiences of Voyage

When they embark from Indian ports, it was maiden voyage for most of the emigrants. They had no inkling of the essential details of their journey: its duration and their destination, because they were often very vaguely told by the recruiters about 'mirich tapu' where they were supposed to reach in a couple of days' voyage. They embarked upon the ships with a sense of uncertainty and apprehension about what would they experience in coming days amidst so many strangers and alien setting. The following folksong from Surinam tries to capture the essence of traumatic experiences of voyage for most of the emigrants:

Several months on the ship passed with great difficulty,
On the seven dark seas, we suffered unaccustomed problems.

Indifferent to this apprehensive mindset of subjects, the authorities on board were ready to discipline the unruly natives and their insanitary habits. This racially hostile attitude of colonial authorities resulted in harsh treatment, insolence towards

the religious-cultural values of emigrants, depriving them of their basic necessities. All this collectively turned the emigrants' experiences of voyage into a horrid episode of their lives.

Initially when the regulatory structure was not very well developed, emigrants on board were treated like waste and not like living human beings. J.P. Woodcock, who went to Mauritius on a ship which carried emigrants also, presented a revealing account of the miserable accommodation of emigrants in his report. Woodcock reported,

‘Coolies were disposed of in the waste, between the gangways and the forecastle, where, if the weather had not been remarkably fine, they might have suffered being unprotected from every change of weather and climate.’ 56

Emigrants on board were expected to obey the orders of the Captain and perform certain menial works 57 and while Woodcock reported no incident of ill-treatment, many other accounts divulge that the non-compliance resulted in ill-treatment. Ramdin, a sirdar who returned from Mauritius, reported about the ill-treatment by the ship captain towards those emigrants who refused to comply with his orders. 58 During rainy days, emigrants were being jam-packed in whatever covered area was available on ships without considering the possibilities of their being suffocated. In one such incident, on ship Antony Anderson which was going from Bombay to Mauritius, heavy mortality was reported because many emigrants choked to death as they were confined below the deck without any open hatch in the bad weather. 59 Considering the extensive occurrences of ill-treatment towards emigrants

57 ibid.
58 Statement of Ramdin, dt. 10 December 1840, Examination of Coolies Returned from Mauritius, OIOC.
59 Report of Bombay Committee, 1843.
on board and the failure of administrators to check them, Dickens Committee concluded that 'no laws or regulations suffice to prevent the great misery and distress upon coolies during voyage.'\textsuperscript{60} Emigrants were whipped and assaulted by the ship Masters and other staff and this 'disciplinary action' continued throughout. On ship Fateh Slam which reached Mauritius in 1866, the Surgeon and Assistant Surgeon assaulted several emigrants.\textsuperscript{61} Incidents of floggings were being reported as late as 1893 by when it is being generally argued that the legislative mechanisms were well set to protect the emigrants against any ill-treatment.\textsuperscript{62} In official justification, the thrashing and violence towards emigrants were considered necessary to discipline the emigrants and as unavoidable punishment for their offences like 'stealing, creating a nuisance either on the upper or lower deck or other misdemeanour.'\textsuperscript{63}

Emigrants on board experienced not only inadequate housing and physical abuses at the hands of the Masters of the ships but their traumatic experiences were aggravated by the insufficient supplies and care. On innumerable instances, emigrants on board complained about the insufficient or unfamiliar food and water. Their food supplies were also altered on the basis of colonial medical prejudices against the conventional Indian dietary habits, leaving many emigrants on board distressed because the diet is directly related to the religious and cultural values of the emigrants. Colonial officials linked the 'overindulgence in a more liberal diet' or 'too exclusive vegetable diet' for causing physical disorder and diseases like dysentery among the emigrants on board and recommended for making them eat salt fish.\textsuperscript{64} In one such reported case of altering emigrants' diet, emigrants of ship Pudsey Dawson

\textsuperscript{60} Report of Dickens Committee.
\textsuperscript{61} ARPI, 1866. A very critical difference in this case was that the Surgeon and Asstt. Surgeon were punished after they were found guilty.
\textsuperscript{62} Prog. No. 14-16, Rev. and Ag. (Emi.), June 1893, NAI.
\textsuperscript{63} Prog. No. 15, Gen.(Emi.) January 1861. WBSA.
\textsuperscript{64} Report of T. Hugon.
complained upon their arrival in Mauritius that they were given only one meal a day on the instructions of the Medical Officer of ship and their breakfast was disallowed by him because he found choorah (parched rice) an unwholesome article of food.\textsuperscript{65} This caused enormous distress for many emigrants because choorah was the only staple diet for the emigrants who would not eat the food cooked by others because of their religious beliefs. It was also the only dry food for emigrants when they were not being able to cook in rainy days. To maintain hygienic conditions among the emigrants on board, the cultural and religious beliefs of the emigrants were regularly violated by the Surgeons and Captains of ships despite the legislative assertion of their protection. Emigrants had to give up almost all their customs and beliefs regarding purity-impurity, dining etc. In one such incident of indiscriminate disrespect towards the emigrants, Captain of Christopher Rawson ordered the cutting of the hair of all the emigrants on board, even women, in order to maintain cleanliness. When Dickens Committee asked for clarifications from him, he admitted ordering for cutting off the hair of all men and women emigrants, despite resistance from many on religious grounds, to maintain cleanliness among them.\textsuperscript{66} This was very offensive to the religious values of the emigrants because only widows were supposed to get their hair cut and for all other women it was considered to be a bad premonition.

In all the regulations to administer emigration, especially in the shipping related regulations, extra precautions were taken by the administrators to ensure a safe passage for women emigrants and protect them from sexual harassment. Despite this, the cases of verbal harassment were very frequent and on several occasions, attempts were made to outrage the modesty of emigrant women. In one such case, the Medical Officer of ship Nimrod was accused by the emigrant women of sexual harassment and

\textsuperscript{65} Prog. No. 15-19, Gen., (Emi.), January 1861. WBSA.
\textsuperscript{66} Evidence of Captain Edwards, \textit{Report of Dickens Committee}. 

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one woman charged him for rape.\textsuperscript{67} This case has been very frequently cited by the scholars of Indian diaspora, yet it holds merits repetition because in this incident we shall see the Indian emigrants, usually described as docile beings, collectively resisted these outrageous acts of Dr. Browne. Ship Nimrod arrived at Mauritius emigration depot from Calcutta on 17\textsuperscript{th} January 1973. Upon arrival three women – Runnoo, Peerun and Jhooneah and Muhabally who was the husband of Peerun complained against the Medical Officer of ship, Dr. Browne for harassment. Runnoo complained for receiving a blow from Dr. Browne. Jhoonea complained for being ‘stripped quite naked in presence of a great many of the coolly passengers’. She also witnessed three other women also being stripped naked by the doctor on the same day. Peerun’s husband complained that the doctor tried to forcibly take her wife into his cabin at odd hours and when he opposed this, he was beaten up by him. Champah, another woman accused Doctor Browne for raping her by making her unconscious while ship was at quarantine station. Junior District Magistrate of Port Louis was asked to conduct an enquiry into the allegations made against Dr. Browne. During the enquiry, the Master of Vessel admitted that he had received several complaints for Dr. Browne’s rudeness towards women and had presonally seen Mr. Browne taking a woman Pursunnoo to his cabin at 11 o’ clock at night. Chief Officer of the vessel had already written a stern note against conduct of Dr. Browne in the log book much before it touched the shores of Mauritius,

‘Medical Officer causing serious disturbances amongst the emigrants; taking liberties with them whilst under the influence of brandy.’\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{67} Appendix to Prog No.6-8, Rev., Ag. And Com. (Emi.), May 1873, NAI.
\textsuperscript{68} ibid.
Assistant Doctor of ship admitted taking Pursunnoo to doctor’s cabin on the pretext of examining her for gonorrhoea where the doctor lifted her saree and examined her sexual parts.

Dr. Browne’s defence for his actions was a mere repetition of usual colonial justification for their inconsiderate treatment towards Indian emigrants based on racist prejudices. He asserted that,

‘The Indian will do nothing of his own accord and very little more by being merely told. Whatever he does, he must be forced to do....They are exceedingly dirty in their habits, and unless cleanliness is rigidly enforced, there is likelihood of disease breaking out amongst them.’

He described Champa as a woman of bad character. The enquiry committee dismissed the charge of rape but found Dr. Browne guilty for other offences and subsequently he and his assistant were dismissed. What makes this particular incident a historically critical event is the collective resistance of emigrants on board against the atrocities of Dr. Browne. As the Chief Officer of Nimrod reported,

‘coolies one day seemed disposed to be mutinous. Some of them said:

"the doctor is a bad man, we shall either thrash him or jump overboard”.’

Ill-treatment during voyage, inadequate accommodation and supplies, disrespect of their cultural-religious beliefs by the authorities and outrageous attempts against their honour made the emigrants’ experiences obnoxious and most of them reached the ‘promised land’ in a deplorable mental and physical condition where their lives were to take a completely unforeseen course under a new work discipline and alien socio-cultural setting.

69 ibid.
70 Evidence of Chief Officer of ship Nimrod, Prog No.6-8, Rev., Ag. and Com. (Emi.), May 1873, NAI.
Emigrants’ experiences during their journey to Mauritius were not a tale of suffering and loss but in some ways they learned new ways of keeping their aspirations high and fight negative circumstances. The harsh treatment they had to go through during the passage prepared them for the repressive plantation regime and gave them the strength to sail through that tyranny as well. They lost many conventional essentials and idioms of collective identity but got a new medium for communion based on more pragmatic and secular foundations – jahaji bhai.