

## Public Administration During the Indenture System



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### Synonyms

Indenture system; Indian laborers; Public administration; Taylorism

### Definitions

Indentured system: refers to the start of a new form of global labor mobility that involved taking laborers from India to a number of British colonies to work in the sugarcane plantations (Lal 2012).

### Introduction

The Indian indenture system has been undoubtedly the most discussed and debated topic in the existing literature by academics and practitioners. According to Lal (2012), the Indian indenture

system started a new form of global labor mobility that involved taking laborers from India to a number of British colonies to work on the sugarcane plantations. During this movement of laborers from India, the specific British colonies that extensively benefited were Mauritius, British Guiana, South Africa, Trinidad, Fiji, Jamaica, Suriname, Reunion Island, Grenada, St Lucia, St Kitts, St Vincent, Seychelles, Malaysia, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Belize, and French Guiana (Lal 2012).

A number of reports and studies, most of which form part of gray literature, have been published on the indenture system in different British colonies over the world, and most of these studies focused on the history, working conditions, and exploitation of workers. However, to date, none of the existing studies have examined how Taylorism and Weberian theories were practiced by the British rule and the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company in order to achieve their goal of establishing a fully functional economic system in Fiji. The main aim of this entry essay is to examine how the British traditional public administration system assisted the Australian-owned Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) and the European planters to exploit workers in the sugarcane plantations. This entry essay provides a discussion on the early public administration models followed by a discussion on how these models are relevant to the indenture system practiced in the Fiji Islands.

## Early Public Administration (EPA) Model

The origins of public administration as theory and practice can be traced back to the early Iranian Susa Empire (3000 BC), then to the powerful Federated Elamite Empire of early Iran (3000–600 BC), and to the mighty One World State Achaemenid of the Persian Empire (559–230 BC) (Ghirshman 1954; Frye 1984; Farazmand 1996; Farazmand 2009). The Persian Empire was the largest, most professionalized, efficient, and most effective system of administration based largely on merit and covered around 80% of the world's populations spreading from Asia to the Middle East and Africa to Europe (Ghirshman 1954; Frye 1984; Farazmand 1996; Farazmand 2009). The Persian Empire was a major contributor to many administrative innovations and contributed to the development of “modern public administration, policy, organization theory and behavior, crisis and emergency management systems, communications systems, and financial management system” (Farazmand 1996; Farazmand 2009). Farazmand (1996) argues that public administration is as old as human civilization, and there are twin fields of public administration, namely, “development administration” and “comparative administration.” Farazmand (1996) further mentioned that public administration as a field of study had gained more attention since World War II and during the 1960s under Fred Rigg's leadership of the Ford Foundation in the USA.

During the eighteenth century, the “early public administration” model (EPA) was used to manage the public sector, especially when monarchies controlled the public sector (Adams 1992; Frederickson 2010). This EPA model was based largely on “loyalty” toward those who hold power in society, for instance, loyalty toward a particular king and those people in power (Adams 1992; Frederickson 2010). The recruitment of government officials was not based on “merit” but family relationships (nepotism), favoritism, and bribery (Grindle 2004). In other words, it was predominantly based on family and personal aspects, and these resulted in corruption, lack of transparency, and the absence of accountability in the public

service (Grindle 2004). Thus, the recruitment and selection under the early public administrative practice were based mainly on nepotism, and there were no formal procedures in place to ensure that those who were employed in the public service were competent enough to take up appropriate positions (Lavigna and Hays 2004). Besides, some of the practices, such as nepotism, making the public sector more personal in nature and patronage, may seem bizarre in the contemporary period but were acceptable practices under the early public administration (Hopkins 1974; Hughes 2012). Furthermore, the administrative positions during the early period of administration were not usually full-time positions but were part-time positions in nature. Some business people preferred to undertake part-time government jobs to maximize their business returns (Hall 1993; Skocpol 1995).

## Traditional Model of Public Administration (TMPA)

Over time, the monarchies changed into early forms of government, and by the early 1800s, the public sector began to adopt Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy. This led to the development of the “traditional model of public administration” (TMPA) (Karl and Sutton 1998; Hood 1991; Wart 2003; O'Flynn 2007). Two important theories that form the basis of the TMPA are Max Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy and Frederick Taylor's Scientific Management principles.

## Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy

In the eighteenth century, Max Weber developed his Theory of Bureaucracy (Weber 1922) that argued that the recruitment of government officials should not be based on family relationships (nepotism), favoritism, and bribery but instead on “merit” and “rational rules” (Chand 2018). Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy is based on five principles. Firstly, the management of the public sector should be based on written documents. Secondly, the management of public sector offices

should be done in a specialized manner. Thirdly, the appointed officials should work in full capacity to meet the demands of the state. Fourthly, general rules must be followed in the management of the office. Fifthly, the administrative regulations would govern the principles of the fixed and official jurisdictional areas (Grindle 2004). Some of the key principles of the traditional model of public administration were undertaking a proper examination before appointing key personnel in the public sector and separating policy-making from public administration (Peters and Pierre 1998; King et al. 1998).

### Taylor's Scientific Management

Furthermore, Taylorism involved standardizing work practices, which implies finding the best way to work (Bain et al. 2002; Baldry et al. 1998). Scientific management emphasized three main issues (Jürgens et al. 1993; Niepcel and Molleman 1998). These three issues are time-motion studies, wage incentive system, and functional organization. Initially, Taylor's principles were applied to the private sector, and it was not long before Taylor's principles were applied to the public sector. Taylor believed that scientific management might be very useful in the public sector organizations because he perceived that each public sector employee performed around one-third or a half of a fair day's work. According to Schachter (1989), scientific management became a key theory that played an indispensable and vital role in both the private and public sectors.

### British Public Administration

The traditional model of public administration emerged in the nineteenth century from Britain (Peters and Pierre 1998; King et al. 1998). The British colonial government also allowed the European planters to utilize Taylorism in the sugarcane plantations. There are two reasons for using the traditional model of public administration, together with the Weberian Theory of

Bureaucracy and Taylorism in this entry essay. First, the traditional model of public administration was used to correct the inefficiencies in the early days of public administration. These inefficiencies refer to the appointing of the public sector officials based on nepotism and lack of transparency and accountability. Second, during the early days of the public administration, Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy and Taylorism were widely used to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the inputs employed in an organization.

### Indenture System in Fiji

Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874, and the first Indian indentured laborers were brought to Fiji in 1879 (Lal 2004). This new colony of Fiji was in dire need of economic development so that it could sustain itself in the long run. Fiji's first governor-general, Sir Arthur Gordon, protected the Fijian laborers from commercial employment and believed that Fijians should continue to live in their traditional surroundings, protected from the outside world and controlled and managed by their tribal chiefs. It was Sir Gordon that invited the Australian-owned Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) to establish the sugar industry in Fiji. The CSR started its operations in Fiji in 1882 and departed in 1973. The decision of Sir Gordon to use Indians to work in the sugar cane plantations in Fiji was based on the success that was achieved by using Indians to work in the sugarcane plantations in Trinidad and Mauritius, where he had previously served as a governor before his appointment in Fiji. The colonial administration controlled the indenture emigration. The indentured workers were required to work for 9 h during weekdays.

Additionally, on Saturdays, they worked for 5 h. Sunday and public holidays were treated as free days for workers. Males were paid one shilling per day, and women nine pennies per day. These laborers were allowed to return home at their own expense after 5 years or at the expense of the government after 10 years. There was a huge disparity between what was promised to them before they departed from India and what

they experienced upon their arrival in Fiji (Lal 2004). The Indians chose to migrate under the *girit* system, as they saw this as a way to evade the tyrannical times and to attain a better socioeconomic life in Fiji.

Nonetheless, this did not prove to be easy for the *giritiyas* (*Giritiya's* refers the Indians who came to work in Fiji under the indenture system.), as the terms of indenture were different on entry as compared to reality (Pandey 2011). There was a strict routine to be followed by workers for 5 years, that is, after having breakfast every day they would have to pick their tools and start engaging in plowing, weeding the fields, digging drains, feeding the horses, mulching the cows, cutting and transporting cane to the mills, and ensuring that the road and bridges and tramlines were kept in a serviceable condition. Initially, the laborers were overloaded with tasks, and they hardly received the minimum statutory wages. Those workers that were underpaid could not afford a proper diet, so they were quite unhealthy and were frequently away from work (Lal 2004).

The nature and amount of work that was to be done by laborers were decided by the Colonial Sugar Refining (CSR) Company. There were few initiatives to reduce the number of abuses that laborers encountered. During May 1886, one hundred and thirty immigrants protested against the "task" system, where workers were only paid if they finished the allocated tasks in a given period. As a result of this, the government responded to this behavior by passing an ordinance where laborers were penalized for inefficient labor and enacted regulations that made it clear that more than five laborers could not participate in the protest (Sohmer 1984).

Additionally, the working conditions deteriorated and even the Colonial Office protested that something had to be done or else the Indian government would disallow further recruitment of laborers. There was no action taken by the Indian government or the CSR. The Indian laborers had no supporters, and finally, in 1916, the indenture system was abolished. It is noteworthy that the suicide statistics during the indenture system in Fiji was nine times higher than in Madras, as life in labor lines in Fiji were referred

to as "*narak*" (*Narak* is the Hindu term that refers to hell where sinners are given punishment after death.) (hell) (Gillion 1962 cited in Sohmer 1984).

There are a number of studies conducted on the indenture system in Fiji. However, most of these studies are on the socioeconomic and cultural effects of the indenture system in Fiji. None of the existing studies have explored the public administration system that existed during the indenture system in Fiji. Gupta (2015) highlighted that the term "*girit*" points to the erosion of the caste system and shows the impact of forced migration on indentured workers. Pande (2010) argued that the indentured system represented the evils of slave trading, thus making the victims of the indenture system also the victims of racial discrimination and racism. Kaplan (2007) and Lal (2012) highlighted that the "Indo-Fijian" identity was created from the intermarriage of the Indian indentured laborers, also known as the *giritiyas*, that were brought to work in Fiji's sugarcane fields (Balakrishnan 2015; Lal 2012; Munro 2012: 687; Pande 2010; Kaplan 2007; Luangphinit 2006). This process also ended the traditional Indian caste system as the "indentured system" forcefully obligated *giritiyas* of different castes to live, work, and eat together (Balakrishnan 2015).

## Indenture System and Psychological Contract Theory

The indentured system contributes to the literature on the Psychological Contract Theory. The process in which the *giritiyas* were lured to the boat without their consciousness was considered inhumane. According to Handy (1999), the term "psychological contract" is usually an unstated agreement between two parties, the nature of which included expectations. The most appropriate of the three types of psychological contract is the "coercive psychological contract" where a party has agreed with their will. Since the *giritiyas* were pushed out of India (Pande 2010; Saha 1970; Gillion 1962), and the fact remains that they were not aware of the intention of their capture or their preferences were not

sought. Furthermore, the indentured system adds to the literature on the Scientific Management theory (SMT), where the indentured laborers were forced to work in the sugarcane field, an environment not of their choice. SMT states that in order for the workers to work hard, they must be forced to produce the maximum output, which on the contrary, failed to consider their physical and their mental well-being (Ramasamy 2009).

### Indenture System and Human Relations School of Thought

Besides, the indentured system contributes to the Human Relations School of Thought theory. Since the *girmityas* were human beings, which, according to Maslow had human needs (Schmerhorn et al. 2013). The fact that they were pushed out of India and worked in sugarcane fields against their will and without any family relations made them fill the gap through intermarriage among themselves, which Gupta (2015) argued as the process of depleting the “caste system” in order to fulfill their social needs on the sense of belonging (Schmerhorn et al. 2013).

### Indenture System and Dunlop’s System Theory

Also, the *gimit* era adds to the Dunlop’s system Theory, where *girmityas* were part of the input as human resources in the sugar production process in Fiji. One can argue that the indentured system was the solution to labor woes in Fiji and other British colonies. They became one of the most important actors (Muller-Jentsch 2004) in the sugar industry in all British colonies that used the indentured system. According to Narsey (1979), around 60,000 indentured workers were imported from India to work in the sugarcane plantations in the Fiji Islands. Narsey notes that the workers were forced to meet task outputs, and workers who did not meet the task outputs were fined and made to work without any form of compensation until the work was completed.

Sharma and Lawrence (2009) and Gaines (2012) argue that initially, the Indian laborers

were imported to work in the sugar cane plantations, but as the economy of Fiji evolved, there was an immediate need for the Indian workers to join the public sector and the government departments. The history proves that the Indians have played a significant role in establishing the economic system of Fiji. Work practices of indentured workers confirm that anything is possible with the right attitude and professional work ethics.

### Task System

Sharma and Irvine (2016) emphasizes that under the indenture system, the Indian laborers were controlled by using the task system. The task system involves the use of controlled hierarchy by using premeditated labor management practices in the sugarcane plantations. Premeditated labor management practices used during the indentured system were such that it increased the pressure on the performance of the Indian indentured laborers. As a result of this, the suicide rate increased because some indentured laborers were not able to take the pressure that the CSR company had imposed on them. Chand (2007) emphasizes that the work ethics and discipline of the indentured laborers are significantly different from the work ethic and discipline of the new generation. The new generation of Indians in Fiji has socialized in a culture whereby they do maintain some of the aspects of the traditional Indian culture, but they have adopted western and local Fijian culture.

Davie (Davie 2000) allege that there was collusion between the British leaders and the high chiefs to import the Indian indentured laborers to work in the sugarcane plantations in the Fiji Islands. Alam et al. (2004) submit that in order to protect the Fijian culture and traditions, the Indian workers were imported under the indenture system contract to work in the sugarcane plantations. These workers were mainly brought in so that the cheap labor supply demands of the Australian capitalist, the Colonial Sugar Refinery, could be adequately met.

Prasad (2009) highlighted that Indo-Fijian work ethics brings communal stability in the

working environment in Fiji. Traditionally, the Indians were recruited from India to work in the sugarcane plantations because these Indians had the discipline and strong work ethics and could start the economic system in Fiji. The Indians recruited under the indenture system were able to adjust to different working environments easily. For instance, during the *Girmit* period, women used to work in cane fields even if they were pregnant. Presently, it is seen as against the Employment Relations Promulgation Act (2007) if pregnant women were compelled to work in the sugar cane plantations.

### **Application of Scientific Management and *Girmit* System**

The British Empire, together with the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) Company, used several deceptive ways to recruit the Indian workers (Lal 2004; Naidu 1980). There were several reasons for using these ways to recruit workers to work on the sugarcane plantations in the Fiji Islands. First, in order to establish fully functional industries in Fiji, it was becoming extremely difficult to use the Fijian laborers in the sugarcane plantations. Therefore, the purpose of using Indian laborers to work in the sugarcane plantations was to maximize productivity, and this was based on the tools of scientific management. Under the principles of scientific management, the employers would go to any extent to maximize the productivity of the workforce.

Achieving maximum productivity from the workers in the sugarcane fields in Fiji required the use of highly productive Indian laborers – who demonstrated their ability to produce high output in sugarcane plantations in other parts of the world too. Next, if Indian laborers did not see a better future in Fiji, it would have been difficult to recruit them to work in the sugarcane plantations. Some of the foul ways that were adopted by the CSR with the support of the British rule were informing the Indians that they had an optimistic future in Fiji, and they would be earning much more than they would be earning in India (Naidu 1980). Under the Scientific Management

philosophies, using foul ways in recruiting workers is not a problem as long as these foul methods help organizations to recruit best workers to maximize the productivity of the workers. The task system under the British indenture system was too difficult for the workers.

Additionally, one of the fundamental tools of the scientific management system is to reduce costs to maximize the productivity of the per dollar input in the organization. The *Girmit* workers were kept in the barracks that comprised of three single men. For men who were married, they were kept with their wives and children. Some indentured laborers described the barracks as “horse stables” (Naidu 1980). Due to overcrowding in the barracks and the indenture laborers’ suffering health, the British colonial administration implemented legislation in the year 1908 that provided bigger and detached rooms for the workers. During the *Girmit* era, there was no system in place to measure the productivity of workers. The CSR officials believed that working in the sugarcane plantations required intensive physical labor. Therefore, men were producing more than women at the workplace. As a result of this, men were paid more than the women in the sugarcane plantations (Naidu 1980).

### **Application of Bureaucratic Principles and *Girmit* System**

During the *Girmit* time era, the British Empire had rules and regulations, as those provided the framework to guide the relationship between the CSR and the indentured laborers. According to Weber’s principles of bureaucracy, rules, and regulations are needed in the public sector so that the state can achieve its objectives. Unfortunately, during that period, the objectives of the state were to establish commercial industries so that the output from the public sector could be maximized. In order to achieve this objective, the Immigration Ordinance Act was implemented by the British Rule (Naidu 1980). This Act was designed to support the practices of the CSR Company. For instance, the workers were



assigned tasks that had to be completed, and if these tasks were not completed, then the workers were severely punished under the Immigration Ordinance Act.

Additionally, there were a lack of implementation of rules and regulations at the workplace, and there were no mechanisms put in place to ensure that these were followed at the workplace (Naidu 1980). The internal characteristics of the indenture system, such as task work and penal code, made it difficult to have a good working relationship between the British rule and the indentured laborers. Due to poor implementation of the labor ordinances, the CSR Company became a dominant stakeholder in the private sector, and the workers could not do anything but to protect themselves if they were mistreated. The CSR Company did not follow the labor ordinance that was implemented by the British rule on several occasions. According to the labor ordinance, the CSR was required to give rations to the Indian laborers in the first 6 months. However, the amount of food received by the Indian families was insufficient, and this harmed the health of workers working on the sugarcane plantation.

Moreover, there were no regulations to guide the type of medical services that were provided to the indentured laborers. The medical services that were provided to the indentured laborers were provided by the people who did not have qualifications in the area of medicine (Naidu 1980). There were no regulations for the necessity of health services that were to be provided to the indentured laborers. The CSR used many forms of violence against the indentured laborers. The planters, overseers, and *sardars* (supervisors) were three groups of people who were controlling the sugarcane plantations. These three groups of people used different types of violence on the indentured laborers. There was also violence among the indentured laborers, and some of the reasons for this violence were overcrowding of houses, prostitution, and lack of availability of proper food (Naidu 1980). The government did not provide any regulation to control this conflict. The labor ordinance regulated the first form of violence, that is, the violence on the indentured laborers by those in power. However,

due to a lack of implementation of the labor ordinance, this type of violence was not curtailed. There were no regulations that restricted violence among the indentured laborers.

This entry essay has emphasized that Taylorism and Weberian management philosophies were practiced during the *Girmit* period. The approach in which the public sector was managed during the *Girmit* era with Taylorism and Weberian philosophies is different from the way the public sector is managed in the modern era. First, some of the important practices of Taylorism prevalent during the *Girmit* period were task payment, barrack housing, violence, and corporal punishment to squeeze the maximum out of the workers. These were some of the tactics used by the state in conjunction with the CSR Company to improve worker productivity. The “indentured system” or *Girmit* had much relevance to the Scientific Management theory (SMT) when the indentured laborers were forced to work in the sugarcane fields, an environment that was not of their choice. SMT contends that in order for the workers to work hard, they must be compelled to produce the maximum output, which on the contrary, failed to consider their physical and their mental well-being (Ramasamy 2009). Another contribution of this entry essay was the emphasis on the work rules that were directed toward work and the maximization of sugar production.

Second, state bureaucracy was present during the *Girmit* era but to a limited extent. The bureaucracy existed to benefit mainly the CSR Company rather than the indentured laborers. Surprisingly, the bureaucracy was quite low in areas, such as defense, health care, and education. Nonetheless, during the indenture system, the children of the indentured farmers did not have access to the proper schooling system.

The indentured laborers that were brought to work in sugarcane fields in Fiji worked in very harsh conditions that were characterized by poor hygiene and inadequate sanitation practices. Therefore, the work environment is an important factor that must be taken into consideration if organizations are keen on enhancing high levels of efficiency and performance of various individuals. From the experiences gained during the

indenture period, it is evident that in order to maximize worker output, the organizations must provide proper and adequate working conditions to workers.

Lower morale of employees contributes to decreased commitment levels and productivity levels. Therefore, it is paramount that the welfare of workers is adequately looked after, especially if organizations are intending to increase the performance of their staff. During the indenture system, there was an absence of labor ordinances, and this contributed to extensive labor exploitation through false promises directed to those who were being recruited. In light of this, there is a need for enactment of proper regulations to facilitate effective labor movement and to protect the vulnerable and weak sections of the community.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this entry essay was to discuss public administration during the *Girmit* era. This entry essay found that different forms of bureaucracy and scientific management practices were present during the *Girmit* era. Additionally, these were significantly different from the forms of bureaucracy and scientific management principles that exist in the workplace today. During the *Girmit* period, some of the Taylorism practices prevalent were task assigned payments, barrack housing, violence, and corporal punishment to squeeze the maximum out of the workers. Bureaucracy mainly existed during the *Girmit* period so that the state could fully support the CSR Company to get the maximum output out of the workers.

One of the limitations of this entry essay is that it is based entirely on the Fijian indenture system. Therefore, cross-country comparisons cannot be made on the indenture practices adopted in other countries around the world.

## Cross-References

- Colonial Period
- *Girmit* System
- Labour Mobility
- Public Administration

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