

**UPSC Syllabus Topic: GS Paper 1 Indian History – Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present- significant events, personalities, issues.**

### **Tamil Indentured Labor in Sri Lanka: An Overlooked Aspect of Colonial History**

The concept of indentured labour emerged in the 18th century as part of a shift towards liberal humanism in Europe. The British, responding to the call for the abolition of slavery in their colonies, introduced indentured labour as an alternative form of servitude.

Following the abolition of slavery in British colonies, a pressing labour crisis arose, leading to a heightened demand for workers from India.

These labourers were sought after for various projects, including plantations and infrastructure development in locations such as the Caribbean, Fiji, Réunion, Malaysia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.

#### **Challenges Faced by Indentured Labour:**

1. **Misleading Promises:**

- Labourers were deceived about the nature of their work, promised wages, living conditions, and even the countries they were traveling to.

2. **Debt Burden:**

- Many arrived at their destinations burdened with significant debt, as they had to finance their high fares.

3. **Lack of Basic Facilities:**

- Residing in squalor, they lacked access to sanitation, running water, medical facilities, and schools for their children.

**Increase in Indentured Labour in Sri Lanka:** In the 1870s, a fungal disease devastated coffee plantations in Sri Lanka, leading to the decline of coffee cultivation and the rise of tea estates. Tea, being more labor-intensive, resulted in a surge in the demand for workers. This, combined with the aftermath of slavery abolition, prompted a substantial, organized migration of Indian Tamils to Sri Lanka.

**Challenges Faced by Tamils in Sri Lanka:** In addition to the common challenges of indentured labour, Tamils in Sri Lanka confronted specific difficulties:

1. **Statelessness:**

- Colonial practices labeled them as "foreigners," rendering them stateless under Sri Lanka's Citizenship Act of 1948, impeding assimilation.

2. **Working Conditions:**

- Women tea-pluckers toiled without access to proper toilet facilities on plantations.

3. **Exploitative Practices:**

- The dominance of sub-contractors, known as kangannies, contributed to the exploitation of Indian labourers. Vague contracts exacerbated abuse.

#### **4. Land Ownership Restrictions:**

- Legal restrictions prevented Plantation Tamils from buying land and constructing houses, limiting landholding to those "domiciled" in Ceylon.

#### **The Way Forward for Sri Lanka:**

Post-colonial nations like Sri Lanka must embark on effective measures to decolonize themselves from the practices, laws, and attitudes inherited from imperial rule. This process is crucial for establishing a post-colonial, inclusive identity that embraces all its people.