

# Indian Opinion

PUBLISHED WEEKLY IN ENGLISH AND GUJARATI

No. 21 — VOL. XIV.

FRIDAY, MAY 26TH, 1916.

Registered at the G.P.O. as a Newspaper  
PRICE ONE PENNY

## DEBATE ON INDENTURED LABOUR

IN the Imperial Legislative Council of India, on the 20th March, Pandit Mohan Malaviya moved the following resolution:—'That this Council recommends to the Governor-General in Council that early steps be taken for the abolition of the system of Indian indentured labour.'

In doing so the hon. Pandit said that this system of labour had been in existence for nearly 80 years. Consequent on the abolition of slavery in 1834 the Colonials suffered heavy loss. Hence they resorted to the labour market of India, their main aim being to get enough labour to do as much work as possible under conditions as good as possible to the capitalists. The natural abuse that these conditions gave rise to led to an Act being passed by Lord Ripon in 1883 which ensured prompt and careful supervision over the labourers before reaching the colonies; but it also served to make recruiting conditions much easier. The laws were consolidated in 1908, but it was a pity that the Government were not perturbed by the thought of the conditions under which the coolies were suffering. They trusted too much to the Colonial Governments to look after the labourers. The public remained ignorant till Mr. Gandhi expressed the undesirable nature of the laws under which they were suffering and their indignation was roused by the anti-Indian policy of the Transvaal Government. It was prohibited in consequence of that as a prudential measure in the case of Natal. Two years later Mr. Gokhale moved that immediate steps be taken for its total abolition, but this Council had unfortunately thrown it out. Latterly a committee was appointed to enquire into this system, but it underestimated the difficulties and even seemed to go so far as to apologise for them. What then was this system by which simple men were inveigled into going to a foreign country and work there? They had to work under men whom they could not choose and under conditions which they had no voice in shaping and they were not informed that they would be punished penally even for trivial faults. Though called a contract indenture was not one that ought to be honoured by that name. The position of the labourers was one of helplessness. Referring to the injurious ways in which the system affected the coolies the hon. Pandit said that the law of 1883 indeed safeguarded them from many evils but it had also unhappily made the condition of recruitment easier. It was maintained in this Council, when Lord Ripon was Viceroy, that the nature of the agreement must be explained to the coolies. This was accepted by the Council but even now the conditions were not explained as fully as they ought to be. The real conditions of life they would have to lead, which often involved the relinquishing of caste and religious scruples, were not explained; nor were they enlightened on the real conditions under which they would have to work;—some were even asked to do butcher's work, for this work was one of the items of domestic service—nor was the nature of the

penalties they would have to undergo made plain to them. Mr. Malaviya referred to a coolie who, owing to some default or another, was imprisoned in the aggregate for 692 days.

Turning to the men who were entrusted with this recruitment, Mr. Malaviya said that they were mostly very low class men who would not deem it wrong to practise fraud and be as unscrupulous as the occasion demanded. They mostly came in the guise of helpers in pilgrim centres or station platforms and then by deception drew these unfortunate men and women to the labour depots. Again, these depots could not be freely entered by the public in search of their lost men and women, and even when these latter were brought before the magistrate it was only done after a good deal of tutoring combined with terrorising and it was therefore not unnatural that the public often failed to disillusionize the men. Even the district magistrate had no voice in the selection of these recruiters. The money these got from their vile occupation was so large that it often proved an incentive to deceit and fraud. Again the conditions under which the labourers lived when on board steamer were not good. There was not sufficient care for the modesty of women and all caste and religious rules were being broken and it was no wonder that many committed suicide or else threw themselves into the Hoogli. In the colonies things were not more happy. They had to work from seven to nine hours. This was in the case of men. It was harder still in the case of women who had to work inside their homes and look after their sons and daughters in addition. Mr. Malaviya also referred in this connection to the whipping of a woman by an overseer for no other fault than that of taking with her a sick child. Mr. Malaviya then went into the statistics relating to the wages and said that financially they were not in a very good condition. There was in fact but a very narrow margin between the wages gained and the amount required to be spent, but the cruellest part of the story was that relating to the number of prosecutions. People were subjected to penalties not only for desertions and criminal conduct but also even for insulting words and gestures. The fact was that too much power was placed in the hands of overseers swollen with pride; nor were the conditions of justice favourable to these wretched men. A very degrading feature of the whole story was the immorality prevailing among these labourers, a factor to be reckoned with when explaining suicides. It was a most outrageous system in which the sacredness of the marriage tie was cast to the winds and women were exchanged as if they were a thing of nought. Such was the record of shame and crime. Could any amount of wealth that might follow from it compensate for the sad degradation?

'We have had enough of commissions, deputations and alterations of laws, but all these have had no effect; nor would they do now. This is no time for tinkering