

An under-discussed facet of colonial history

This year marks the bicentenary of the arrival of Tamil indentured labourers in Sri Lanka (in November 1823), a milestone recently commemorated in Colombo at an event called "Naam 200", where I delivered an address on this woefully under-discussed facet of our colonial history. I have often said that history belongs in the past, but understanding it is the duty of the present. There are still millions of Indians and Sri Lankans alive who remember – and lament – the depredations of the British Empire in our countries. The United Kingdom may have lapsed into imperial amnesia, but the former colonies cannot: so we ought to remember, time and again, the forces that made and nearly unmade us.

The British imperial project began as licensed looting in service of the crudest form of capitalism. Britain voraciously drained its colonies, depriving them of their resources, economic strength and political freedom, until they were reduced to a state of poverty and desolation. In India they decimated our textile industries, rendering millions unemployed, and hurled thousands of Indian farmers into indigence by purloining their lands for opium cultivation. Their policies created legions of poor, landless and hungry people in need of work to survive.

A new form of bondage

Ironically, as the British went about pillaging India, a wave of liberal humanism wafted through Europe. Slavery, at long last, came to be considered reprehensible, and the British duly banned it in their colonies, only to replace it with another kind of bonded servitude, euphemistically christened "indentured labour". The economies of most British domains had thus far run on slavery; and the labour crisis that followed Abolition led to a soaring demand for workers from India to work on plantations and infrastructure projects in the Caribbean, Fiji, Réunion, Natal, Malaysia, Singapore and, of course, Sri Lanka. Press-ganged indentured labour was the answer.

The destitute Indians dispatched to these distant lands could scarcely imagine the fates awaiting them, misled as they were about the work they would undertake, the wages they would receive, the quarters where they would dwell, and – shockingly – even the countries they were sailing to. Having survived a perilous sea voyage, most labourers revived their destination mired in debt, for they had to pay for their own exorbitant fare – under a fiendish rule not changed till 1922.

As soon as they reached those unfamiliar lands, they were confined to massive plantations and construction sites. Many Tamils arriving in Sri Lanka perished on the arduous trek from the



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The bicentenary of the arrival of Tamil indentured labourers in Sri Lanka also points to the unfulfilled task of nation-building in the island-nation

coast to the Central highlands. Those who made it were compelled to reside in agonising squalor, with no access to sanitation, running water, medical facilities or schools for their children. It was not without reason that the British historian Hugh Tinker called indentured labour "a new kind of slavery."

Sri Lankan tea and the Indian Tamil

Sri Lanka today is a redoubtable producer and exporter of tea, but its first plantations were not of tea but of coffee. In the 1870s, the rapid spread of a fungal disease led to a blight that caused the disappearance of coffee from Sri Lankan plantations, paving the way for the more fecund and profitable crop, whose estates increased manifold. While coffee requires only three workers for every 10 hectares of cultivation, tea requires at least eight, and as such, demands far more intensive, and perennial field labour. This augmented requirement of workers, compounded with the shortfall caused by the abolition of slavery, sparked a massive organised transfer of Indian Tamils to Sri Lanka.

Of course, the migration of the first Tamils to the island nation far preceded the arrival of the Plantation Tamils in Ceylon in the 19th century. However, what distinguished the Plantation Tamils from Tamil migrants of antiquity was the fact that the British denied them even the most basic rights and services. They were subjected to discrimination soon after setting foot in Sri Lanka. Like earlier communities of South Indian origin, Plantation Tamils forged a distinct Sri Lankan identity, but colonial practices and policies deemed them "foreigners", thus rendering them stateless and blocking well-trodden paths to assimilation. By placing Plantation Tamils under the categories of "aliens and resident strangers" and subsequently calling them "Indian Tamils", the colonial state made it arduous for them to assimilate into Sri Lankan society. Independence was no better: the Citizenship Act of 1948 rendered them stateless. Few were paid a fair wage or ever knew the privacy of their own room. Women tea-pluckers toiled all day in the plantations without any toilet facilities. Displacement and disenfranchisement were their lot.

Exacerbating their travails, moreover, was the deleterious system of sub-contractors called *kangani*s, labour recruiters and overseers who played a dominant role in the recruitment, management – and exploitation – of Indian labourers on plantations. Once recruited, the worker unwittingly forfeited his autonomy to the *kangani*, who accompanied him on the voyage to the plantations, and acted as the intermediary between him and estate managers once he began working on the estates.

Unlike indentured workers who were technically entitled to demand passage home

after the end of the indenture period, the Plantation Tamils had no deliverance from the horrors of the *kangani* system – even after their service period elapsed. Their contracts with the *kanganis* were vague, allowing for their greater abuse at the hands of the recruiter, who – being someone they knew – would often persuade them to borrow money, plunging them in debt they could never afford to pay off. Nor could the Plantation Tamils buy land and build houses, for colonial laws restricted landholding to those "domiciled" in Ceylon, which the British planters and officers construed as excluding them.

An identity and a journey of integration

The Plantation Tamils found the local conditions in Sri Lanka conducive to the creation of an identity anchored in Tamil linguistic and literary traditions, and Tamil values and ideals. They identified themselves more with who they were linguistically and regionally than with a pan-Indian nationality or religion. Over a span of several generations, though, they strove towards greater integration with the mainstream of Sri Lankan society, encountering several man-made obstacles such as the Citizenship Act of 1948, which rendered them stateless in the process.

With commendable fortitude, the Plantation Tamils grappled with the challenges besetting them, carving a place for themselves in Sri Lankan society. Thanks to the efforts of democratic parties such as the Ceylon Workers' Congress, they are now all citizens with the democratic right to vote, and the government speaks of dividing the plantations so as to make workers the owners of the land they work on – a project still in the planning stage but with immense potential. In reaffirming their identity as the descendants of those who were dispatched to Sri Lanka from India, they have reclaimed their heritage as the Plantation Tamils who are also equal and prominent citizens of Sri Lanka. There has been a valorous, subaltern struggle for equality and self-determination, and merely thinking of it fills me with admiration.

It is important that post-colonial countries take effective steps to de-colonise themselves from the practices, laws and attitudes of our imperial masters. Too often, post-colonial nations adopt the same tools introduced by the colonisers to continue the practices of systematic oppression. Sometimes there is little difference between the two systems, only the skin colour and names of the rulers change. As Sri Lanka looks forward to economic and social revival and the integration of all its communities, decolonisation must be at the heart of it. Forging a post-colonial, inclusive identity for all its people remains the unfulfilled task of nation-building in Sri Lanka.

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Taiwan, a Malacca blockade and India's options

With China frequently intimidating Taiwan over the past year through deployment of its air force and navy in the surrounding areas, there is the oft-posed question whether India would take action in the Strait of Malacca or the Andaman Sea in the event of a conflict between the United States and China over Taiwan. Any speculative action in the Strait of Malacca or the Andaman Sea would involve either a naval blockade against commercial shipping or China's key trade and energy sea lines of communication or military action against Chinese naval vessels. The fact is that commercial shipping as well as naval vessels of any country have a right to freedom of navigation on the high seas. A naval blockade against commercial shipping is not feasible.

India's options, the constraints

There are multiple constraints in regard to India's options in the Strait of Malacca. First, "distant blockades" away from a belligerent nation's geography can be challenged under international law. Second, the trade that passes through the Strait of Malacca is not just China's economic and energy lifeline. An overwhelming volume of the trade of Japan, South Korea and even India itself passes through the same Strait. Third, the channel of the Strait of Malacca is long, nearly 500 miles, and involves the sovereignty of other states such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore who would all be affected adversely by a naval blockade. The affected countries are unlikely to support a naval blockade. Fourth, commercial shipping is extremely complex to identify in terms of the sovereignty of the vessel, flag, registration, insurance and ownership of cargo. And these are often multinational in nature and can also be changed as convenient through transshipment at any port in Southeast Asia. Fifth, apart from the fact that it is difficult to interdict China's trade and energy supplies, the



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There are limitations to what India can do in the event of a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan

additional reality is that even if the Strait of Malacca were "choked", shipping can take a detour either through the Sunda or the Lombok Straits to reach China. In any case, very large crude carriers carrying crude or natural gas to China do not use the Strait of Malacca which is shallower. They use the Sunda Strait. Sixth, China also has a huge onshore and floating Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) which can help it tide over disruptions, especially with growing overland energy supplies from Russia and Central Asia.

A naval blockade or unilateral action against an adversary's naval vessels would tantamount to a declaration of war; at the very minimum, it could lead to a conflict, not necessarily limited to the maritime sphere. Regional countries which are adversely affected by disruption in the Strait of Malacca, including friendly countries, are unlikely to endorse any unilateral action. China would use its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council and regional influence to good effect to thwart any such effort.

Lessons from the past

It is also relevant to note that in both the First and the Second World wars, a naval blockade and sanctions led to conflagrations. During the First World War, the British blockade of Germany which lasted from 1914-19 saw Germany retaliating against British shipping on the high seas with its submarines (U-boats) with deadly effect. Subsequent developments, including the Battle of Jutland in 1916 and the sinking of U.S. merchant vessels by German U-boats eventually drew the U.S. into the First World War. During the Second World War, the U.S. had embargoed Japan's energy supplies which ran through the maritime commons, which probably played a key role in Japan's decision to launch the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941.

The ongoing tensions between Iran and the

U.S. in the Strait of Hormuz are emblematic of the proposition that interdiction of even commercial shipping can easily lead to a military flare-up. Whenever Iran has attempted to disrupt the passage of internationally flagged oil tankers, it has immediately escalated the situation with the U.S. responding by sending its naval and air assets in the region to confront the Iranian vessels.

Conflict scenarios

The larger question in the context of the Strait of Malacca that remains to be answered is whether any of India's strategic partners, especially the U.S., would support any interdiction of Chinese vessels in a bilateral conflict between India and China, unless the U.S. itself were involved in a kinetic conflict with China. Even in such a scenario, there is perhaps no guarantee of support by other stakeholders in the region, especially the South-East Asian nations.

To the extent that a full-blown U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan sends ripples across the Indian Ocean, India's primary role may be limited to a proactive defence of its territorial interests and the security of its sea lines of communication and those of its strategic partners in the eastern and western Indian Ocean.

In any such eventuality, India's primary focus would remain on its continental borders with China.

India has traditionally faced China's military threats on its borders essentially on its own. The new U.S.-India partnership in the economic, high-tech and military areas is expected to strengthen in the years ahead. The U.S. increasingly regards India as regional ballast for stability in the region. A robust India with a strong economy, nuclear deterrence capability and a credible military can contribute to multi-polarity in the Indo-Pacific.

The views expressed are personal

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