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Documenting the British East India Company and their Involvement in the East Indian Slave Trade

By Bonnie Pinkston

British Studies Research Paper

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Primary Reader: Dr. Teresa Welsh



Figure 1. Newly Arrived Indentured Laborers from India in Trinidad (<https://qz.com/india/290497/the-forgotten-story-of-indias-colonial-slave-workers-who-began-leaving-home-180-years-ago/>)

“The abolitionism which I advocate is as absolute as the law of God, and as unyielding as his throne. It admits of no compromise. Every slave is a stolen man; every slaveholder is a man stealer.

By no precedent, no example, no law, no compact, no purchase, no bequest, no inheritance, no combination of circumstances, is slaveholding right or justifiable.”

William Lloyd Garrison’s Defense of His Positions (1854 Speech)

Introduction

The histories of the British East India Company, possessions, political influence, and economic ventures have shaped the dynamics of modern history. The enormity of the British East India Company (EIC) and other European trade companies’ impact on globalized world trade has been the subject of numerous studies. Yet, as

many scholars have pointed out the topic has lacked proper attention regarding the Indian Ocean slave trade, particularly when it involved the transportation of people from nations other than from the continent of Africa. As Jayasuriya (2005, 2006) stated, “Africans were not the only people to be enslaved within the boundaries of the Indian Ocean.”

Problem Statement

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the documentation of the British East India Company and slave labor, specifically East Indian enslavement and relocation via slaving ships to other regions including the Americas.

Research Questions

R1. What primary sources related to the East India Company and East Indian slavery are housed in The British Library?

R3. Are there other British repositories that hold resources related to The British East India Company and East Indian slavery?

Limitations of the Study

Researching the topic of East Indian slavery, primarily in the 16th and 17th centuries, is an ambitious undertaking. The story of Indians' relationship with the British is not addressed in this paper, nor are the history and complexity of the political battles that shaped the British East India Company and their growth into foreign territories.

Definitions

BL – British Library

EIC – East India Company

Girmityas – slave-like indentured Indian laborers. Word origin is a corruption of the word for “agreement” (Ghoshal, 2014).

NMM – National Maritime Museum, Greenwich

RMG – Royal Museums Greenwich: Royal Observatory Greenwich, the Cutty Sark, National Maritime Museum and Queen's House Art Gallery

Slavery - Major (2010, 2014) defined slavery as it was known in Asian Culture, where there were many types of slavery, a range of “labor arrangements;” slavery was already practiced within Hindu and Muslim faiths and India had a caste system that dictated the status of a person for life. In addition, there was the practice of voluntary bondage due to debt or poverty. These

arrangements complicated the European view on slavery, and the EIC was reluctant to interfere with these ancient customs.

Importance of the Study

Historians like Richard Allen (2009, 2010, 2015) have made considerable contributions to documenting the Indian Ocean slave trade and the connection with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Yet he admitted there is still a significant number of documents yet to be investigated that can lead to a more informative account of East Indian slavery. This study adds to the body of literature on East Indian slavery but there is more material for researchers to analyze to document the extent of the Indian population affected by the slave trade. The complexity of the system due to cultural and regional implications, the personal accounts of the people themselves, and links to the economic, social, and geographical impact due to the Indian and Atlantic slave trade are further considerations to examine.

Literature Review

Major's research (2010, 2014) focused on the East India Company and the complicated history arising from their participation in Indian slavery. She used British Parliamentary records related to colonial governance, East India Company (EIC) debates, India Office Records, and other documents in The British Library. Major (2014) states, “slavery in India was erased within British public discourse on Empire at the very moment when the horrors of the trans-Atlantic trade were being seared onto the national conscience” (p. 7).

Major (2010, 2014) analyzed and created a timeline when the EIC actively participated in using Indians for forced labor. Parliament passed legislation to prevent slave trafficking as far back as 1774 and ratified this law in 1789 and the debates recorded before passage were essential in documenting East Indian slavery in colonial America and the regions to which East Indians were transported and the circumstances of their enslavement. Impoverished Indians were in a precarious position being members of a lower caste system and victims of what was known as the Bengal Famine. “The relationship between

famine, distress sales, and perpetual bondage was to become a recurrent theme in the colonial discourse on Indian slavery” (Major, 2014, p. 56). Poverty and famine were some of the arguments that were put forth within Parliamentary debates as slavery was seen by some as a means to keep the stricken peasants from starvation and death.

Allen’s works (2009, 2010, 2015) are essential for students, historians and those interested in East Indian Slavery primarily within the 16th through the 18th centuries. His works draw on valuable first-hand accounts of the East Indian Company, merchants, governing officials, ship captains, and a mountain of records from Parliament. Allen was able to present an overview of the Indian Slave trade in and beyond the Indian Ocean to lead others in their pursuits on detailing this lesser-known area of history.

Allen (2009, 2010, 2015) conducted extensive research on the East India Company’s involvement in the Indian Ocean slave trade that “relied heavily on British and Mauritian archival resources” as well as sources from The National Archives at Kew and The British Library. Allen maintained that most scholarship has been on the Atlantic slave trade without mention to the concurrent activity in the other parts of the world. Allen (2015) reminds the reader there is much additional work that has to be done to give Indian slave trade justice and his study “seeks to address these concerns and in so doing, accord *the Mare Indicum* its proper place in slavery studies” (Figure 2).

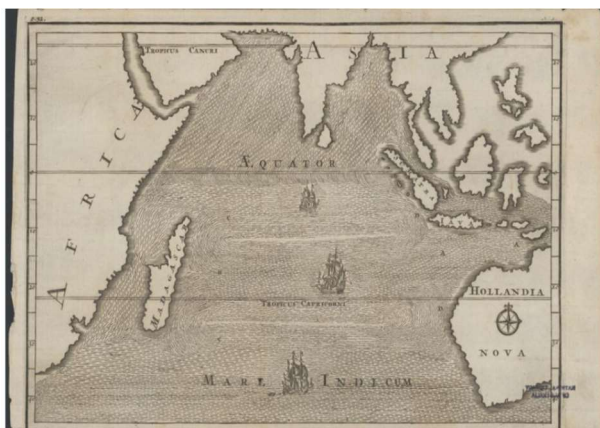


Figure 2. The Mare Indicum, 1692
(<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-232430172/view>)

Allen (2009) laid the foundation for his studies on the Indian Ocean slave trade with a historical background of the earliest use of Indian labor. Labor was necessary for the East India Company to sustain an advantage in a growing competitive global market. The EIC holdings had factories in Indian Provinces such as Bencoolen in Indonesia, Madras in Bengal India, and Bombay, which is known today as Mumbai (Allen, 2010). With financial difficulties due to lack of labor, the EIC court of directors issued a request for slaves, which coincided with the use of African slaves being transported from Madagascar. Allen kept this as a crucial theme throughout his work and indicated three areas of concern: 1) Research on the transoceanic region has focused mainly on the slaves from Africa and “Africa is not the only source of chattel slavery in the Indian Ocean Basin, and slaves flowed toward the continent as well as away from it”; 2) East Indian slave labor remains limited in scholarly research; and 3) Indian Ocean Slave trading is mistakenly viewed as distinct from the Atlantic Ocean slave trade (Allen, 2015).

East India Company (EIC) archives established when the East India Company first engaged in the slave trade. “The East India Company launched its first massive slave slaving expedition in 1684 when Robert Knox, the captain of *Tonquin Merchant*, received instructions to purchase 250 slaves at Madagascar and deliver them to St. Helena” (Allen, 2015). Why is this relevant? There are several implications - first is evidence of the British East Indian Company participation in trading slaves. Second, records from St Helena, an island in South Carolina is proof the company transported slaves to the Americas. Although Africans were the primary exports to this region, further research by Allen indicates European vessels took slaves from India and Africa to the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Americas (Allen, 2009).

Study of the East India Company’s use of slaves in their territories carries over to the issue of abolition. Much of what we know about the political and social strife related to the Abolitionist Movement within the company can

be gained by studying and reading the debates and speeches from figures such as William Lloyd Garrison. The politics behind the eventual abolishment of slavery allowed Allen to discover the depth of friction between merchants and the governing bodies of Britain territories and it demonstrates the basis of transporting East Indian to the Americas as “free labor” as opposed to slave labor. Free Labor is another term for indentured servants, and the presence of East Indians in the Americas can be traced through the study of “free labor.”

The British Library is actively working in preserving manuscripts that are in danger of being lost. The Endangered Archives Programme (2017) relies solely on grants and other funding to protect and digitize materials in areas that have limited resources. Under the African category is “To Survey the East India Company and Colonial Archives of Jamestown, St Helena, and South Atlantic” (EAP524). This project was initiated by David Richardson from the University of Hall in partnership with St. Helena Government Archives to document the East India Company and their presence in the Americas. St. Helena, a British Colony governed by the EIC, is pivotal in understanding the mechanics of the slave trade; the transportation of peoples from India. Documents that can be found and read online range from “St. Helena - Letters from England dating from (1673-1689)”, “Godwin’s Abstracts - Letters from England (1678-1682)”, “Secretary of State Dispatches” and “Census of St. Helena Island.” The census records on the ethnic makeup of the population were helpful in determining the arrival of East Indians to the Americas (Pearson & Richardson, 2013).

Methodology

The first action in researching East India Company and their involvement in Indian Slave trade was to search The British Library Catalog of the East India Company Collection and to examine materials via onsite visits. The British Library houses the *EIC Charters, Minutes of the East India Company Directors*, the maritime and political histories as well as countless books dedicated to the company’s history. Another consulted source

at The British Library was the *Guides, Catalogs, and List* bibliography, which lists and describes the material available at the library related to the EIC.

An onsite visit, as well as a search of online materials at the National Maritime Museum Library and Archive in Greenwich, was conducted as well as a search of archival materials at the U.K. National Archives at Kew.

Results

R1. What primary sources related to the East India Company and East Indian slavery are housed in The British Library?

The British Library holds an extensive collection from the East India Company original contracts, company minutes, manuscripts, and other records as it pertains to the company’s operation. The library allows researchers to access these files by reserving the material in the reading room or accessing the records digitally. Of course, not all records are digitized and in 2016, it was announced more EIC records dating from 1599-1950 are scheduled to be digitized (British Library, 2016).

A primary source of information at The British Library is the *India Office Records: Arrangements of Records, and List of Classes*, which was cited extensively by Allen in his research (2009, 2010, 2015). The arrangement is listed from A to Z starting with A: East India Company: Charters, Deeds, Statutes and Treaties c1550-c1950 to Z: Original Registers and Indexes to Records Series c1700-1950. Allen frequently cited Class G, which contains the *East India Company Factory Records, St. Helena 1676-1858*. Class G includes “groupings of letters, minutes ('consultations'), diaries and other documents for each of the factories, presidencies and agencies established by the Company in India and elsewhere from the seventeenth century onwards” (British Library, n.d.).

Endangered Archives Programme: To Survey the East India Company and Colonial Archives of Jamestown, St. Helena, South Atlantic, another important source, is a digitalized project that can

TABLE No. 3.
Shewing the proportion of the Native to the whole population,—Garrison and Shipping not included.

PLACES OF BIRTH.	DISTRICT OF JAMERTOWN.			DISTRICT OF LOGWOOD.	DISTRICT OF St. PAULA.					TOTAL.
	James' Town.	Ruperts.	Briars.		Half Tree Hollow.	Lemon Valley.	Sandy Bay.	Central.	West of Carons Gate.	
St. Helena — — —	2056	73	78	411	441	26	259	397	433	4204
United Kingdom — — —	74	2	9	19	2	...	2	18	...	126
British Colonies — — —	16	...	...	3	2	...	...	4	...	25
Foreign Colonies — — —	8	...	...	...	...	...	...	1	...	9
Africa, West Coast of — — —	29	14	9	6	4	2	2	4	7	77
America, United States... — — —	48	...	...	1	...	...	...	1	...	50
Austria — — — — —	4	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4
Chili — — — — —	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1
France — — — — —	1	...	...	1	...	...	...	...	...	2
Germany — — — — —	7	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	7
Norway — — — — —	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	1
Portugal — — — — —	3	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	3
Sweden — — — — —	1	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	2
Total	2249	90	96	441	449	28	293	425	440	4511

Figure 3. Secretary of State Dispatches and Census of St. Helena Island (BL, 2017)

be accessed online (British Library, 2017). The record of interest was the “Secretary of State Dispatches and Census of St. Helena Island” that accounts for the population by the origin of birth (Figure 3). The records do not directly list India, but the category “British Colonies” may refer to regions such as India

The India Office Records collection has manuscripts, maps, official publications from East India Company (1600-1858), of the Board of Control or Board of Commissioners for the Affairs of India (1784-1858), of the India Office (1858-1947), and of the Burma Office (1937-1948)” (British Library, n.d.). Other EIC materials housed at The British Library are the *East India Sales Catalog*, which advertises products sold by the company such as pepper, spices, teas, and porcelain.

R3. Are there other British repositories that hold resources related to The British East India Company and East Indian slavery?

There are other important repositories for scholars and historians who are serious in documenting the East India Company and slavery such as the National Maritime Museum Library and The National Archives at Kew. The National Maritime Museum and Library has exhibitions, records of the sailing vessels, and manuscripts about The EIC commerce and trade in

the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Researchers can find an impressive collection of journals with first-hand accounts from private citizens, ship captains, merchants, and surgeons. Logbooks on sailing vessels are another source of information, particularly as it pertains to the East India Company and slave trading. Merchant shipping logs for example, like one kept by John Tregelles on his voyages into the West Indies between 1703 and 1707 (RMG, n.d.).

The National Archives at Kew is another major repository that houses East India Company records. Sources to be found at this institution include maritime records, original documents of the East India Company, and maps. Many of the records found at The National Archives are found at The British Library, which is the richest repository of EIC records.

Conclusion

DNA analysis of African-Americans sometimes indicates an East Indian heritage (Tracing African Roots, n.d.), which is usually unexpected given that scholarship on slavery has generally been regulated to the Atlantic slave trade without mention of the concurrent activity on the other side of the world. Yet scholars like Majors (2010, 2014) and Allen (2009, 2010, 2015) have found evidence that links the East India Company to their participation in the slave

trade and the transportation of East Indians to the Americas. European vessels took slaves from India and Africa to the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Americas (Allen, 2015).

The parliamentary debates on abolition show by their dates of discussions, a timeline when the EIC was engaged in slavery. These debates on eradicating slavery lead to an understanding of views of Britain on slavery in India at a critical period in the EIC history. The cultural and historical uniqueness in India regarding slaves, the caste system, and voluntary servitude caused great confusion on ending slavery in India and adds to the complication of why there is a lack of research devoted to this subject.

Informative revelations that were gained through the substantial documentation of the EIC records at The British Library, the National Maritime Museum Library, Greenwich, and The National Archives at Kew. More research is needed on slaves and indentured laborers from the Indian Ocean area to the Americas such as detailed statistics on the volume of Indians who were brought to the Americas and the areas from which they were transported. As DNA analysis becomes more common, perhaps that will inspire more scholarship and awareness of the East India Company, Indian slave trade, and the Indian Ocean - Trans Atlantic connections.



Figure 4. East Indian Diaspora (andrewstojanov.wordpress.com).

<https://www.newsgram.com/indian-arrival-day-remembering-the-hardships-of-indians-who-were-brought-as-indentured-labourers>

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