

**Indian Indentured Diasporic formations: An Exploration into  
Coolie Migration**



*Dissertation submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of MASTER OF  
PHILOSOPHY in English Language and Literature*

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “**Indian Indentured Diasporic Formations: An Exploration into Coolie Migration**” is a record of bona fide work done by me under the supervision of Dr.Latha Nair R, Professor(Retd), Research Guide, Department of English & Centre for Research for the degree of M.Phil in English Language and Literature and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma or any other similar title of recognition.

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## **CERTIFICATE**

I hereby certify that this dissertation entitled, “**Indian Indentured Diasporic Formations: An Exploration into Coolie Migration**” submitted to St.Teresa’s College (Autonomous), affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam in partial fulfillment of the award of M.Phil degree in English Language and Literature is a bona fide work carried out by Sona Joji under my supervision and guidance.

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## Introduction

Indentureship was a system of forced labour, wherein labourers were recruited on contract for a certain period. They were bounded to work under the terms and conditions of the contract. With the abolition of slavery in 1834 and apprenticeship in 1838, the plantation of British colonies in the West Indies and other African countries faced acute labour shortage. This historical moment facilitated in the replacement of slavery with indentureship. Indentureship appeared to be an invention of the British Empire, but it was not a new system and examples for contract-based labour recruitment existed from the Roman period onwards. James Walvin, historian and author of the book *Britain's Slave Empire* comments on indentured labour as "... a man or woman putting a mark on a document signing away their freedom to a particular employer for the duration specified by the indenture, five years or ten years, you are no longer free" (*Coolies: How British Reinvented Slavery* 4.23-4.37). Though in records, indentureship was far better than slavery, in practice indenture become an ironical synonym for slavery. The importation of indentured labourers from Indian sub-continent was an answer to the continuous search for a reliable labour force to meet the needs of 'powerful plantocracy' as Odeen Ishmael put in the post slavery period.

The regulated mass migration of Indian labour force to British colonies can be traced back, to what historians refer by the name, 'Gladstone experiment'. To overcome the labour shortage in his two sugarcane plantations in British Guyana, Gladstone approached the Calcutta based recruiting agency Gillanders Arbuthnot and Company. In his letter to his former colleague, Gladstone very well narrated the situation at the plantations, and the requirement for Indian labourers as a set off plan if the black

population is lost due to abolition of slavery. Gladstone clearly mentions that he is in need of only 'able bodied coolies'. The reply that Gladstone received in response was monumental and changed the destiny of migrations. It is recorded in the BBC documentary '*Coolies: How British Reinvented Slavery*'. The letter clearly shows how recruiters viewed the labourers

...they have no religion, no education and in their present state nothing beyond eating, drinking and sleeping and procure which they are willing to labour. We are not aware that any greater difficulty would present itself in sending men to the West Indies. The native being perfectly ignorant of the place they agree to go to and the length of voyage they are undertaking. (5.37-5.56)

This attempt from Gladstone's part which eventually attained significance in the history of indenture was intended to materialize the recruitment of Indian labourers on contract and he succeeded in getting permission from both colonial office and Board of Central East India Company. The first batch of Indian indentured labourers arrived in Guyana in two steamships named 'Whitby' and 'Hesperus' on 5th May 1838. The migration of Indian indentured labourers to British colonies continued till its abolition by legislature in 1917. The system of Indentureship can be characterized as one of struggle, sacrifice and resistance. Historians who wrote about indenture found an unambiguous connection between the system of indenture and the institution of slavery. According to British historian Hugh Tinker, indentured labour is a 'new system of slavery' (1974).

Totaram Sanadhya was an Indian indentured labourer to the Fiji Island. His autobiography *Fiji Dwip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh Samay* was translated by John Kelly et al.

under the title *My Twenty –one Years in the Fiji Islands* gives the firsthand experience of a bonded labourer in the British colony. Sanadhya, like Hugh Tinker, asserts that “Indenture is slavery in incarnation with the only difference that slavery was for life while coolie system was based on an agreement” (124).

In *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, Gaiutra Bahadur gives an account of the impact of indenture on families. The act of separating children from their parents was one among the atrocious acts meted by the planters upon the enslaved Africans. Though the experience of indentures with regard to family was not similar to that of the enslaved Africans, in no way can we attribute a better or stable familial bond under the institution of indenture.

It must be most remembered that the family bonds of coolies had already been broken; most landed without original wives and husbands and often without siblings or parents. Still the realities of plantation life played further havoc with their personal lives. (112)

*Guyana 1838: The Arrival*, a docudrama by Rohit Jagasser, released in 2004 has reconstructed the period 1838. The docudrama attempts to speak about the conflicts that might have taken place between the slaves and the newly arrived indentured labourers. It throws light upon the least discussed part in history that is the troubled psyche of the existing workers upon the arrival of the new set of labourers. This is very well expressed through the elderly character who speaks for the once enslaved people who were bound to the plantations. His words defended their life and existence. The question of ownership is raised here.



We have been here for 200 years. Our blood our sweat is in this land and we will not allow you to take it from us. We will not allow you to burn our homes down. Where are you from? Who sent you here? The White man. You came here to destroy us, to burn our homes. We were here for 200 years. Our life, our sweat is in this land. We will not allow you to destroy it. We will defend it with our lives. (Stephenorsteven 8:50-9:27)

Most of the postcolonial historians have associated indentureship to slavery. Representation of indentureship using slave theory somehow missed out the agency that the migrants had when they chose to migrate. Internal Migration, i.e., leaving one's village in search of employment was one of the key features of the period. Indo Fijian historian Brij V Lal, grandson of an indentured labourer, tries to discard the slave theory and attempts to situate labour migration as a human urge to go in search of green pastures. Historians Brij V Lal through his autobiographical works as well as his academic works analyses the process of migration in terms of a larger historical process of the period.

The whip and chain story is still a dominant part of the public discourse and understanding of with even though the new indenture historiography cast serious doubt about explanatory value. There is of course undeniable truth in the indenture as slavery thesis. ... Suffering and pain were an integral part indenture. All this is abundantly clear from the historical record. But it is not the whole story. It cannot be. It is possible to acknowledge hardships while granding girmityas agency as a people who had a hand in shaping their destiny. (Lal 5)

This question of agency of indentured will be discussed in the core chapters.

### 1.1 Factors that led to indentureship

There was a traditional labour migration system within India mainly towards tea gardens of Assam, jute industry in Bengal, and overseas migration to Burma and Ceylon. To meet the demand of indentured labour supply, the recruiters were able to find people from these migratory workers. In other words, these workers became an easy prey for the recruiters, who were badly in need of a cheap labour force to be imported to the colonial plantations. High levels of unemployment, chronic poverty, indebtedness, famine, were the push factors that pressured Indians to venture into indenture. At the same time society outcasts such as ex-convicts and widows willingly volunteered to escape social exclusion. In addition to these two primary groups, there were also workers who entered the migratory movement, cajoled by the promise of better living conditions.

Even professional recruiting agencies adopted deceptive techniques and coercion to get the necessary supplies. Many were attracted by high promises and assured of lucrative employment and vivid opportunities. The recruiters exploited the ignorance of the poor, uneducated commoners and lured them to leave their homes on false promises. The destination to which they were shipped and voyage time were not disclosed to the labourers. The voyage and the related struggle, was a prologue to a long novel, a larger narrative, which would take centuries to unravel. The immigrants struggled hard for their very survival on board. The ships were overcrowded and it neither had enough food nor

water. Water borne diseases such as cholera, dysentery, and diarrhoea were common. The prolonged tiring voyage aggravated the situation and mortality rates were very high.

## 1.2 Overseas living conditions

The living conditions of the labourers in the plantations were resented, where they experienced the toxic reality of the indentured labour system. The plantocracy was very powerful and the contract under which the labourers were recruited was heavily weighted in favour of the planters. Similar to slave laws, the beneficiaries of the indentured contract laws were the planters. Further, the laws of indentureship were codified, interpreted and implemented, ignoring the subject position of the immigrant, who was literally lost in the host country. The unfamiliar and obscure trajectories of the New World, the host country, affected the existence of the immigrant. The position of the immigrant was similar to an actor, persuaded to enact a role in a completely alien language. Hugh Tinker, who wrote about indenture as a diplomatic renaming of the preexisting slavery, comments about the plight of poor peasants who volunteered for indenture dreaming a better prospect, "... they had exchanged one form of poverty and servitude for another, and many more found only death and disease in the new life" (60).

The laws were easily varied and abused in collusion with immigration agent generals and stipendiary magistrates in the interest of the plantocracy. The Indian immigrants often went before the courts as victims of labour laws and legal system in general. The planters have several instruments of prosecution at their hands. He could prosecute the labourers for refusal to commence work, work left unfinished, absenteeism,

neglect and insubordination. Punishments resulted in fines or imprisonment. Moreover, an immigrant prisoner for misconduct could have his indenture extended to compensate the period in jail which in effect means punished twice for same offence. The conviction of immigrants was inordinately high as revealed in the annual report of the immigration agent general for 1874-1894 at an alarmingly high figure of 65084, for violation of labour contract.

Throughout the period of indentureship the immigrant was deprived of minimum social amenities. Their dwelling places were very small and unventilated. It lacked proper water supply and sanitation; medical facilities were also poor. As a consequence, outbreak of diseases to epidemic proportions became common. The sex ratio of the immigrants was largely uneven. From an orthodox understanding, the unequal gender presence in the plantations, led to the collapse of the concept of morality and chastity. An observation which appears to be problematic, but still communicates many concrete realities in the colonial narratives.

As an integral part of planters' strategy to localize and place restraints on workers liberty, movement of immigrants were restricted. The labourer had to get a pass signed by estate manager if he wanted to travel beyond the estate limits and without this pass colonial police could arrest him. Managers utilized the pass as an effective control device, a means of preventing communication between the workers. This strategy had come in handy, as the workers were made to be unaware of the wages and facilities in different estates.

### 1.3 Labour unrest

The restrictive laws, inhuman living conditions and hardships of work led to labour unrest and revolt. The root causes of this uprising were widespread dissatisfaction with the allocation of tasks, long hours of work, unilateral wage deductions, general ill-treatment and abuse of women labourers. Riots and disturbances were common from 1869 and it continued with regularity, a clear continuum can be observed. Towards the end of indentureship system labour protests had assumed various forms including work stoppage, mass picketing, violent demonstrations, marching to emigration departments and assault on managers and overseers. This was coupled with passive resistance such as feigning illness and deliberately performing poorer. There are instances of protests turning into confrontations with the colonial police, wherein many labourers lost their lives.

#### 1.4 Nationalist movement and abolition of indenture

The formation of Indian National Congress in 1885 is a significant event in the history of the national struggle for independence, interestingly the event also had its repercussions on the system of indenture. In 1893 Gandhi arrived in Durban and began to practice as a lawyer. During his period in South Africa, he got to know about the injustices that the Indians had to face under the colonial planters. With his close association with the Indentured Indian Labourers in South Africa Gandhi became aware of the problems faced by them which he tried to bring to the attention of the nationalists in India. Krishna Gubili in *Viriah* (2018) presents a character Bala who has been helped by Gandhi (114). Bala is the fictional counterpart of an indentured coolie named Balasundaram. Gandhi once helped Balasundaram who was severely wounded. He was whipped by the Sardar. Gandhi protested against the ill treatments faced by the coolies. In

the interview taken by BBC for the documentary, Gandhi's great granddaughter Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie gives an account of Gandhi's encounter with coolies

Gandhi knows about indentured labourers very soon after arriving here. His first major contact with an indentured work was in 1894, the man was beaten by his employer. His front two teeth were smashed. The man was in terrible distress and came to Gandhi's legal office. (36.46 – 37.03)

Gandhi organized public meetings to expose the plight of the indentured labourers.

Founding of the newspaper Indian Opinion was instrumental in mobilizing the Indians in South Africa for a common cause that is to protest against the injustices Indians had to face under the colonial powers. Passive Resistance, based on the principle of civil disobedience became the face of Gandhi's protest. Gandhi met nationalist leader Gopalkrishna Gokhale in 1896 to invite his attention to the cause of overseas Indians. In 1901 Gandhi raised the problem of overseas Indians with Gokhale. The Sathyagrahas by Gandhiji at South Africa from 1906 to 1916 marked the beginning of the anti-indenture movement. By the meantime an association having concern for the Indian immigrants was founded at Bombay namely Imperial Indian Citizenship Association. In the interest of Gandhiji, Gokhale piloted a resolution in February 1910 through the Imperial Legislative Council, in which, he was a member. The resolution called for a complete ban on the indentured labour and as a result a ban was imposed on the recruitment to Natal, South Africa.

After his return to India in 1914, Gandhi mounted a nationwide campaign against indenture with the support of other nationalist leaders. Gandhi made anti-indenture

speeches all over India, wrote articles in newspapers and succeeded in building a national feeling against indentureship. There were nationwide protests against indentureship and the main issue raised by the agitators were in tune with the idea that indentureship was a moral stigma for the country. Organized movements were initiated to put an end to the indentured labour system. The general opinion against indentureship, was on the rise in India with the intensifying of the nationalist movement. In fact, by 1915 the old plantations of British colonies had sufficient labour supplies and they were not much bothered about the importation of Indian labour also the breakout of First world war shifted the British interest in curbing the protest of Indian nationalists against indenture. The economic situations in India also nourished the anti-indenture movements. In India the industrial growth had attained momentum and labour required for the factories of Ahmadabad and jute mills of Bengal. As a result, there was a growing concern among the Indian industrialists that the continuation of immigration will affect their labour supply. These industrialists, Marwaris of Calcutta and Parsis of Bombay, had considerable influence in society and they raised the issue as a patriotic move veiling the economic motive.

It was a combination of these capitalist interests and the plight of Indians at the colonies that led to the call for abolition of the system of indenture. The issue and the related protests originated as a concern of English-speaking liberal elite in the country. The anti-indenture movement attained new heights in 1913 with the involvement of influential Marwari community. They spread anti-indenture campaign to the villages. There were clear economic reasons behind Marwari community's opposition against indenture as they considered colonial capitalists as rivals of Indian labour.

However, they mainly campaigned on the ground of social justice. With the determination to avoid indentureship, the Marwaris actively entered into the mainstream of Indian politics by associating with Gandhi in his anti-indenture move.

By 1916 anti-indenture agitation was at its peak in which women were the focus. Women's group against anti-indenture were formed all over India. Women's meeting in Bombay in which, though Kasthurbha Gandhi was the prominent personality, the presence of the elite women of Bombay such as Lady Mehta, Ms. Ramabhai Ranade, Lady Tata, Lady Fazulbhoy Currimbhoy, Lady Chandwarkar and Lady Petit became an encouragement to the upper middle class to indulge in the abolition of indenture. They protested against the humiliation of the Indian womanhood under indenture. With the auspices of the Home Rule League, the ladies of Ahmadabad submitted a stirring representation to Lady Chelmsford, inviting her attention to the pathetic situation of Indian women under indenture, requesting for her intervention in the issue. The Lucknow congress meeting held in December 1916, passed an anti-indenture resolution. As a result of these nationwide campaigns and agitations the ban on recruitment of indentured labour was extended to all overseas colonies of Britain, thereby putting an end to the system of indentured labour. The ban of recruitment of indentured labour in 1917, and the system came to an end by 1920

### 1.5 Social life and contributions of immigrants abroad

Even in the face of often harsh and oppressive life situations and environments, immigrants persisted with their religious and cultural practices. From the late nineteenth century they began to build temples and mosques along the coastal landscape and their



local language, music, dress, food, and folklore were made to prevail. They were introduced to western education to facilitate the process of social mobility, and this exposure eventually became catalytic in nature and they emerged as teachers, doctors, lawyers, and civil servants. The indentured labours made considerable contributions in the areas of village development, cash crop cultivation, cattle rearing and other economic activities. In contemporary times, the descendants of the settlers occupy visible positions in the mainstream stratifications of the society. Krishna Gubili identifies that “4.5 million grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the 1.3 million Indian indenture coolies are thriving across the globe today” (*Viriah* 193). Many are leading sports personalities, entrepreneurs, scholars, while a section among them have migrated to first nations like USA and UK. In the addendum to *Viriah*, Krishna Gubili envisages the dream of building an "Indenture Network - platform where the current generations of all the indentured coolies can discover their ancestors, learn Indian languages, cuisines, and art, connect with their roots and share their stories"(204).

Apart from the colonial records and later historical studies, the narratives on indenture from a first hand perspective is rare. This is because the immigrants were mainly illiterate poor peasants. In *Coolies of the Empire* (2017), Ashutosh Kumar makes the observation, “Emigrants don’t write, they are written about.” The phrase as he acknowledges is an altered form of the line, “Peasants don’t write, they are written about” (163).

Munshi Rahman Khan, Totaram Sanadhya, Ramachandra Rao et.al were exceptions for they attempted to narrate their indenture experiences. Ramachandra and Totaram Sanadhya belong to the high caste Brahmins whereas Munshi Rahman Khan

was a learned Muslim man. These autobiographical accounts were attempted after their return to India. Ramachandra came back to India in 1915, but wrote this autobiographical fragment only in 1939. There is a considerable time difference between his return from Fiji and his writing about his Fiji sojourn. On the other hand, Totaram Sanadhya returned from Fiji in 1914. He didn't write his experience of indentured life himself, but he narrated it to Banarasi Das Chaturvedi- a Hindi writer and one of the prominent nationalist anti-indenture campaigners. The language of his text is Hindi. It bears the influence of Banarasi Das' thought- it comes across as a condemnation of indenture system within the framework of nationalist enterprise. Similarly, Munshi Rahman Khan also wrote his manuscript in 1943 when there were differences among Hindus and Muslims and separate groups emerged based on one's communal identity in Surinam. (Kumar 163)

British historical records of the colonial migrations give the factual details regarding the men and women that they recruited to different colonies. The later studies like the one edited P.C Emmer provides the factual and British arguments regarding the system. These narratives lacked the immigrant's perspectives, whereas the autobiographical narratives provide with the indenture's point of view. Hence these kinds of narratives are useful to get a wider perspective view about the system. Munshi Rahman Khan says about his life in brief as follows:

We came from India to do service here, completed girmmit (agreement) with difficulty and then toiled on government field as well. My district is Hamirpur in Allahabad Division, my village is Bharkhari in Bimabar Police Station. With good and bad of the land and the year, Came to Dutch-Guayana on 13<sup>th</sup> April

[1898]. Finished [my] girmat of 5 years at the field of Lust and Rust, I served as sardar for 20 years under manager Horst. (qtd. in Kumar 1)

British claims that the indentureship was purely based on the voluntary agreement contradicts with the stories that these people narrate. Ignorant about the kind of work and the nature of terrain they had to tame in future, many jumped into the contract.

Middlemen deceived men into these contracts. Totaram records his experience of indenture as:

One day when I was in a market near Kotwali, engaged in this worrying about finances, a man I didn't know came up to me and asked, "Do you want employment?" I said, "Yes." Then he said, "Good, I can get you a very good job. It's the sort of work which will make your heart joyful". (qtd. in Kumar 166)

Postcolonial period is rich with narratives from the descendants of the indentured migrants. Prof. Brij V. Lal, David Dabydeen, Gaiutra Bahadur, Verene Shepherd, Ramabai Espinet, et.al. made use of extensive research that includes archival studies, collection of interviews, compilation available materials etc. in the making of their works. Memory and oral tradition play a vital role in their narratives. Prof. Brij V. Lal's note about his search for roots sums up the interest that the descendants of indentured migrants had towards their past. "I have devoted most of my adult life trying to understand the experience of Indian people in Fiji. It is very emotional because I am not talking about a group of people in abstract. I am talking about people I am descended" (*Coolies: How Britain Reinvented Slavery*).

In every narrative, the Indian indentured migrants assume the identities of girmitya, coolie and jahajin. Despite the fact that the three names are frequently used identically, each one needs to be interpreted. The three terms can be used in order to distinguish the various naming processes that were engaged in the indentureship.

Girmitiya is a person who has entered into an agreement or contract. The word is a native corruption of the term agreement called girmitya. The existence of an agreement or contract with untrue promises altered the migrants' course of events. Indian migrants were referred to be girmityas after the agreement was signed. The overall result is being forced into a vulnerable position of "salaried slavery," as Torabully observes. (Carter and Torabully 150). Jahajin is the identity constructed by the shipmates so as to nurture a community sentiment among the migrants. In *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through Indenture in Fiji* Prof. Brij V. Lal gives an instance of the 'sense of community' formation in the colonial plantations

The voyage fostered a sense of community among the migrants irrespective of their social positions in India. They were all coolies. The sense of comradeship formed during the crossing endured years after their girmitya had expired, the indentured labourers would hobble long distances on foot to meet their jahajibhais(shipmates) and reminiscence over the shared ordeals of the voyage. (Lal 144)

The term coolie is a politically loaded and colonially coloured word. The term "coolie" has its origin from Tamil *kuli*, meaning wages or hire. It was first used by the Portugese during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. The term was later taken up by British to denote

indentured labourers. Therefore, with time in Caribbean islands, coolie became synonymous to Indians. There were protest against this addressing, as seen in a folk song “why should we be called coolies/ we who were born in the clans and families of seers and saints” (Bahadur xx). “Even when Indians in West Indies became milk sellers, or village shopkeepers, or rice farmers-or, generations later, teachers or lawyers – they were still called coolies” (Bahadur xx). The term has later become an ethnic slur. This led to the ban of the word. Nonetheless, while some want to completely discard it and equate its wounding power to that of N-word, others want to reclaim it as a marker of history. The movement ‘Coolitude’ as formulated by Mauritian poet Khal Torabully, aims to bring up the pride of a broad group that has scattered across the globe, who has roots in Indian indenture (Bahadur xxi). With the coinage of the term Coolitude, Khal Torabully attribute multiplies layers of meaning to the word coolie. Coolitude represents a culture that fearlessly voiced the forgotten or silenced stories of the indentured migrants and their descendants in an optimist light. Descendants of the indentured labourers embraced their coolie identity in such a way that the narratives that came from them served as harps that sung the songs of their ancestors. David Dabydeen titled his second poetry collection as *Coolie Odyssey* (1988). *Coolie Odyssey* focuses on the journey of the indentured labourers or the coolies as the British called them, and the migration which resulted in diaspora formation. The futility of race encounters, and the alteration of language, the dream of the coolies when they began their journey etc. are some of the themes that Coolie Indenture unveils. David Dabydeen’s great grandfather was an indentured migrant to Guyana. Dabydeen belongs to the second-generation migrants who left Guyana to

settle in Britain. Therefore, the collection marks not only the odyssey of Dabydeen's great-grandfather but also his own experiences as a migrant.

Indo-Guyanese poet, writer and activist Rajkumari Singh celebrates the word coolie and asserts her identity as a coolie descendant. Her essay "I am a Coolie" explores the potential dynamics of the word coolie. Rajkumari Singh defines the word coolie as follows:

Coolie is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears, defeat, achievements. The word must not be left to die out buried and forgotten in the past. It must be given a new lease of life. All that they did, and we are doing and our progeny will do must be stamped with the name COOLIE lest posterity accuse us of not venerating the ancestors. Remember the Hesperus and the Whitby. They came with blowing sails, riding the waves of our coffee- tinted Atlantic to unload the precious cargo on our Guyana. Brave, courageous, daring, exciting, industrious, nation-building humble folk -our coolie ancestors. Not only in Guyana context must COOLIE be given new meaning but in a every land of the Caribbean Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Seas of East, in Africa and Europe. Proclaim the word! Identify with the word proudly say to the world: I AM A COOLIE. (353)

Gaiutra Bahadur chooses Coolie for the title of her book. Commenting on the title, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, Bahadur says that "Coolie may have a jagged edge, like a broken bottle raised in threat," yet despite the pain it evokes, Bahadur says that "I have chosen to employ it because it is true to my subject" (xxi). *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* is a "narrative history that is structured as series of

journeys, that reconstructs the journey of my great-grandmother from India to Guiana in 1903, it traces the journey of indentured women, their psychological as well as physical journeys” (“Gaiutra talks about *Coolie Woman*” 0:49-1:12). In *Coolie Woman*, Gaiutra Bahadur makes a thorough investigation on the lives of indentured immigrants from India. As she says, the book was partly the result of her personal venture in search of information about her great grandfather. Her grandfather Lal Bahadur was born on the ship Clyde. His paternity is unknown. Sujaria boarded on the ship alone and four months pregnant. From these available basic information Gaiutra Bahadur travels to Bhurahpur in Bihar, a century after her great-grandmother left it as an indentured labourer. Gaiutra Bahadur ventures to dig out the “narrative gold” (228). She unravels multiple stories of indentureship, coolie lives and about coolie women on board in particular. In order to create an understandable story, Bahadur cleverly mines the family genealogies, oral histories, and archives for the remnants and reflections of the voices of the coolie women. Bahadur uncovers multiple stories of emigration and return. Homeland and host land takes different shapes.

The *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* is the narrative of a voyage that began from the colonial India. The voyage to Guiana in the nineteenth and twentieth century resulted in the formation of an Indo-Guyanese identity which was later questioned in the post independent phase of Guyana. This led to the secondary migrations, where they migrated to first nations like USA and UK. Bahadur possesses a hyphenated identity of an Indo-Guyanese living in the USA. In order to deal with her current identity dilemma, the narrator tries to skirt the shattered and irredeemable multiracial past.

Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2007), investigates the indentured migration of women to the Caribbean. It weaves together the stories of many generations of women. The narrator in *Jahajin* is a researcher in Trinidadian Bhojpuri. She is in a quest for figuring out the hues of the language which is now in a dying state. Interviews are her key source for study. Oral narratives of the coolie immigrant woman not only set the stage for the learning of the language but also allows the narrator to dig deep into her coolie ancestry. According to the narrator of *Jahajin* "The migration came across to me as a story of women making their way alone, with men in the backgrounds, strangers, extras. In the history books it had always been the other way around: it was the men who were the main actors" (204). Women folk had much to say. Their experiences on the deck and on the plantations were different from that of their male counterparts. But their stories were rarely heard. According to Maggio (2007), in order to hear the subaltern's voice, we must not only accept their language of communication as a genuine medium but also make a concerted effort to listen to them using all of their modes of communication (437). We hear a coolie woman spilling her heart out through *Jahajin*. By blending lines of distinction, Peggy Mohan criticizes historical nostalgia, which obscures the pain of oppressed populations and fosters violent cycles.

*Viriah* (2018) by Krishna Gubili stands in stark contrast to Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin*. Krishna Gubili's great grandfather was one among the coolies who left India for Natal as an Indentured labourer. *Viriah* traces the journey of Viriah, narrator's great grandfather. Deeda, the central character in *Jahajin* refuses to repatriate to India. Viriah on the other hand returns to India. Krishna Gubili ventures to retrace his great-grandfather's life in Natal. Oral narratives, archival study and collective memory had



contributed to the making of *Viriah*. According to Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory is the sum of the individual recollections of the members of a certain group or culture. People "acquire their memories" with the help of a group's or society's memory. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize memories (Halbwachs 38). Gubili dedicates his book to his grandmother, Nacharamma Gubili, quoting that "her stories started it all" (i). Unlike Gaiutra Bahadur and Peggy Mohan who travelled to India in pursuit of their great-grandmothers' ancestry, Gubili journeyed to South Africa to trace his long-lost family.

The dissertation entitled "**Indian Indentured Diasporic formations: An Exploration into Coolie Migration**" makes an effort to read the selected texts in the light of different spaces encountered by the migrants. Migrations results in the formation of diasporic communities. The first chapter titled **Indian Diaspora formation: A Study of the Old and the New Diasporas**, expands on the concepts of diasporic spaces. Memory, oral tradition, language, religion, the concept of homeland and host land, are some the concepts that we will be discussing in the chapter. Chapter two particularly deals with the journey of the migrants. In the chapter titled **Configuration of Space on Board**, the Foucauldian construct of ships as the epitome of heterotopias (1967) is examined and contested. The third chapter, titled **Power and Precarity: The Agency of Female Migrants in Question**, discusses gender and migration. The differential status afforded to men and women as a result of the nature of employment and workplaces is highlighted by Daphne Spain in her book, *Gendered Spaces* (1992). The focus of the debate in Chapter three is an attempt to examine the agency of coolie women on board

and the power politics that affect female bodies. It analyses the effect 'gendered spaces' that women in particular had to endure.

## Chapter 1

### Indian Diaspora formation: A Study of the Old and the New Diasporas

People migrate for different reasons. Diaspora traditionally refers to "...the movement of Jewish people away from their own country to live and work in other countries" (Hornby 421). Walker Connor gives a broad working definition for diaspora. He defines diaspora as "that segment of people living outside the homeland" (qtd. in Safran 83). Safran extends Connor's definition to include the expatriate communities. According to Safran diaspora are those who share some common characteristics including the dispersal from a specific "centre", the centre can be called as homeland, to two or more "peripheral" regions, preservation of "collective memory" about the homeland, the assimilation to the host land is always partial or incomplete for them. The diaspora has an idealised vision of their homeland to which they always relate. The homeland is the place to be restored, and the diaspora keeps the myth of return alive in them.

- 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "centre" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland- its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not- and perhaps cannot be- fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return- when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should,

collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (84)

Vijay Mishra classifies Indian diaspora as the “old” and the “new” Indian diasporas (14). The old diaspora as Mishra puts in was a result of state sponsored mass migrations. The Colonial economic patterns and growth of plantations ensued mass labour migrations that consequently led to the formation the ‘old diasporas’. During the nineteenth century, there occurred a mass migration in the form of indentured labour from colonial India to various British plantations. Emancipation bill passed by the British parliament that came into force on August 1, 1834, abolished slavery throughout the British colonies. The resultant labour shortage forced British to introduce a new system to import workforce. Mauritius was the first colony to import indentured labourers and it was in 1834. The system that continued for over eighty years had resulted in the emigration of over one million Indians into British plantation colonies. Satendra Nandan makes the observation on Indian diaspora during colonial era as:

Indian indentured emigration was started soon after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. Colonial governments in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Pacific turned to India for sources of cheap labour supply. Mauritius, in 1834, was the first colony to import Indian indentured labour, followed by British Guyana in 1838; Trinidad and Jamaica in 1845; small West Indian colonies

such as St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Granada in the 1850s; Natal in 1860; Surinam in 1873; and Fiji in 1879. During the eighty-two years of indentured emigration, over one million Indians were introduced into these colonies. Large numbers of laborers were also imported into Malaya, Srilanka, Burma, but under a slightly different contract. Thus, Indians became ubiquitous in the Empire; these were Indians from India, not Red Indians (qtd. in Paranjape 310).

Indian indenture, *girmitya* as they came to be known over time, were contract labourers (the name *girmitya* derived from the term *girmit*, a corruption of the word ‘agreement’). Indentured labourers left India not with an elaborate plan to settle but the circumstances paved way to the formation of Indian settlements across the former British colonies. The ‘old diaspora’ settled in the colonial countries. They “...occupy spaces in which they interact, by and large with other colonized people with whom they have complex relationship of power and privilege as in Fiji, South Africa, Malaysia, Trinidad, Guyana and Surinam” (Mishra 14). From the original “centre” (Safran 83), i.e., from India they were dispersed to different British plantation colonies. They sailed to the Caribbean islands for a contract period of five years. So, the early migrants had a hope of return. As a result of their greater preoccupation with the home they have left behind, the first generation of immigrants always feels more uprooted and has a harder time adjusting. This diaspora as Safran points out retained a “...collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland...” (83). The postcolonial period, marked by the independence of once colonised countries questioned the hyphenated identities of Indians. If the old diaspora emigrated in search of labour, the new diaspora was forced to leave the country because of the

political unrests and racial segregations that began to take shape after the colonial phase.

‘Twice migrants’, the term coined by Parminder Bachu (1985) refer to those people who have migrated from their original host countries to developed countries. Bachu had used the term in the context of Sikh migrations. Twice migration is also applicable in the Indo-Caribbean context. Indians in the former plantation colonies like Guiana, Trinidad, Fiji etc after living more than half of a century in the countries, were forced to leave the country because of the socio-political discriminations and governmental policies. Sudha Rai argues that it was the marginalization of Indo-Caribbean community in the former British colonies of Trinidad and Guiana that gave pace to the diasporic movement, “The dominance of the Afro-Caribbean in the post-independence nationalism, precipitated the large wave of Indo-Caribbean migration to Britain, Canada and United States” (Rai 80).

In *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, Gaiutra Bahadur deals with both the Old and the New Diasporas. Bahadur identifies herself as an Indo-Guyanese settled in USA. Sujaria, Bahadur's great grandmother, is the source of her Indo-Guyanese identity. As an indentured labour migrant, she left India for Guyana. Sujaria left India while four months pregnant. She was travelling by herself. Lal Bahadur, Gaiutra Bahadur's grandfather, was born on board. Sujaria arrived in Guyana as a coolie immigrant and chose not to return to India. She flourished in Guyana. Coolie immigrants like Sujaria who refused to return and their descendants established Indian settlements in Guyana. The old diaspora in Guyana was a result of colonial migrations. Sujaria was a “passenger and also part of its cargo” (Bahadur 27). Gaiutra Bahadur was born in Guyana. Her ancestral roots reach to a small village called

Bhurahpur in India, from whence her great grandmother left. In 1981, when Bahadur family left Guiana for USA, Gaiutra was seven years old. “I was almost seven old enough to have memories of Guyana and young enough to be severed in two by the act of leaving it” (Bahadur 4). The socio-political scenario in Guyana made the life of Indians in Guyana difficult. She recounts the socio-political scenario with the help of her father. “Indian homes had been burned down, my father said. Indian women were raped, Indian people killed” (Bahadur 11). The resultant secondary immigration, was migration to the first world nations in search of green pastures. Even then the uprooting of one’s culture and the gradual replanting of the same in another milieu became more difficult. This was because the racist sentiments became stronger in the first nations. The hyphenated identity of Indo-Guyanese was put to question in the multi-ethnic space of American society. Though multiculturalism was the policy, anti-ethnic sentiments reverberated in the nooks and corners of the state, which made the settlement a problematic and a complicated one. Homogenization was one of the main issues faced by the Indo-Caribbean diaspora in the first nations. Despite the fact that the second generation of the immigrants were born and brought up in America, ‘Indian looking meant Indian’ and they were targeted by the racist gangs. Bahadur recollects the experiences of Indo-Guyanese in America.

In 1987, the same we moved to our very own house, bigots began terrorizing the neighbourhood. We picked up the local newspaper to find their crudely scrawled manifesto. They signed their note ‘The Dot Buster’. It was a few years after the release of Ghost busters, and their nom de guerre was a terrifying play on the movie title and on dothead, an anti-Indian slur mocking the bindis that some married Hindu women wear on their foreheads. ‘We will go to any extreme to get Indians to move out,’ the note read. (Bahadur 9)

Bahadur's narrative therefore sites evidence of the colonial diaspora formation as well as serves as an example for the postcolonial diaspora formations.

Julia Creet in her introduction to *Memory and Migration*, states the role of memory as follows "Memory in all its form, physical, physiological, cultural and familial play a crucial role within the context of migration, immigration, resettlement, and diasporas, for memories provides continuity to the dislocations of individual and social identity" (3). To locate oneself, to stabilize one's identity diaspora was forced to dive into the memories of all forms. Stuart Hall locates three presences with reference to African Caribbean identity. They are Presence Africa, Presence Europeenne, and Presence Americaine. These three presences when applied to the case of twice migrants, beginning from their immigration from India to Caribbean islands, three presences that contribute to their "cultural identity" (Hall 116) can be located i.e., Presence Indian, Presence Caribbean and Presence Americaine. Gaiutra Bahadur's quest for her identity is motivated by fragments of her ancestral memory.

Ancestral memory had told my family the story of who we are brown skinned people with many Gods and peculiar, stubborn habits. It had told it imperfectly. Memory, after all, fails us. That we expect, especially over generations and across the oceans. Details get smudged and dialogue garbled. The will to remember the past is undermined by an equally formidable will to forget. (Bahadur 18)

Nabanita Chakraborty in her research paper 'Writing the "Stigmatext" of *Indenture: A Reading of Gaiutra Bahadur's Coolie Woman*', uses Helen Cixous concept of Stigmatext to read *Coolie Woman*. Cixous defines Stigmata as the one that has gathered "...stitched together, sewn and resewn..." (Cixous 10). According to



Cixous, Stigma is capable of "...stinging, piercing, making holes, separating with pinched marks and distinguishing remarking- inscribing, writing and all in one motion..." (Cixous 10). Here the authors of the selected text as well as their narrators are descendants of coolie migrants. Three identities are consequently present in these narrators, as Stuart Hall points out. Therefore, they carry with them the 'traces of wound' of their long-lost past and these people being part of the new diaspora and engaged in the global transactions, attempt to sew the 'stigma text' of their great-grandparents. Bahadur relies on the family history and archival studies. She had meticulously studied colonial records in order to understand the migrations from colonial India that resulted in diasporic formations. Bahadur travels to India to find her ancestral roots. Since she is settled in America, Bahadur has two homelands in her, Guyana and India. In America 'Indian looking meant Indian', where the Indo-Guyanese identity is put to question. The hyphenated identity put her in a liminal space. This liminality in which our narrator is in, provides her with ample space in 'sewing' up her identities from multiple standpoints.

Gaiutra Bahadur deals with nostalgia of two different generations. Though the two travels take place in different timeframes, the pain of leaving, nostalgia for the land left behind and the desire to return exists in both the generations. Emigration is not an easy act; it calls for the physical and psychological displacement of individuals from the cultural terrain of their homeland.

Emigrating was like stepping into a magician's box. The sawing in half just a trick. In time limbs coherence would be restored, and a whole, intact self sent back into the audience. But at my age, unformed and impressionable, I didn't know that. All I knew was that everything seems to split apart. Time became

twofold, divided into the era BA, or before America, and the one after it, after 7 November 1981. Space was also sundered, torn slowly and excruciatingly into two conflicting realms, inside out. (Bahadur 4)

The word stigma, that takes synonyms like shame, disgrace, stain etc, etymologically means a mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance, quality or person. In the case of coolie migration, the very act of crossing the sea is the stigma. Crossing the sea in Indian religious context meant the loosing of one's caste. Therefore, stigma is embedded in the embryonic stage of this diaspora. It has been handed down through the ages, in a way they symbolically act as the carriers of the stigma. The carrier trope is one of the features of Wole Soyinka's play *The Strong Breed* (1963). In *The Strong Breed*, the carrier is the one who carries the sin of the villagers. He is the chosen one and there is no escape from it. If we are to find parallels with sin to the stigma of crossing, the stigma needs to be evaded and a carrier is required. The *Jahajin* presents the characters in the context of Indian settlements in Trinidad. The unnamed narrator of *Jahajin*, is the fictional counterpart of the author Peggy Mohan. The narrator's research in Trinidad Bhojpuri is partly personal as she traverses through her lineage during the course of her investigation. This text is in a way a metanarrative in which the narrator's present crosses lines with her ancestors' migrant past, through the story told by Deeda. Deeda, the purabiya jahajin quilts the present and past through her narrative. Her stories come out of her memory. She recollects events of her past and shares with the narrator, expresses the feelings of the shipmates who have migrated, known as jahajins, and their longing to come home. Here, a folktale that Deeda had been familiar with since she was a child is transmitted to the next generation through storytelling. Deeda narrates the tale of Sada Brij and Saranga. Deeda remained connected to her native country or the village

from whence she immigrated, through the stories. It is notable how the story spans generations and relives past events. "I am coming with you" (202), here Deeda means that through the tape-records she is also accompanying the narrator to her journey to India. Our narrator's role as a vehicle for the long-awaited return is understood. She observes that "I would be carrying a hitchhiker with me. Had she been waiting all these years for someone like me to give her a ride?" (204). The tale therefore functions as a metaphor. The story is essential to "completing a voyage" in this scenario. Deeda symbolically ends the cycle, much like an exile who comes home after their time away. Our narrator thus act as the carries who was instrumental in bringing an end to Deeda's migration. Deeda's return is not physical; instead, she weaves her memories of home into stories and sends them back to her village through our narrator. Deeda represents people who chose to stay in the Caribbean Islands despite the fact that they retained strong ties to their homeland.

Vijay Mishra employs V.S. Naipaul's remark on the role of material possessions as part of preserving the memory of homeland to draw our attention to the fate of Indian colonial diaspora in relation to memory:

The indentured migrants brought holy books and astrological almanacks, images, sandalwood, all the accoutrements of the religious shrines, musical instruments, string beds, plates and jars, even querns, even grinding stones. It was amazing what they (the indentured labourers) did bring, but they were going to the end of the world and they came prepared for the wilderness. "...they carried India with them and were able to recreate something like their world". (qtd. in Mishra 45)

Myth of Rama was one among such things that the coolie migrants hold on to ease the pain of separation from their homeland. Gaiutra Bahadur gives an account on how the Indian immigrants to British Guyana brought with them the myth of Rama. Coolies brought Ramayana to their land of toil. They believed that through Ramayana, they could retain their connection with the traditions of homeland. These people were forced to forgo their tradition by crossing the sea for, the act of crossing was considered taboo by different castes. Therefore, by upholding the Ramayana tradition, these displaced Hindus aimed to create a cultural arena of their own. The version of Rama's story that they used, was based on Tulasidas's *Ramacharithamanas*. The immigrants often drew parallels between the exile of Rama and their own indenture period. "Ancient verses of exile and its end, the prayerful tale of triumphant return home" (Bahadur 164). Myth of Rama not only instilled in immigrants a hope for a triumphant return but also became instrumental in casting a new Hindu society. The new society thus formed, believed in the need of Rama's story to be ingested and imbibed into their lives in order to reclaim the lost tradition. They adopted Ramayana as a model where Rama was the embodiment of righteousness, while Sita, was the model of an ideal, obedient and chaste wife and Shurpanakha represented the deviant woman.

The tale that the indentured tell by torchlight is the tale of that of an ideal women tempted. They sing of Sita's abduction and the attempt on her honour by the demon Ravana, who rules netherworld Empire from his base, on an island. They sing in suspicion that unsettles her husband and the purity test to which he subjects her after the rescue. (Bahadur 106)

Religion has a vital role in building a community in the colonial plantations. It shaped both the public and private spheres of the migrants. Places of worship were built by the coolies.

That year Sirdar floated the idea of building a temple on the farm...the coolies worked in the evenings and on holidays to build a small temple of wattle and daub...The temple was completed just in time for Diwali, the festival of lights. The Sirdar declared a holiday and the coolies celebrated by lighting up their meagre barracks with lamps and singing bhajans to gods. Some of the coolies who knew the chants officiated as priests and performed ceremonies. (Gubili 108)

Internally, religious practices gave them strength to resist the colonial intrusions into their culture. Outwardly it offered spaces of celebration and community building. *Viriah* offers a narrative celebration that the coolies had in the plantations of Natal.

In the small temple they built, Viriah and the other coolies started celebrating the other Hindu festivals like Diwali, Dasara, and Kavadi. Kavadi is a big festival in Tamil Nādu, but it became a prominent festival in Natal since the majority of the coolies were from Madras state. (Gubili 109)

Religion served as an anchoring point that fixed the identity of the migrants in the new settlement. The identity that was sought to recreate their religious and cultural lives of homeland, thus helping in the formation of a community that indulged in common practices. In *Elementary Forms of Religion* (1912), sociologist Emilie Durkheim observes that religion is principally social solidarity whittled down, it

manifests in powerful, shared rituals and collective representations that build and preserve moral communities and insulate individuals from the ‘anomalies of centrifugal forces’. The Canadian missionaries were keen in imparting Christian values among the coolie migrants. As a result, conversion to Christianity was common in the plantations. Those who converted, viewed Christianity as an escape from the caste based subject hood. They embraced Christianity as the initial step of social climbing.

Descendants of the old diaspora carefully carried with them the legacies of their parents. The myths and stories passed on to them are preserved for future generations. Bhajans and songs that came along with the first generation of immigrants continue to live through the subsequent generations. The domestic sphere was instrumental in shaping the traditional religious practices. It was in this space that the common beliefs and modes of worship were perpetuated by the immigrants and communicated to their children. Shrines, personal prayers, and bhajans were part of their plantation cottages and the descendants even when they immigrated held on to the traditions. Bahadur gives an instance of how her mother used to observe the customs scrupulously even after immigrating to the USA.

Every Sunday, the white shutters of the linen closet would open. Fresh flowers were placed on the bronze plate, and incense sticks lit. My mother would sing bhajans, Hindu devotional song. She knew very little Hindi. ... Those early days in America often sent my twenty-year-old mother to her shuttered Gods. They gave the hymns she did not understand, from an India she had never seen, a tangible quality. You could touch the words. They bent down your feet, imploring your blessings. *Mein ik nanha, mein ik chotta sa, bacha hoon. I am a tiny child I am a small child.* (Bahadur 5)

Krishna Gubili, during his visit to South Africa, learns from his cousin that the Indians in South Africa were keen in sustaining their Indian religious roots. Indians make up approximately half of the citizens of Tongaat, a charming tiny suburb of Durban. There are temples built and maintained. He is surprised to find that festivals of South India like *kavadi attam* that came to Natal along with the indentured migrants, are still alive and celebrated with all zest. He identifies that it is all because of the fervour of the Indian diaspora in South Africa.

He took me to the Sri Siva Soobramaniam Temple which hosts the largest Kavadi Attam festival in South Africa. ... Durban has the largest Indian population by city anywhere in the world outside India. With an eclectic mix of colonial and modern buildings... streets named after Indians, temples, and mosques; Durban is a home away from home. (Gubili 37)

Along with memory, language and customs play a significant role in the construction of diasporic identity. Presence Indian, (an alteration of Hall's Presence African) is constituted mainly through language and culinary practices. Oral tradition is seminal in propagating the language of the homeland. Apart from the great narrative of Rama myth, the women folk had their own versions of stories which were less heard in the narratives written by men. In *Jahajin* we listen to Deeda, the coolie migrant to Trinidad, speaking Trinidad Bhojpuri. The narrator in *Jahajin* is a researcher in Trinidad-Bhojpuri. She interviews old jahajins like Deeda to record the Bhojpuri utterances. Throughout the book Peggy Mohan has retained the Bhojpuri utterances. She translates Deeda's conversations in Bhojpuri to English for the sake of the readers. The narrator uses Bhojpuri with accuracy even then she takes the help of her grandmother whom she calls Aji to translate Deeda's interview. This shows that

language for the immigrants was mostly a private affair. To comprehend the language to the fullest the younger generation has to rely on their grandparents. They act as the transmitters of culture, especially language. Unlike Deeda, who preserved the Bhojpuri tongue along with the creole as a remnant of her homeland and plantation past, the narrator's household was not favourable for the growth of Bhojpuri. Her grandfather considered Bhojpuri as a broken language. "And Bhojpuri, as far as he was concerned, was a thing of the past, a tie to the estate" (Jahajin 51). In Guyana, the language underwent the changes resulting in the formation of creoles.

...various versions of Creolese, an English dialect that evolved from plantation pidgin, was the idiom. This is what we spoke inside our immigrant home; this was our cracked, our stained-glass English, made from smashed bits of multi-coloured glass, a thing of beauty constructed from fragments, including fragments from India. (Bahadur 8)

Struggle with language was more crucial for the secondary immigrants. In Magician's Box, the first chapter of *Coolie Woman*, Bahadur sets the background of the narrator. Language of Guyana, which is marked by the broken English and Creole had to be kept in the closet. The creolese of the Indo-Guyanese was the marker of the plantation life. It belonged to the inner enclave and was more personal. The private sphere was marked by the use of proper English, free from the clutches of the plantation past. Bahadur notes the influence of Bollywood in the imparting language to her younger self. "Both religion and the cinema give me the conviction that I was Indian, although I had never stepped foot in India, nor had my parents, nor had my grandparents. Bollywood and bhajans also game me language" (Bahadur 6).



It was Bollywood that helped in fixing language in them. Occasional screening of Bollywood movies helped them in emotionally connecting to the land to which they have never been to. Bollywood movies gained huge success in Guiana and US. The movie Bahadur mentions is Love story, starring Kumar Gaurav. Popularity of Kumar Gaurav among the Indo-Guianese people was later made use by Rohit Jaggessar in the movie *Guiana 1838*. *Guiana 1838* is a docudrama released in 2004 that narrates the story of the first set of indentured labours arrived in Guiana. Kumar Gaurav plays the lead role, of that of Lakshman. “Indian movies were part of the landscape of inside, existing in a rarefied private place that had little to do with a specific location on a map” (6). Thus, the land of their imagination was an entity that was constructed partly by Bollywood. But these movies were hardly close to the socio-political situations in India.

Hindi films imparted nothing of the social rifts or other realities in India. After all, Pinky and Bunty weren't star-crossed lovers because one was Muslim and the other Hindu, or one Brahmin and the other from a 'backward caste'. If India looked anything like the country of Bollywood, then it was a place where lovers ran into each other's arms across flowering fields. ... even so, Indian movies did impart an odd, foetal sense of identity to me. (Bahadur 6)

Diaspora 'perform customs' through their domestic spheres. In addition to flow of language, influence of bhajans and prayers, culinary practices involved in diasporic homemaking has also been seminal in enacting 'Indian' in the Caribbeans as well as in the first nations. Brinda Mehta observes that "...the language of cooking offers a certain point of commonality between generations" (111). Deeda recollects an instance of making 'penny noose' (a traditional Indian sweet made out of the first

milk got from the cattle), during her days in the plantation Deeda's memories make our narrator realize the interconnectedness of the people who came from India. The narrator instantly connects the custom of preparing penny noose in her own household. The narrator who belongs to the fourth generation of Trinidad-Indians adds to Deeda's narrative of penny noose making with her own childhood memories.

When I was a child, my father would sometimes get this same first milk, which he called colostrum milk, from a man he knew called Sirju, who had a herd of cows...he would send over colostrum milk from time to time, and Dad would boil it down in a huge pot and make penny noose for us. Now I understood: Sirju's family and our family were jahajis. Our ancestors had come on the same boat from India. It was like being from the same caste, or better yet, the same gotra, clan. It cut across caste lines, and was a relationship you could take for granted. (Jahajin 135)

The diaspora, whether old or new always had a dream of return. More than the secondary immigrants for whom India is the land of great grandparents, homeland was closer kin to those who remained in the colonies. From the beginning of the indentureship, indenture coolies attempted to escape to India. Though their attempts were in vain, they continued to do so in a hope that one day they would reach the land from where they began. Return was not just a story but a promise made in writing. The Contracts (Indenture Labour Contracts) to which they entered promised return trip to India after the bond period. This promise was not kept. Planters asserted that the coolies had to remain in the country, without leaving. The tension between workers and the planters lasted for long. By the end of nineteenth century, colonial governments offered money, land or both to those who gave up the passage to India.

By 1898, men and women whose indenture had been over, could return to India, provided they could pay a portion of their expenses. Ex indentured men had to meet half of their expenses by themselves, while women were to pay only one third of the total. It took more than a century, after the arrival of first ship in West Indies, to Indians to sail back to home. About 250 ex-coolies and their children boarded MV Resurgent.

“For the mostly elderly passengers aboard the MV resurgent, memory had remade India, fading details of its map but not intensifying the colour of its contours” (Bahadur 166). Homeland for them was an ideal, more than a physical reality. Their children, who were also on board, perceived India through Hindi films, screened at Guiana’s cinemas. “– kaleidoscopes of songs and sunlight” (Bahadur 166). One of the ‘push factor’ for the youngsters to return was Bollywood. They hoped to make a better prospect through film industry. Some aspired to become playback singers and some actors. Bahadur recalls the words of the repatriation officer of The Resurgent, Chhablal Ramcharan that “...these boys wanted to go to India but all they knew of India was pictures...films portrayed India as paradise, they thought it would be easy” (Bahadur 167). In 1955 The Resurgent set off its sail boarded by men, women and children who were expecting to reach the India of their imaginary. To the contrary the homeland, India of their imaginary was not in a welcoming mood at the time of their arrival. Independent India that had not yet freed itself from the pangs of partition was not ready to receive more people. “Already overwhelmed by partition’s uprooted millions, Nehru sounded irked by the prospect of any more displaced peoples-even just 243 more” (Bahadur 169).

Neither the social circumstances favoured the repatriates. Though they returned, they failed to realize the 'home' that continued to exist through their memories and nostalgia. The first problem that they had to encounter, was to locate themselves in the land they arrived. Many of them could not locate the villages from where they or their parents had immigrated. Secondly, the social structure that their forefathers had left behind, now returns to the repatriates like a spectre. "Many could not return to their homes, having once left them" (Bahadur 167). Therefore, to fit into the tradition, men abandoned their wives and children. Pollution was another stigma attached to them. Bahadur states an instance of a man, who on arriving Calcutta abandoned his wife for she was from another caste.

Among coolies there was a sense that once men or women married outside India, especially if they also married outside caste, there was no going back. The belief ran so deep that some men deferred marriages to preserve the hope of someday returning to India.

(Bahadur 168)

The social positions and privileges that these returnees enjoyed back in the Caribbeans, no longer continued to exist in India. Mukoon Singh, was punished for the murder of an overseer and was repatriated to India. Deeda refuses the marriage proposal by Makoon Singh. She was afraid that returning to India might result in reinstating the caste system in her life. Unlike in the plantations where everyone was a coolie, in India according to the caste hierarchy Mukhoon Singh belonged to the higher caste of Thakur than Deeda, who was a kahaar. She had the fear of being abandoned by the Thakur once reaching India. The returnees irrespective of the caste and class were never satisfied with their life back in India. Heera Singh and Hour

Singh who accompanied their father Mukhoon Singh in repartition, were asking their relatives in Trinidad to arrange for a return ticket. In *Viriah*, we see Viriah who happily returns to India with riches from Natal. His children, who were educated under the colonial system, found it difficult to adjust in India. Viriah's daughter Chengamma and her husband Bheempalli returns to Natal, as they found it difficult to survive in India.

Muhammad Anwar wrote about the myth of return in the context of post-war Pakistani immigrants in *The Myth of Return: Pakistanis in Britain* (1979). According to him, the very concept of return is psychologically determined. It links the migrations of the present to aspirations for the future and desires to reclaim the past. For the repatriates, who have actualized the process of homecoming, this myth of return no longer exists. This brought in disillusionment. While for those who decided not to return, decided to keep India in the past, the myth of homeland and return existed as a psychological entity. "Perhaps she knew that India was best when kept in the past- that it would stay sweet as long as she shed tears for it, and desired it, but never actually held or beheld it" (Bahadur 172). Ramcharan, the repatriate officer on the arrival, advised the people who came from Guiana to do their best to adjust and resettle. He said "keep an open mind. Do not worry about Guiana. Try to adapt" (Bahadur 169). Realization that they failed to adapt, made them disillusioned. This forced some to return leaving India.

Mishra identifies New Diaspora as those who have relocated to metropolitan areas of the Empire or other white settler nations, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US, following a global immigration pattern that began in the 1960s (13). The old diaspora, Mishra says, has also become the part of new

through remigrations. Bahadur's family migrates to USA in 1981, because of the ethnic attacks directed towards Indians in Guyana during that period. Later Bahadur travels to Guyana to visit her ancestral home. She also visits India, the country of birth of great-grandmother. In *Jahajin*, we get to see that our narrator considers her life in Trinidad short and her parents always wanted her to go abroad. She travels to USA and to India for her research purposes. Krishna Gubili, the narrator of *Viriah* migrates to America leaving India, for his job requirements. He settles in the USA and is seen travelling to India and to South Africa to meet his family members. Gubili supplies "the missing branches" in his family tree from a letter that he receives from his cousin who lives in South Africa. The family photographs send along with the letter are treasured by Gubili. Later he traces his cousin in South Africa with the help of those photographs. Gubili makes use of the potential connectivity offered by the world wide web in his search for family branches. He makes use of social media through Facebook in his venture in finding out his cousins. He succeeds in the attempt and he gets connected to his cousin's daughter and hence to his cousin through Facebook. This initiates Gubili's visit to South Africa. In the case of secondary immigrations that took place in the modern and advanced times, the journey was not cumbersome unlike those taken up by their great-grandparents, in the initial stages of diaspora formations. The journeys that the new diaspora undertook mostly contributed to the 'global flow'. "The new, surfaces precisely at the moment of postmodern ascendancy, it comes with globalisation and hypermobility, it comes with modern means of communication already fully formed or in making" (Mishra 14). In this setting, the new migrations' diasporic imagination is not only shaped by the remnants of the old diaspora but also by the imaginations that the former construct through the global connections. The new diaspora makes use of highly sophisticated technologies

to produce content and depend on digital archiving with the help of the media and cyberspace. Production of media with the purpose of archiving the diasporic experiences include interviews of the old indentured migrants, documentaries produced to commemorate the arrival of the coolies in Caribbean etc. The younger generation is keen in bringing their past alive and as a result they have made several materials including exclusive YouTube channels for sharing the indenture history. This way the diasporic imagination of the new diaspora, to which Peggy Mohan, Krishna Gubili, Gaiutra Bahadur et. al are part of, meshes well with Arjun Appadurai's mediascapes of global cultural flow. Mediascapes "tend to be image-centred, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements, out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places" (Appadurai 299). They are part of memory projects. For example, Moray trust house is dedicated to promoting Guyanese culture and public discourse and indenture history is inseparable from the making of Guyana. Satish Rai, researcher from IndoFijian community has produced different documentaries dedicated to the Indian settlements in Fiji. Karen Dass has published an interview with 97-year-old Mr. Ranjit "Pa" Ramsingh of Enterprise, Chaguanas, Trinidad, in her YouTube channel. A FM media's *Untold: The woes of an Indian female indenture labourer in Mauritius*, are examples for the same. These contents are available to everyone and the interactions that take place through the comments are noteworthy. The ability of internet-based media to facilitate continual communication among geographically dispersed transnational groups makes it seem particularly suitable to the demands of diasporic communities. They offer comparatively pricey, decentralised, interactive, and user-friendly technologies.

## Chapter 2

### Configuration of Space on Board

Large ships were used to transport coolies from India to colonial plantations. In ship voyages, the people travelling in the ship are passengers, and the goods transported across are known as cargoes. As far as the indenture transportation is concerned, passengers themselves were the cargo. Imperial ships were transporting labour forces across the oceans. The journey spanned almost three months. The coolie migrants were loaded from the depot. In India, Calcutta and Madras were the two depots from whence coolie ships sailed to their destination colonies. The recruited coolies were to wait in the depot as long as the required number was met. Depots were the first major destination in the coolie transportation. The period of waiting was also a period of transformation. The depot space served as a dress rehearsal for the migrants' upcoming cultural strains and social tensions on board. Though the migrant population constituted of people from all strata of the society, a great number of people entered into migration to escape the unprivileged status of being a social and economic outcaste in colonial India. Social stigmas of pollution attached to the lower caste Hindus and the upper caste migrants' fear of pollution and losing of caste, became the site of conflict. In addition, crossing of Kalapani or black water, here ocean was a sin in itself, for crossing was analogous with the losing of one's caste. In "Theorizing the Troubled Black Waters" Mishra notes that "Kalapani, the black water, historically defined as the marker of the voyage to indenture is thus a signifier of the sociality that began in the depot itself. The polluted body was already taking shape and even without the voyage the emigrants were now outcastes" (Mishra 20).



Carl Thompson identifies journeys as “confrontation with” or “negotiation of alterity” (9), where alterity being the state of being other or different. In postcolonial theory, alterity is used interchangeably with otherness and difference (Ashcroft 9). Spivak argues that the colonizing subject’s self-identification is inextricably linked to the identity of the imperial culture, which is determined by a process of othering i.e., alterity of colonial others (Ashcroft 10). The journey in the ship is monotonous and subjected to risk. The grand narratives on the indenture journey celebrates the Jahajin bonds or the bond that the shipmates make among themselves. It is a larger romanticized view of the relationship that was maintained among the coolies. The ship was not a homogenous space. Colonizer and the colonized were travelling together. It was a space of hierarchies and othering. The ship space was divided into the first class, second class and third class. In *Viriah* an account of the different levels of ship space is given. “All the coolies were pushed into the lower level which housed the third-class passengers. Above that was the main level which housed the second-class passengers. The first-class passengers enjoyed large, luxurious cabins on the top floor” (73). The third class was the coolie deck. It was divided into three quarters. The first quarters were occupied by single men, the second were occupied by married couples and the third was women’s quarters. Peggy Mohan notes down the occupants in each quarter.

They had different quarters on the boat for moglasiyans, single people and married couples. The single men’s quarters were in the front of the boat, under the main deck, the married couples’ quarters were behind that, and the single women’s quarters were in the back below the poop deck and the main deck. (Mohan 53)

The mobility of the passengers is limited inside the ship space, at the same time the ship offers the mobility to the passengers across the sea. It traverses long distances and connects two geographically and culturally separated islands. Also, the ship journey brings together the culturally different, socially separated people within the limited ship space. Unlike in India where different caste people failed to mingle, the ship became a point where people of different caste converged. The colonial other as well as the religious other were together in the ship. Therefore, ship space act as a contact zone where alterity is addressed. Here different cultures meet and contest, resulting in the formation of new identity, which in short is the byproduct of the conflicts and negotiations offered by the ship space. The term ‘contact zone’ was used in relation to the “colonial frontier” (6). Mary Lousie Pratt uses the term contact zone to refer to the space where people meet, interact and contest.

Contact zone, I use to refer to the space of colonial encounter, the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict...contact zone is an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjuncture, and whose trajectories now intersect. (Pratt 6-7)

Pratt highlights “contact” in relation to how subjects are formed through and as a result of their relationships with one another (7). In “contact zone” the “relation among the travelers and “travelees””, is emphasized in terms of coexistence, interaction, intertwined conceptualizations, and behaviors, frequently under profoundly unbalanced power relations (Pratt 7).

The ship was carrying “live cargo” (Mohan 85). The British planters wanted their ‘human cargo’ in good position. The English doctors were therefore responsible for the health and life of the coolies. The doctors had to treat the coolies in need also, they had to check the condition of coolies and examine the patients. “Recruiting doctors to work on the ship was a challenge of its own. Despite the promise of pay of ten shillings for every healthy coolie who arrived, there were not many English doctors who wanted to undertake these uncomfortable journey” (Gubili 76).

The relationship between the colonizer and the colonised took a different turn in the ship space. The circumstances of the maritime voyage were a great leveler. The harsh weather, seasickness, food poisoning, outbreak of infections etc. affected the coolies as well as the English men alike. Even the doctors fell ill during the course of the journey. In *Viriah*, the ship in sail is Umkuzi. Dr. Robertson, the ship doctor in Umkuzi falls ill due to the adverse conditions and his health deteriorates. “...he rarely stepped out of his cabin, so it was left to the lone compounder to treat the coolies in need” (Gubili 77). British and the Indians co-existed in their journey of survival.

The coolie deck was a melange of people from all religion and castes. There were Brahmins (they occupied the highest position in hindu caste hierarchy, they were mostly pundits and priests), Rajputs (warrior caste), Dhobis (washer men), Kumhars (potters), Ahirs (cow minders), Chamar (untouchable leather worker, they occupied the lowest position in the caste system), Muslims et al. For example in *Jahajin*, Deeda gives a glimpse of the caste of some of her fellow travelers. Deeda was a Kahar (family of palanquin bearers), Sunnariya came from Thakkur family, Janaki, a widow from Faizabad, was a Sonnarin (the caste of goldsmith), Sahatoo Maharaj and his brother were pundits. In *Viriah*, Viriah was a Kapu or agriculture worker by caste, and his friend Shaikh was a Muslim (73). All these people were sharing the same space in

the coolie deck. It was different in India, for example, Brahmins stayed in their own neighborhood distancing themselves from the untouchable lower caste people. The upper caste maintained a social stigma of pollution against the lower caste.

...there was a special well for Brahmins that no one else could approach... If a Brahmin touched an untouchable or the other way around, the Brahmins would bathe and perform rituals to get rid of the impurity. The untouchables would be punished for the grievous crime of polluting the Brahmin with their touch. (Gubili 72).

In the beginning of the voyage upper caste members attempted to retain their cultural practices that they were following in India. They failed to comprehend the homogenizing capacity of the term coolie. Gubili notes an instance where the upper caste people protesting against the lower castes for sharing the vessels and water. "... On the ship..., Coolies from the higher castes like Brahmins and the Rajput started protesting. They refused to drink water from the same drum or eat food which was cooked and served in the same vessels that were used by coolies from the lower castes" (Gubili 72). They had no choice but to be subjected to the system, they resisted the state but the space counteracted "everyone was just a coolie" (Gubili 72). These resistances did not last longer. During the course of the journey, a gradual realization came to the coolies that signing up for indenture also meant losing the caste identities. The ship as a new space has transformed the people, thousands of years' customs and social structures crumbled. In the "indenture altar" (72) everyone has blended into just a coolie. Thus, a bond began to evolve among the migrants.

"Hybridity refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone" (Ashcroft 108). It simply means a "cross cultural exchange" (ibid 109). Hybridization

can take place in linguistic form, cultural form, political form, racial form etc (ibid 108). Coolies found the ship journey monotonous and tiring. “Then day after day, just going on and on and on and on in that crazy ocean, we got tired. Tired! The boat was quiet, so quiet. Just splash-splash and the wind in the rigging” (Mohan 87). The long journey has brought many changes in the life of coolies.

Liminal space is an “interstitial or in-between space, a threshold area” (Ashcroft 117). In postcolonial theory, the concept of liminality is connected to contact zone. The “co-existence of the travelers” (Pratt 7), is thus the product of the liminality that the migrants experienced in the contact zone offered by the ship.

The concept has been employed to consider how the contact zone exists as a cultural space in between that of the colonizer and the colonized, in these liminal spaces of transcultural exchange, the colonized subjects may find resources and strategies for self-transformation that upset the fixed polarities of colonial discourses. (Cuddon 399)

The liminal ship space was instrumental in making of a cross cultural bond among the coolies and therefore the coolies began to identify themselves as jahajins, or those who travelled by boat. The jahajin bond that was central to the community building. In *Jahajin*, Deeda recollects the formation of jahajin bonds, in her ship named Godavari. According to Deeda, the jahajin relationship was a solace for the migrants who had left their family. Irrespective of the differences, the fellow travellers in the ship were connected by the hardships they had to endure and the sort of companionship eased the difficulties in the later stage of the journey.

Now we were looking at everybody else on the boat with us as our family, apan palwaar. And we started calling each other something new: jahaji bhai

and jahaji bahin, ship-brother and ship-sister, and speaking of each other as jahajis, shipmates. People who had travelled across two big oceans on the same ship had seen too much together to be anything but family. (Mohan 82)

In *Rebelias and his World* (1984), Bakhtin, introduces his theory of carnival. His concept of carnival opposes the social hierarchies. In carnival space the society moves away from the established order and the social order is inverted.

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth. And from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.

(Bakhtin 45)

The jahajin bonds were transgressive and it inverted the already existing social hierarchies. In addition to that, coolies came together for singing and dancing. It was the only possible way to find a relief from the dull and tedious ship voyage. Playing dholaks and dancing provided the coolies a way to vent their rage and frustration. “Then Sirju started to play the dholak. Then the other started to play the dholaks, and Chirag Ali and his brother took up their sticks and started to beat the tassas” (Mohan 63). In *Jahajin*, Deeda recalls the impact of music and rhythm of dancing upon the ship as well as on its passengers. It was as if the music was “burning out all the bad energy from the boat, turning it into power...And then, when we felt like the sound around us was growing into a heartbeat strong enough to bring a dead boat back to life” (Mohan 63). During the celebration, the migrants moved into the absurd insane world of a carnival. Bakhtin notes that result of carnival is temporary interruption of

the existing state of relationship between the participants and formation for a special form that is limited to the carnival space. In *Jahajin*, when Sirju began to play the dholak, other coolies joined him in a trice and they play together. This simultaneity is the result of the carnival.

The temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time as a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. A special carnivalesque marketplace style of expression is formed. (Bakhtin 46)

Bakhtin's carnival is a brief relaxation and suspension of social norms and the regulations are only put on hold, once the carnival is done they will resume. Here in the ship space the carnival puts a halt to the dreary life of the coolies. The coolie deck came alive during the period. The anxiety about their future, the precarity of the journey, the language differences etc. were suspended for a while. It can be perceived as a new form of coping mechanism for the coolies. The carnival space was free from the linguistic barriers and results in linguistic hybridization.

Gradually during the course of voyage, they get adjusted to their new space irrespective of their differences, they came together, sang together, this singing and celebration helped the coolies to manage the pain of leaving and the anxiety of settling in a new land. Crowds gathered, and coolies with drums or flutes pulled them out to entertain everyone. Coolies sang bhajans and folk

songs. The language did not matter-Hindi, Telugu or Tamil. The coolies also entertained themselves with wrestling matches and games. (Gubili 76)

According to Homi K Bhabha, all cultural claims and systems are created in what he refers to as the "Third Space of enunciation" (38). As per Bhabha, the assertion of a hierarchical "purity" of cultures is unworkable since cultural identity always develops in this paradoxical and equivocal Zone (Ashcroft 108).

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willing-ness to descend into that alien territory . . . may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. (Bhabha 38)

Ship space, when studied under the light of Bhabha's third space, proves that it is different from the land space from whence it began to sail. Also, it is different from the space to which it reaches. The ship served as an in-between space between the land they left and the land they were about to reach. The cultural formations are thus a spin-off from the crossing of the sea, i.e. the ship voyage. The ship in sail is therefore the lived space. The ship is therefore "real" and "effective place", the 'heterotopia' as Foucault terms it.

Foucault identifies heterotopic space as opposed to 'utopia'. Utopia, as Foucault suggest is an unreal place, an imaginary land that does not exist. In his essay "*Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*", Foucault, individuate heterotopia and utopia as follows: -



There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places- places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society- which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because the places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault 17)

Heterotopia functions as a mirror that renders a place that one occupies at the moment. Though actually localizable, it is a kind of place that is outside of all places. It is absolutely different from all the emplacements they actually reflect. Hence heterotopia is the actual space that exist in contrary to the imaginary dream place, Utopia which, according to Foucault is an imaginary place, “emplacements with no real place”. “It is society itself perfected or it is turned upside down” (Foucault 17). This actual perfected place does not exist.

The ship is the ‘real’ ‘floating piece’, the heterotopia. As far as the migrant coolies were concerned the utopia is constructed by their ideal images of the land across the seas, here Caribbean islands. The future host land imaginary is constituted of the hopes and promises that lured them into the crossing of the seas. Their ideal destination was an Eldorado, from where they could reap riches. It is a place that exist not in real but in the psyche of the coolies on board.

The first principle of heterotopia is that every culture constitutes a heterotopia (Foucault 18). The migrant ship is a heterotopic site that contains in it multiple sites

that are open to negotiations and contestations. Different forms of heterotopias are present in the single site of the heterotopia of ship. For example, the heterotopia of crisis exists in the ship space in the form of isolation clinics. Ship being a closed space with limited mobility within the space, the diseased bodies were required to be isolated from the healthy ones. In *Jahajin*, Deeda narrates an instance from her journey in Godavari, about her fellow passengers contracting measles. They were isolated and others were restricted to enter into that infected space.

Then one of the men in the men's quarters got fever. The doctor came and took him to the clinic said he didn't want others people to get sick. ... The day after that, four more men from the men's quarters got fever and had to go to the clinic. Every day the doctor would go to the men's quarters to check everybody, and take away who ever looked a little bit sick. ... The women in our quarters were not to mix with the men since there was no sickness in the women's quarters. The doctor didn't want the fever to spread where it hadn't reached ... There was nowhere to run, we are all on the same boat. (Mohan 56)

Heterotopia of crisis being a space reserved for individuals "in relation to the society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (Foucault 18), the isolation clinic was a heterotopia of crisis in relation to the ship space.

Heterotopic spaces are not easily accessible. One of the principles of heterotopia insists that to enter a heterotopic space one has to be "constrained" or has to "submit to rites and to purification" (Foucault 21). "Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and make them penetrable" (Foucault 21). Likewise, entering the space of ship was not easy. For the

coolies, signing of the agreement was the first act of initiation. Secondly, they were thoroughly put under medical check-up. The access to the ship was gained only by the 'able bodied' coolies.

All the coolies lined up outside the medical examination shed. The doctor started examining each of the coolies. He made each coolie cough, breathe deeply, raise his or her shoulders, and turn around back. He would make them open their mouth wide to check their teeth and prod them in their ribs to hear their cough. (Gubili 68)

Those who failed to pass the medical examination, failed to gain the access to the ship. In *Viriah*, Venkatswami's father fell ill due to the adverse conditions in depot. During the medical check-ups, he failed to prove healthy. "Venkatswami was cleared, but the doctor rejected his father" (Gubili 70).

The ship in sail is a "floating piece of space that is enclosed and at the same time is given over the infinity of sea" (Foucault 22). It is a heterotopic space, "that have in relation to the rest of the space a function" (ibid 21). Here the ships under study, were carrying indenture coolie migrants. This ship space not only assisted in the displacement of the coolies from India to the colonial plantations in the Caribbean islands but also played a significant role in instilling a sense of community among the coolie migrants. This sense of community had helped them during their settlement in the Caribbean islands, in their later period. The larger network of Indian indenture diaspora, spreading over the Caribbean as well as the other parts of the world, owes its sense of connection to the heterotopic space of the ship. The ship as Foucault refers is "Heterotopia par excellence" (Foucault 22), thus participated in one of the greatest

historic events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that contributed to the early forms of global flow of people.

## Chapter 3

### Power and Precarity: The Agency of Female Migrants in Question

Men and Women were recruited from the village, they agreed to leave because they were offered better prospects. Womenfolk who were to leave, primarily consisted of widows and runaways from home. Sujaria in *Coolie Woman* was four months pregnant when she left India, and her reason for emigration remain as an enigma. Even though the narratives give us a picture that most of the indentured labours were cheated and were transported by middle men or akritis, there were also people who willingly embraced indenturship. “Roughly thirty per cent of the migrants on every ship were female. Some of these were women coming with their husbands, of course, and children. But most of the men were not travelling with wives. According to the records, most of these women were adults travelling alone” (Mohan 12).

Among the recruited female population, there were women who agreed to ship across as well as those who were deceived by the recruiters. In Judith Butler words, precarity is “the politically induced condition in which certain population suffer from failing social and economic network of support and ... becoming differentially exposed to injury, violence and death” (ii). Sati, Child marriage and ostracising widows etc. were some of tools with which the patriarchal society of 19<sup>th</sup> century India, from whence the migration took place, regulated the subordinate status of women. Widowhood reduced status of women in the society. They were seen as social outcasts and were forced to wear white clothes devoid of jewellery and accessories. In *Viriah*, Rangamma is a widow migrant from Anandpur district. She boarded the ship with joy trusting the arkati’s offer that “she could find good work,

fair wages, and a safe place to live in the sugarcane plantations” (Gubili 75). In *Coolie Woman* and *Jahajin*, Faizabad is the place from which women were recruited. These women choose to overturn their destiny. Deeda in *Jahajin* left her husband and opted to be an Indentured labour. “They brought all of us from India. They caught us one by one and told us a lot of lies. Yes, I came as a single woman- I wasn’t really single, I was married before I came. And my husband is still in India. I came alone and left him behind” (Mohan 16). The famine was the reason that forced Deeda to leave her homeland. In *Coolie women*, Bahadur discusses the existence of Vrindaban in 19<sup>th</sup> century, known as “City of Widows” (37), widow’s flock to Vrindaban seeking shelter. They were considered outcasts by the family. The journey of most of the women coolies began not from the port but from their own homes. As in the case of the widows their first destination was Vrindaban, where they expected a safe shelter but in reality, the social conditions forced them to prostitution. This vulnerable group of women were lured by the offers given by the recruiters. The socio-cultural practices including ostracizing of widows, sati and forced prostitutions put women in a precarious state, some women willingly chose to migrate to escape from this state.

Colonial discourses impart a victim position to Hindu women. The construct of a Hindu women was necessary for the colonizers, to implement the subordination laws and the civilizing mission. Debate over *sati* began in the latter half of eighteenth century, these debates and the related hullabaloo led to the prohibition in 1829. The abolition of this deeply penetrated social practice and the related legal formulation, was widely viewed as a significant point in the history of emancipation in India. Many prominent Indian social reformers supported the above-mentioned statement. To the contrary, the very act of British intervention in the matters that they (Colonizers) regarded as barbaric, helped them to move forward with their greater

ideology of ‘civilizing Indians’. An ideology the colonizer adopted to instil a sense of inferiority and subordination in the collective psyche of the natives.

James Mill in his History of British India, finds women’s position as an indicator of social advancement.

Nothing can exceed, the habitual contempt which the Hindu entertain for their women... They are held, accordingly, in extreme degradation. Among rude people the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted. (qtd. in Forbes 13)

According to this parameter, the British evaluated and projected the Indian society as a primitive one. One of the major tropes of nineteenth century colonial discourse was the degraded Hindu woman. Considering the social situations of the time such as the pitiable conditions of the widows, child marriage and polygamy, historians of the Empire attributed a ‘victimized’ position to Indian women. The colonial construction of ‘Hindu women’, as the one lacking agency, was later exploited as well utilized by the British during the recruitment of the indentured labourers.

The coolies in the ship were weaving a new identity. Many perished in between, while the survivors who came out were entirely new people, shaped by the hardships they endured. The coolie women mainly came from the outcastes of Indian society. They expected a new beginning at the “new world”. One of the women on board comments about her voyage as, “in the beginning there was a boat. On the mad ocean, we came to life” (Bahadur 62). The process of migration carried with it certain liberties, firstly it put an end to the caste hierarchies and secondly marriage as an institution crumbled.

There are two pertinent perspectives based on which women on indentureship are studied- firstly the precarious position that subject women as victims and secondly the agency with which women achieved liberation, the experience of emigration had a liberating effect on the womenfolk.

Doreen Massey observes that “The limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination. Moreover, the two things – the limitation on mobility in space, the attempted confinement to particular places on the one hand, and the limitation on identity on the other” both are crucially related (179). The women in the ship have experienced limitation in their mobility. They were confined into the limited space within the women’s quarters, violating boundaries made them promiscuous to sexual assault. “And then at night they would send us back to the quarters and close down the hatches. The women had to sleep the whole night with the lamps on, so that none of the sailors could come in the dark and try to interfere with us. That was a rule” (Mohan 54).

The skewed sex ratio, demanded more Indian women abroad. The *Daily Chronicle* noted that:

the women were pretty and youthful. Coolie women, are in demand here as... a number of vacancies for coolie wives exist; but the difficulty about shipment is that all the ladies seem to be very much engaged already to their fellow passengers of male persuasion. There were more men than women abroad. (Bahadur 78)

Bahadur presents a number of evidences about the sexual assault of coolie women on board. The crew transgressed and entered into sexual relationship with the



women. Limited ration and hunger forced many of them (coolie women) to offer sexual services for extra food. “Jainab, testify that she accepted extra food from a crew member who made sexual advances to her. But it did not probe too deeply what might make her consider trading her body for a bit to eat” (Bahadur 55). Women’s complaint was rarely recorded. If at all their complaints were recorded, they did not get justice. Describing Rohimon’s experience on ship ‘Foyle’, Bahadur says

Her encounters with white men onboard- the one who wronged her and the one who failed to punish that wrong- doubtless made Rohimon feel impotent. I imagine that feeling took root in many a coolie woman’s soul, as stoutly as the para grass that they would have to weed in cane fields to come. Was that what it would mean to be a ‘coolie woman’: to be disgraced- and powerless to do anything about it”? (70)

Another instance where women got recorded was, in the complaint filed against Dr. Holman. The woman involved wailed that she was not a prostitute in India. Bahadur cites the instance thus:

The fourth woman stood by her story. She said: ‘the surgeon frightened me... I was afraid to refuse... He used to slap me hard on my bottom and hurt me... The surgeon came after me, and made me go by force... Inside his room the surgeon had connexion with me. It was true that on three nights the surgeon took me into his room and had connexion with me... I was not a prostitute in India’. (59)

Men condemned women, even for the transgressions from the part of the crew members. “The boatswain charged with rape on the Hesperides swore that it was the woman who came after him and not the other way around” (60). The officers on boat

argued that the partitions that separated men's quarters from that of women were in vain. "Indentured women would not take kindly to such separation from the men at the starting. It would be of no more easy to prevent the women going down..." (61).

The experiences of the women on board does not suggest that women were altogether lacking agency. There were women, who used their body and sexuality to gain favour from the whites. One instance that Bahadur unearthed is the story of Sukhia, who was a "prostitute" back in India. She maintained sexual relationship with multiple men (both Indian counterparts and the crew members) in the ship.

The *Royal Gazette* editorialized: "we protest the barbarous and flagitious system of bringing into a strange country hundreds of men without an adequate proportion of women" (qtd in Bahadur 79). Women were not present in equal number as that of men.

The coolie women were paid less than the male counterparts. "They were paid half the wages and rations that the men received for the same amount of work" (Gubili 105). On the arrival at Guiana, women had the freedom to not to enter into marital relationship. Women could live on their own without a male companion. But the British wage policy put an end to this freedom and women were forced to live with men, who were paid better. The meagre income that the women earned out of the labour was not enough to support a life in Guiana. "You can't live by yourself. You have to pick somebody..." (85). Women who arrived man less, had to choose someone as her partner. Women, who were lower in number, had the choice of selecting their partners. The major impact that unequal sex ratio brought in was the agency that women had, unlike in India, to select their partners. Bride price was reversed. In India, bride has to give the man money and gold, for the marriage to take

place. One of the reasons that lured elderly men to indenture was the hope that, the labour would help him earn enough money so as to pay the bride price for their daughters. To the contrary, in the plantation settlements, men had to win the women by settling her bond money. The one who could pay the greater amount had the higher priority. “In Natal, the marriage custom was reversed. Given the scarcity of women demand for marriageable girls was so high that the father of eligible brides asked for a dowry instead of providing one” (Gubili 107).

The discrepancies in the relationship had resulted in many crimes. Sexual jealousy was the prime cause behind the violence that women had to endure. The new Indian community that settled in Guiana and other colonies paralleled themselves with the myth of lord Rama’s exile. *Ramayana* tradition was followed by the community. Storytelling and folk tradition helped to keep the tradition alive. The ideal hero figure was offered by Rama, Sita, the chaste wife and her binary Shurpanakha, the transgressed woman, served as models for the society. The patriarchal model was reimposed by the *Ramayana* cult. Honour killing as a result of sexual jealousy became rampant in the colonies. Along with sexual jealousy, the fear that women might refuse to be subservient and might breakaway the conjugal bonds, triggered insecurity in the menfolk. Doreen Massey, in her seminal work *Space Place and Gender*, observes the impact of economically independent women in a patriarchal construct. Women becoming economically independent “was seen as a threat in two ways’ that it might subvert the willingness of women to perform their domestic role and that it gave them entry into another public world- a life not defined by family and husband” (Massey 179). Any transgression from the ideal image of ‘Sita’, was seen as an act to be condemned. With domestic violence and torture men attempted to curtail the autonomy that women had in the marital relations. Thus, the agency that women had

when they landed on the new world was curbed by violence. This brought down women to the victim position. In *Coolie women*, Bahadur traces several examples where women were reduced to victims, as a result of domestic violence.

When she arrived at the hospital, in a mule cart, her left foot hung by a strip of flesh, just above the ankle. The doctors amputated the leg and her left arm. They were beyond saying. Though still alive, Laungee looked beyond saying too. More than thirty-five wounds covered her body. ... Laungee had been cut in eighteen places. ... Her attacker was a man with whom she had lived for a year. (Bahadur 103)

Lutchminia had been murdered by her ex-partner, Ramautar. He after murdering her, surrendered to the police station nearby. He reported that he had cut a woman. He used the term *randi*, which actually means prostitute or widow. The term had later come to be used as synonymous to woman. The man accused Lutchminia of prostitution and her life was the penalty that he wanted her to pay for her infidelity. There were many domestic killings that took place in this period with the plantation as a backdrop.

The 'nose' was seen as a sign of honour. To cut a woman's nose was the punishment that can be meted out for infidelity. The pattern of violence differed in respective to the religious orientation of the men involved. This was studied by Guiana's sheriff, Henry Kirke, in his anatomy of crimes, observed that a Hindu man, in the case of adultery, mutilated his wife(partner) by chopping off her nose, breast, or arms, and if in a violent rage hack, her to pieces with his cutlass. He offered an example of a Muslim who had cut off his wife's nose, only as an exception to this proved rule. Muslim assailants were, in fact few (Bahadur 116). The observation that

a chief justice of Guiana made with regard to the murder and violence against women is as follows

A man and a woman are brought here as immigrants from India in the same ship; they became intimate; on their arrival, they are married by the immigration agent. ... Women who is young, uninstructed and vain is attracted by a coolie who has been longer resident in the colonies. ... The woman either openly abandons her first husband and goes to live with him or carries on an intrigue with him, which comes to the knowledge of the husband. ... The injured man is left a mark for the jeers and ridicule of the fellows, and the consciousness that such is the case is often a powerful factor in goading him on to the fatal violence. (Bahadur 117)

The stereotypical colonial construction branded coolie man as abusive and violent, while coolie woman was constructed as a wayward, infidel woman. The local newspapers, plantation narratives and even colonial correspondences, contributed towards stereotyping Indians as violent and immoral. They resorted to racist typecasting.

In fact, the precarity in the lives that forced them into migration, continued to follow them like a spectre even after they reached the colonial plantations Bahadur cites a colonial historian to illustrate the same. “As one historian has put it ‘a radical rupture was effected between the crime and the scene of the crime. It was as if the script for the murders was written beforehand in India and the Plantations were a mere stage where it was enacted’ (115). A close reading of the colonial texts reveals the different ways in which Indian women’s morality is constructed. In the colonial

records rarely do we hear coolie women talking for themselves. Too much stress was put upon the morale of women.

There is a “fine line between an involuntary migrant and a focused immigrant” (Mohan 144). Many women migrated from India as focused immigrants. They wanted to escape from the social oppressions imposed upon them. The women in Trinidad slowly transformed their selves into a new one. Ravindra Jain uses Torabully and Carter’s work on *Coolitude* written in the context of the plantations in Mauritius, to explain that the indentured women had risen above the oppressed state to reorganise themselves in the hostland.

Carter and Torabully cite David Northop (1995) to highlight the fact that indentured women did rise above the plantation camps in nineteenth century Mauritius to reconstruct some kind of enduring family life. They used resilience of the customs, culture and religion in particular to successfully thwart androcentric attempts to subdue and cow them down whether by the white planters and overseers or by the Indian Sirdars. (Jain 26)

Discourse is always the outcome of greater power dynamics. Foucault defines discourse as one that “produce” and “transmits power” (101). “It reinforces it but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and make it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are the shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions, but they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance” (Foucault 101). Indian women in the Caribbean had to contend with a double-edged sword that had colonial discourse on one side and patriarchal discourse on the other.

The colonial discourse asserted a victim position to Indian women. The baggage of morality was imposed upon the womenfolk. The classical and clichéd way

of presenting women as those with degraded morals, and sexually promiscuous, was once again put to use by the colonial historians.

The immigrants paralleled their condition in the Caribbean islands to the exile of Rama. Rama who was banished from his homeland, his Kingdom for no fault of his, was a symbol of hope that instilled in the immigrants the dream of return. The myth of Rama not only brought an Indian myth of exile and return but it also constructed the binary of a perfect, submissive and chaste woman in Sita and deviant woman in Shurpanakha. The grand narrative of exile of Rama was thus instrumental in establishing the patriarchal discourse of family with women occupying the domestic sphere. The society thus structured within the psyche of the patriarchal forces operated power in all possible ways.

In *The History of Sexuality Volume One* Foucault defines power as “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation” (92). Both colonial discourse and the patriarchal discourse attempted to limit women to the domestic sphere. At the same time resistance was offered against the dominant discourses from the realm of this domestic sphere. Women were the potential sites for production of a counter discourse in response to the grand narrative of exile of Rama. Resistance to the dominant discourse resided within the orality practiced by the womenfolk. Deeda’s tale is an example. The concept that Maggio introduced in “Subaltern need to be heard” (Maggio 2007) can be observed in Deeda’s narrative. Here Deeda’s story is one such story that let us listen to the subaltern.

Saranga, the heroine in the folktales is not a single person but there were many Sarangas. Sarangas’ folk tale is the fictional counterpart of the journey of the coolie

women. In the folktale the story of Saranga begins with her choice of jumping into the river. Jumping into the river has overturned her destiny. Deeda and many other coolie women choose to jump into the river of migration by crossing the 'Kalapani' or ocean encounter a similar fate of that of Saranga. Wherever Saranga went, whatever circumstances she faced, Saranga always had the wish to reunite with her partner. Likewise, the myth of return was always intact in the first-generation settlers. With the help of an 'Uran Khatola' Saranga and Sada Bhaij reaches home. Rama is welcomed to his homeland once his period of exile ends. In the case of coolie migrants, the return to homeland was not as easy as it was according to their myth of return. In "Theorizing the Troubled Black waters" Vijay Mishra suggests that "Kala pani is the space of transgression which polluted the self and carried one to lands from which return, as pure subjects, was impossible" (20). Deeda, on reaching Trinidad, her first thought is not to leave Trinidad. "I was never going back, that I would live and die across kalapani" (Mohan 33). Deeda envisions that some sort of magical intervention can only take her home, because the home that she had left behind might fail to accept her if she returns in any other ways. Return of Saranga is much more challenging than return of Rama. In myth of Rama, Sita the female counterpart in exile is docile and passive when compared to Rama, the man in action. Unlike Sita, Saranga actively participates in the course of her journey. She is in control of every action that happens in her life. Saranga's fate had been designed by her free will and choices. In the context of Indo-Caribbean feminist writings, Brinda Mehta observes that the women writers from Caribbean "have to resurrect woman from the clutches of ritualized myth and abstraction and by representing them in accordance with their specific, ontological realities" (29). Here Deeda, as a story teller "resurrect women" from being a passive component as in the myth of Rama to an active participant as in



the tale of Saranga. Deeda's narrative offers an alternate history of migration, like the narrator of *Jahajin* observes it is

...a story of women making their way alone, with men in the background, strangers, extras. In the history books it had always been the other way around: it was the men who were the main actors. But there was also this unwritten history of the birth of a new community in Trinidad. And it was women who were at the centre of the story. (Mohan 204)

Though the forces acted upon the women in the hostland were same, agency was vested in the individuals. Deeda uses the metaphor of the boat to refer to the life of migrant women. "Sunnariya was going to stay in the boat ..." (Mohan 173). Deeda had decided to 'jump out of the boat' that is she had decided to live on her own. Deeda refused to repatriate to India with Mukhoon Singh. India. Deeda, gave up the marriage proposal fearing that returning to India may reinstate the caste label and will bring up problems to the marriage. She thought that her caste was not upto mark with Thakur caste to which Mukhoon Singh belong to and if she came back to India the prevailing caste system will hunt her again. It reveals that the migrated people believed that leaving India had liberated them from the shackles of the caste system, and they were scared that these chains would bind them again if they returned to India. Here Deeda employs her agency and chose to remain in Trinidad.

The personality of Sunnariya contrasts with the persona of Deeda. Sunnariya yields to the age-old systems to which Indian women were subjected to. She neither compromised with her 'orhinish' nor was she ready to use her free will. Both her dress as well as her choices were linked to the patriarchy and morals. She was "letting other people find a way for her" (Mohan 173). The folktale that Deeda narrates to the

narrator, transgresses the custom of being a docile partner. Beginning with the female monkey who had decided to dive into the river and to turn to human, the female move 'ahead'. The tale of Saranga proves the transgressive nature of the narratives by the women storytellers. "In this story, it's the women who is always ahead. That isn't typical. What you are supposed to get in a Bhojpuri folktale is undying loyalty and submissiveness" (Mohan 104).

The colonial plantations provided a space for women to attain economic independence. Other than the work in the sugarcane field, women earned by working as Khelauni, one who minded children while their parents were away in the field. In Jahajin both Janaki deedi an Sunnariya work as Khelauni. Women who became free Indians traded vegetables and flowers in the market. There were also women who earned by cooking for fellow coolies. When Viriah and friends reach the plantation, they met with a "lady who was a coolie's wife who earned money by cooking food. They would pay her when they received their wages (85).

The resilience of women was visible even in the choice of their attire. They all discarded saree and began to wear ghangris, long skirt, orhinis and jewellery. Deeda recollects the changed way of dressing of the women in the plantation with much surprise, she notes that women had stopped covering their neck, which was a tradition back in India.

Some of the time expired women who into work during the crop season used to go a step further. They would tie their orhinis only over their hair.... They didn't cover their neck at all! Some of the women had also started cutting work and used to tie cutlass at the waist to go into the fields, just like men. (Mohan 146)

Orhins was not only a piece of cloth tied around but it has become a symbolic marker while analysing the fleeting agency vested with the women in Trinidad. In the beginning, orhins were symbol of submissiveness. Women in the plantation wore orhins as a veil against the external gaze. Later when women wear orhins with cutlass attached and keeping their neck uncovered shows the transformation of women from a submissive position to an independent one. For our narrator's ajie (grandmother), who belong to the second generation of free migrants, orhini represented the new social life that they enjoyed. "Wearing lace orhins was a powerful statement that she was now light years away from the estate and forced labour" (Mohan 199).

Later critics of indenture, also took up women's issue as the focal point from where the demand to abolition took its shape. C F Andrews, a prominent critic of indenture, bemoaned the deplored state of women in colonies. "The Hindu women of this country is like a rudderless vessel with its masts broken being whirled down the rapids of great river without any controlling hand. She passes from one man to another and has even lost the sense of shaming in doing so" (Bahadur 118). This was taken up by the Indian nationalist discourse of the time. Arunima Dutta in her study on the coolies of British Malaya, comes up with the argument that the colonial strategy in effect contributed to a new nationalistic critique centred on coolie morals:

Colonial strategy of demonizing Indian coolie households as inherently immoral and violent spaces backfired by opening the way for a nationalist critique of the colonial order that created such spaces. Rather than challenging the prevalence of violence and immorality amongst coolies, nationalist (both in India and in Malaya) criticized colonial governments for defaming their traditions and causing their

‘fellow’ Indians of the coolie class to live in immoral condition. (Dutta 13)

“Therefore, sexual morality of Indian women became a battleground for colonial and anti-colonialist discourses” (Dutta 13). Back in India, organized movements were initiated to put an end to the indentured labour system. The general opinion against indentureship, was on the rise in India with the intensifying of the nationalist movement. In fact, by 1915 the old plantations of British colonies had sufficient labour supplies and they were not much bothered about the importation of Indian labour. In India the industrial growth had attained momentum and labour required for the factories of Ahmadabad and jute mills of Bengal. As a result, there was a growing concern among the Indian industrialists that the continuation of immigration will affect their labour supply. These industrialists, Marwaris of Calcutta and Parsis of Bombay, had considerable influence in society and they raised the issue as a patriotic move veiling the economic motive.

It was a combination of these capitalist interests and the abuse of Indian women at the colonies that led to the call for abolition of the system of indenture. The issue and the related protests originated as a concern of English-speaking liberal elite in the country. The anti-indenture movement attained new heights in 1913 with the involvement of influential Marwari community. They spread anti-indenture campaign to the villages. There were clear economic reasons behind Marwari community’s opposition against indenture as they considered colonial capitalists as rivals of Indian labour. However, they mainly campaigned on the ground of social justice. With the determination to avoid indentureship, the Marwaris actively entered into the mainstream of Indian politics by associating with Gandhi in his anti-indenture move.

By 1916 anti-indenture agitation was at its peak in which women were the focus. Women's group against anti-indenture were formed all over India. Women's meeting in Bombay in which, though Kasturbha Gandhi was the prominent personality, the presence of the elite women of Bombay such as Lady Mehta, Ms Ramabhai Ranade, Lady Tata, Lady Fazulbhoy Currimbhoy, Lady Chandwarkar and Lady Petit became an encouragement to the upper middle class to indulge in the abolition of indenture. They protested against the humiliation of the Indian women hood under indenture. With the auspices of the Home Rule League, the ladies of Ahmadabad submitted a heart felting representation to Lady Chelmsford, inviting her attention to the pathetic situation of Indian women under indenture, requesting for her intervention in the issue. The role played by women, highlighting the value and honour, was one of the strongest factors that led to the ban of recruitment of indentured labour in 1917, and the system came to an end by 1920.

Aswini Tampe identifies that morality issues of Indian coolie woman, as the 'initial motivation' to assemble and protest against the system of indenture (qtd in Dutta 33). An analytical study of the socio-economic aspects that triggered the anti-indenture movement throws light on the less discussed motives behind the abolition of indentureship. More than the moral issues involved, it was the economic factors that triggered the movement. This can be identified as a nationalist technique, the highlighting of a capitalist interest in the guise of a women's issue. The major argument raised in the interest of women's issue was that colonial policies affected the Indian women's pride and the essential 'Indian culture' in them. This argument in a way tries to construct an icon of Indian women.

Partha Chatterjee in his seminal essay "Whose Imagined Community" narrates Indian national consciousness into the outer and inner domains of actualization. While

the outer domain is defined by a spirit of progress and change, the inner domain consists mainly of what can essentially be considered uniquely Indian.

Anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practice into two domains- the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the 'outside'... The spiritual, on the other hand, is an 'inner domain' bearing essential marks of cultural identity. (Chatterjee 217)

The outer, material domain leads to the increased interaction with other cultures and human life. While the inner realm would act towards the preservation of the inner sanctity of what is essentially Indian. "The greater one's success in imitating the western skills in the material domain, therefore greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's culture" (217). Of all the members of the society, Chatterjee observes, women are considered as the steward inner domain. In other words, they are the carriers of cultural purity. This legitimizes the culture's increased insistence on the household existence of the female population of the country. Indian nationalists including Gokhale and Gandhiji insisted on this cultural significance of women outside India as the carriers of essential Indian culture, which according to them must be reinvented. Reading in this light the history of Indian women indentured labours speaks a rather unvoiced story of the national past.

## Conclusion

Migration may be planned or accidental, permanent or temporary. The factors that frequently trigger migration vary between people. Indian Indentured migration was systematically staged by the colonial government and the British plantation owner's. Indenture labour is a system centered on the idea of 'contract', wherein the workers were incorporated into an alien milieu with their consent and ratification. This statement is to be understood and read in tune with the official historical narratives created as well archived by the colonizers. The first part of the statement is true to a great extent, the coolies from India, the indenture labours, entered the system through the signing of a contract. While the second part is problematic and historically incorrect, in the sense, the different ways and means by which the 'consent' or the 'ratification' was attained, happens to be unethical. The colonial colouring of the system of indenture, specifically the idea of consent is questionable, mainly based on the 'unethical' part involved in the recruitment of the workers. In *Coolie Woman*, *Viriah*, and *Jahajin*, the counter narratives to the larger colonial history can be read. Narratives from the perspective of the migrant coolies helps in filling the gaps that was left in the historical text. The narrators are second generation diaspora who are in quest of their family roots. During their search they produce an alternative historiography from the perspective of the migrants. For example Gaiutra Bahadur, the author of *Coolie Women*, has undertaken secondary immigration. The experience of her migration from Guyana to the US, in itself speaks volumes of the significance of the idea of 'homeland' reverberated in their lives. The thesis looks into the different experiences of the coolie immigrants during the process of

migration and settlement. The experiences of the old and new diaspora are compared and analysed.

Travel is an important facet, an integral and inevitable process involved in diaspora formation. Carl Thompson identifies travel as a confrontation with alterity.

All journeys are in this way a confrontation with, or more optimistically a negotiation of, what is sometimes termed alterity. Or, more precisely, since there are no foreign people with whom we do not share a common humanity, and probably no environment on the planet for which we do not have some sort of prior reference point, all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity and identity, difference and similarity.

(Thompson 9)

Travel for the coolies was not an easy venture, on the contrary it was an uphill task. The middle passage, the journey in the ship, they had to undertake was one of hardships. Indenture ships were four to five times larger than the slave ships. But the distance they had to cover was three times that of the slave ships. Almost ninety days were spent in the ship. Not everyone who boarded the ship accomplished the journey, for some perished in the middle passage, some committed suicide, other died of diseases, and hunger. Alterity in the identity of the migrants was a result of the ship space. Ship as a heterotopic space provides multiple sites of confrontations. Ship space act as a microcosm of the diasporic settlement. The alterity in the identity of the migrants is the result of different sites that is involved in the heterotopia of the ship.



The system of indenture is a pertinent event in the pages of history, in the sense, the system was developed and implemented as a substitute for 'slavery'. The idea of migration and its increased relevance in the context of the subsequent generations of the indentured labours, is an interesting facet of the phenomenon of indenture. The idea of a homeland, and its efficacious working in relation to the members of the subsequent generations is worth discussing. For the illiterate coolie, indenture worker, the homeland is imagined and to a great extent materialized through, the narratives of Ramayana and other religious stories and practices. For a later diaspora, the homeland fixation is satisfactorily left intact, through Bollywood cinema and other religious and cultural practices. In other words for the descendants of old diaspora, cinema and religion serves catalytic in the imagination of their homeland, India. The desire to return to one's homeland, or the imagination of one's homeland is a natural tendency to which every diaspora is a part. But in relation to the system of indenture, the construction of the image of homeland becomes problematic for the increased curtailments, this process of imagination, bestows on the women. Interestingly this curtailment is experienced by both the indenture women workers and their women descendants. The middle passage had provided the women indentured workers with a greater sense of individuality, the ability to exert as well exercise the freedom of their choices. The comparatively lower proportion of women is a major reason for this liberation. They had the liberty to 'choose' as well 'leave' their partners, an option which was practically impossible to think in the context of their homeland, India. The freedom and opportunities provided by the middle passage, did go through a considerable change, a drastic one, especially through the reinforcement of the 'ideal men' and 'ideal women' paradigms, facilitated

through the religious narratives. These narratives were instrumental in impelling the wide spread violence against indentured women.

The condescending perspective of the colonizers and the indifferent attitude of the western legal machinery facilitated in the reinstatement of the 'ideal women' mould. In the case of the women descendants, the tendency to emulate the tradition and the practices of the never seen, but close to heart, 'homeland', aided in the consolidation and perpetuation of the 'ideal women mold'. The unvisited and imagined 'homeland' revisits the secondary immigrants and the new diaspora representatives through traditions that are kept alive in the private sphere of their family.

The Indian national movement needed the image of an 'ideal man' and an 'ideal women', interwoven with the construct of a glorious past. These images were necessary in bringing back the lost pride, ravaged and depredated by the colonial rule. In other words these constructions were the interstices from which the proponents of the national struggle expected to launch the 'lost pride'. The protests from India opposing the system of indenture, was based on the pivotal point that this inhuman system denigrates, Indian culture. The predicament of the Indians abroad, specifically the women, was a matter of botheration for these exponents of nationalism, as the women in indenture exhibited the tendency to deviate from the image of an ideal Indian women, a chaste wife, a representative of the mythical 'Sita'.

In addition to the Indian male workforce and the condescending gaze of the colonizer, there is also the integral role played by the Indian national movement and its proponents, in destabilizing the liberation space occupied by the coolie women. All these

factors amalgamate in replacing the positive changes and the related positional shifts the Indian women had achieved in the course of the journey. The reinstatement of the ideal womanhood led to the re-marginalization of the Indian women in indenture scripts.

In the colonial narratives Indian women appear only in relation to the physical abuses and violence and the subsequent trials. It is to be noted that in all these references there is a deliberate attempt on the part of the colonizer, to reduce the women into the position of an 'adulterous', in a sense appeasing or pacifying the interests and viewpoint of the Indian male workforce in indenture. Indenture was much more than what was projected in the colonial histories. Mariam Phirbai has observed the role the Indo-Caribbean feminist writers in offering a counter model to the colonial and patriarchal construct of women that altogether lack agency. "...they not only strive to fill in historical gaps but also to mobilize these stories as models of cultural and feminist agency for present generations" (47). While reading in the light of feminist historiography, characterization and narration *Viriah* and *Jahajin* are poles apart.

The central character in *Viriah* is Viriah, the coolie labourer who has migrated from a village in South India. The reason for his migration is economic. *Viriah* records the journey of an individual and his experiences that he encounters throughout his migrant life. The privilege of being a male coolie, is alive throughout the narrative. Throughout *Viriah* we hear male voices and male perspectives that include formation of jehaji bhai's or ship brothers. Jahaji bahen or shipsisters are absent in the narrative. Women whom Viriah meets are either damsel in distress as in the example of Rangamma or those who are busy in the domestic sphere performing their familial duties.

*Jahajin* primarily focuses on the female experiences. Deeda's narrative can be separately viewed as a testimonio that "appropriates" the dominant patriarchal discourses to "create powerful subaltern voices" (Ashcroft et.al 210). Deeda's narrative is the result of collective, shared experiences of the migration. Men and women are active participants in the making of the diasporic community.

Gaiutra Bahadur in her attempt to trace the history of her great grandmother succeeds in reconstructing the history of the Indian women in indenture, the line of segregation between the public and the private spheres vanishes in an organic and coherent manner.

On the whole the thesis titled, **Indian Indentured Diasporic formations: An Exploration into Coolie Migration**, is an attempt to reimagine the lives and the stories of the indentured migrants from different voices available through the selected texts.

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