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Imagined Mindscapes: Indenture and After

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Abstract: The spaces of postmodernity are inhabited by individuals who straddle different cultures and spaces and who are no longer certain which place they can call home. These are times of revived nomadism, of constant coming and going, the crossing of boundaries both spatial and temporal, of tracing one's root to strengthen one's mooring, of romanticizing the past while reaching for the future. My paper proposes to engage with one such group—the offspring of the indentured workers of the Caribbean, Trinidad and Mauritius who migrated from India in the 19th century and grew roots in a new land.

Keywords: Postmodernity, Nomads, Migrants, Crossing the Boundaries

*"History turning a blind eye bore him not witness
History standing mute told not his full story.
He who had first watered this land with his sweat
And turned stone into green fields of gold,
The first immigrant he, son of this land
He was mine, he was yours, he was our very own."*

- Abhimanyu Unnuth

The young writers, long cut away from the land of their ancestors, nevertheless, display an inherited yearning for their homeland, a curious attachment to its traditions, religion and language. The migrant comes "unstuck from more than land". (Rushdie, Salman: Shame, Picador, Rupa 1983). They move away from history, from memory and from time and therefore clutches at them, carrying his 'bundles and boxes' always with him and 'dreams of someday returning to his homeland when conditions permit him'. (Stuart Hall). This they do metaphorically, sifting through archives to record the dislocation of their ancestors. Gaitra Bahadur in "Coolie Woman", Amitav Ghosh in "The

Sea of Poppies” and Peggy Mohan in “Jahajin” bring to life the struggle of a handful of women who braved the high seas, exile and social excommunication to carve out a new life for themselves in a new land. The striking similarity of theme in the novels of these writers writing more or less around the same time highlight the interest generated in the autobiographical stories of these forgotten brave hearts.

After the abolition of slavery in 1831 plantation owners in the British colonies of the Caribbean, facing bankruptcy sought a replacement for their abundant and cheap African labor in the form of a system of contract labor in indentureship. From Europe and Asia came thousands of Portuguese, Irish, German, Chinese and Indian recruited contract laborers. The intense tropical heat eliminated all sources except Indians from India, which over a period extending from 1838 to 1917 supplied about a million coolies to various British colonies. About half of these came to the Caribbean and the harsh working conditions quickly led this labor to be dubbed as ‘a new form of slavery’. Both men and women were recruited, averaging about forty women to a hundred men with most women without partners. How these women fared, about a quarter million of them, in making the radical crossing of the ‘kalapani’ losing caste in the process is the subject of GuitraBahadur’s book ‘Coolie Woman’ which concentrates on indenture in the British Guyana.

Much has been written about the dehumanizing effects of African slavery in the New World, but no similar body of literature exists for the victims of the Indian indentured system and less so about the women. Drawing upon the experiences of the narrators of the dehumanizing effects of slavery KalTorabully coined the word ‘coolitude’ to identify the travails of this minority with the more popular ‘negritude’ movement. Bahadur, born in Guyana but now resident in the U.S. and a descendant of indentured laborers seeks to rectify this lacuna. It all started with her desire to decipher her own identity through her great-grandmother, Sujaria, who embarked on ‘The Clyde’ in 1903, with 389 men and 171 women, bound for a plantation in British Guyana. Sujaria, a single woman was four months pregnant, a Brahmin, who like all the others was compelled to share the space for three months and a week violating caste pollution laws. Paradoxically, in this indiscriminate mix of caste and disproportion of men and women, would germinate a new liberatory order to take root in the soil of the New World. Sujaria would come to symbolize the plight of the indentured women from the point of recruitment, surviving, living in the overcrowded belly of the ship and working on the plantations for nearly all of her adult life. Coolie Woman –

The Odyssey of Indenture is a genealogical page-turner interwoven with a compelling, radical history of empire told from the perspective of indentured women – or "coolie", as they were known by the British. The collective voice of the "jehajibehen" (ship sisters) has been barely audible across the centuries, until now. For Bahadur, "[their] relative silence ... in the sum total of history reflects their lack of power".

Indentured labour is by no means a relic of history. Today the International Labour Organisation estimates that at least 11.7 million people are in forced labour in the Asia-Pacific region – the majority of these are in debt bondage. But the organised movement of indentured people across the world on a grand scale, the ensuing dislocation and loss of collective memory is peculiar to the empire.

With only a single photograph and an emigration certificate from the British Guiana Government Agency for clues, Bahadur discovers that her ancestor was a 27-year-old light-eyed, fair-skinned Brahmin woman who boarded The Clyde in Calcutta in 1903. Like many coolie women, she travelled unaccompanied.

Sujaria gave birth on the three-month crossing and disembarked in Demerara, Guiana, with her premature baby son. Was she a runaway, a widow, a prostitute, or just a rebellious adventurer? We may never know definitively. But thanks to her great-granddaughter's meticulous research in archives across three continents we can now make an educated guess about her experiences. Rather than shoe-horning Sujaria's story into neat "Who do you think you are?" type resolutions, Bahadur picks at the unfinished edges with anxious lists of unanswered questions and hypothetical conjectures that convey her own fractured cultural identity.

Bahadur grants us rare imaginative access to the odyssey through the experience of women's stories she finds in the archives. Between 1854 and 1864, the death rate on ships to Guiana was 8.54% and the threat of sexual exploitation ever present. But she is careful to stress that coolie ships were not slave ships; indentured women also played games, sang, worshipped, fell in love and began the process of re-inventing themselves for their new lives.

Bahadur explains: "The records also provide other views of the women: on deathbeds, giving birth, losing children, going mad, being driven to suicide, engaged in infanticide, rejecting or being rejected by shipboard husbands."

The untold stories she surfaces include one of a determined young stowaway and a widow, "Janky", who marries a British ship's surgeon, as well as the heartbreaking case of the eight-year-old girl whose father prostituted her for biscuits.

While some historians have called indenture a form of slavery, Sujaria's case demonstrates that "the story is more nuanced than that, especially for women ... Men well outnumbered women in all the colonies ... and it gave the women sexual leverage".

However, exercising that leverage often meant suffering brutal attacks at the hands of spurned men. Between 1859 and the end of indentures in 1917, more than 167 women were killed by intimate or would-be intimate partners in Guiana. Indeed, the high rates of "wife murders" in indentured communities during the colonial era have left modern-day Guyana with a toxic legacy of chronic gender-based violence.

In the first few chapters of the book, Bahadur shows how recruitment was practiced and how the category 'coolie', astigmatic term, was constructed from the raw material of free unfettered labor. It is in the latter part of the book that Bahadur focuses on the oppression of plantation women. In particular she would address the phenomenon of sexual abuse from jealous, paranoid Indian male partners, in the context of the gender imbalance that prevailed and the growing autonomy of women, leading to wanton, physical dismemberment of women. While underscoring overall subordination she would make this particular form of brutality the subject of poignant enquiry. She looks critically at the role of indentureship itself, the pervasive violence in the governance of the plantations, the Indian family structure, Hinduism and so on for insight that explains this aberration. In a chapter devoted to the return of the indentured after their five years of virtual servitude, Bahadur describes vividly how returnees were disowned by their families, robbed on arrival and frustrated in regaining their old homes. Most Indians chose to stay accepting the incentive of land for return passage, leading to the evolution of a vibrant Indian peasantry and permanent citizenship in the New World where caste is now only a memory.

In this context it will be relevant to recount the experiences of Luchmun, an immigrant who came to symbolize the immigrant who gradually grew roots in the New World. In 1830, Luchmun (Immigrant No.3534) was thirty-five years old when he arrived in Mauritius from Calcutta to work for Mr. Rudelle, who was part-owner of a sugar estate in Flacq district. Immigrant Luchmun was born in a village in Bihar in 1795 and he was described as belonging to the Gowalla caste. Between 1830 and 1835 he worked for Mr. Rudelle and completed his indentureship. During the late 1840s and 1850s, he worked as a labour overseer on Belle Mare Sugar Estate. However, by the late 1850s,

Luchmun continued to work his way up the complex plantation hierarchy and became a sirdar. Between 1859 and 1879, he was employed as a sirdar and then as a labour contractor on Belle Mare Sugar Estate and then Constance Sugar Estate.

In 1865, Immigrant Luchmun purchased three arpents and two perches of land near to Constance from Mr. Villiers, the estate manager of that sugar estate, for the amount of five hundred and fifty-two dollars. Shortly after, this important portion of land was devoted to small-scale vegetable cultivation. It is important to note that Luchmun, a pioneer Bihari Old Immigrant, was one of the early precursors of a large and important emerging class of ex-indentured immigrant small landowners. By the early twentieth century, their immediate descendants became some of the colony's most important small sugar planters, landowners, land speculators, vegetable cultivators, merchants, traders and businessmen.

In 1881, Luchmun lost his old Immigrant Ticket and went to obtain a duplicate copy from the Immigration Depot in Port Louis. Immigrant Luchmun was photographed for the first time when he was 86 years and more than half a century after his arrival in Mauritius. He is seen as being a well-dressed, well-kept individual and whose hair has been dyed black. These are clear signs, to a certain extent, that he had achieved some measure of social and economic mobility. He passed away in 1885 at the age of ninety at his residence near Constance Sugar Estate. He was survived by his wife Lutchmee, an Indo-Mauritian lady, and five sons.

The archival data clearly shows that between 1826 and 1834, there are an estimated 2100 Indian and some Chinese indentured labourers who were brought to work on the Mauritian sugar estates and in Port Louis. In addition, the experiences of several of the pre-2nd November 1834 indentured laborers have already been recorded and analyzed. It is through such an approach that we can gain a better understanding of the complexity of the long, gradual and difficult transition from slave labor to indentured labor. Equally important, it can also make us realize that these two historical periods overlapped one another and are not separate, as it has often been suggested in our country's historiography. The arrival of these 2100 indentured workers, which until recently has remained an untold story, should also be honored and remembered on each 2nd November. After all, they were the true trailblazers of a large scale migration of contractual laborers that forever altered the history, demography, economy and politics of the British Colonies.

Peggy Mohan may be considered a soul sister of Bahadur as she too, picks as her subject the story of the immigrant indenture. Her novel 'Jahajin' has at its heart a gifted linguist, much like the author herself, tracing the long forgotten route followed by her ancestor to a new life in a new land. This she knows—from Calcutta to Trinidad they went, the 'girmitiyas', crossing two oceans to reach their new homes on the other side of the world. 'Jahajin' illuminates for us the extraordinary experience of that journey—the train ride from Faizabad to Calcutta, the passage down the Hooghly, the three-month voyage around the stormy cape and up the Atlantic to Trinidad where the weary migrants settled into life as indentured laborers on the sugar estates. The narrator reconstructs this great adventure through the tales told to her by the hundred and ten-year-old Deeda, the wizened keeper of memories, who came to the Caribbean on the same ship as her great, great grandmother. Deeda speaks of leaving her village in Basti with her son and sailing across the seas to Chini-Dad, the land of sugar, and the life and friendships she built on the estate. Nested within the larger story is the dreamlike myth of Saranga, torn between her monkey lover and her prince. Deeda's story of a lost world captivates the younger woman, encouraging her to make the journey back across the 'kala pani'. Alive with compelling characters and the lilt of Trinidad Bhojpuri 'Jahajin' gathers up the various narratives of relocation and transformation across a century in a tale that is part history and part fairy tale.

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