

A Critical Review of Labour Diaspora and Reflections on Girit Stories

Eram Fatima¹, Research Scholar, Department of Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Integral University, Lucknow-226026, India

Mohammad Tariq^{2*}, Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies and Research, J. S. Hindu PG College, Amroha-244221, India

Hafiz Mohd.Arif³, Associate Professor, Department of Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Integral University, Lucknow-226026, India

Abstract

This paper aims to draw attention to the paradigm that dominates the Indian Labour Diaspora or Indentured Labour. This paradigm echoed in the 1830s and ground into the twentieth century, integrated with the most oppressive physiognomy of slavery and marginalized within the plantocracy system in British enclaves. This paper will ask questions and hope to find answers on the design of 'Neo Slavery,' more of a misnomer, far more complex, and variegated. The researcher intends to lend fresh insights into undocumented oral stories of individual Indian migrants addressing their circumscribed political, economic, and social domain and the silence of the chronicles. The paper analyzes the terms like Coolie, Bonded Labour, Girmityas, and Negritude that carry boundless burdens more as reclaimed terms, polysemic, and going beyond their deviant use by the imperialists. In the current inquiry, the modest goal is to explore and reinterpret the oral stories, interviews of the garments, or stories told by their family members on the Youtube Channel, thus giving it a written form. The stories narrated are fragmented where the focus is not only on the voice of the subaltern who conveys their challenging experiences on the plantations but also on life in doldrums in general and punishment met in the hands of the dominant groups. This provides a convincing voice to the plight and colonial history of the migrants in the bygone era of the nineteenth century and thereon. The seminal findings of this paper will be 'the Unchronicled Saga of Girit' along with the need and growing awareness of preservation and access to archived heritage worldwide. The report is based on interpretative, exploratory, and critical analysis.

Keywords: Indentured, Plantocracy, Neo-Slavery, Unchronicled, Girmityas, Coolie, Negritude, Migrants, Bonded Labour, Heritage.

Girit is a global story. A story, where fingerprint led to a bizarre world, liberty was lost in transcription where misinformation was widespread. Surprisingly, the word girit does not reflect in the dictionary. This reinforces that their story is an 'untold' one that involved millions of people over 90 years, yet it is commonly not known. Girit is an agreement in the form of a contract between the people of South Asia who had signed in an incomprehensible language and terms. Such people were called girmityas. The word 'slavery' is commonplace, but not many are aware of the term 'indentured labor.' Can the term 'indenture' be confronted as a form of slavery that is civilized? In the article "Re-conceptualizing the new system of slavery" (2012), Richard Allen stresses on conceptual problems faced in indentured studies:

Coming to grips with such questions requires us to attempt to reconstruct the world view of employers and colonial authorities and often indentured immigrants themselves. The subaltern voices often remain unheard even though, as Marina Carter (1996) has demonstrated, they can be recovered, albeit perhaps not without difficulty or as entirely as we would like, by carefully reading immigrant dispositions, letters, and petitions (235).

Slavery was abolished in 1833 by the Parliament of the UK throughout most of the British Empire. However, plantation owners had already figured out a new way of exploitation. As soon as slavery ended, the British and European imperialists formulated a system of indentured labor or servitude to source cheap labor. The indentures were derogatorily labeled Coolies, Bonded Labour,

Negritude, Girmityas who worked on the plantations replacing the formerly enslaved people under the banner of 'neo slavery' and euphemistically termed 'indentured laborer.' They were no different from enslaved people. I believed that the British had a severe craving for sugar. They used it extensively in various food products. The plantations of sugarcane, cotton, rubber, Cocoa, etc., were British-owned.

Mauritian and French Poet Khal Torabully coined the term 'Coolitude' to emphasize the interaction of cultures of India and China, coolie diaspora, especially in Mauritius, and other similar forms of migrations. This term has been used more as an offensive term. Khal Torabully writes about 'Coolitude' in his book of poetry *Cale d'Étoiles: Coolitude* (which was translated in English as *Cargo Hold of Stars* (2021)) to "lay the first stone of my memory among all memories, my language among all tongues, my share of the unknown that numerous bodies and numerous stories have lodged over time in my genes and my islands" (10). Thus, Coolitude becomes a symbol of cultural memory for him, a collective memory that encompasses time and place. The desire for creativity evokes, rearticulates, and reconstructs newly constituted expressions of national identity and Indianness. Khal Torabully addresses and creates a stir in the archives as being 'silent.' Though he tried to re-define the word beyond its mental, religious, cultural, and linguistic definitions symbolizing to err incessantly while in the margins. The word 'Coolitude' emerged as archipelagic oceanography, a dramatic development in the historical narratives applied to a broader perspective of cultural expression of Indian migrations. 'Coolitude' owes its digressive impact to movements, namely creolite and negritude.

The word 'Coolie' has been derived from the Tamil language in which 'kuli' refers to wages with its dictionary definition as being a "hired laborer." In the Indian context, coolie is a person who carries baggage. Colloquially : baggage of colonialism. 'Coolie', i.e. lay bare a barbed edge, a shattered bottle lifted in threat or ricochets down the muddy lanes far more complexed, turned into salutations which are intimidating yet affectionate and harmonious symbolic of shared onsets. The whole concept of the word belongs to those who use it and why. A word like 'Coolie', which is distorted and has lost its contextual essence is because of the power of the colonizers; the autocrats have been arbitrary,

dictatorial, absolute who had the liberty to alter the identity, name, or misname anyone carrying the burdens of imperialism, slipping into progressive haunting 'silences.' Khal Torabully contextualize on the contrary that the word 'coolie' signifies a far broader range of expression about cultures. He asserts that "Coolie symbolizes... the possibility of building a composite identity, one both free of specific ethnic identifications yet simultaneously emblematic of the cultural exclusivity intimated through the process of creolization" (Carter and Torabully 144).

Aimé Césaire coined the term 'negritude' that replicated the period 'Coolitude'. These terms are emblems of bondage, insulting sobriquets in indentureship studies and realms. Black writers negated this term in the 1960s as it signified too much of blackness and could not define Africanness that aimed to liberate the black Africans. This led to a renaissance of the negritude movement. Benjamin Rush, Russian American physician, calls the term disease of the rhetoric's or a form of milder leprosy, and its cure was to turn 'white.' Hence the term was used more in a derogatory and pejorative sense. Shailja Patel, a Kenyan poet, political activist, and artist, in her book *Migritude* (2008), claims to have borrowed the book's framework from the term 'negritude.' Migritude is characterized by hard work, a way of life and is not just a mere word. It calls for a world that has a voice, a viewpoint, a space that is powerful, unique, and self-defined, where the migrant inhabits and resides. The question here is whether being a migrant is more important than whether they have assimilated or belong to the place of origin. Artist and scholars in the new generation have altered their approach to 'Coolitude' more as a realization of their academic and creative pursuits.

The word 'bonded laborer' is forced labor akin to slavery. The word 'bonded' in the Oxford English Dictionary means "put into bond where bond means fetter or imprisonment or agreement that binds one who pledges it." 'Laborer' means working with either mind or performing physical or mental labor. Thus it is a system, analogous to the exploitation of the bondman (the weak) by the bond master (the powerful). Krishna Iyer, in the book *Social Justice and Labour Jurisprudence* (2007), calls it "quasi slavery." This system was perpetuated as a bonded labor system, and bonded laborers flourished in varied regions of the world with different names.

The indentured Indian laborers and their stories are the most gut-wrenching anecdotes with their inception in the nineteenth century. The term 'indenture' means a contract a person enters into, to work for a fixed term. According to this contract or agreement, a labor's return, work hours, wage, medical remunerations, and housing were specified. This agreement seemed fair at the surface but was one of deceit and malignant objectives.

All the above terms replicate under intellectual deconstruction with a pioneering discourse on indenture. The indentured labor system is a complex theory of firm, strong, troubled, historic negotiations with intercultural insight and transnationalism with diversity, hybridity, creolization, post-colonial oppressions, and indigenous aristocracy, consolidated under not-so-recognized nomenclature.

David Dabydeen, a Guyanese author and academician whose great grandfather was indentured labor in British Guiana, interviews a ninety-year-old elderly girmitya lady whose name is not revealed on a YouTube channel. The response given by her is overwhelming. She's the last surviving witness and a bound coolie, born in India and grew up in Guiana. Her father was a cane cutter in Guiana. She narrates the incident of one of the days when she had bundled up the cane trash on her back. She could then dig up the earth with a hoe, where big men would wrap the cane bundles and load them into the punt. She could see white men and run back home. According to her, white men were shooting people, and in turmoil, people were instructed: "don't go this way, don't go that way... peep around, watch around and wait for a safe time to go home" ("Old Indian" 00:04:14). Sometimes people were successful in hiding and reaching home safely. They had procured a chain from an old clock and made a padlock to secure the door. They would peep by the hole. The woman further narrated that six of her children died: with belly aches and cramps and one child with a wound around the leg. In her words, there are no records of what she went through and how her children died. The old Indian lady continued to give her interview to David Dabydeen on YouTube Channel and said, "I beg God, night and day. I said, God, why did you send me into this world?" She lost her parents too. "I bought my kids up well, but I never had any good to give them, and you took them from me" (00:04:14).

According to Rajendra Prasad, an author from the Fijian Indian community, in his article "Banished and Excluded: The *Girimit* of Fiji" (2015), which was published in Himāl Sounthasia magazine in a web-exclusive series, "Diaspora: Southasia Abroad" (2014) mentions a story of girmitya woman, Naraini, on 22 August 1910 who was given the work of shattering stones on tramline 'Sigotoka' with a hammer six days post her childbirth. It looked as if she could not cope with the grievous task. Harold Bloomfield, the overseer, caught hold of her with her hair and brutally smashed her face on the scattered stones. She was intensely wounded, later turned insane, and consequently extradited to India. The overseer, Harold Bloomfield, though charged, escaped castigation ("Banished and Excluded" Prasad).

Karen Dass chats in a video clip with the ninety-seven-year-old son, an indentured labor Mr. Ranjit Ramsingh or "Pa" in Chaguanas, Trinidad. He remembered his parents coming from India to sift sugar and ended up being forced to work as indentured servants. They faced trials of everyday life and had to work hard to survive. Mr. Ranjit, in the video, renders his parent's story, which was uploaded on YouTube Channel (2021) "they used to plant rice, cut cane, make syrup and sugar.... 40 yards, 50 cents" ("Ancestral Connection" 00:17:38).

The commentary of "Untold Woes" of Bibi Zuhoorun, an Indian female indentured labor in Mauritius in the nineteenth century, offers rare insight into early migration by testifying before the committee appointed by the Supreme Government of India in 1835 to enquire into the abuses alleged to exist in exporting Indian laborers to other countries. Like many coolies coming to Mauritius, her story showcased deception, ill-treatment, and injustices. She was born in Calcutta and was forced by a recruiter to sail to Mauritius for work. In Mauritius, she was recruited by a French doctor, Boileau, and his family. Her Mauritian experience was narrated in an inquiry committee officially set up to investigate offences in the indentured trade. Bibi Zuhoorun describes in a video clip uploaded by AFM media (2021): "I had an allowance of rice served out to me, three small pots full for seven days, every Sunday a little dhal and a little ghee. No fish, turmeric, no tamarind, nothing put down in the agreement". She testified that her employer was an evil man. When she objected to working as a sweeper, her master

said, "I will make you my mistress. I refused and three times made complaints to the police" ("Untold Woes" 00:03:39). Her new piece of wage was refused. She was beaten, slapped, and kicked, and on one occasion, her master ran a needle into her breast. It drew blood. Bibi Zuhoorun was put in the house of corrections once, and that was because she refused to work. She further says in hopeless anger, "if I were to starve and could not live by begging, I would rather die in the street than go back to Mauritius. It's a country of slaves" ("Untold Woes" 00:03:39). It was between 1834 and 1930, half a million indentured immigrants arrived in Mauritius. The last ship carrying coolies arrived in Mauritius in 1924, the year in which this practice was abolished. "The Protest Songs of East Indian in British Guiana" was published in The Journal of American Folklore laments:

...listen, oh Indian, listen to the story of us émigrés, The émigrés who constantly cry, tears flowing from their eyes. When we left the ports of Calcutta and Bombay. Brother left sister, and mother left daughter. In deep love of the mother country, we cried; water flowed from our eyes... Painful is our story; choking is our voices (Vatuk 255).

Migration in the form of indenture has shaped the nature of the globe profoundly. In the work *Understanding Migration: Curriculum Resources for the Classroom* (2011), a collaborative work by Hemispheres, The International Outreach Consortium at the University of Texas at Austin emphasizes that in the present time, the number of people who migrate for work has doubled to 191 million people in 2005. Today migration pertains to 'human capital,' the 'push and pulls' factors. Migration is looked upon more as an individual factor, a rational decision of family members to maximize earnings and income and minimize risk factors. Political and social factors can be seen as compelling emigrants 'pushing' from homes and 'pulling' to their desired destinations.

The Indian indenture system that was British-led was finally given closure in 1917 due to constraints from Indian nationalists, dwindling profits more than altruistic concerns. The Indian labor indenture studies leave us with distorted, incomplete comprehension of the labor experiences. After using non-traditional sources like interviews and oral commentaries through videos, the researcher can conclude that the indenture labor stories and their

historiographical data have been neglected for most of the world. The labor studies and indenture remains mired and in a state of contextual recession. Only in recent times have attempts been made to study indentured migrants under the new system with a natural tendency to revolutionize the slave studies while discerning this population as separate entities compared to other communities where these men, women, and children were caught in the plantation world.

The various terminologies on labor migrants like 'Bonded Labour,' 'Coolie,' 'Negritude,' and *Girmitiyas* lead to the same reminder of a painful and troubled past and homogenizes the experience of indentures in different parts of the world. These terms provide a far-reaching coherence to the indentured laborers. The plantations and ships are taken as emerging tropes in post-indenture identity formation in academic discourse, showcasing a dangerous middle path, indicating a commemoration of arrival, and signifying a powerful metaphor for constructing newer life and identities in labor diaspora.

Apravasi Ghat in Mauritius is a heritage site where Indian indenture first set its foot from India. It symbolizes human triumph against all odds and stands as a backdrop of endurance, fortitude, and strength. It is a very productive initiative that will throw light on the 'Slave Route Project' and memories of sufferings and traumas endured by more than four lakhs of Indian indenture, including women and children. The aim is to seek a brighter future in the modern immigration system and recognize the heritage of the indentured labor system. This set an example to create a global network of institutions where migrants can unite on a common platform to disseminate all information and knowledge on indentured culture, history, and its descendants, to lend a hand in nation building. The government of various countries must plunge into the task of preserving heritage sites and establishing a Documentation Center on indentured labor migration worldwide.

The surviving indentured and their ten million descendants in the twenty-first century need recognition, and a voice to live, contemplate, and scuffle in the present to bond with the citizens of their home countries. The citizens, in return, must support a lending hand, remember their vivid and complex history, and engage with indentured

diaspora, thinkers, scholars, intellectuals, and policymakers through special conferences and cultural events/activities celebrating their girmitiya history as well as achievements. The *girmitiya* or the Indian indentured are to be identified as the torchbearers of Indian tradition and culture who have contributed significantly to the assimilation of Indian culture into their national ideology and ethics.

References:

- Allen, Richard B. "Re-Conceptualizing the 'New System of Slavery.'" *Man n India*, vol. 92, no. 2, April 2012, p. 235.
- Bahadur, Gaiutra. *Coolie Women: The Odyssey of Indenture*. The University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Babu, Sharath, and Rashmi Shetty. *Social Justice and Labour Jurisprudence: Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer's Contributions*. Ist edition, Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd., 3 May 2007.
- Dabydeen, David. *Coolie Odyssey*. Hansib Publishing Limited, London, 1988.
- Epigraph from Tulsi Das. *Sri Ramcharitmanas: The Manasa Lake Brimming Over with the Exploits of Sri Rama*. Geeta Press, Gorakhpur, 2004, p. 680.
- Interview by David Dabydeen. "Old Indian-Guyanese Woman Talks about Indentured Servitude under British Empire." *YouTube*, uploaded by Raja Vijay Chandra, 15 August 2017.
- Kumar, Ashutosh. *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. Routledge, London, 2007.
- Prasad, Rajendra. *Tears in Paradise: Suffering and Struggles of Indians in Fiji, 1879-2004*. Glad Publishers, 28 October 2014.
- . "Banished and Excluded: The Girmit of Fiji." *Diaspora: Southasia Abroad*, vol. 27, no. 4, Himāl Southasian Publications, 02 January 2015.
- Patel, Shailja. *Migritude*. Kaya Productions, U.S., 30 November 2010.
- Rai, Satish C. "In Exile at Home- A Fiji- Indian Story." The University of Western Sidney, May 2010.
- Shanaaz, Mohammad. "Reimagining the Aapravasi Ghat: Khal Torabully's Poetry and the Indentured Diaspora." *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2021, pp. 118-143.
- Torabully, Khal. *Cargo Hold of Stars: Coolitude*. Translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson, Seagull Books, London, New York, and Calcutta.
- Torabully, Khal, and Marina Carter, editors. *Coolitude 2, an Anthology: 31 Years of Sign Crossing in Indenture*. Marina Carter and Khal Torabully Publishers, 2021, p. 144.
- Tinker, Hugh Russell. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1820-1920*. Oxford University Press, London, 1974.
- "Untold: The Woes of an Indian Indentured Labor in Mauritius in the 19th Century". *YouTube*, uploaded by AFM media, 16 February 2021.
- Vatuk, Ved Prakash. "Protest Songs of East Indian in British Guiana". *The journal of American Folklore*, vol. 77, no. 305 (July-Sep.; 164) American Folklore Society, pp. 220-235.
- "97-year-old Son of Indentured Labourer". "Episode Ancestral Connections," *YouTube*, uploaded by Karen Dass, 29 December 2021.