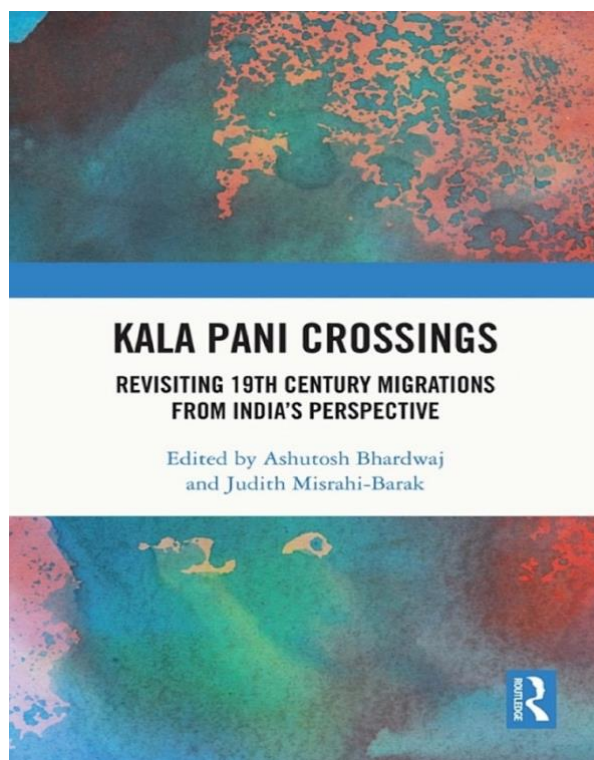


Ashutosh Bhardwaj and Judith Misrahi-Barak, eds. *Kala Pani Crossings: Revisiting 19th Century Migrations from India's Perspective*. London: Routledge, 2022. i-xiv+227 pp. ISBN: 978-0-367-76088-5.



This volume addresses issues related to a largely ignored historical phenomenon – the pre-independence indentured Indian diaspora. Mainstream history of the nation-state has been mostly insensitive to the struggles and lived experiences of socio-economically marginalised indentured labourers who were forced to leave British India for foreign shores between the 1830s and 1920 to work on colonial plantations across the Indian Ocean. The lived experiences of these migrants went largely unrecorded. Temporally, these transoceanic migrations coincided with a politically charged period of the history of the Indian nationalist movement; and the segment of Indian history that was unfolding offshore involving the socially marginalised, slipped into oblivion.

In the Introduction, the editors outline multiple connotations of the term *kala pani* and focus on the history of the indentured labour system. It features an

exhaustive literature review, referencing works on indentured historiography. Various literary representations of indenture are also included, listing contributions from the 20th and 21st centuries, simultaneously identifying significant divergences in thematic foci that differentiate works emerging from various temporal, spatial, and generational origins. They end their discussion by linking the indentured migrations to those of 1947 that were occasioned by Partition and the comparatively recent COVID-19 migrations, poignantly commenting on the role played by economic deprivation, social hardships, and political victimisation in all three exoduses. The chapters in the volume are grouped into three sections, titled “Shifting the Gaze,” “Across the Oceans,” and “Re-imagining the *Kala pani* Narrative” respectively, and look at the phenomenon of indentured crossings from different perspectives.

“Shifting the Gaze” contains India-centric chapters. While the indentured diaspora flourished in the nations where the *coolies* settled, their own home country has been mysteriously silent about the history of their exodus. The word ‘shift’ in the section heading targets this silence. In the opening chapter, Vijay Mishra focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of the indentured discourse. Apart from reading its usual pivotal points such as the act of *kala pani* crossing itself, the role of the *arkatis* or recruiters, Mishra also analyses the spatial configuration of the Garden Reach port (Calcutta, the point of departure of the indentured *coolies*) as a liminal zone that challenged the established caste-class hierarchies. He reads the port as a zone of free-mixing and ties it up to “the condition of “*douglabood*” (27) or miscegenation, which was interestingly initiated even before the *coolies* had left the Indian shores.

In the second chapter, Nandini Dhar addresses questions of historical non-representation and academic non-engagement with the *coolie* diaspora, as well as the role of memory in reconstructing *kala pani* narratives. Dhar sees that as a mode of accessing personal histories, “an exclusive analytical focus on memory keeps the discussion on the issue bound to questions of the possibility or impossibility of recovery” (45). She proposes ‘labour’ studies as an alternative mode that emphasises the economic backdrop of indenture in a sustained manner by studying the intertwining of capital and labour.

Ritu Tyagi focuses on the intersecting histories of converging routes, of the opium trade and indentured migrations, both contributing in a major way to the colonial economy of 19th century travels across the Indian Ocean. She also discusses the hill *coolies* belonging to various tribes from Jharkhand, who were not officially registered in the port before embarking on the journey “thus leaving no trace of these people in the colonial records” (57). Kanchan Dhar addresses the question of deprivation of agency to include women and studies the various forces at work that enabled their crossing of the *kala pani*, either voluntarily or under compulsion. Suparna Sengupta explores the manufacturing and circulation of notions of aberration, deviance, and exclusion in popular psyche with regards

to *kala pani* crossing. She maintains that this was strategically done to ensure a decisive grip over the legal system in colonial India and how colonial authorities manipulated Indian religious scriptures to maximise the sense of fear associated with sea journeys.

The articles in the second section, "Across the Oceans," read different types of religious and cultural customs and performances emerging in the diaspora space. These social performances constitute a mode of acknowledging and connecting to a geographically distant, now inaccessible ancestral past. Joshil K Abraham analyses how class and identity markers of the original home country and culture are carried into the indentured space and continue to have their own afterlives in the psyche of the descendants of indenture. He reads V.S. Naipaul in this context to navigate "the precarious nature of caste and religion... [which] remains repressed in the unconscious" (99). Vijaya Rao studies how the indentured labourers from Tamil Nadu kept alive their ancestral Indian religious traditions of *Baradam/Paratam* which is a ritual of reciting the Tamil *Mahabharata*. It was through the performance of the Draupadi cult, selected scenes from the epic, that cultural specificities were maintained. Ridhima Tewari tackles female victimhood engendered by indentured crossings, economic hardships in the lives of the 'abandoned wives' who were left behind. This led to the emergence of a new cultural mode, the *Bidesia* songs, capturing these women's sorrows and difficulties. Reduced to abject poverty, they were forced to seek labour-intensive work in India. Kumari Issur reads cultural representations further to include depictions of Mauritius and indentured history in Bollywood cinema. Geotopographically and spatially, Mauritius amounts to the representation of the "decadent otherness" (143) and Issur reads multiple Bollywood movies to examine the complexities generated by this homeland/diaspora-space dyad between India and Mauritius.

The final section, "Re-imagining the *Kala pani* Narrative," groups chapters that read literary representations about the indentured diaspora. These texts attempt imaginative reconstruction of histories, journeys and lived experiences of the original *coolie* ancestors through looking back. The 're-imagining' emphasises various aspects of the retrieval efforts. Kusum Aggarwal closely studies the figure of Totaram Sanadhya from his autobiographical accounts namely, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands* and *The Story of the Haunted Line*. Though he was an indentured labourer, he exercised considerable agency within the system of indenture by embracing the role of a "cultural intermediary...[awakening] among the illiterate coolies, haunted by the trauma of dislocation, the hope of a new kind of rootedness and homeliness" (155). Many chapters in this section actively engage with the various aspects of history and historiography of the *kala pani* discourse.

Himadri Lahiri reads two fictional works by Ramabai Espinet and Gaiutra Bahadur and one 'factional' account by Totaram Sanadhya, approaching

history from multiple angles. He asserts that history writing stands to benefit from both fact-based and fictional accounts of indenture, as “history indeed needs fiction in order to excavate [the] hidden stories” (177) and studying both strands simultaneously will “add new dimensions to India Studies” (177). Arnab Kumar Sinha analyses the efficacy of various methods used by researchers to reconstruct events and life-histories through his reading of Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) and Peggy Mohan’s *Jahajin* (2007). Starting the discussion with the role of the historian, he comments on the significance of fictional representations and research as valid processes of historical reconstruction, eventually connecting to Foucault’s and Derrida’s notions of archive, archival research, and knowledge creation. Praveen Mirdha focuses on the woman question in indenture, through her reading of Ramabai Espinet and Gaiutra Bahadur’s texts. The role of geographical dislocation in carving specifically female experiences and how those experiences in turn shape the female subjectivities of their descendants are some of the questions tackled in the chapter. Udit Banerjee reads Olive Senior’s “Arrival of Snake-Woman” (1989) and her chapter is again thematically linked to Mirdha’s chapter in its examination of the female question. The Indian coolie-woman in Jamaica who is othered by the gazes of Jamaican as well as White Christian men, is seen simultaneously as a threat and as sexually desirable.

Through these fourteen chapters, the volume highlights the dynamic nature of the *kala pani* discourse which offers multiple entry-points towards productive academic engagement. It serves as a timely offering, drawing our attention to a largely forgotten part of our history, offering a scope for positive engagement which can dispel the official amnesia.

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