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KALA PANI CROSSINGS, GENDER AND DIASPORA

INDIAN PERSPECTIVES

Edited by

Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao



The book under review is a companion volume to *Kala Pani Crossings: Revisiting 19th Century Migrations from India's Perspective* (2022) co-edited by Ashutosh Bhardwaj and Judith Misrahi-Barak. While the first book explored the indentured diaspora from multiple perspectives, its sequel is a more focussed one. The present volume investigates the migration of women 'coolies' to different colonial plantation economies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from fresh points of view. Both the volumes approach the displacement of socially marginalised migrants from the standpoint of India where knowledge about this colonial diaspora is limited. The two volumes are, therefore, considered significant contributions in the field of indenture diaspora studies.

The lack of knowledge about the indentured migrants, also called ‘girmitiyas’ and ‘coolies,’ is surprising because the volume of migration was noteworthy and the crossing of the *Kala Pani* itself, a phenomenal event in the history of India and an act of inhibition for the Hindus, was really a transgressive feat if looked at in the contemporary socio-cultural context. It also brought about a revolutionary change in the lifestyle and worldview of these migrants. Their journey together in ships and living closely in the plantations created a largely egalitarian society free of caste and religious prejudices. Gender also played a crucial role in the entire process of migration, settlement, and the preservation of cultural norms. Since there was a severe imbalance in the male-female ratio in indentured communities and women were wage-earners and thus economically independent, the female ‘coolies’ enjoyed greater freedom in choosing as well as deserting their partners. All these triggered male jealousies and led to much violence and even murders. Thus, a critical exploration of the role of gender in the migration of the ‘coolie’ diaspora demands more attention from scholars. This volume adequately addresses this aspect.

The introduction critically contextualises women’s migration to plantation colonies, discursively explores its historical significance, and sensitises the readers to the glaring absence of women’s role in major historiographies. It explores women’s experiences of the navigation of transoceanic journeys and foregrounds the issue of their agency and empowerment. It recognises the significance of the emergence of new areas of studies such as ‘post-indenture feminisms’ and acknowledges the ‘connected’ nature of these studies that can eventually make meaningful dialogues possible.

The first section of this book has three chapters. In the first chapter, Mala Pandurang suggests pedagogical departures from traditional frames of reference and advocates for the adoption of a ‘south-south framework’ and comparative readings to foster more inclusive and interconnected perspectives. Her comprehensive analysis of diaspora studies in Indian universities, using various syllabi as case studies, is impressive. In the second chapter, Himadri Lahiri, taking his cue from Derek Walcott’s poem “The Sea Is History,” analyses Peggy Mohan’s *Jabajin* and Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* and shows the transformative nature of women’s sea journeys. Drawing on Heideggerian concept of ‘dwelling,’ the author argues that the ‘coolies’ considered the ship not an inanimate object but a dynamic dwelling place having a built infrastructure. This theoretically rich chapter utilises aspects of ‘Ocean as Method’ discourse resorted to by critics such as Isabel Hofmeyr, Renisa Marwani, and Dilip K. Menon. In the third chapter of the section, Amba Pande provides a brief statistical and historical analysis of the indenture system, analyses the factors that

made the system run so long, and then moves on to enquire how women lived in the colonies. She examines problematic nature of women migrants' appropriation in Indian nationalist and colonial discourses, leading to the eventual silencing of their voices.

The second section of the book extensively explores how women navigated their evolving gender roles in response to the opportunities offered by their new diasporic settings. Suparna Sengupta's chapter "'Intimate Violence' and the 'Sexual Contract': Female Convicts and Marriage 'System' in Andamans, c.1860-c. 1920" stands out as an important document as it studies the lives of women prisoners in the nineteenth-century penal colony Andamans. The exploration of the Andamans is a unique form of 'Kala Pani Crossing,' characterised by similar elements of transgressiveness and involuntary migration, albeit in a different context. She scrutinises various civil, criminal jurisdiction, and administrative dictums concerning issues such as marriage and prostitution. In the next chapter, Auritra Munshi analyses female characters in specific works of fiction, examining the dynamics of relationships between men and women during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Munshi underscores how women during this period responded to the prospect of achieving "economic self-sufficiency" and navigating "gender roles and patriarchal structures" in the diasporic space (83). Arnab Kumar Sinha's exploration of same-sex relationships and queer desire in the final chapter of this section offers a compelling perspective on the nuanced nature of gender issues. Through an analysis of Shani Mootoo's fiction *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, Sinha delves into the complex interplay between a community's religious expectations and an individual's queer identity and desires. This discussion not only recognises the importance of addressing same-sex relationships but also broadens the discourse on gender complexity in varied social contexts.

The third section extensively examines the silencing of indentured women in mainstream history and explores alternative approaches to address these gaps. Expanding its scope, it focuses on the French-speaking islands of the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. Vijaya Rao examines a gap in the study of Reunionese literature related to the theme of return. She specifically studies Sully Santa Govindin's work *La Tragédie d'Appasamy* (2007) and K. Madavane's unpublished *Rue des Tisserands, Pondichéry*. Exploring the concept of the archive and the notion of decoloniality, this chapter explores how these returnees rediscover their humanity and reclaim their dignity, thereby countering trends found in dominant narratives. In the next chapter, Jenni Balasubramanian raises a critical point about the absence of migration narratives from Pondicherry to Reunion even though "Pondicherry and Reunion have a shared history" (129).

She foregrounds the need of reevaluating the colonial texts and explores how women, though confined to the space of domesticity, dare to “cross the line” which makes them “strong.” In her exploration of select poems of some Indo-Caribbean women, Praveen Mirdha investigates how they depict the untold tragedies and triumphs of the coolie community. Through her analysis of poetics and aesthetics, Mirdha offers valuable insights into the often-neglected role of women as ‘workers’ in the plantation economy. In an interesting chapter, Gargi Dutta argues that ‘selective archiving’ and ‘silence of [mainstream] history’ do not reveal a comprehensive picture of the migrants. To reveal the ‘other’ realities, she foregrounds micronarratives of deviant women characters in Peggy Mohan’s *Jahajin*, Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge*, and Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*. The ‘visions, trances, and other abnormalities’ of these eccentric characters reveal unique aspects of indenture diaspora.

In the penultimate section, Ridhima Tewari studies Bhojpuri cinema in the context of Kala Pani crossing. Drawing on the dichotomies of ‘spiritual/material, home/world, inside/outside’ that scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Suruchi Thapar provided, Tewari examines how Bhojpuri cinema constructs a masculine narrative of its *bidesiya*, ‘the popular figure of the Bhojpuri male who travels far from home’ and deals with the women question within (196). In the next chapter Stephanos Stephanides, quite uniquely moving across time and space, weaves together account of his own life story and experiences from 1970s-1980s Guyana. This chapter combines both academic and creative elements.

The volume also includes eight interviews of novelists, poets, and historians who bear the inherited ‘girmitiya’ legacy of their ancestors. This section is as interesting as they are valuable for readers and research scholars. It contains conversations with Brij V. Lal, Ananda Devi, Shani Mootoo, Peggy Mohan, Cyril Dabydeen, Davina Ittoo, Ramabai Espinet, and Khal Torabully. The interviews feature a wide array of discussions on various aspects such as personal/familial involvement in the experience of the exodus, shifting understanding of the meaning of home/land, the role of myths in the lives of the authors/communities, their ‘discovery’ of real India and alienation from the ancestral homeland, appropriateness of terms like ‘coolie,’ ‘coolitude,’ ‘kala pani’ and so on. The conversation also revolves round literary and critical works of the individual authors. Along with the first twelve scholarly papers, the interviews featuring first-person narratives, personal reflections and critical comments provide a fulfilling and comprehensive conclusion to the volume. The editors of the present volume have performed an impressive task by curating articles of high quality on socio-cultural issues and literary-film texts, alongside valuable

interviews. This meticulous selection showcases their intellectual investment in the area and opens up new avenues for conversations, fresh perspectives, and future discourses.

Sarmistha Mondal

PhD Candidate

Department of English, Bankura University

West Bengal, India

Email: sarmistham2021@gmail.com