

Indian Diasporic Formations in Guyana: Reading *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*

Murari Prasad,¹
D.S. College, Katihar, India

Binod K. Jha,²
A.N.S. College, Magdah University, India

Article Received: 23 May 2016; Article Accepted: 21 October 2016

Abstract

This paper deals with Gaiutra Bahadur's recently published non-fiction narrative, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013). As a sequel to the end of slavery in the 1830s, the system of indenture, though equally exploitative, served as the source of voluntary migrant labour to manage the plantation economies in far-flung British colonies. In reconstructing the traumatic experience of her great-grandmother as an indentured worker uprooted from her homeland in 1903, Bahadur has meticulously researched archival sources from which we can extrapolate the adaptive persistence of nearly 240,000 Indians who migrated to Guyana between 1838 and 1917 and became the vanguard of the Indian diaspora there.

We propose to discuss the key characteristics of diasporas as well as the typological criteria of existing diaspora models. For this paper we adopt the theoretical conceptualisation of Susan Koshy's term "neo-diaspora" because it fits well with the Indian case in Guyana. The Indian relation to homeland and myths of return are much more affected by ambiguity and stress than the classical model of diaspora posits. We examine Bahadur's empirical depiction and gendered articulations of the indentured Indian women, braving brutalities and, at the same time, recreating a cultural dynamic in the domestic sphere as well as shaping an incipient home in an alien regime. The paper will also probe the culturally reflexive data excavated by Bahadur to postulate that the Indian female immigrants, despite remaining fettered and embattled, contributed to family making and negotiated creolised change for cultural reproduction conducive to a distinct diasporic formation.

¹ Murari Prasad teaches English in the Postgraduate Department of D.S. College, Katihar, India. He has edited critical anthologies on Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, as well as on Arundhati Roy and Post-Rushdie Indian novels in English. He has also authored a string of book chapters and dictionary entries on postcolonial Indian writers. Email: prasadm123@rediffmail.com.

² Binod K. Jha teaches Political Science at A.N.S. College, Barh (Magadh University), Patna, India. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on Regionalism in Asia at Delhi University, Delhi and is currently writing a post-doctoral monograph on "Indians in Mauritius: Diversity and Transformation in a Historical South Asian Diaspora." Email: bkjpatna@gmail.com.

Keywords

Slavery, indenture, coolie, diaspora, India, Guyana

From the perspective of viewing diaspora as demographic displacement – voluntary or forced – and the migrants’ eventual settlement in their host countries, the case of India is a striking phenomenon because of its prolonged colonisation and the attendant political and economic consequences, which were of staggering dimension for its people. The Empire engineered population movements to fortify its fragile colonial tentacles and paramount economic interests. As a result of the unprecedented population dispersal from India since its colonisation, the Indian diaspora has become one of the largest – almost global – in its spread. “If the black diaspora emerged from the transportation of slave labour,” says Susan Koshy, “the South Asian diaspora provided the sequel to that story by serving as the labour source for every variant of ‘voluntary’ labour that succeeded it and through which the economic transformations inaugurated by the end of slavery were managed” (3). With the official abolition of direct slavery in 1833, the supply of cheap labour to the sugar plantation in British colonies as far-flung as Mauritius and Fiji to East Africa and the Caribbean sharply declined. To run the ever-profitable plantation colonies with cheap labour, Indian peasants, wrenched from their village economies, were indentured to plantations as coolies, meaning menial workers. The word became a racial epithet unfairly applied to the indentured labourers whom the colonial government enlisted using the ploy of an optional form of recruitment. The transportation of coolies across oceans to work in the system of indenture after signing contracts and accepting the terms out of their choice was considered fair by the colonial authorities. In reality, the freedom was notional, in fact something of a misnomer, in that its terms were dictated by the colonial regime to the most vulnerable people of a subject nation.

In this paper, we propose to analyse the specific dispersal of indentured Indians, particularly the female workforce, and the resultant diasporic formations in British Guiana (the new nation of Guyana since 1966) as depicted by Gaiutra Bahadur in her non-fiction narrative, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013). The Guyanese-American journalist reveals the plight of variously distressed migrants choosing to work overseas in her deeply personal yet diligently researched narrative of what began as the story of her great-grandmother. Large-scale indentured migrations, including destitute women’s diasporic movements, were caused by the imperial penetration in colonised India, entrenched social injustice and agrarian hardships following frequent famines (24 in the last quarter of the 19th century, as Bahadur said in a *New York Times* interview with Max Bearak on November 21, 2013). The conceptual potential of Bahadur’s narrative is

substantially grounded in her critique of colonialism. In her reply to a question on the indentured servitude of Indians and the enslavement of Africans on American plantations, Bahadur says:

Overseers beat indentured servants, like the enslaved before them, with whips and canes. The women were subject to sexual abuse. They did the same work that the enslaved had done and lived in the same quarters they did. Abolitionists in England, and several magistrates at work in Guiana who had seen the system up close, called it a new form of slavery. And it was a system based on deception and exploitation. The indentured often didn't know what they were getting into; some were led to believe that they could return home to India for the weekend. There were even cases of outright kidnap. They were, however, paid. It was a pittance and planters often cheated them out of their daily wages, but they didn't work for free as slaves had. The indentured signed up for five years of work. Their contracts were often extended, because illegally low wages led them to become indebted to company stores and planters. (Bearak)

Ostensibly, the system of rustling up or recruiting voluntary labour was a contractual transaction but practically it was far from a flexible labour supply. As a variant of slavery it produced traumatic dispersals of population because voluntary labour supply couldn't have facilitated the colonial sway and sustained the Empire. Colonialism was obviously the impetus for the domestic abandonment that produced the indentured diaspora.

To clear the conceptual ground for the nature of diasporic formations in the broad historical context of displacement as depicted by Bahadur, it is relevant to turn to the salient reflections of some of the influential scholars in diaspora studies. William Safran's six-point model includes the following features of diaspora: dispersal from the original homeland; retention of collective memory, vision or myth of the original homeland; partial (never complete) assimilation in host society; idealised wish to return to original homeland; desirable commitment to restoration of homeland; and continually renewed linkages with homeland (83-84). The strong homeland orientation in Safran's typological criteria has been de-emphasised by several other analysts in the area of diaspora studies. Robin Cohen's study *Global Diasporas* (1997) modifies Safran's model by including voluntary movements as part of the diasporic dispersals although it retains the emphasis on homeland attachments among the characteristic features of diasporas. According to Khachig Tololyan, the founder and the editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, the semantic domain of diaspora may well extend to immigrants, expatriates, refugees and exiles as well as guest workers and overseas ethnic community (4-5). In Nicholas Van Hear's working definition for diaspora, features such as "dispersal from original homeland to two or

more places; movement between the homeland and the new host; and social, cultural or economic exchange between or among the diaspora community” (6) only are included. Interestingly, scholars like C. Markovits and Thomas Blom Hansen have questioned the relevance of the term diaspora in the Indian instance in view of the historically ongoing circulation, multiple demographic moves and transnational shifts and settlement of many overseas Indians. Their nostalgia for Indian roots or longing for a home is neatly encapsulated by Vijay Mishra’s phrase “diasporic imaginary” (1996). Its import is akin to Safran’s emphasis on the diaspora’s “ethno-communal consciousness or solidarity” by invoking “the homeland in one way or another” (84). However, given the characteristic features of voluntary or involuntary migration occurring under radically different political and historical conditions, there are problems with typological criteria or a definitional fiat for diasporic models. For instance, the forced-voluntary dichotomy in the case of indentured Indian subalterns shipped out to the far-flung plantation estates obscures the compelling push factor in diasporic movements.

This point has been noted by G.W. Brown in a recent analysis of the diaspora phenomenon. Although the characteristics of diasporic dispersal identified and underlined by Brown are substantially the same, he argues that the movement away from the homeland could be prompted by a forced migration with political causes or by the economic necessity of better employment. He further says that diasporic connections are enlivened by a sense of shared identity, and the nostalgia of the dispersed group for the ancestral homeland is most often triggered by the difficulty of integrating into the adoptive country. Another feature of diaspora that Brown emphasises is the way in which diasporic groups create a “trans-border ethnic identity” in which diasporas of a common ethnic identity that reside in different countries assemble shared notions of identification (72-73).

The entanglements of the deeply contested South Asian diasporic politics and the competing strategies and claims of belonging have been analysed by Susan Koshy. Koshy uses the term “neo-diaspora” (“to distinguish the old and new diasporas from South Asia from the diasporas of antiquity”) which captures the phenomenon of indentured emigration from India to the British Giana or the West Indies at large. She argues that the term “neo-diaspora foregrounds the internal diversity of the South Asian diaspora in the older and newer migration movements” (7). Critiquing the prevailing tenets of diaspora theory which recognises the strong homeland-diaspora nexus animated by the myth of return as its formative force, Koshy contends that “in the South Asian case the opposite can be just as true – a weak myth of return can co-exist with and, indeed, can foster a strong

diaspora” (7). With their diasporic consciousness tethered to two homelands, the issue of return in the case of Indian emigrants to the British Guiana has remained fraught with uncertainties and indecision during the post-indenture years. In this paper we adopt Koshy’s theoretical position on the South Asian diaspora and wish to emphasise that the traumatic dispersals of the indentured Indian labourers labelled as “coolies” by imperial bureaucrats in a dozen colonies across the globe, including British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Surinam, Mauritius and Fiji, resulted in a markedly specific diasporic formation, though each interspersed with varying local dynamics. More than a million coolies were ferried from India to colonised plantations around the world during eight decades beginning 1838. This significant demographic shift of Indians plucked from their natal origins formed the critically important vanguard of the emigrant workforce that has multiplied over the years with new propelling forces in the postcolonial and globalised world. The coolie tag was imposed on the migrant Indian workers during the indenture era regardless of their caste and occupational backgrounds. They were reduced to stock characters conforming to a fixed pattern and having stereotyped qualities. In the hierarchy on the sugar estates, they were held at the bottom, below the English, the Scottish and the Irish, as well as the locally born descendants of the African slaves and the people of mixed descent and free blacks. According to Bridget Brereton, “[t]hrough their economic and class position... would have categorized them [Indians] with the third tier, the differences between them and the descendants of ex-slaves were too great. In Trinidad, as in Guyana and Surinam, Indians constituted a fourth distinct tier in the social structure” (36). Typecast, mislabelled and degraded as such, they have continued to suffer the ethnic slur despite their economic mobility and occupational advancements. The distinctions based on the material, social, structural and cultural factors relegated Indians to the most powerless position of the fourth tier, situated symbolically outside the core of Guyanese society. However, recent generations of indentured Indians in Guyana and elsewhere have begun to declare *coolitude* with pride and wear the baggage of colonialism without any shame or sense of lowliness. In *Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*, which Torabully co-authored with Marina Carter, the reflexivity of the indentured labourers has been extensively studied and cogently assessed. As Ravindra K. Jain points out, the sense of the Indian diaspora’s de-territorialised sense of belonging is highlighted in this book:

Carter and Torabully cite David Northrop (1995) to highlight the fact that indentured Indian women did rise above the plantation camps in nineteenth-century Mauritius to reconstruct some kind of enduring family life. They used the resilience of their customs – culture and religion in particular – to successfully thwart androcentric attempts to subdue and

cow them down whether by White planters and overseers or by the Indian sirdars. Significantly, the ‘othering’ of the Indian in the face of a multi-cultural environment of White capitalist hegemony was successfully mediated by effective cultural resistance as becomes the perceptions of the coolies belonging to a long literate, religious and secular Indic civilization. The interface of the two civilizations, as between the Indic “self” and the multi-cultural ‘other,’ and vice versa, ushered in the processes of ‘coolitude.’ And the role of women in these processes deserves pointed recognition. (26)

Bahadur has retrieved the repressed history of indentured Indians, particularly the emigrant coolie women, in Guyana and explored the evidence of their adaptive persistence culminating in the formation of the Indo-Guyanese community – a community within the colonial society

The Indian presence in Demerara – the shorthand used by the British for the part of Guyana that they took from the Dutch early in the nineteenth century – began with the arrival of indentured immigrants there on May 5, 1838, primarily to work on the sugar plantations. It was the first colony in the West Indies to receive coolies. There had always been a labour shortage in the sugar industry and planters anticipated that the emancipation of enslaved Africans would whittle down the supply of plantation workers. That did not quite happen. Between 1838 and 1917, about 240,000 indentured labourers went to British Guiana, which had more extensive sugar plantations than many of the other colonies and also received far more workers or “bound coolies” in total than any other colony in the region. Bahadur extrapolates the tough odyssey of the coolie women – the silent, rarely written underside of indenture experience – from the excavated material marshalled in her narrative.

There was shortage of women in all sugar colonies. The first two ships to transport the recruits from Calcutta to the West Indies, *The Hesperus* and *The Whitby*, commissioned by Sir John Gladstone, the man who introduced Indian indentured workers into the Caribbean, arrived in Guiana on May 5, 1838 with 400 men and just fourteen women and seven girls. The gender proportion was better in Mauritius but there, too, by the end of 1842, only 1,014 women had arrived as indentured labourers against 25,076 men. Plantation promiscuity, radical collapse of the traditional sanctions against infidelity, and the frightfully meagre proportion of women led to widespread polyandry and rape, domestic violence and sexual chaos. Bahadur says that the increased quota settled at 40 per hundred and that twenty-nine per cent of every shipment had to be female. The last shipment of immigrants – consisting of 437 persons and originating from both Madras and Calcutta – arrived on April 18, 1917 aboard the S.S. Ganges formally terminating the

Indian indentureship system. However, the movement of recruits, though substantially reduced, ended only in 1928. About 400 immigrants were brought on contracts to work on the sugar plantations in 1921-1922 and several others also came as ordinary settlers.

The recruits experienced a life-altering trauma during their voyage. The breakdown of their familiar life-worlds from the caste-violating space of the embarkation depot to the ship's hold, and from the ship's hold to the plantation barracks, amounted to a traumatic metamorphosis. Bhikhu Parekh remarks on the "rites of passage" that the indentured coolies underwent:

From the very day they assembled at the port, they were huddled together; allocated work indiscriminately, shared facilities, ate the same food, slept together, and in general lost all visible signs of caste differentiation. Barracks on the plantation reinforced the trend. The migratory experience also generated the solidarity and weakened the sense of hierarchy. Most of the indentured Hindus belonged to low castes and had every reason to efface all traces of their social origin. In a new environment the caste had no occupational relevance either. For these and related reasons, the caste system weakened over time among the indentured Hindus. (126)

As traditional identities fracture, new solidarities are forged "out of a sense of subaltern companionship and togetherness... which would over time lay the foundations of a new, more egalitarian, more pragmatic and less protocol-driven culture," as Brij Lal, an Indo-Fijian academic, observes (Lal 50, qtd. in Rai and Pinkney 74). The internal diversity of the Indian diaspora melted away on the indenture vessels as new ties in breach of caste injunctions and hierarchically oriented understandings of work, religion and gender formed into an animating bond by which the migrants mitigated the hardships of displacement. The displaced workers internalised the ethical message emanating from Rama's 14-year banishment, as Vijay Mishra notes (1979), for their own moral and religious succour amidst adversities on plantations.

According to Lal, an influential diaspora-based Indian scholar, indenture exposed the workers to liberating opportunities and experience despite suffering and privation. Pitted against new challenges of adaptation, they could thwart acute penury and deprivation with adventure and fortitude. However, many indentured workers paid their own way back to India after completing five years of contract and did not stay on for a second term required for getting their free return passage. Archival accounts have it that 75,547 workers returned to India under the terms of their contract and those who survived among the remaining immigrants came to terms with their new identity and environment and chose to make Guyana their home. Kelvin Singh says that the legal status of indenture restricted the mobility of East

Indians and minimised their interaction with the wider society, thus ensuring a certain degree of social and spatial isolation:

The Indians did not at first view themselves, nor were they viewed by those who imported them or by other groups in the society, as permanent members of the society, but only as temporary migrants, related to the society in a segmental way, that is, as a part of the plantation economy.... In fact, the indentureship system operated within a legal framework that reduced to a minimum the possibilities of social contact with other groups outside the plantation. (33)

Since there was no institutional mechanism to facilitate or encourage social integration of the workers from varied circumstances and backgrounds, the Indian immigrants remained segregated from the wider island society. Indentured workers were largely recruited from the heavily-populated, Bhojpuri-speaking areas of present-day eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar and embarked at the emigration depot at Calcutta (now Kolkata). With their strong linguistic, demographic, cultural and religious bonds, they could grow and merge together over the years as an ethnically homogeneous and separate entity in Guyana.

A degree of miscegenation, nevertheless, was present owing to the short supply of women immigrants from India and as a result of Indians marrying or cohabiting with African women. The children produced from Afro-Indian sexual relationships are referred to as “douglas” (to mean “bastard” in Hindi) – a pejorative term in contrast to the domesticated and indigenised mixture connoted by creole. Today, it is estimated that there are 325,000 Indians, making up 43.5 per cent of the population in Guyana, which includes about 125,000 persons of mixed racial ancestry. Living and working conditions on the plantations would have made it difficult for the immigrants to maintain ethnic exclusivity. However, few relationships developed between former slaves and the Indians who replaced them – or between their descendants. Quoting Brereton, Viranjini Munasinghe says, “very few Indian men took black women as wives or mistresses,” a pattern corroborated by other scholars, which meant that there was serious competition among East Indian men for the few East Indian women on the island” (194-95). This point is also corroborated by the Colony’s sheriff in Guiana and a contemporary observer, Henry Kirke: “[I]t is the rarest thing in the world for an Indian to take up with a black woman. There is a mutual antipathy between the races” (263). Several reasons have been given by historians for the racial conflict between blacks and Indians. Some have pointed out that there were equal numbers of men and women in the Afro-Guyanese community and that black women hated Indian men for their alien language, unfamiliar food and

strange gods (Diptee 12); others are of the view that the coolie was far away from the British notions of civilisation internalised by many women of African descent (Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People* 180). Few black women lived on plantations and so the main reason for the lack of interaction or sexual separation between blacks and Indians, as Bahadur observes, was “residential segregation and mutual distrust” (90).

Indian immigrants chose to affirm their ethnicity as a complement to their national identity as Guyanese. In short, their legitimacy as Guyanese natives would rest on their unique ethnic status as Indians in the cosmopolitan nation of Guyana. The desire for ethnic consolidation became stronger as they were excluded from the term creole which meant anything and anybody native to the New World as a consequence of racial mixing. The category distinction between coolie used in relation to Indians and “Kirwal” (a Bhojpuri corruption of Creole), which was applied to all persons of African and European ancestry, militated against the formation of Afro-Indian solidarity in Guyana. The correlation between ethnicity and culture defined the collective identity of Indians in Guyana. This mutual dependence also explains why religion is a strong diacritic of identity maintenance and why cultural practices of hybrid nature gain special significance for the Indian diaspora. On the strength of their cultural persistence they did not totally convert to creolisation.

Religious performances and participation in syncretic cultural forms may be a combination of the spirit for celebration amidst alienation and desperation, an attempt by the embryonic diaspora to forge free space within the regulatory domain of colonial prescriptions, or an ensemble of cultural and expressive practices to beat the alienating drudgery of indenture and, at the same time, insulate their culture from creolisation. Ostensibly, the system of bonded servitude under the scheme of indenture dispensed with the brutal excesses of direct slavery, but it incorporated harsh regulatory and disciplinary impositions. However, the coolies did not passively succumb to the instrumental ethos of plantation capital and drew upon cultural resources like Indian festivals, their native religious traditions and observances for community bonding in a convivial atmosphere. The performance of the Ramlila outside India may also be a temporary actualisation of the dispensation based on morality and ethics of the diaspora – a population for which Rama symbolises ideal human attributes, and by extension becomes the paragon of righteous conduct for all Hindu men and the diaspora itself. In comparison, Ravana, with his ten heads, is open to multiple interpretations. His multidimensionality embraces a variety of motivations in human life. In this instance, Ramlila proves to be a protean pageant of Indian culture, a voyage into the rich and various past of the subcontinent.

But, despite the cultural anchorage and ethnic knitting, the institution of family was in fragments during the indenture years. Most of the coolies arrived in the colony without their original spouse. Their siblings and parents lived in India and so the family bonds had already been broken. As forty per cent of the colony's population, Indian immigrants made up the largest ethnic group in British Giana but most of them lived on or near plantations in the far countryside. The oppressive realities of plantation life, including the evils of sexual imbalance, stymied stable family life and the planting elite were blithe about it. In the midst of the sugar crisis and economic depression the murders of Indian women by partners and suitors rose high. The maiming and killing of women by their men declined during the final years of indenture in the early twentieth century. Families were organised when emigrant Indians moved from plantation barracks into adjoining villages. It was a difficult exercise because the impoverished workers lacked the wherewithal to clear swampy land for settlement. As late as 1950, 44 per cent of Indians in Guyana still lived on plantations (Poynting 234). The situation was far better in Trinidad, where half of them had moved off by 1890. Patriarchal values were preserved in the traditional family structures. Women did unpaid labour in the domestic sphere and were dependent on their men. Bahadur writes: "While modest bungalows with Bottom Houses were being constructed in villages reminiscent of North India, the family was likewise rebuilt, on concrete pillars of custom, religion and strictly defined gender roles" (206). Her observation is consonant with what V.S. Naipaul wrote of the Indian family in the West Indies in *The Middle Passage*:

Everything which made the Indian alien in the society gave him strength. His alienness insulated him from the black-white struggle.... His religion gave him values which were not the white values of the rest of the community, and preserved him from self-contempt; he never lost pride in his origins. More important than religion was his family organization, an enclosing self-sufficient world absorbed with its quarrels and jealousies, as difficult for the outsider to penetrate as for one of its members to escape. (79)

Child marriage, joint and extended family, council of village elders, religious performance in temples and mosques were the characteristic features of the emerging Indo-Guyanese community – a re-created India in miniature.

Set in a materialist colonial society, women's domestic labour was crucial in sustaining the family's livelihood in the framework of a complete community life. In addition to the normal household chores like cooking, cleaning, washing and looking after children, they reared cattle, carried on agricultural operations on farms and sold the produce at market to remain

economically viable. Inspired by Sita in the Ramayana, they performed the panoply of their housewifely duties as a religious mission and negotiated normative identities produced within their ethnic communities. Symbolic religious rituals accompanying the homeland traditions of cooking were replicated as emotional props in the alien atmosphere. The remembered rituals were articulated in nascent efforts to build a communitarian space as well as promote a sense of belonging. Bahadur depicts her great-grandmother as a prototype of the diasporic matriarch who, having relinquished her parents, siblings and children in India, reinvented herself in a distant, unfamiliar location with hard work, tenacity, renewed religious fervour and ethnic feeling deep in her bones, and a tattooed reminder of Sita's dedication carried on her arms. Bahadur pieces together her great-grandmother Sujaria's sacrifice and her feat of survival:

She had receded from the public sphere of the plantation to the more private sphere of the home and the village. Each delivered its own set of licks, and each required its own brand of forbearance. As much as religion or culture, imperial policy had nudged her inside. For this, too, had been a disfigurement of indenture: the complicity of women in their own fates, the tortured attachment – the tenderness – they felt and continued to feel – in the cave of their hearts for their own men, who had also been disfigured by the planters and the colonial state. (208)

Not all emigrant women, however, tried to heft the baggage of the past and endure the ills of indenture like Sujaria and Latchmin. Those who thought of carrying on the family in the midst of tribulations and conjugal violence, alone survived the perils of displacement; others succumbed to the hardships and privations. Post-independence Guyana continues to remain wounded by the repressive and violent legacy of indenture.

Annie Paul, a reviewer of Bahadur's book, says that women became willing conscripts in indenture because they were desperate to strike out on their own after fleeing oppressive ordeals at home:

In the so-called New World, they adjusted to their newfound freedom and economic betterment with aplomb, leading to situations where women who were ill-treated by their husbands felt free to leave them and move on to a new suitor. Bride price became the norm instead of dowry, and women didn't hesitate to make the most of their independence.

Equally, Rhoda Reddock enlarges on women's supposed liberation and empowerment in a persuasive discussion on the benefits from women's exposure to Creole modernity following indentured immigration. She has argued that women's decision to emigrate was a sign of their strength and

independent character. She puts it that the plantation work saved them from penury and a possible life of prostitution. In this paper on Indian women in Trinidad, she says:

This history of struggle from their initial decision to migrate to the rigours of plantation is one which unites them with oppressed and exploited women the world over who when necessary and where possible have resisted their oppression and fought for their autonomy as women and as members of exploited class. (45)

It seems an exaggerated view of the level of women's resistance as indentured labourers in that Reddock has sandpapered women's turbulent odysseys to a neat conclusion. Bahadur's account of the travails of indentured Indian women reveals that their enhanced position, as circulated by the rhetoric of empire, should not be overestimated. Compared to Indian women in Mauritius, "where they were explicitly imported as wives not workers" (91), the women immigrants in Guiana were economically less vulnerable to exploitation but their financial strength was undercut by unequal wage rate, as Reddock herself observes in her book, *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago* (1994). Brown women were paid one-half to two-thirds of what brown men were paid by their white employers in every colony that received indentured labourers (Reddock 57) on the assumption that their income was extra. While contempt for wives was hard-wired into Indian feudal culture, they faced many constraints and appalling discrimination and felt curbed in the coercive setting of the colonies. Bahadur aptly sizes up their pragmatism, "Coolie women were not exactly like Jane Austen heroines, practicing love as a form of social mobility; but they seem to have used their scarcity to survive as best they could in an exploitative environment" (92).

Bahadur looks at the vitality of the domestic sphere – drawing and articulating remembered customs and rituals from their natal homes – which played an important role in providing continuities in spite of ruptures and breaks through the loss of language, thus reinventing an imagined space, particularly in displacement, exile and resettlement. Despite the disproportion in gender ratio, the majority of women worked alongside fellow male workers on plantations and were breadwinners as well as homemakers. Without women, families could not be formed by the indentured male immigrants. With the contribution of industrious and enterprising women in the sugar estates the Indian diaspora could set up nascent boundaries of social interaction and extended kinship and, as S.W. Mintz puts it, "recreate their ethnic hearths" (54-55). Bahadur too notes that "Their families moved up in the world, from coolitude in the far countryside to an address in the capital, from indenture to independent wealth" (167). They were the key instruments

of oral communication which remained the crucial vehicle for remembered rituals, social and sexual habits and, more significantly, for languages of the migrants, such as Bhojpuri and Tamil. The steady transfer of these cultural ingredients for at least the next three generations was the wellspring of the primary nexus of diasporic networks.

Significantly, a smaller percentage of the women immigrants in Guyana returned to India than men. The reason was their transgressions and emancipation from illiberal social and religious customs in India. The fear of getting sucked into the hidebound traditions or the prospect of rejection caused trepidation. This apprehension made women the more stubborn settlers in Guyana than male returnees to their homeland, as in other parts of the Caribbean.

S. Chatterjee rightly says:

Just as pollution and caste impurities of travel played an inhibitive role in the workers' ability to relocate or 'belong' once again in their natal home, so too the prescriptive gender ideologies operating in India made the female worker's return doubly problematic. In this context then, in the early period of uncertain settlement, female presence, female voices and the power dynamics of gender played a very critical role in shaping the spiritual and material ethos of an incipient home in an alien regime. (210)

In this context, Jeremy Poynting is quite wrong in his interpretation of exclusively feminine rituals accompanied by raunchy and ribald songs and customs. According to him, the bawdy singing and dancing and clay drawings on the wall were expressions of women's repressed sexuality. Contrary to Poynting's contention, women experienced a sense of empowerment and relief from the relentless grind of hard labour in the elaborate wedding festivities and observances.

As the scholars of diaspora contend, an idealised wish to return to the original homeland remains etched in the minds of diasporic immigrants. The indentured Indians in the British Guiana, too, cherished a strong fantasy of return. About 112 years after the first indentured workers had arrived in Demerara, the British government in Guiana announced in 1955 that the *MV Resurgent* would be the last ship of ex-coolies to return to India, ever. More than a thousand were initially interested in going but eventually fewer than 250 signed up, and one cried off and cancelled when the ship was just about to leave. It echoes the assembly of indentured labourers in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* (1969):

... pulling at clay cheelums that glowed red and smelled of ganja and burnt sacking.... They could not speak English and were not interested in the land where they lived; it was a place where they had come for a short time

and stayed longer than they expected. They continually talked of going back to India, but when the opportunity came, many refused, afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporariness. (193-94)

Naipaul here captures the essence of diasporic experience, that is, the failure to find roots. The wistful longing of the indentured Indians in Guiana for homeland, coupled with a reluctance to return, is the typical diasporic state of perpetual transience, “the ambivalence of becoming part of the landscape and yet somehow beyond or beside it” (Mishra 65).

In a similar vein, Bahadur reflects on the tenuous links between the descendants of the indentured Indians in Guyana and the homeland as an imaginary creation of the diasporic subjects. The nostalgia has been kept alive by shards of Hindi spoken by the diaspora, their religious observances, Bollywood songs and dances. The diasporics have grown up with their segmented and snipped selves:

Over the generations, various Indian tongues have been lost as spoken languages in Guyana. The missionary-run schools during British rule taught English – not Hindi or Tamil. Many Guyanese living in the gravitational pull of sugar plantations got little or no formal schooling, well into the twentieth century. Whether educated or not, they still had to assimilate into a multi-ethnic society where 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. (6-7)

The problematic affinity with the homeland is in a state of flux in the provisional lives of the diaspora thrown into the existential context of activities and transactions in a cross-cultural melange. Bahadur delineates the intensified ambiguities of the dislocated population, the sense of a partial, tentative belonging, the bricolage of a new life assembled bit by bit by the displaced Indian diaspora during their domicile in colonial Guiana’s heterogeneous, multiracial and fragmented society. The relationship between India and the Indian diaspora in Guiana like that in the Caribbean region as a whole, as Naipaul writes in *The Middle Passage*, “quickly developed into the relationship of muted dislike between metropolitans and colonials, between Spaniards and Latin Americans, English and Australians” (80). To sum up, the Indian diaspora in Guyana spawned by indenture has shown infinite capacity to morph, to reinvent and reproduce itself amidst colonial afflictions and formidable impediments to assimilation and incorporation in the inhospitable host country. For many hyphenated Indians in Guyana, the

diasporic moment was far from over as the postcolonial state proved to be politically brittle too soon. Inevitably, the post-indenture diasporic formations ruptured amidst political disruptions and economic crises, forcing hundreds of thousands to cross borders and emigrate. The dislocation of families raised the spectre of employment and settlement. By choosing to re-diasporise and resettle in the USA in desperation and extremity rather than return to India because of the homeland's reluctance to reclaim the diaspora, many descendants of the Indian immigrants, like the author of *Coolie Woman*, have embraced identities that are multilocal rather than territorially circumscribed. Their waning expatriate loyalties and weakened diasporic affiliations reveal their alternative identities constructed along the fault lines of nations. The ontology of labour migration from India to the British Guiana and the post-indenture evolution of the transplanted Indians into a demographically dominant ethnic community in the new nation of Guyana, although with their periodic tribulations, unsettle the received notions and scripts of diasporic belonging and may arguably be taken as a discrepant diasporic formation – in other words, a salient social formation outside the defining paradigms and governing tropes of diasporic filiation.

Works Cited

- Bahadur, Gaiutra. *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Bearak, Max. "A Conversation with Author Gaiutra Bahadur." *The New York Times* 21 November, 2013. india.blogs.nytimes.com. 1 December 2014.
- Brereton, Bridget. "The Experience of Indentureship: 1845-1917." *Calcutta to Caroni: The East Indians of Trinidad*. Ed. John Gaffar La Guerre. St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: Extra Mural Studies Unit, University of the West Indies, 1985. 21-32.
- Brown, G.W. "Diaspora, Transnationalism, and Issues in Contemporary Politics." *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*. Eds. A. Quayson and G. Daswani. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2013. 85-99.
- Chatterjee, S. "Communitarian Identities and the Private Sphere: A Gender Dialogue Among Indo-Trinidadians (1845-1917)." *Community, Empire and Migration: South Asians in Diaspora*. Ed. C. Bates. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001. 206-23.
- Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: UCL Press, 1997.
- Diptee, Audra. "Cultural Transfer and Transformation: Re-visiting Indo-Afro Sexual Relationships in Trinidad and British Guiana in the late 19th Century." *The Society for Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers* 4 (2003): 1-19.

- Hansen, Thomas Blom. "Diasporic Dispositions." *Himal South Asia* 15.12 (2002): 12-20.
- Jain, Ravindra K. *Nation, Diaspora, Trans-Nation: Reflections from India*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2010.
- Jain, Shobhita and Rhoda Reddock, eds. *Women Plantation Workers: International Experience*. London: Berg, 1998.
- Kirkey, Henry. *Twenty-five Years in British Giana*. London: Sampson Low, 1898.
- Koshy, Susan. "Introduction." *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora*. Eds. Susan Koshy and R. Radhakrishnan. Delhi: Oxford UP, 2008. 1-41.
- Lal, Brij V. *On the Other Side of Midnight: A Fijian Journey*. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2005.
- . "The Indenture System." *The Encyclopaedia of the Indian Diaspora*. Eds. Brij V. Lal, Peter Reeves and Rajesh Rai. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006. 46-53.
- Markovits, C. *The Global World of Indian Merchants 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Mintz, S.W. "Labour and Ethnicity: The Caribbean Conjuncture." *Crises in the Caribbean Basin*. Ed. R. Taradanico. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1987. 47-58.
- Mishra, Vijay, ed. *Rama's Banishment: A Centenary Tribute to Fiji Indians, 1879-1979*. London: Heinemann, 1979.
- . "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora." *Textual Practice* 10.3 (1996): 421-47.
- Munasinghe, Viranjini. "Douglas Logics: East Indians, Miscegenation, and the National Imaginary." *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora*. Eds. Susan Koshy and R. Radhakrishnan. Delhi: Oxford UP, 2008. 181-214.
- Naipaul, V.S. *The Middle Passage* [1962]. London: Picador, 1996.
- . *A House for Mr Bismarck*. [1961]. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969.
- Parekh, Bhikhu. "Some Reflections on the Indian Diaspora." *Journal of Contemporary Thought* 3 (1993): 105-51.
- Paul, Annie. "A Coolie Woman's Work is Never Done." *The Margins* 31 March 2014. <http://aaww.org/coolie-womans-work-gaiutra-bahadur/>. 18 May 2016.
- Poynting, Jeremy. "East Indian Women in the Caribbean: Experience and Voice." *India in the Caribbean*. Eds. David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo. Hertfordshire: Hansib Printing, 1987. 231-63.
- Reddock, R. "Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917: Freedom Denied." Paper presented at the Third Conference on East Indians in the Caribbean, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad, 29 August-5 September 1984.

- Rodney, Walter. *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981.
- . *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago*. London: Zed Books, 1994.
- Safran, William. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 83-99.
- Singh, Kelvin. "Indians and the Larger Society." *Calcutta to Caroni: The East Indians of Trinidad*. Ed. La Guerre. St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago: University of the West Indies, 1985. 33-62.
- Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labourers Overseas, 1830-1920*. London: Oxford UP (for the Institute of Race Relations), 1974.
- Tololyan, Khachig. "The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface." *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 37.
- Van Hear, Nicholas. *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*. London: UCL Press, 1998.