

## Book Review

# Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives

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This book attempts to bring together scholarship from the disciplines of Literature and History to understand the nature of indentureship and the subsequent diasporic location for the lives of marginalised men and women who made the journey. Did that experience result in empowerment and a better life or further marginalisation? How did diverse individuals cope and negotiate with the changed circumstances? What role did race, class, caste, ethnicity and gender play in these negotiations? How does theorising 19<sup>th</sup>-century experiences of indentureship allow for a better understanding of diasporic Indians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? These are some of the questions guiding the essays in the book. Apart from academic essays, the book also includes interviews with contemporary fiction and non-fiction writers to understand how they use the legacy of indentureship as a space to resist and challenge. This is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on forced migration, displacement and legacies of slavery and indentureship. The book's intended audience is researchers of literature, history, gender, migration, race, postcolonial studies, South Asian and Indian Ocean studies, and those interested in questions of slavery. The editors are located within the discipline of English literature and postcolonial studies and have previously published titles around literature on the indenture and diaspora.

The volume is concerned with intervening in South Asian history and Indian diaspora studies, which have not paid adequate attention to the '*girmitya*' or the indentured labourer. Diaspora studies have mainly focused on the more affluent and recent diaspora in the USA, Canada, Australia and Europe: the 'new' diaspora consisting of post-colonial migration. According to the editors, the 'old' diaspora, consisting of labour-related colonial migrations like indenture, is disowned owing to the marginal status of the migrants. This volume is, therefore, an attempt to correct this neglect and reinstate the '*kala pani*' (in Hindu cosmology, crossing the ocean was forbidden, the term *kala pani* literally means black waters) crossings and migrants into the fold of diaspora studies.

Within the '*girmityas*' literature and history, women constitute a further marginalised group whose experiences and voices seldom find representation. The volume aims to bridge this gap by bringing a gender lens to the discussions over Kala Pani crossings and diaspora. The particularly complex and vexed question has been the emancipation of women within the indenture system. This has to do with who the recruited women were, the skewed sex ratio at the ports of destination, and the impact of the changed context on structures of intimacies, marriage and kinship. Whether indenture offered women a chance at a new life or a life marked by sexual violence and economic exploitation was a question that achieved salience in the historical context and continues to be

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debated. The nationalist discourse of colonial times elevated the indentured woman and the question of sexual violence to a question of purity and national identity. In colonial historiography, the indentured woman came to be equated with the loose sexual morals of the colonised. These complexities have only been fully addressed within feminist scholarship, which has tried to make sense of the contradictory freedom of indentured women and humanise them, rescuing them from sexualisation, dehumanisation and iconisation. This volume then attempts to address this question more holistically by bringing gender to the centre of the discussions of *kala pani* and the diasporic communities wrought out of these transformations.

The book is divided into five sections. The first section, 'Rethinking Kala Pani: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches', has three essays: Mala Pandurang's essay applies a south-south comparative framework to studying the diaspora by decentring both the 'old/'new' diaspora framework as well as the mainstream framework of Atlantic slavery. She draws from her experiences of designing and teaching a course focusing on intersectionality within an Indian university framework to do so. Himadri Lahiri takes on the idea of the sea as a method to read the representation of transoceanic travel of female coolies as represented in fiction and how it allows for problematising the binaries of land/ocean and public/private. The third essay in this section examines the question of women and indenture by studying historical records and accounts, especially the discourse in India around the victimhood and morality of indentured women. Overall, this section lays out the most relevant issues that inform the volume, particularly its methodological concerns and theoretical preoccupations, including how bringing gender as a central analytical category recasts the understanding of indenture and the subsequent experiences of migration and formation of diasporic communities and how reading fiction and narratives might be an excellent methodological entry point for the same.

The second section, 'Past and Present: Revisiting the Sexual Contract', consists of three essays focusing on marriage, intimacy and kinship within the diaspora. The first essay by Suparna Sengupta looks at the marriage 'system' as it was shaped in the penal colony of the Andamans and the complications in rendering these into a semblance of 'permanence'. She argues that male convicts were provided access to women's bodies to enforce a heteronormative moral code, which enabled both the reproduction of labour, as well as the imperial process of colonisation of the penal colony. Auritra Munshi's work focuses on man-woman relationships and marriage in the coolie diaspora through a critical examination of literary texts. Arnab Kumar Sinha's essay examines the interrelationship between queerness and diaspora by exploring Shani Mootoo's novels and short stories. The essay mainly focuses on the fraught relationship between Hindu religious rituals, the formation of diasporic Indian communities and negotiations of queerness, highlighting the conflict between the religious desires of the community and the queer desires of the individual.

The third section of the collection, 'Voice and Vision Redeemed', consists of four essays that focus on voice in poetry, literature, and narratives. The first two essays, by Vijaya Rao and Jenni Balasubramanian focus on Francophone resources, while the others look at English literature. In her essay, Vijaya Rao examines two French narratives from India and the Reunion Island to understand the experience of the 'returnee', a relative rarity in the history and literature of indentureship. She argues that these works engage with the idea of decoloniality, and the figure of the returnee is granted agency on the intersections of archival recuperation and epistemic disobedience. Jenni's chapter explores literary representations of the first-generation Indian indentured women labourers in colonial literature from Reunion. Praveen Mirdha's essay examines and reads meaning into women's silences, as articulated within Indo-Caribbean poetry, to underline the distinctive diasporic consciousness among postcolonial Indians. The essay argues that this poetry provides an insight into the untraceable history and distant memory of these first-generation expatriate labourers and how they accepted home as a temporary residence and found opportunities for healing and negotiation in these new worlds created by indentureship. Gargi Dutta's work focuses on the non-normative characters in three literary texts, *Jabajin*, *The Swinging Bridge*, and *Sea of Poppies*, to explain their role in constructing Kala Pani's history. Underlining the differences between the three novels in terms of the gender of the authors and their narrative arcs, the essay reads them as retrieval narratives, highlighting their importance for mainstream Indian colonial history.

The book's fourth part – titled 'In Conversation with India: Memorial Narratives Inside Out', has two essays and focuses on conversations with India. Ridhima Tewari's essay looks at popular Bhojpuri films to argue that the popular becomes a site for creating a coherent, prescriptive narrative that draws from gendered imaginaries of the nation and attempts to 'resolve' the gender question across indenture diaspora and post-indenture migration. Stephanos Stephanides' essay documents the worship practices around Mariamman in contemporary Guyana and the Indo-Caribbean diaspora in the United States. This profoundly personal essay tracks a Greek-Cypriot scholar's relationship with Mariamman, who becomes both the focus of his study and the object of his faith and worship. It traces the shifts in the Indo-Guyanese community through indentureship, colonialism and neo-liberal capitalism, with goddess worship as the entry point.

The book's last and perhaps the longest part, 'In the Writers' Own Voices', consists of detailed interviews with eight writers of Kala Pani literature. These include writers from the Kala Pani diaspora, including Fiji, Trinidad,

Guyana and Mauritius. What emerges from these extremely rich and diverse interviews, which should each be read in the original version for the depth and intensity of issues they open up, are many cross-cutting questions. It highlights the degree to which the idea of India as 'homeland/motherland' shapes the subjectivities and identities of these writers and how the degree of generational separation from the 'original' migration, as well as peculiar family histories, shape their notion of themselves as Fijians/Guyanese/ Trinidadian or Mauritian and as belonging to the Kala Pani diaspora. The interviews also engage with Khal Torabully's invocation of the concept of Coolitude and how different authors see it as a useful term. Some reject the term, preferring those like 'girmil' or 'girmitiyas' instead, while others see it as helpful in making sense of the peculiarity of the diasporic existence of indentured labourers. These interviews also reflect on the archive and its influences on oral histories, family myths and folklore as resources for fiction writers, among other issues. The thread that runs through these interviews is an understanding of the creative process of writers and how they navigate the complex identities of gender, race, and nationality in their writing and life.

The book's contributors are primarily located within the discipline of Literature, and this is perhaps the collection's strength and weakness. Essays sometimes do not take cognisance of debates taking place within other disciplinary spaces like Gender Studies. For instance, while an essay draws from Partha Chatterjee's formulation of the nationalist resolution of the woman question, it does not account for the extensive debate around that formulation, fuelled mainly by feminist historians, among others. This is not merely an argument for citation and acknowledgement but about how these elisions / omissions might have affected the substantive arguments. A growing body of literature on the Bhojpuri diaspora and the Bhojpuri language and culture exists. The book does not consistently take cognisance of this body of work either.

The book is relevant for its contribution to knowledge around diaspora by de-centring the 'new' Indian diaspora, which has been the de facto framework. It is also important to challenge the idea of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and related journeys as the only 'crossings' of importance in understanding the making of labour diasporas and cultures. However, it is an uneven book, with certain parts and essays being more theoretically rigorous and advanced.

Creating a category called Kala Pani as a conceptual category is an important contribution to knowledge of the book, especially since it brings together anglophone and francophone plantation colonies. The attempt to read these as 'connected histories' with continuities and ruptures with each other, as well as with the homeland and as 'connected sociologies' conscious of their positionality in the larger context of colonialism, indentureship, and enslavement, is a significant contribution and should be acknowledged. The attempt to bring together scholars and writers in the same volume allows for a multiplication of the voices that address, write and redefine the contours of this historical experience. This book is, therefore, an important addition and will be helpful not only to those who study slavery and indentureship but also to those interested in South Asian history, politics, and culture as a whole, with a focus on gender.

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