

“COOLIES IN COLONIES”: READING TRAUMATIC JOURNEY OF INDENTURED LABOURERS THROUGH THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES.

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Abstract

The present paper significantly traces the history of indentured labourers, the jaw dropping experiences and meticulously mirrors the traumatic time period being spent, since generation to generation by the coolies, from a number of corners of India, who had shown interest to work willingly on sugar plantation in various colonies based on contract system for a period of five and more years, in spite of not having a detailed information and realization that the promises and agreement being made would not be fulfilled. Moreover, the intention of this paper is not only to dig out the history and root of the coolies merely, but also to make the readers aware of the gap between the literatures produced by indentured labourers and Indian diasporic writers. This paper also is going to reveal the systems implemented on coolies, because of which they had turned out to be toys for a play, specially, the women being physically harassed by Arkatis (a mediator whose role was to convince the poor men and the women to work on plantation and be with them until the ship left through ocean). In addition, the paper also simultaneously focuses on various systems that the coolies had to follow mandatorily.

Key words: Girmitya, Box Hand, indentured, Arkatis, Ship Brother, Bonded Labour, Sirdar

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to studying about Indian diaspora, our focus predominantly floats on a few writers of postmodern era and chronologically on a few writers of generation, but if it is studied with efforts, we observe a line of connection with Indian migrants who had been appointed and carried off to different colonies as coolies. These were the coolies who had expressed the life they had lived over in their autobiographies and we can't deny the reality that the root of Indian diaspora studies begins from them. Those coolies, from the corner of India were taken for work under indentured system (a contract for certain years, minimum for five years) "The English Sahib (Sir) who is the head of this depot gets the requirement for the number of coolies from different places. He tells the subdepot agents to find the coolies. The agents at the subdepot depend on the arkatis to find coolies like you and me."(Gubili 66)

The British government, with its corrupt and shrewd statistics, had applied all the strength towards most of the countries to rule them with liberty and spread slavery, among which a few countries, in spite of being ruled by British government, managed to win independence, but other developing countries could not fetch courage to fighting against their policies. Consequently, the British government succeeded in establishing their kingdom and business which earned and made them rich while the countries which were under their rules became poorer and poorer. Unequivocally, India was one of those countries to be witnessing the slavery and plight they had undergone. On the flip side of it, South Africa too stood in the same line of slavery and torcher. During such times, the British had established various colonies of sugar and coffee plantation, where the Negroes (people of Africa) were impelled to work reluctantly day and nights without rest, but the fact of the matter was that the wages being paid them were less than the efforts they used to put on the farms under the scorching sun. On one hand the Britishers did not accept them as humans and considered merely toys and on the other hand the ration which was decided to be shared among them was distributed scarcely. Thus, the people lost tolerance and rebelled against the system and denied to work on plantation. As a result, due to sudden decreasing number of workers, there was an urgent requirement of workers who would get ready to be employed.

Finally, their eyes fell on Indians, who too owing to poverty, struggles and inadequacy in work suffered a lot. So, the Britishers announced to carry the people from India through ocean to unknown countries but initially, the people showed disinterest and disbelief, because they had no idea about the place, work, wages, food, language etc. Thus, the British government appointed local people who were known as Arkatis to convince them for work and get paid more wages and the ration than the workers. Gradually, those arkatis, however, convinced

the local people to work on plantation falsely, explaining them about more wages, permanent work and better meal. Eventually, a verbal agreement between a local worker and the Arkatis before a voyage was made. “The arkatis were unlicensed agents whose job was to recruit coolies for indentured. The word ‘Arkatis’ is the distorted Hindi word originating from the word ‘Recruiter.” (Gubili 60)

The government, in order to function the voyage smoothly and timely, had appointed the emigration agents in cities like madras and Calcutta and these agents hired sub agents who held respect, richness and name in the town and the village. However, the work for recruiting the workers was not looked after by them, instead, they had appointed a few arkatis who were supposed to accumulate the workers from villages and towns. Ultimately, workers through long process, starting with body check up to registering themselves, managed to reach different colonies in Africa and those workers were known as ‘coolies’ in common, meaning “an unskilled laborer or porter hired for low or subsistence wages.” “Most likely, the word coolie is derived from south Indian Tamil word ‘kuli’, which means wages normally associated with work performed by people from a lower caste.” (Gubili X)

The indentured labourers carried various names according to the place being recruited at, for instance, Sami in South Africa, Gladstone Coolies in Trinidad, Girmitya in Fiji, Natal and Mauritius and commonly ‘Jehaji bhais’ (Ship Brothers) in spite of having split in the caste and religion, all coolies had to make a journey on the same ship, which completely demolished the mind set of upper and lower caste system. It was a different matter that a few upper caste coolies had denied to stay in the same compartment, eat food being cooked in vessels used for lower caste and drink water from the same pots, but there was no any solution to be found since the number of coolies being carried in a ship was about 600 and to permit them to forming a new community was certainly tough.

“The Girmit as a word is read as a ‘sign’ which gives the experience of ‘old’ Indian Indenture diaspora. The ‘Girmit’ ideology and the word Girmit (from agreement) is the Fiji Plantation diaspora’s vernacularized neologism.” (Mishra 22)

Another root of this word, seemingly, is to be believed an old and ancient India known as ‘untouched.’ These untouched coolies, specially, from India before migrating to Colonies already were under the slavery of British and some rich men who used to squeeze the subaltern and helpless men and women since generation to generation, driving advantage from the social system called ‘Bonded labour.’ According to this way of system, the workers being employed under took wages in advance from employer as a loan to meeting the expenses of social celebration like gathering, festivals, birth, marriage and the death ceremonies. A few loans taken from employer were fixed at certain interest while others had deliberately increased the amount of it so that those workers owing to working at a low wages would not be able to pay it back.

BONDED LABOUR

The loan to the workers was granted initially in the form of ‘Land’ to cultivate it and share a huge amount of the produced grains with owner which left only edible grains for the workers family. This system led the worker again to receive loan from owner because the wages and grains he was to be given apparently, were equal to nothing. The second type of loan which was offered to the workers by the owners was in the form of ‘Homestead plot’ according to which, the worker had to make himself available for work throughout the year on nominal wages. Generally, the workers who were working under this type of system faced a number of problems, because that work did not require a whole year to be finished rather a certain period of time and a few weeks. On the flip side of it, the workers were not permitted to work for other employer in free time, and other employer would not even hire such workers. Thus, most of the months were passing without works. The third type of work which compelled them to take loan was ‘Customary Obligation’. Indians under British rules, were considered merely slaves but as it had existence of several upper, lower and middle class community, the work precisely was allotted on caste based. Customarily, duties for instance, carrying dead animals, burning dead bodies, playing drums on birth and funeral function, were concerning activities of lower caste people and for doing these works they were paid off very little money.

In that case, almost all the works with minimum wages shattered the dreams of those workers to meet both the ends. In fact, the pathetic situation dragged them to borrow money in a form of loan from the owners. On the other hand, merciless and conspirator owners forcefully intended to grab the opportunity by confiscating the property until the loan was paid off in return. In other words to explain it, the loans were never paid off owing to less wages and a high interest on loans. Consequently, as the part of paying back the loan, generation after generation had to work under the same owner as long as the members of the family returned the loan. In addition, after having taken loan, the worker was prohibited to go out for work or individual pleasure with freedom. Moreover, the system of bonded labour did not belong only to lower caste but all who were signed to be associated with the work and the owner. Neither they could refuse working under the terms nor work for other owners till the payment of the loan. In a nut shell, the condition of those workers was unspeakable.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Since the commencement of indentured system 'Vulgi' which means foreigner as a word was used for Indian Migrants and from among them who had headed to Fiji considered the place as 'Narak' (Hell). Still, owing to inadequacy in labour work, the people from the villages and towns of India purposefully willed to travel across the ocean, crossing the countries but registering oneself as coolie to be allowed to working on the plantation was not a cup of tea. It required to go through a long process before starting the work. One of the well-known coolie who carved his experience in a book was Totaram Sandhya who had registered himself as a laborer on 2nd Feb, 1893. Though he was from Brahmin community he had admitted himself to be Kshatriya Thakur because a common understanding during those days for Brahmin community was that they would not work on plantation being the people of upper caste and will unnecessarily create hindrance. Therefore, he not only hid his surname but also age. His age was 16 but he registered as of 18 in order not to be considered as minor and get rejected for work. Likely, most of the workers either had changed religion or age on paper. "You don't know the English Government. There is a paper for every coolie with the salary, and it has the Queen's seal on it" (Gubili 60)

These encouraging words thrown by arkatis, having greed to earn more by adding more number to the group of coolies, anyhow inspired the jobless and hopeless coolies to sign agreement. In the case of coolies being suspicious about the voyage were gifted a few annas freely to attract them, and the workers innocently, in a hope and promise made by arkatis to receive five rupees as wages per month and the ration, accepted the invitation. Poor workers who hardly could earn few annas per month when heard of free ration, accommodation and high wages got attracted by the offers.

The first step to be registered as coolie and reach beyond the ocean was agreement between arkatis and themselves. After being registered, they were dumped in to a subdepot and made to staying over there until they had gathered a large and enough workers. Sometime, the workers had to remain in the subdepot for more than a month and finally, after the supervision by sahib (Sir) they were taken to the main depot to be sent across the ocean. Since the farm owners never desired for unhealthy and weak coolies to work in scorching sun and heavy rain, a doctor in a ship used to assist them physically because their payment also depended on the number of healthy coolies being sent successfully. During voyage to the main depot, few arkatis used to mingle with the coolies without letting them know so that they can have control over them. If the coolies showed disinterest to cross the sea at main depot, he would ask for money spent after him during the month on ration, journey and the stay. "The Coolies from the higher caste raised hell. But their protest came to no avail. On the ship everyone was just a coolie." (Gubili 72)

Earlier, in most of the villages, the Brahmin communities who were considered as the upper caste people used to live in a separate place, far from the place of the lower caste people. Even, the well was separate for the Brahmin community and nobody, however thirsty, was allowed to quench thirst from that well. In case of breaking the rules through a touch to any Brahmin, the Brahmin would immediately bathe and would punish the untouchable. Similarly, the Brahmins had protested to drink water from the same drum which was used for untouchable and to eat food from the vessels which were used to cook food for the same people but it did not benefit them. The voyage broke the line between upper and lower caste which existed since thousands of years. "They all became Jehaji bhai (Ship Brothers)." (Gubili 72)

THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN

During this journey, the situation of women was worse than the men. Most of the women who were unmarried were physically bullied and harassed by the ship attendant. The ship attendant knew the tricks to use over women to convince them to sleep with them. Those women, having left the family and country behind, had no any other way to survive on the ship and on the plantation, so, they easily gave up fighting and surrendered themselves to the attendant. On the other hand, the women who fought against such a sinful act were raped and muted. A few women who did not want to be involved in to this dirty relationship were pestered by not giving ration and the wages. Ultimately, they too had to obey them.

On the foreign land, it was quite easy for men to survive but difficult for women, because either they were raped or harassed physically. Thus, to save themselves from indulging in to it, they used to get married with local men over there whether they belonged to their caste or not was a least matter to be pondered over. Though the women were allotted equal work as offered to men, they were paid less wages and ration. No mercy was granted to a pregnant women. The weaker women involved themselves, sometimes willingly and other times forcefully in to the act of marriage, because it was only a way they had discovered to remain protected. One more thing, the number of women was very less for indentured system. Earlier it was confirmed to be 40 per 100 men but later on it got decreased and only 25 women per 100 men were allowed on ship. Even, the wages they used to earn did not reach their hands, instead it was directly transferred to their husbands. Most of the women preferred to stay in colonies and hated going back to their country because they knew that they would see their husbands married with other women.

The struggles began at the same moment when they agreed to work in colonies under indentured system. The young officers from Australia and New Zealand raped the working women on farms and the husbands who came to about this reality either used to abandon or kill their wives. Women on farm were considered only as unwanted instrument and prostitutes by the agents and some of the men. A bunch of women who survived through such hard life had little freedom after the completion of five years on farm. The head of the women had introduced a 'box system' to help out the indentured woman. According to this system, the indentured women had a gathering once in week at a decided place. In that gathering the women had to throw minimum amount of money as decided. The head of the women, who had completed five years and had more freedom than the fresher indentured women, took little share from collected money as a tax and returned the remaining amount of collection to the needy indentured woman. This went on every week. As the time and years passed by, those women forgot the mental struggle and found out a peaceful way of survival through writing books and drawing tattoo on skin.

PLIGHT OF MEN

Similarly, the men too had their own struggles and issues to be looked after. The farm owner had appointed a man known as 'Sirdar' (a man who looked after the works to be done on farms daily in a well manner) and he had never shown mercy to anyone. In fact, the Sirdar used to threaten them to cut their salary for incomplete work and hardly there was a day when he did not whip the coolies unnecessarily. Most of the Jehaji brother who had developed a good bond among them had lost contacts with each other due to two reasons; firstly, they had been deliberately kept separately on the farms and different colonies to avoid a group and secondly, they could not find out the places they were dumped in to it, because the coolies were recognized with a number given to them and not by the names. Even, the family members who tried to find out could not succeed because some of them either had changed surname, caste, age or the names.

Arkatis, before bringing the coolies from India, had promised to offer them the work of their field but after their arrival, they experienced strangely. Sunday seemed like a day of heaven after working continuously for whole day in scorching sun and without rest. But, they were not permitted to move out of the farm, and in case they disobeyed, they had to pay a huge amount of money as punishment which they would not be able to earn even in five years. As per the rules made by the owners, it would consume five years to become a free coolie which would earn them more wages and ration for month, but while they approached the Sirdar after completing five years of journey, they were either asked money to return which was spent for free journey, ration and accommodation or start re-indentured. There were a few white Sirdars who had shown no partiality among the workers. "For a white farm owners, a coolie was a coolie, irrespective of his or her religion." (Gubili 108)

When the coolies felt inappropriate working with Indian Sirdar, they had freedom to change the farm. For some of the coolies who had changed the farm, it was a blessing. The coolies had a dress cord on farm which had broken the difference of caste system. All men and women were merely coolies on farm and nothing more.

CONCLUSION

On one hand the life journey of coolies whether men or women on unknown land and working on plantation appeared painful but on the other hand it had released the corrupt mind set of upper and lower caste system, from mind and ground. People who had kept space between the communities since thousands of years was mended within no time and accepted happily, when they had to eat, drink, stay and work together. The situation and the pangs made them to reach a conclusion that they were merely coolies forever. Even, the women who had been the subject of harassment initially, learned to survive through various ways. Thus, whether the men or women, in spite of being tormented during whole journey and at work place, still managed to survive.

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