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# Echoes Across the Kala Pani: Memory, Migration, and Colonial Trauma

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**Abstract:** Indian diaspora as we understand explores the experiences, lives of people of Indian origin who live outside

India and in literature it focuses on the themes of cultural exchange, identity, diversity and the various challenges faced by migrants across generations. Many often conceive Indian diaspora with the images of a sophisticated life in a foreign land. Many individuals were not cognizant of the fact that before the rise of the Modern Indian diaspora, there was a notable movement of Indians to European colonies, which is recognized as the Indenture Indian Diaspora. This was a new form of bondage that shattered the happiness of the people with low incomes. The number of people transported to the British colonies was more than twenty lakhs from the year 1837 to 1920. These people lived with a sense of trauma and their memory is haunted by the torturing everyday life. They experienced cruelty at the hands of the Britishers like the false promises of return to India but actually they faced kidnapping, a journey that continued for more than three months on a lonely sea without proper food, more than eighteen hours of work at the plantation, harsh punishments, and sexual violence at the hands of their masters. The paper aims at presenting the trauma, sufferings and pain experienced by innocent Indian labourers in an alien nation by using autobiographies, biographies, historical records and testimonials.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Kala Pani, Trauma, Culture, Imaginary Home.

## Introduction

The concept diaspora was one of the buzzwords of the 1990s and after globalization it has emerged as a fascinating word. Since the 1960's almost all the migrations happened for economic growth or educational pursuits. Before the 1960s the word diaspora was used to denote specific, ethnic communities with negative meaning. It denoted loneliness, no

connection with the roots, discrimination and marginalization. Vijay Mishra, a great diasporic scholar believes that the Indian diaspora evolved in two distinct periods- The first one he calls as Sugarcane Diaspora which involved indentured labourers in the colonies for plantation purposes. The second one is the 'Masala Diaspora' which involves migrants and refugees for education and economic upliftment. The paper aims to shed light on the indenture diaspora and how the pain borne by the innocent Indian labourers on an everyday basis. In 1834, William Gladstone, a British Liberal Party member, came with a new labour supply system which transported coolies from the hills from Bengal to Mauritius to take care of his plantation. From the 1830s until the early twentieth century, the vast majority of the millions of voyages covering long distances by Indians were not by convicted transportees or reluctant sepoys- they were sea journeys taken by contract labourers. Geoghegan's (1874) report on colonial emigration stressed that the bulk of immediate post- mutiny emigrants crossed the kala pani to Mauritius to avoid a compulsory sea trip to Port Blair. While many British Indian officials like Geoghegan viewed migration as a means of solving India's overpopulation and immiseration, others sided with local landowners and businessmen who were concerned about the transfer of bonded and cheap sources of labour to colonial enterprises. Regarding the system of indenture, the British claimed it was beneficial for the Indians as most of them suffered due to famine and other economic crisis.

The process for recruiting the labourers had lawful steps. The recruiters appointed Indian labourers as indentures by telling the reality of the work, journey, location etc. Nevertheless, these rules appeared simply on papers as the greedy recruiters appointed local people called arkatis or arkatia as in charge of getting more indentured labourers. The arkatis are described as merciless, selfish and betrayed the ignorant villagers by

portraying a fake picture and many false promises about their salary and other perks. They exercised four techniques to lure the labourers such as showing them economic gains, attracting men through beautiful women. The homesickness and loneliness make the journey a never ending one haunted by trauma. The calmness of the sea and the doubt about returning to the home country left many of the labourers lose confidence resulting in the suicide of many. Moreover, the poor maintenance of the ship, more passengers than that of the allotted number on the ship, poor quality and no proper arrangement of food affected the health of these people adversely. Once the labourers landed in the colonies, people from the plantations selected the labourers and moved them to the respective colonies. In the plantation fields, indentured labourers were given demanding tasks that required them to work for over fourteen hours. They were also denied wages if they were accused of not completing their assignments. If an indentured worker was absent or refused to work, they could face fines or imprisonment. The entire system of indenture was designed to benefit plantation owners by extracting money and instilling fear in the labourers through fines, taxes, and punishments. Most of the time, the Indian labourers were blamed as lazy and criticised that they dwell in idleness without active works in the field. The practice of the system of slavery left the planters to implement the same treatment upon the indentures. The British plantation owners wanted to prolong the stay of the indentured labourers at any cost. They believed that increasing the women's indentures in the colonies may increase chances of establishing families, which paved the way for permanent settlements in the colonies. The plantation community charged the indentured women with immorality and claimed they were compromising the nation's cultural values and traditions. They were blamed for the death of the children in the fields and for lack of interest in bearing children due to the absence of motherly instinct. In spite of

providing relief and care for the health of the young mothers, plantation authorities pressurized the indentured to work in the field immediately. With no one to care for the newborn babies, the young mothers work on the field by tying the babies on their backs under the hot sun. Most of those children were malnourished and they died.

The trauma of indentured servitude extended beyond physical suffering; it involved the obliteration of cultural identity. Labourers were thrust into an environment that was completely unfamiliar, with different plants, a new climate, and unfamiliar social customs. They were frequently prevented from speaking their native languages or engaging in their traditional practices. The plantation system sought to erase their history to shape compliant workers. This erasure led to profound feelings of alienation, with labourers expressing a sense of dislocation, yearning, and a loss of identity. The masters in the plantation sexually harassed indentured women. If the women complained, the authorities on the plantation punished them by giving them challenging tasks to perform until they accepted it. Indian women were occasionally coerced into sexual relations by European planters and these relationships were rarely sincere. The memories of their native country and most importantly the friendships they formed in the ship and depot allowed the indentures to escape their trauma. Once the voyage from the hometown to the depot started, all the labourers mingled with each other through their sorrow, the pain of leaving their family, home country and physical & psychological trauma. Thus, the ship journey created a bond among the passengers and the bonding is called jahaji bhai (shipmates). This journey brought them two things: fortitude and brotherhood. Even when the plantation owners recruited them in different plantations, such friendship continued for many decades. They would walk many miles to meet their friends in other plantations. For the indentured labourers, music served as

more than mere entertainment; it was a connection to their heritage. Many hailed from regions in North India where the folk traditions of the Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Magahi communities were prevalent. On the plantations, they sang birha, sohar, chaiti, alha, and kauth songs, which evoked memories of village life, festivals, rivers, families, and relationships. These songs allowed migrants to reconnect with a homeland they believed they would never revisit, acting as a form of emotional transport. The lyrics often conveyed feelings of longing, sorrow, separation, and hope. These melodies articulated themes of suffering at sea, betrayal by arkatis (recruiting agents), and the challenges faced under plantation overseers. Through their songs, workers expressed their hardships, which were often omitted from colonial records. Consequently, music became an alternative archive, preserving history through emotion rather than documentation, fostering community and a shared identity. Indenture did not preserve Indian culture unchanged; instead, it transformed it. The interaction with African, European, Chinese, and Indigenous cultures in the colonies gave rise to new hybrid musical styles. In Trinidad and Guyana, for instance, Bhojpuri folk music merged with Caribbean beats to create chutney music, a lively genre that remains popular today. In Mauritius, geet-gawai became a key element of Indo-Mauritian wedding traditions, combining North Indian tunes with island influences. Languages also evolved: Bhojpuri fused with English, Creole, and local dialects to form linguistic hybrids like Fiji Hindi and Caribbean Hindustani. However, the emotional essence of the songs—the yearning for home, the memories of rivers and fields, the sorrow of separation—remained unchanged. The plantation setting was a mix of different languages and cultures, bringing together Hindus, Muslims, various caste groups, and individuals from diverse regions. Songs were instrumental in fostering a sense of collective identity among this varied population. Group

singing helped create unity, enabling migrants to overcome the caste barriers that had strictly organized life in India. The indentured followed Hindu festivals such as Satyanarayan Puja, Ramayan Recital, Bhagvada Katha, Ram Navami and Shiv Ratri to protect and follow their culture. Following the cultural practices of the homeland, mother tongue, their religious practices and rituals in the settled land enabled them to construct an imaginary India in all the colonies they settled. Additionally, the unity among themselves and cultural bonding enabled them to come out of their pain and create their identity in the settled land.

The experiences of Indians who crossed the Kala Pani weave a rich and intricate narrative of trauma, memory, and resilience. Their time under indenture was characterized by physical violence, cultural displacement, gender-based abuse, and psychological upheaval. Despite these hardships, these migrants used memory as a means of survival, turning their trauma into cultural expression and crafting new identities in unfamiliar lands. Examining the Kala Pani crossing goes beyond historical analysis; it acknowledges the emotional and cultural impacts that continue to influence modern diasporas. Their narratives highlight the significant human toll of colonialism and the enduring power of memory in reclaiming histories that were once suppressed. Songs and folk culture throughout the Kala Pani essentially show how displaced communities relied on art to survive remember and rebuild. These musical traditions were more than just artifacts from the past they were potent manifestations of emotional truth echoes of suffering longing and resiliency that assisted migrants in making sense of their broken lives. Songs gave them continuity in a world where exploitation and erasure threatened their identities by serving as a reminder of their origins. Migrants created a cultural lifeline in unfamiliar and frequently hostile settings by uniting through shared rhythms and group singing. Furthermore the persistence of these folk

traditions in modern diasporic societies—from the chutney performances of Trinidad to the geet-gawai gatherings of Mauritius—shows how music that has been preserved across oceans can develop into vibrant new cultural forms. This living continuity highlights the unwavering spirit of the indentured workers who refused to let their memories fade in the face of unspeakable adversity. They made sure that future generations would inherit stories of creativity survival and community in addition to stories of suffering by transporting their cultural heritage across the dark waters. In the end songs and folk culture became the essence of the Kala Pani journey turning displacement into identity and trauma into expression. Through the power of collective memory and cultural expression communities manage to maintain hope dignity and humanity even in the darkest historical moments as evidenced by the enduring resonance of their melodies.

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