

ISSN 0976-3686



Contemporary Discourse

A Peer Reviewed International Journal

VOLUME 8 • ISSUE-1 • JANUARY-2017

Editors

Identity and Indenture: Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean Migrants

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The paper will explore the experience of the twice-migrated descendants of the indentured Diaspora along with issues of exile, rootlessness, alienation, language and culture dislocation, marginalisation and racial discrimination. The concept of identity becomes very important while studying indenture literature primarily because it looks at varied ways in which one belongs to a nation. The notions of home are also to be looked at while we look at the rights and duties that should be given to a citizen. Various literatures in English have discussed these issues, but indenture literature in particular looks at the notion of identity in respect of one being a citizen and the rights for which one has to fight to claim citizenship. Making a comprehensive study on how cultural identity is displaced, as well as discussing issues of adaptation and assimilation and the birth of a cultural hybridity as affective dimensions of migration, the paper will analyse socio-cultural issues like place of origin, destination, resultant identity, cultural continuity and change, as well as cultural identity and integration. Further, it will research the impact of the indentured system on the political, social, historical, economic and philosophical changes that led to the second migration by projecting the stories of the twice-migrated and by highlighting their sense of wanting to belong. The paper will also show how the experience of displacement and homelessness has been a source of unrelieved sadness and trauma and has consequently given rise to a social formation in the children of the indentured Diaspora.

Keywords: Indenture, Migration, Colonialism, Citizenship, Belonging, Identity, Homelessness

'One sad evening you leave your broken home: A journey through the monticules of memory'

- Satendra Nandan in *Motherland*

The history of indenture is one of the most significant events of Indian emigration that took place during the second half of the nineteenth century of the British colonial period. After the Abolition of Slavery during the 1830s, an acute shortage of labour was felt in the sugar plantations of the British colonies. In

order to overcome this problem, the British created the system of indentured form of labour from its colonies. In India, persons belonging to the agricultural caste living in the modern day states of western Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and Orissa were fraudulently recruited to travel to the British colonies and serve as labour on the plantations.

The indenture was a form of contract labour in which the contract was usually fixed for five years of work in a particular plantation. The plantation owner paid the labourer as per the contract, both in cash and in kind. At the end of the contract period, the labourer was free to work either elsewhere on the colony or return to the home country with the money earned. The labourer could also choose to renew the contract to work at the same plantation for another term. The employer was under a legal obligation to provide fixed wages, free housing, medical assistance and other basic amenities. This is what was written on paper but the practice was different from what was promised. In reality, the life of the indentured labourer (*girmitya*) was so rigid that the indentured system was almost a new system of slavery (Tinker 77). The labourers were forced into at least five years of harsh state-regulated labour and were denied the right to either change their employer or their employment mid-term. Despite the increased prices and cost of living each year, they could not even ask for an increase in their wages.

In the indentured system, the initial group of Indian labour was sent to the Caribbean Islands of Guyana in 1838, Trinidad and Tobago in 1845, and to Surinam in 1873. The second group was sent to Fiji in the Pacific Ocean in 1878. Indentured labour began as a term with a designated economic status but has since been broadened to encompass a human condition.

It is important to note here that the indenture system was never meant to be permanent. It was, 'merely a convenient device to stem the economic haemorrhaging of Caribbean plantations following the emancipation of slaves.' (Singh X) The immigrants did not arrive in the new land with the objective of making it their permanent home. The long voyage on ships from the east coast of India, across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans to the Caribbean, was just the beginning of the sense of homelessness and loss of identity that would plague the indentured Indians as well as their generations for all time. Even the twice-integrated off-spring would not be spared the feelings of homelessness that came along with the exile.

On their arrival in the Caribbean, the sense of isolation from the homeland was absolute. The displacement of language, dress, customs and food habits further managed to highlight the sense of alienation. The Caribbean was home to an English-soaking Christian society which looked down upon the indentured immigrants as 'pagans'. They were addressed in a derogatory manner as 'coolies'. (Singh XII) The word is derived from the Tamil word, *Kuli*, which means 'hire'. Even today, after many generations, the discriminatory word remains associated with them. Eric Willaims, in his book, *Inward Hunger: The Education*

of a Prime Minister; describes the advent of the scorned and ostracised coolie in the Caribbean, 'There is no question that the Indian occupied the lowest rung of the Ladder in Trinidad' (21). Their progeny did not fare any better. Born to indentured parents, led the children to have an exilic perspective that developed a double consciousness, which in turn highlighted the memory of an imagined homeland and played a big role in the longing to belong. Shunned by the natives as 'outsiders' and by their own Indian brethren in India as outcasts, the indentured Indians in the Caribbean were literally and figuratively cast adrift. Merely crossing the 'kalapani' was enough to be turned an outcaste in the Hindu system.

Brij V. Lal in *Chalo Jahaji*, writes, 'Once they had served their indenture, the Indians were left to their own devices.' (58) When the indenture system was discontinued in 1920, a major population of the *girmityas* chose to stay on in their new 'home'. Returning to India was not an option for many as they had been dispossessed of their homes in their native villages. Staying on in Trinidad presented problems of its own. The natives were suspicious of the integration and assimilation of the Indians and muted hostility and contempt characterised relations between them. 'In Trinidad, Indians "strenuously objected" to intermarriage with blacks.'

The indentured labourers themselves lived in a crisis, caught between the demands of two worlds, one which they had left and to which they could not return and the other where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than they had expected or wanted. The ironic thing is that a century later, that tension between alienation and attachment still animates the lives of many overseas Indians. (Lal 59)

Jahaji, Frank Birbalsingh's anthology contains potent narratives on the Indo-Caribbean indentured experience. It focuses on the issues of immigration as well as the 'outsider' experience of the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora. The stories throw light on the angst of the twice-migrants and showcase their experience as one beset with the anxiety of displacement and finally of disillusionment. *The Job Interview* by Christine Singh, realistically illustrates the pathos and predicament faced by the protagonist, Kris, a twice-migrant whose grandparents hailed from India and were indentured to a plantation in Trinidad. His parents moved to UK before he was born. The confusion faced by him over his status—whether he is a citizen or an immigrant—is brought out clearly and evocatively through his feeling of being alienated and exiled in what he considers his 'home'. The questions underlying the story remain unanswered till the end—Kris wonders, 'What is my point of origin? Where do I call home?' (172)

The migration process of the twice-migrants is complex. It comprises two courses of direction—the first being the migration of their ancestors from India to the Caribbean and the second, the migration of their parents from the Caribbean to other countries. (Nautika 3) Their experience emphasizes the issues of migrancy and also evaluates their negotiating, interrogating and navigating the cultural constructs involved in the emergence of a new hybrid identity.

Their quest for a home, roots, identity and belonging precipitates a level of trauma that leaves a deep psychological scar that no amount of assimilation and acculturation can overcome. Brinsley Samaroo suggests in *India in the Caribbean*, 'The Westindian East Indians will be neither West Indian nor East Indian until they first of all come to terms with themselves; and this process certainly involves an understanding of their Indian connection'(44). The exilic perspective references the rise of a different poetics showcasing how the memory of an imagined homeland plays a big role in the longing to belong.

The story opens with Kris being offered a summer job at IBM, London. Building up on his background, Singh narrates how Kris, while growing up, had been embarrassed and annoyed with the West Indian lilt in his mother's speech. Each time he would point out to his mother that she was a Trinidadian while he was British, the refrain would be, 'Eh, eh, how come yuh is English? Ah tell yuh already - yuh is Trinidadian jus' like me!' (157) When he turned nine, 'Krishna' (the Hindu name with which he had been christened at birth), consciously started calling himself 'Kris'. The change in name was necessitated by the fundamental question of identity and was a bid for adaptation and assimilation in the country in which he had been born, and to which he thought he belonged. However, his citizenship has always remained under question. His grandparents were from India, they had migrated to Trinidad as indentured labour; his parents were Trinidadian who had moved to the UK, and he had been born in the UK and had spent his whole life there. He was English but the British considered him an Indian, the Indians considered him Trinidadian and the Trinidadians considered him either English or Indian. The ignorance and indifference of the people he considers friends results in the creation of stereotypes whereas the loss of shared ethnicity with the Indians creates a vacuum in Kris' mind. Caught between the demands of two worlds, one which his grandparents and parents had left, and to which they could not return, and the other where they had come and stayed longer than they were wanted. 'The ironic thing is that a century later, that tension between alienation and attachment still animates the lives of many overseas Indians.' (Lal 59) Kris is caught in the vortex of identity reconstruction and acculturation.

His schoolmates and friends are ignorant and indifferent in their perception of the historical and contemporary social struggles faced by his people. Using the technique of flashback, Christine Singh explores the textures of Indian culture among people of Indian origin and the difficulties they continue to encounter as communities in a different land. In school, Kris chooses Football over Cricket, a move that annoys his father. He wants his son to play Cricket as it was 'in his heritage' (159) However, even though Kris is a good football player, he is made to sit on the bench and never allowed to play any match. The author suggests racism as the underlying cause for this discrimination. As a thirteen-year-old, he faces a paradox and realises that, 'finding friends is like fighting a losing battle.'

The 'milk chocolate' Kris has grown up receiving 'a stare, a giggle or sometimes even a shove against a desk' (162).

When his father puts him in a West Indian social group so that he can make friends, Kris is perplexed at finding that everyone there was 'black with frizzy hair' (163). When he sees another Indian boy and tries to connect with him, he is shunned and treated as an outcaste by the latter,

'Yuh said yuh was English. You doan soun' like a Trin to me.
I was born here but my parents are from there.
Well, I was born there, an' I tink this group is for children from
there.' (164)

This exchange illustrates in a stark manner, the loss of shared ethnicity with the Indians. Cut loose and set adrift, the homeland is lost to the twice-migrants.

When he tries to correct his friend's girl friend, Sara, that he is not from India, she ends up being confused by what she considers a convoluted explanation of Indian indenture, and the Caribbean plantations. 'I ain't from India. My grandparents were, but my family's from Trinidad.' He insists on being called British. 'I was born here. I am not an immigrant' (165). Finally, at the end of his tether and backed by a lifetime faced resolving the crisis of identity and belonging, Kris explodes on Sara, 'Your country grabbed up cheap Indian labour and stuck them in their colonies. Did your precious country not teach you that in your history lessons? We were dragged, whipped, beaten and killed, just so your country could get rich.' (169) This explosive encounter leaves him anxious and confused. He starts to question his identity on the way to the interview. As is the fate of other Indo-Caribbean's, Kris 'comes face-to-face with the void again, with a sense of emptiness compounded by helplessness' (Mishra 82).

During the course of the interview, Kris relieves the sense of exile and alienation that has plagued all those who have faced a double migration. On being asked whether he is from Depford, he responds after a lot of thinking, 'I do live in Depford, and I've never lived anywhere else. But that's not where I am from.' Urged to answer where he actually comes from, and taunted that it is not a difficult question to answer, Kris answers furtively 'I really don't know.' This poignant and evocative answer captures the very essence of loss that is inherent to the twice-migrants.

The paper discusses various works that illustrate and discuss various issues on cultural hybridity; how one constantly juggles between adapting to the idea of citizenship of the migrated land from the idea of being a neglected citizen of the motherland. Thus, the new floating identity of the migrated citizen affects the socio-political and economic perspectives. They often neglect the marginalized sections of society that are waiting to belong. In this way, the characters of the indentured Diaspora offer a significant field of study to research scholars of literature and culture studies.

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