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From India to Mauritius: *Jahaj* and *Jahajibhai* Sentiment in Indian Post-Indentured Diaspora Literature

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Abstract

After the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, more than one million Indians were taken on ships to the plantation colonies of Mauritius and Reunion in the Indian Ocean, Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, Suriname, Guyana, Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean under another system of labour that later came to be known as the Indentureship. Whereas Atlantic slavery has been studied extensively, the story of this massive migration had been silenced for centuries. It is only recently that one sees a growing interest in writers and intellectuals across the world to retrieve these narratives. This article, therefore, proposes to read three contemporary works of historical fiction-- *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* (The Rocks of Golden Dust) by the Mauritian writer Nathacha Appanah, the celebrated novel *Sea of Poppies* by the renowned author Amitav Ghosh and *Mati Mati Arkati* (Agent Everywhere) in Hindi written by an Indian writer Ashwini Kumar Pankaj, in order to retrace the history of the indentured Indian labourers, particularly their ship journeys from Calcutta in India to Mauritius. I intend to compare these somewhat similar tales of migration from India and the arrival of these migrants in Mauritius with a special focus on the space of the boat. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's notion of ship as a 'heterotopia par excellence' and Edouard Glissant's concept of *navire* (boat), I analyse how the space of the boat transforms itself into an extraordinary ecotone where the colonial officers coexist with the outcasts, the prisoners and the exiled. The heterotopic spatiality of the indentured/slavery ships becomes instrumental in forging strong subaltern, lateral alliances based primarily on the sense of fraternity emerging out of a sentiment of alienation, uprootedness and helplessness.

Keywords: Heterotopia; Indentureship; *Jahaji bhai;* Nathacha Appanah.

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India and Mauritius are tied together not only through their economic interests but also through the history of Indentureship, a past that was strategically silenced in the history of colonialization and imperialism. After the Atlantic slavery was abolished in the 19th century, there was a need for cheap, unskilled labour to replace the slaves. The British therefore came up with another system of labour, the Indentureship through which many Indians were taken to different sugar colonies between 1834 and 1917. It was different from slavery in some ways as the labourers were made to sign a formal contract of 5 years that they called *girmit* in Hindi and from where springs the term *girmitiya* referring to the indentured labourers. While Atlantic slavery has been discussed at length, little attention has been accorded to Indentureship. Ashutosh Kumar notes that the field of indenture studies developed late in the 1970s and it was only in the 1990s that important literary works emerged and "began to have an impact on teaching and research on the subject of Indian emigration History" (11).

In the Indian academic world, too, the departments of Diaspora Studies have focused more on the Indian diaspora in Canada and the USA as they were more affluent. Even in the UGC's model curriculum which is used as a point of reference by different university departments across India, one can observe "a glaring paucity of references of primary and secondary sources on writings from the Old Indian diaspora" (Pandurang 24). Diaspora researchers tend to think of migrations from India as 'two relatively autonomous archives designated by the terms 'old' and 'new''(Mishra 2-3). Amba Pande further explains this distinction stating that the "'old diaspora' emerged from colonial migrations due to capitalism and constituted mainly indentured labour migration to the Global South after the abolition of slavery whereas the 'new diaspora' emerged from the post-colonial migrations, including movements and settlements of working and more professionally skilled classes mainly to the North" (3).

It was as late as the 1990s that the Indian government, too, began showing some interest in its diaspora, thanks to the new emerging economic model following liberalization, privatization and globalization, but it focused on the new diaspora that was economically stronger. The old one was mostly overlooked due to economic as well as cultural reasons. According to the Hindu cultural belief system of the 19th century, crossing the *Kalapani*

(Black Waters) was considered a sin and led to the transgression of one's caste (Vertovec and Claveyrolas)*. This attitude of blatant discrimination prevailed in the social, political as well as the academic fields for a long time. It is fairly recently that one sees a growing interest amongst writers in retrieving this lost history.

Nathacha Appanah's French novel *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* (translated as *The Rocks of Golden Dust* and published in 2003), Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) written in English, and Ashwini Kumar Pankaj's *Mati Mati Arkati* (2016) in Hindi are three novels that evoke the journey of the indentured labourers from Calcutta to Mauritius. This article will read these three novels in comparison to comprehend the boat journeys as well as the arrival of the immigrants to the island of Mauritius with particular attention to the space of the boat. Drawing upon Michel Foucault's notion of the boat as a 'heterotopia par excellence' and Edouard Glissant's *navire* (boat) as a fertile matrix that leads to the creation of a creole tout-monde, I analyse how the space of the boat transforms into an extraordinary ecotone where the colonial officers co-exist with the outcasts, the prisoners and the exiled; where authoritarianism is often called into question through resistance. Although Nathacha Appanah is a Mauritian, Amitav Ghosh and Ashwini Pankaj are both of Indian origin. My aim is also to understand the need these writers feel to look back at the old diaspora that crossed the *Kalapani* centuries ago and found little mention in the Indian diasporic historiography. In telling the tales of these Indians, do these writers recognise the *girmitiyas* as their long-lost brethren who need to be remembered and whose stories need to be located within the history of the Indian subcontinent?

The boat and sea adventures have occupied a central position within the Western imagination since time immemorial. Sea narratives have had a past that emerged from cultures obsessed with adventure and travel narratives. Certain canonical literary works from ancient history related to sea adventure come to mind such as Homer's epic *The Odyssey* first written around the 7th and 8th century B.C. that became part of the Greek literary canon only by the mid-6th century B.C; *The Seafarer,* Old English poem recorded in the tenth-century Exeter book and *The Saga of Erik the Red* of the 13th century. First, the economic opportunities brought by the sea and later the influence of the Romantic Movement led to the glorification of

* To explore the history of ban on sea travel since ancient times to the 19th century, see Crispin Bates and Marina Carter. "Kala Pani Revisited: Indian Labour Migrants and the Sea Crossing." *Journal of Indentureship and Its Legacies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2021, pp. 36–62; S. C. Bindra, "Notes on Religious Ban on Sea Travel in Ancient India", *Indian Historical Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2002, pp. 34-37.

the ocean as the realm of unspoiled nature and a refuge from perceived threat of civilization, ship or boat as the medium to sustain afloat the perilous waters and sailor as the adventurous master whose heroic exploits triumphed over all the trials and tribulations at the sea. The insular island therefore was represented as an alternative form of society.

Literary critics and writers have valorised this maritime poetics of exile, vagabondage sea adventure and ships. Be it *Georges* (1843) by Alexander Dumas, *Paul et Virginie* (1788) by Bernardin de Saint Pierre, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe, ships have been the markers of wealth bringing in economic prosperity, as well as symbols of adventure leading to the discovery of the unknown people and knowledge. However, the literature and literary criticism of the twentieth century, the postcolonial literature in particular, attempt to break away from this tradition. They tend to focus on understanding and analysing the impact these journeys had on the local destinations. The story of slave ships and ships carrying indentured labourers during the colonial era disrupts the romanticized narrative and fore-grounds a counter narrative where boats and ships are what Antonio Benitez-Rojo calls "*la machine infernale*" at the origin of the histories of exploration and exploitation, colonization and contemporary capitalism. Here the boat comes to allegorize displacement, despair, uprootedness and absolute alienation. These boats were marked by disease and misery as the dead outnumbered the living (Kumar 84). They were the first site of trauma for the people uprooted from home in the most brutal way to be deported as animals to far off destinations where they were meted out a treatment worse than that of the animals. While in absolute agreement with the infernal image associated with the slavery and indenture ships, I intend to extend my reading of the boat in order to explore it as an ambivalent site where it is the trauma and misery that give way to a space open for lateral transcultural connections and a *jahaji bhai* identity that disrupts the old hierarchical structures in multiple ways.

Published in 2003, *The Rocks of Golden Dust* recounts the story of the ship Atlas with 138 coolies that sets sail on 23rd April 1892. When the novel came out with the collection Continents Noirs of Gallimard, a prestigious French publication house, it was well received and appreciated by the Francophone reader precisely because it was the first work of historical fiction emerging from Mauritius that openly discussed the theme of mass migration of Indians towards Mauritius. Narrated mostly in the third person, this text is divided into two sections. The first one is situated in India describing the Indians who made the decision to leave or were forced / tricked into leaving the country. This historical novel narrates the story of

four Indians who leave India and cross the *Kalapani* with the hope to work as indentured labourers in Mauritius and make fortune.

The first part explains their situation in India and how adverse circumstances force them to leave their home, family and nation, analysing the socio-cultural, economic and patriarchal issues prevalent during that time that led to migration. There is Badri, a young lazy lad who spends his time playing cards and decides to leave his native village to escape punishment from his father, Chotty Lall who is unable to pay the debt his father took from a zamindar decides to board the ship Atlas in order to make money, Ganga, a princesses from a royal family in Bangalore, after becoming a widow, is expected to mount the pyre of her dead husband. She escapes the city trying to save her life. Vythee, another Indian accompanying this group, desires to join his brother who already worked on a plantation in Mauritius.

All these characters are disillusioned by their situation in India and try to flee their circumstances. Most of them are marginalized in some way or the other: Badri and Vythee are too poor, Chotty Lall is exploited by a higher caste zamindar, Ganga is suppressed by the patrons of patriarchy. They are therefore easily convinced by the depot wallahs[**] that they are headed towards a bright future in Mauritius with easy access to money. They also heard numerous stories about discovering gold under rocks in Mauritius that refers to the title of the novel, "Les rochers de Poudre d'Or," translated as Rocks from a town named Golden Dust. This tempts them to leave behind their home and alienate themselves from their "motherland" by crossing the *Kalapani*.

The major section of the book that describes Atlas and life onboard is narrated as a first person account by an English racist doctor Mr. Grant through his daily diary entries. Marked by a strong sense of hatred and xenophobia, Grant's account portrays the ship as a monstrous, infernal space. Seeing the Indians piled one over the other in the holds where they could hardly breathe, he remarks "the sentiment of pity had completely disappeared. In fact, I felt a sense of pleasure at this spectacle and it made me laugh" (66)[***]. He describes how the holds of the ship smelt of rotten corpse, urine and shit; and states that if misery and death were to have a smell, it would be this.

Atlas, according to him, is a cursed vessel devoid of all romantic gran-

** The agents employed in India by the Britishers to convince people to work as indentured labourers in Mauritius, known as *arkati* in Hindi.

*** The translations from French are mine.

deur, given to utter helplessness death and disease. He witnesses a suicide in the early days of the journey and had to throw a man off the board as his body had started decomposing. These images become specters that haunt him throughout the endless and slow journey to Mauritius. As he reads Shakespeare's *Tempest* on the boat, he often confuses between the image of Prospero and the dead man and finally commits suicide. Poddar in her article "The Poetics of Boat in Francophone Mauritian writing" sees Atlas as a palimpsest, a subversive rewriting of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. According to her the hero on board is not the European sorcerer in full control of nature especially the sea, but an ambivalent phantomic figure that incarnates the figure of the European exploiter, colonialist and the exploited Indians equally tyrannized by the ocean and the infernal journey.

The uncanny and bizarre resemblance between Dr. Grant's suicide and that of the Indian labourer at the beginning of the journey by jumping off the ship into the black waters of the *Kalapani* is definitely symptomatic of a toppling over of rigid hierarchical difference that the colonizers struggled to maintain on the overcrowded ship. Whereas suicide by a labourer is a routine matter on every ship, that of a colonial officer is one of utter concern to all. Carter, an officer who looks at the register at Port Louis remarks that 30 deaths was a good number. In usual circumstances one could say that that was an excellent journey but here one of the dead was not only an Englishman but also the doctor of the ship whose body could not be found. Describing the conditions that led to Dr. Grant's suicide, the captain of the ship Mr. William states:

> (…) there was a strange death on the boat. 3-4 weeks after our departure from Calcutta. It was a man whose body was decomposing. So he had to be thrown while he was still breathing. We could not do much. It was raining heavily, the Indians were panicking down below and he was howling to death. It was terrible. It was there that I believe it all started. The sea was something. We have not seen it like that even during cyclones. The waves covered us and made threatening scary faces at us. Sometimes I thought the boat would crack open. That death had a major impact on the doctor. He suddenly started looking very old. Devon had remarked that his hair had gone white and he would not cut them and he started resembling the old man who had committed suicide. That ship was cursed (85).

In his death one witnesses the transformation of a tyrant colonizer who resisted all interaction with Indians to one who ends up meeting the same

fate as the colonized onboard. His death can then be attributed to a sudden bout of madness that envelops him as he begins to have hallucinations and sees spectres of people who had died on the ship in a rough sea. It is therefore a certain geo-politics within the spatial reality of the ship that triggers Grant's madness. It would then be reductive to read the dynamic space of the ship as one marked only by suffering, misery and trauma, as does Grant in his account of the journey. The space of Atlas resonates neither with the romantic image of the ship in the 18th or 19th centuries nor with the Antonio Benitz Rojo's dystopic view of boat as an infernal machine or that of Dr. Grant. In fact, this site can best be articulated through Foucault's notion of Heterotopia. Contrasting it with the concept of utopia, Foucault describes heterotopia (etymologically meaning other space) as,

> (…) counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias (23).

Outlining six different kinds of heterotopias, Foucault's theory finally considers ship as a heterotopia par excellence simply because it is a space that perfectly embodies the essence of his notion of heterotopia. Underscoring its peculiar characteristic to be connected to and yet separate from land, he calls it "a floating piece of space, a place without a place that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea" (27). Ships do connect sea to land and multiple ports together. Yet, they also create self-contained environments, their own micro-communities due to their peculiar geopolitical status. Their capacity to create constant movement challenges terrestrial stasis and allows the possibility for distinct spaces governed by unique rules calling into question conventional social structures, leading to affirmation of differences and magical possibilities of resistance against authoritarianism and repression.

In the case of the floating Atlas, it is the drifting away from the British territory of India that creates a situation where the subservient passengers, the Indian labourers rise as a majority on the ship. It is their sense of

fraternity against the brutal oppression by the colonial officers that allows Atlas to challenge Grant's reading of this place as a diabolic dystopia, as the vessel gradually transforms itself into a heterotopic spatiality where conventions are contested and often inverted.

The second half of the novel, narrated in third person, presents a more nuanced picture. At the depot in Calcutta even before boarding the ship Atlas, Indians sense a sentiment of fraternity towards each other. They might be complete strangers to each other but they were all united as outcasts who were to cross the water of the *Kalapani* and soil their souls, abandon their castes. They all shared a sense of uncertainty, fear of the unknown, as they were headed to a far-off destination that many had not even heard of before. The narrator rightly describes their plight as he states: "(…) that night, all men who were to cross the *Kalapani* felt a little like brothers" (32).

Although the novel does not develop the relationship amongst Indians onboard because the journey is described through Dr. Grant's diary entries, unlike the other novels, yet there are instances when one notices an evolution in this sentiment of fraternity-- the folksongs they sing together throughout the journey, shared unease at throwing dead bodies without a proper funeral ceremony etc. In fact, when Chotty Lall, one of the immigrants, dies on the ship, he is sent off with a small funeral ceremony-- chanting of "Ram nam satya hai"[****], lightening of incense, betel leaf in his mouth and red tikka on his forehead. When Dr. Grant enquires about the ceremony, William replies that they are offering a traditional funeral ceremony because Lall was more than a co-passenger to them, he was like a big brother to all. Mr. Willam describes how Atlas was different from other ships where Indians would soon divide themselves into groups based on region, caste or class and start fighting for women, thereby reconstituting the same socio-cultural hierarchical patterns they lived in India.

On the contrary, on Atlas, he states, Chotty Lall had managed to keep them all united. Atlas then becomes Foucault's heterotopic floating space, that despite the teeming number of dystopic elements manages to forge a sense of jahajibhai sensibility amongst the passengers enabling them to fight terrible repression imposed from the colonial authorities. Brij V. Lal, an acclaimed scholar in indentureship also observes that "overseas journey leading beyond the kalapani levelled down social hierarchies and obliterated oppressive cultural practices. New relationship grew. Among these relationships, the relation of *Jahajibhai* (shipmate) was the most prominent emotionally. This *jahaji* relationship was as deep and caring as

**** Lord Ram is the only truth

blood relationship" (2). This *jahajibhai* sentiment often outlived the boat experience to forge a sense of kinship amongst the shipmates even after they landed and created a life for themselves on the island.

This ambivalent aspect of the ship is further underscored in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* that narrates the journey of the ship Ibis departing from Calcutta to Mauritius in 1838. Ibis was built to serve as a blackbird for transporting slaves. However, after the abolition of slavery it was taken by the company Burnham Bros that was interested in opium trade to India and China. In this particular trip the ship was carrying indentured labourers as well which constituted a motley array of sailors, stowaways coolies[*****], convicts and colonial officers. Unlike Atlas, where the protagonists Badri, Chotty Lall, Vythee with the only exception of Ganga who tries to hide herself as she is a runaway Sati, board the ship with their original names and identities; Ibis is an extra-ordinary space that opens itself to many only after they have sufficiently disguised themselves as others. Deeti, a Brahmin, who is from the village of Ghazipur disguises herself as a *chamar*[******] in order to board the ship with her partner Kalua who belongs to the *chamar* community. Paulette, daughter of a French botanist, after being orphaned is running away from an arranged marriage with an older colonial officer by disguising herself as an Indian woman. One cannot ignore Zachary the second mate on the ship whose identity as a free black is revealed much later in the novel as he is a son of a quadroon and a white master. There is Neel Haldar the king of Raskhali who is forced to board Ibis as a prisoner along with a half-Parsi half-Chinese named Ah Fatt. Serang Ali, pretending to be a lascar belonged to a notorious pirate gang and the agent Baboo Nob Kissin who undergoes a spiritual transformation onboard.

The novel opens with Deeti's dream of a huge ship, "The vision of a tall-masted ship at sail on the ocean, came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny. For she had never seen such a vessel before" (3). Deeti was the wife of a high-class Rajput Hukum Singh who belonged to a farmer's family. While

***** Coolie is a pejorative term, a demeaning word that was originally used in India to designate specific labourers, mainly those involved in carrying and transporting heavy loads. It was later applied to porters on railways stations or the docks. The Britishers used this term for the indentures workers as a racial slur. However, in recent times the descendants of indentured labourers are reclaiming this term to invest a sense of retrospective pride in it. See Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Women: The Odyssey of Indenture*. University of Chicago Press, 2013.

****** Designating a lower caste

serving in the British regiment, he gets injured and is offered an employment at the opium factory. This provides him an easy access to opium as he is an opium addict and aggravates his condition. After Hukum Singh's demise, Deeti is expected to be sacrificed alive at her husband's funeral pyre, but she ends up escaping and boarding the Ibis. The journey on the boat is such that it allows her to question many customs and superstitions. She states that the Black Water had drowned their past and "their rebirth in the ship's womb had made them into a single family" (432).

Deeti views her reincarnation on the ship as a transformation intricately related to the boat, as if the belly of the boat itself was the matrix of their existence leading to relations built on the common experience of the boat. The narrator observes, " it was now that Deeti understood why the image of the vessel had been revealed to her that day, (…) it was because her new self, her new life had been gestating all this while in the belly of this creature, this vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden *mai-bap*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come" (357). Her understanding of the ship as an ancestor strongly resonates with Edouard Glissant's notion of the boat as a fertile matrix, the creator of a creole tout monde:

> First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat. For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamour of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death (6).

According to Glissant, this suffering in the abyss never dies, even after all memories from the past fade away. In fact, it is this abyss, the belly of the boat that through experience becomes the source of knowledge, not just a specific knowledge -- appetite, suffering, and delight of one particular people but knowledge of the whole and freeing knowledge of relation within the whole. Regarding the absolute misery and suffering one experiences on the ship Glissant states, " for though this experience made you original victim floating towards the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others (…) relation is not made up of things that are foreign bit of shared

knowledge (…) we know ourselves as part and as crowd in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open and we sail them for everyone" (7).

The sense of fraternity viewed in Appanah's *The Rocks of Golden Dust* even before entering the vessel reappears in a strong way in *Sea of Poppies* particularly the group of women as they dissolve all cultural, caste and religious differences to consider themselves as boat sisters (*jahaji behen*). On being asked if she feared losing her caste by crossing the *Kalapani*, Paulette's daring and ingenious answer stuns all: "on a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same. It is like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship siblings, *jahaz bhais*, *jahaz behans* to each other. There will be no difference between us" (356). All women reach out their hands in a communion of touch as Deeti affirms, yes we are *jahaz behan* all of us children of the ship. Although women on the vessel come together transcending all differences at the beginning of the journey itself, the men evolve with the temporal and spatial reality of the ship to achieve a sense of *jahaji* fraternity that transgresses all differences and binds them together into one single spatially shared experience of the boat. When a Muslim weaver from Pirpainti travelling with two cousins dies on the ship, Deeti with many others on the boat appeal for a pre-funeral ceremony and it is met with success. At this victory, however, Kalua is unhappy, fearing the retaliation by colonial officers. To his apprehensions, Deeti remarks they could not do much as they were all at sea, underlining the geographical particularity of the ship that is empowering for the *girmitiyas*. If in Appanah's work *girmitiyas* see the possibility of a rebellion given their large numbers but later abandon the idea fearing that they might not be able to sustain themselves as they didn't understand the ship or the sea, in *Sea Of Poppies*, some migrants join hands with the lascars and others who understand the sea better and bring about a rebellion in which they kill the captain and the chief police officer and escape on a small boat.

Much like Glissant, the agent Baboo Nob Kissin, who undergoes a spiritual transformation aboard, sees suffering and misery on the ship as an essential prerequisite, a sort of purification that prepares one for the moment of awakening. For him, Ibis was not a ship like any other, as he explains, "in her inward reality she was a vehicle of transformation, travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive ever-receding landfall that was truth" (66). This sudden wisdom allows him to be instrumental in unlocking the cages that imprisoned the two convicts setting them free and thereby bringing about a small rebellion on the ship in which the captain

and the chief police officer are killed and a boat with 5 people on board escapes from the Ibis. Deeti, too, has her own moment of enlightenment as she reflects on how opium had governed her life since the beginning, contrary to her belief that it was Saturn. Giving seeds of opium to Kalua, she states, "Here, taste it. It is the star that took us from our homes and put us on this ship. It is the planet Shani, that rules our destiny" (452).One sees how her experience at the boat allows her to question her own superstitious beliefs and traditions that were once very dear to her and embrace a more realistic vision of life with an open mind, leading to a spiritual and philosophical rebirth that sets her free to be a part of the world where differences are celebrated much like Glissant's creole tout monde.

Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* as suggested by the title itself situates the story of indentured laborers within the larger colonial context of plantation politics and opium trade and by so doing reveals the significant impact that capitalism had on trade relations and mass movements of people towards the New World. It weaves uncanny parallels between the slave trade and the indentured labourers helping us to understand the tale of indentured labour within the narrative of colonial politics and imperialist capitalism.

Ashwini Pankaj's novel *Mati Mati Arkati, Hill Coolie Kaunta kee Kahani* that roughly translates as Agent Everywhere, the story of Kaunta, a hill coolie was published in 2016. Much like the other two novels, it narrates the journey from Calcutta, India to Port-Louis, the capital of Mauritius on the ship Emerald Isle that carried around 250 Indians on an open deck in 1843. This ship was initially constructed as a cargo ship destined to transport goods but in this trip it was forced to carry human beings as well.

This text is intriguing for many reasons as it brings to the fore the story of a hill coolie, The introduction of the novel itself is revelatory in this context: "there is nothing new in this story that has not been said or heard before, the only difference is that the earlier stories did not have Kaunta" (15)[*******] and highlights the clear intention of the author to give voice to the forgotten tales of hill coolies, the tribal population that boarded the ship but was not registered officially, unlike the non-tribal coolies who were registered by the British companies and therefore figured on the official records.

Pankaj explains how difficult it was to get sufficient information on the hill coolies who boarded the ships to go to Mauritius or Fiji or other plantation colonies. According to him there was a strategic plan to supress

******* The translations from Hindi are mine.

Kaunta's story and therefore he feels the urgent need to bring this tale to the fore. He has done extensive research and based his story on John Scoble's pamphlet written in 1839 criticizing the manner in which hill coolies were transported. This novel written in contemporary times also becomes a liminal space where Kaunta's tale merges with that of the tribal population in Mauritius.

Kaunta, a hill coolie boards the ship Emerald Isle so that he could make some money and help his family in paying the debts. The colonial officers get him married to a Brahmin lady named Kunti who was trying to escaping her village after her husband's demise. Within this frame narrative are merged several tales of co-passengers who left either voluntarily or by force. It is the utterly miserable treatment meted out to the passengers on the ship that brings them together. Initially, due to prominent caste differences the higher caste people such as Kunti and Ramnarayana are not willing to eat with others and often ask for separate meals. Kunti was not able to accept Kaunta as her husband because he belonged to a tribal clan, and was often looked down upon by the upper caste people as barbaric.

These differences, however, slowly disappear and the passengers manage to come together as members of a family; as explains the narrator, "(…) on the 26th day of the journey when lunch was served there was no division. High caste, low caste and tribes all sat together along with the women folk" (52). They finally comprehend the significance of being united given the terrible situation on the ship. When they finally arrive at the port and have to part ways for plantations, they seem to be very emotional: "after 40-45 days of journey together in which they participated in each other's sorrows from the dark sombre room at Calcutta to the monstrous journey on the ocean. There were no blood ties amongst them but the ties made of ocean of suffering were indeed stronger" (78).

The sense of unity that later became the *jahaji bhai* spirit therefore springs from the peculiar geo-politics of the ship. However, as the *girmitiyas* settle and evolve with time this sentiment begins to fade away. Initially both Kaunta and Ramnarayan who belonged to a higher caste fight together as *girmitiyas* against the plantation owners. However, with time Ramnarayana begins to cheat his fellow coolies as he seeks better opportunities and ends up becoming the Sirdar, the chief labourer. In one incident, Kaunta and his friends are attacked by the plantation owners and many of his friends die. However, Kaunta manages to escape and is later saved by the sea pirates. One can read his disappearances as an allegory to the disappearance of hill coolies from *girmitiya* histories of the new plantation

colonies as one finds no mention of this clan in either the literary works or the historical accounts. Interestingly, however, Kaunta is later saved by a group of tribal Malagasies whose leader exclaims, "He is Kaunta. Like us. An aboriginal from far off land who fights for the heart and the land of this earth" (242), establishing a sense of identification between two different tribal groups.

The writer questions the rise of Bhojpuri coolie population in Mauritius at the expense of the hill coolies as he explains how the *jahaji bhai* sentiment fades away and numerous differences remerge as ethnicity-based identity politics becomes strong. It is these differences that finally lead to the communal riots following Kaya's death in 1999. Kaya was a well-known Mauritian musician and creator of a new genre of music seggae. He belonged to the group Mauritian Creole who are descendants of African slaves from Madagascar and Mozambique and came from the Bantu tribe.

One would be surprised to observe that the last chapter of the novel sheds light on Kaya's childhood and describes in detail the events that led to his death in the prison. Kaya was taken into custody on the grounds of consuming drugs in public but many believe that he was arrested for fighting for the rights of the Creole people. His death led to communal riots escalating the conflict between the Creoles in Mauritius and the Bhojpuri Hindu community that today has a significant representation in the government. In the author's opinion, the conflict between Kaunta and Ramanarayan is identical to the one between Kaya and the government, as it highlights the differences between high-caste Hindu society and the descendants of African, Malagasy, and Asian descent.

Ashwini Pankaj who is an activist working for tribal rights dedicates his work not only to hill coolies like Kaunta but also to Kaya who had been struggling for the rights of Mauritian Creoles. His dedication reads "militant ancestors Kaunta and Kunti and to Kaya, a martyr of the new generation of tribal Mauritians" (5). For him, Kaya is a descendant of Kaunta, suggesting possibilities of alliances between Creoles, the descendants of slaves and the descendants of indentured workers. Furthermore, the beginning and the end of the novel are marked by Malagasy citations. There are references to numerous Malagasy idiomatic expressions in the narrative that emphasize the similarities within different and distant tribal communities who have never been in obvious contact, hinting at the possibility of a common tribal culture. The author uses both textual as well as paratextual means to allow us to reflect on subaltern and lateral connections that can challenge not only the geographical but also the cul-

tural boundaries and thereby emphasizes a transnational tribal aesthetics that emerges out of the mass movements such as those of slaves and indentured labourers.

Conclusion

This article has examined long boat journeys of indenture ships that departed from Calcutta, India to Port-Louis in Mauritius in order to understand the crucial role ships play in the larger dynamic of *girmit* identity. It attempts to understand the geopolitical particularity of these ships as heterotopic spaces where conventions and norms are challenged, as new communities and relationships are forged based on shared sentiment of solidarity and resistance. The holds of the ships become gestating wombs where passengers are reborn as *jahaji bhais* and *jahaji behans*. By analysing the *jajhaji bhai* sentiment that took birth on the boats and its evolution in the post-indentured societies, it enables us to comprehend how mass migrations have contributed in the creation of subaltern, lateral alliances based on a sense of fraternity that emerges out of a feeling of alienation and uprootedness. This solidarity has the potential to surpass boundaries and borders determined by class, caste or race, as it becomes instrumental in fostering multiple polymorphous affiliations that are not only transnational but also transcultural in nature.

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