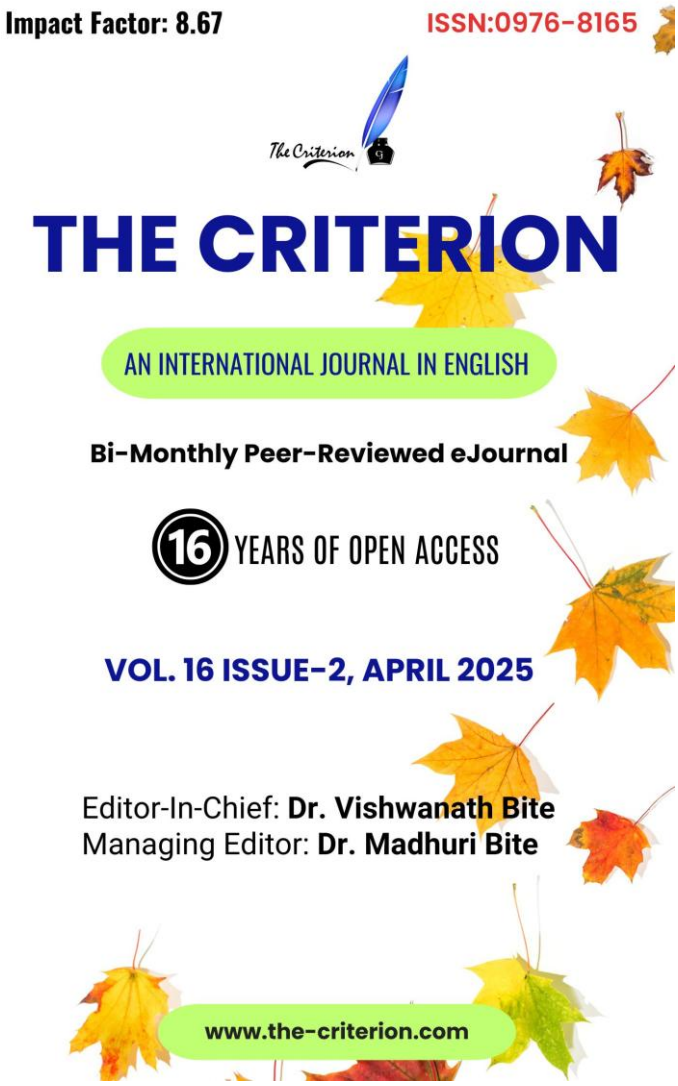

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Every Day as Epitome of Trauma and Memory: Lives of Indentured Indians across the 'Kala Pani'

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Abstract:

Indian Diaspora is often conceived as a fascinating migration with the images of a sophisticated and luxurious life in a foreign nation. Consequently, many ignorantly associate the Indian diaspora as a recent activity which happened/s mostly for education or a well-paid job. However, many were not aware that before the beginning of the Modern Indian diaspora, a mass migration of Indians to the European colonies happened, which is known as the Indenture Indian diaspora. Indian Indenture Diaspora, also called 'a new system of slavery', shattered the happiness of the people with low incomes and the middle-class Indians. More than twenty lakh Indians were transported to the British colonies either willingly or forcefully from 1837 to 1920. Sense of trauma and the pain of memory became a happening of every day in the lives of the indentures but its intensity differed based on every day. They experienced tragedy under the cruelty of the plantation system like the false promises of return (in some cases), kidnapping, voyage for more than three months on a lonely sea without proper food and space to sleep, more than eighteen hours of work in the plantation, scarcity of food, cruel punishments, sexual violence and the truth of never returning the home country. The paper aims to present the trauma and pain experienced by innocent Indian

labourers in a foreign nation by using autobiographical and biographical works, testimonials and historical records. In addition, the paper also aims to present the transformation of the pitiable Indians into powerful ones by establishing their culture and identity in those colonies.

Keywords: Indenture, Kala Pani, Trauma, Home, Imaginary Home.

The term diaspora was one of the buzzwords of the 1990s, and, especially after globalisation, it has emerged as a fascinating word. The economically elevated lives in the developed nations attract many people. Since the 1960's almost all the migrations have been happening for economic growth or education purposes and most interestingly all these migrations are towards the developed nations. Before the 1960s the word 'diaspora' was used to denote specific ethnic communities with negative connotations. It denoted rootlessness, loneliness, discrimination and marginalisation. In the case of the Indian diaspora, one could easily differentiate the features of the Indian diaspora during the pre-independence and post-independence periods. Vijay Mishra, a great diaspora 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 purposes in the metropolitan centres. The above-mentioned two types of diaspora differ in all aspects except the basis of migration. The present paper aims to shed light on the indenture diaspora as many research works are available on the Modern diaspora. The hypothesis of the research article is to present the trauma and pain undergone by innocent Indian labourers in a foreign nation on an everyday basis and the paper refers to the historical records, testimonials, literary resources and the research works on indenture diaspora.

Till the beginning of the nineteenth century, the British used enslaved Africans for plantation work and other development-related activities. The cruel treatment experienced by

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the Africans forced them to resist the burden of slavery. Consequently, in 1834 William Gladstone, a British Liberal Party statesman, introduced a new labour supply system which transported hill coolies from Bengal to his Mauritius plantations. The British government supported and implemented it as an indenture system with some laws to follow in all the colonies of Britain. Thus, "Between 1834 and 1917, over one point three million Indians, East Asians, Africans, and Pacific Islanders were resettled on British colonies worldwide, mostly to sugarcane plantations as replacements for formerly enslaved Africans, following the indenture resettlement program." (Lal, 1983:1) The greediness of the plantation owners and the British government and the idea of the indenture system turned the lives of the innocent Indians into a pathetic one and their everyday lives filled with torture and pain.

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 crises, thus projecting themselves as saviours. In reality, in the case of emigration of indentures, there were many push factors than pull factors. Kapil Kumar states regarding it as "There was tremendous pressure on land as a result of the colonial practices of disbanding the armies of local rulers, the weavers and the artisans being thrown out of their professions as one after another, the local kingdoms fell prey to British expansion." (26)

Process of Recruitment:

The rules for recruiting the labourers followed some lawful procedures. The recruiters should appoint Indian labourers as indentures by telling the reality of the work, location, journey and other conditions. Those labourers were taken before the magistrate before being approved for indenture. The magistrate would permit them to travel after getting consent from the labourers. Nevertheless, these rules existed only on paper as the greedy recruiters appointed local people (called a*rkatis* or *arkatia*) as in charge of getting more indentured

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labourers. The *arkatis* are the mediators who supply labour to the recruiters. They are projected as merciless, selfish and cruel-natured due to their evil doings. They cheated the ignorant villagers by telling them that they must travel by boast as the workplace is covered by water and many false promises about their salary and other advantages. They used four techniques to get the labourers such as forcing them to migrate, using their poverty, kidnapping and attracting men through beautiful women.

> Arkatties are common residents of the recruiting districts. . . . They take out no licences, but otherwise perform most of the functions which the law assigns to licenced recruiters. The profession is well established and well recognised. They keep themselves informed of the circumstances of their poorer fellow villagers. If any man gets into debt and is pressed by his creditors, if any quarrel or disruption takes place in a family, if any woman strays from the path of virtue, they are on the alert to put out the advantage of escaping from present troubles. ... It is a common practice with them to visit the weekly hats [markets] which are held all over the district and make overtures to any likely looking young man or young woman whom they meet. When the arkattie has got one or two more or less willing recruits he carries them off to his house where he keeps them well fed and if possible makes them drunk. The arkattie then presents himself before the local agent. . . . He brings in his coolies generally in the night and in covered carts lest they be seen and detected by their friends and taken away. Then they are produced before the local agent and accepted by him and despatched at the earliest possible date (quoted by Tinker 124).

All these labourers stayed at a depot and they had to express their willingness to travel to the magistrate. Though it was a procedure implied by the indenture law, the labourers were threatened beforehand that if they gave negative responses, they would face severe punishment. After the procedure, they were shipped to the respective colonies.

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Journey across the 'Kala Pani':

The ship journey of the indentured labourers leaving their homeland for a foreign land, fear about the life conditions in the new land, homesickness and loneliness made the journey a never-ending trauma. Additionally, for almost all of them, that was their first journey overseas, which lasted for more than three months. The calmness of the sea and the doubt about returning to the home country left many of them to lose their confidence which resulted in the suicide of many labourers and a decline in their health. During the ship journey, the migrant should be given seventy-two cubic feet for adults, a separate place for the sick people, as the travel took more than a hundred days. However, the recruiters did not follow any of these rules. Moreover, the poor maintenance of the ship, more passengers than the allotted numbers on the ship, inferior quality, and less quantity of food affected the health of many passengers. A newspaper article was published about the condition of the passengers thus,

> Among the dead were numbered 29 men, 33 women, 5 boys, 7 girls, 9 male and 11 female infants. Of the 364 landed here, 39 were in a condition which necessitated their immediate transference to the hospital. […] The surgeon states that about fifty of the immigrants were in a low state of health when shipped; and that he would have objected to their embarkation had he been aware of their condition. But, as he did not join the ship until she was ready for sea, he did not become acquainted with it until she had actually sailed. [...] When lime juice and fresh vegetables were required, it was found that the lime juice was bad, and that the whole of the onions and potatoes taken on board at Calcutta were rotten (Jenkins xvii)

Once the labourers landed in the colonies, people from the plantations selected the labourers and moved them to the respective colonies. In the beginning period they were given

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less task and provided rationed food for a week. The food was significantly less and many of the indentured completed it in three days and starved for the rest of the week.

Life in the Plantation:

In the plantation field, the indentured were assigned hectic tasks which required more than twelve to fourteen hours of work. The practice regarding the payment of salary differed in colonies; in the Caribbean colonies, the labourers were paid based on the completion of the task, in Jamaica it was weekly wages and in Mauritius, it was monthly wages. Though the differences may appear in the payment rules, mostly the indentured were deprived of salary with a complaint of not completing the task. Mauritius plantations followed a system of 'double cut' that is if an indentured labour was absent for a day from work, the labourer would not receive payment for the two days. It may sometimes add as a double indenture at the end of five years. In some places, if the indentured labour failed to work due to illness or other reasons, a penalty of four 's' was imposed.

> A man who was engaged at 10s. a month, composed of twenty-six working days (as was normal) might, through illness, work only ten days. He would earn 3s. 9d. thereby; but for the sixteen absent days he would be fined 12s., leaving him in debt to the planter 8s. 3 d.—and this sum must be worked off the following month by labouring twenty-two days for no pay. Thorny Hugon alleged that some planters engaged more workers than they required, and were deliberately careless about absences from work so that they could levy fines and reduce their wages bill. (Tinker 188-189)

Tinker listed different types of punishments for absence from work thus,

> For absence from work, or refusal to work, an indentured coolie could be fined -£2, or given a sentence of a month's imprisonment in Trinidad; for the same offence, he would be fined $10 or get a month in jail in British Guiana; while in Jamaica he would

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> be fined -£3, and in Fiji be fined 3s. for each day's absence. Mauritius had a category of 'habitual idleness' (i.e., absence from work for two weeks without excuse) which was punishable by three months imprisonment. For absence from the plantation for three days without leave, the penalty was a fine or two months' imprisonment in Trinidad; a fine of$24 or two months' imprisonment in British Guiana; a fine of -£2 in Jamaica, and a fine of -£5 or three months' imprisonment in Fiji. Mauritius also imposed three months in prison for this offence. For refusing to produce identifying documents to a police constable or the Protector, the penalty was a fine of -£1 or fourteen days' imprisonment in Trinidad, $5 or fourteen days in British Guiana and a fine of -£1 only in Jamaica. Thus the law was harsh, yet uneven in its severity, in the different colonies. (195)

Added to that, the other punishments were

> "Then, when indentured Indians failed to complete tasks, planters would bring actions against them under section LXVIII of the ordinance, which penalized indentured Indians who "fail[ed] to show ordinary diligence in the performance of any work assigned to [them]" with a fine amounting up to three days' wages or seven days' imprisonment." (Harvard Law Review 1846).

They suffered from overwork, low wages, poor housing, illness, isolation, and malnutrition. The whole law of indenture supported the plantation owners by extracting money and fear from the indentures through fines, tax and punishments, and imprisonment. Indentured labourers faced indescribable struggles in the colonies. W. C. Twynam, a Ceylon official, described the pain undergone by the indentures thus,

> The miserable gangs of coolies of 1843 and 1845, with one or two women to fifty or a hundred men, strangers in a strange land, ill-fed, ill-clothed, eating any garbage they

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> came across . . . travelling over jungle paths, sometimes with scarcely a drop of water to be found anywhere near them for miles, and at other times knee-deep, the greater part of the way in water, with the country all round a swamp, working on estates just reclaimed from jungle, or on jungles about to be converted into estates, badly housed and little understood by their employers (Quoted by Tinker 93).

Most of the time the Indian labourers were blamed as lazy and criticised that they dwell in idealness without active work in the fields.

> It is when the rainy season sets in that his [the Indian's] heaviest trials commence, when he makes his first essay in weeding, perhaps in high cane and heavy grass . . . the work is hard, monotonous, and in high canes may almost be called solitary; he loses heart, makes a task in double the time in which an experienced hand would make a whole one, returns at a late hour, cold, wet and fatigued, to renew the struggle on the morrow with decreased vitality till at the end of his first year it is found that his work has not paid for his rations. . . . An immigrant embarks on the second year of apprenticeship saddled with a considerable debt from his first year's ration (Quoted by Tinker 182).

The indentures had a difficult life in the fields. The fear of losing their wages and imprisonment forced them not to take leave from work even if they did not feel well enough to work on the plantations. Peggy Mohan narrates an incident to highlight the plights of the indentures in the estates. Mukoon Singh had a seizure in the fields and was made to stay in the barracks. Though he knew that it would take a day for him to recuperate, he didn't want to miss any work. Because he knew that his pay would be reduced and he would have to borrow money to buy rations. This fear forced him to work but he collapsed in the field due to

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weakness and hunger. The next day, the police took him to jail, by claiming that he was a vagrant (104).

Discriminations:

The practice of the system of slavery left the planters to implement the same cruel treatment upon the indentures, too. The Plantation owners restricted the indentured from moving freely outside the estate. The pass system to go out of the plantation was another kind of discrimination that enabled the indentured to undergo psychological issues due to the feeling of isolation.

> After the expiration of their contract, they needed a pass to leave the plantation and without a pass, they were not allowed to leave. A worker could leave the plantation only with the approval of the director, who issued the pass. Planters thus limited both the social and geographic mobility of contract workers to control their labour force both on and off the job. Social provisions such as housing, the estate hospital, and the plantation ration shops also enhanced planter's control over contract labourers (Yadav 66).

Indenture be seen as a system which receives only profit through labour without giving anything in return. The labourers did not receive any incentives or full payments instead received only punishments and penalties.

> …often their attempts to forget the cane fields ended only in drunken oblivion. When goaded beyond their apparently infinite endurance and patience they would try to rebel; but the protest almost always ended in repression. For many, the plantation brought sickness and premature death. For a few, it brought a chance to acquire a little power, and so by petty exploitation of one's fellows to become a little less poor, thus giving the means of getting away from the confinement of the plantation. But for most, the

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> plantation remained the boundary of existence. Although the indentured coolie could be held in legal bondage only for a period of years, the plantation held most of them for life (Tinker 179-179).

The indentured received false promises and assurances about their work and the recruiters manipulated the labourers about the living conditions and about the distance they had to travel. Anjali Singh states this thus:

> Almost all indentured voices agreed that they were not told about the living conditions they would be offered in the plantations. Nor were they given a fair summation of the money they would earn. Among the list of deceptions practised by the recruiters, the recurrent complaint was about the lack of information on the return to the homeland. It was only when they reached the plantations that the indentured people learnt they would have to pay for their food from their salary, that the food given to them for a week would not be enough for even five days. They soon learnt that they would be punished for the smallest of 'offences', which would entail their money being deducted by the overseer. They would also have to face extreme humiliation at the hands of the overseers, and be treated like animals, violently thrashed and beaten, while their women would be sexually assaulted. They would have no recourse to legal measures and the natives and indigenous people would continue to remain hostile to them. This was the fate that greeted the indentured labourers on their arrival in the plantation colonies. (24)

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 the chances of establishing families, which paved the way for permanent settlements in the colonies. Consequently, a new law enforced that 25% of the migrants must be women

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indentured. Asthosh Kumar quotes G. A Grierson's report of four categories of women who migrated as indentures thus,

> The first category was that of the wives of emigrants, the second category was widows without friends or kin, who were starving, and the third category comprised married women who had been socially ostracised for absconding from their husband's house (with or without a lover) and had been shunned by him, and finally, women who were regarded as prostitutes and had no other means of support (41).

Added to that, kidnapping and other immoral ways of transporting women as indentureds occurred. Several such narrations that focus on the reasons for migration highlight compulsion as a major reason.

> One woman told me she had quarrelled with her husband in anger and ran away from her mother-in-law's house to her mother's. A man on the road questioned her and said he would show her the way. He took her to a depot for indentured labour. Another woman said her husband went to work at another place. He sent word to his wife to follow him. On her way, a man said he knew her husband and that he would take her to him. This woman was taken to a depot. An Indian girl was asked by her neighbour to go and see the Muharram festival. While there she was prevailed upon to go to a depot. Another woman told me that she was going to a bathing ghat and was misled by a woman to a depot. When in the depot they are told that they cannot go till they pay for the food they have had and for other expenses. They are unable to do so. (Chatterjee 2014 42)

The plantation community blamed the indentured women as immoral and spoiled the culture and tradition of the nation. They were blamed by the as reasons for murders in the plantation and projected as a 'veil of dishonour'. In addition to that, women were blamed for

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the death of the children in the fields and for lack of interest in bearing children due to the absence of 'motherly instinct'. Unfortunately, the truths behind such deaths and decisions put the plantation owners and the British people to blame. Despite concentrating on the health of the young mothers, plantation authorities pressurised 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 overseers and sirdars 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. The European planters sometimes forced the Indian women into sexual union and seldom it was a genuine relationship.

> It is not at all uncommon for overseers, and even managers, to form temporary connections with Coolie women, and in every case with the worst possible consequences to the good order and harmony of the estate.' In some—many—instances, the planters on their lonely eminences found genuine affection in a stable, long-lasting relationship with an Indian woman, usually the daughter of a coolie. But in other cases the Europeans merely demonstrated their contempt for the Indians by taking their women casually; while on many estates they exercised a *droit de seigneur* (Tinker 221-222).

The indentures could escape from their trauma through the memories of their homeland and importantly through the friendship they acquired in the depot and ship. 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 and home country, and physical and psychological trauma. Thus the ship journey created a bond among the passengers and the

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bonding is called *jahajibhai* (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. Many believe that "you can take Indians out of India, but you cannot take India out of Indians" (Lal 2022 33). They were unwilling to assimilate into the foreign land by adapting their homeland's cultural practices. The indentured followed Hindu festivals such as Satyanarayan Puja, Ramayan Recital, Bhagvada Katha, Ram Naumi, and Shiva 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.

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