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A Study of Internal Migration and External Migration of the Indentured Labourers in Colonial India: Understanding the Making of Coolies with Reference to Selected Bangla Literary Texts

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Abstract

Colonialism changed the way the world economy and trade were happening. The colonial powers were unable to maintain the institution of slavery. Consequently, with the abolition of slavery, a new form of labour system was set up to fill the demand and supply gap. This labour system was created to reap maximum profit while exploiting the labourers in every possible manner. This is how indentureship was born. This system was born in various European colonies during 19th century, and the labourers were referred to as coolies- a derogatory and racial term. The colonial plantations of jute, tea, rubber, coffee, sugarcane, etc., had draconian labour conditions that caused the coolies' lifetime suffering. In the context of British India, this coolie network from India to other countries (external migration) was similar to the coolie network within India (internal migration). Indians were sent to other countries as coolies and within various tea plantations, coal mines, or other places for working. The internal migration of the Coolies is very much related to the greater migration project of the British Raj that wanted to create settler colonies in various parts of the colonised world. This paper will analyse both the internal and external migration mentioned in these Bangla texts- Phoolmoti by Krishnendu Mukhopadhyay (novel) and Alokrekha by Samaresh Majumdar (novel). This paper will analyse both these migration forms and how they are represented in these texts that are contemporary to each other.

Keywords: Indentured labourer, Migration, Coolie, Bangla Literature, Internal Migration, External migration, Colonial India.

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A Study of Internal Migration and External Migration of the Indentured Labourers in Colonial India: Understanding the Making of Coolies with Reference to Selected Bangla Literary Texts

Aratrika Ganguly

Indentured Servitude or Slavery?

Indentured servitude was a way to propagate capitalism. It was none other than a very refined way of substituting slavery. Capitalism and indentureship walked hand in hand. The European colonial powers made it look like the labourers (under indentureship) were going to work for a few months to years based on legal contracts that would allow them good working conditions and enough wage to sustain themselves and their families. However, in most cases, after coming to work in a foreign land or other parts of their country, they would discover how they have been fooled by the middlemen like the sardars or arkathis working under colonial power. The imperial power would always take advantage of the people who suffered from poverty and were illiterate. They had a heart full of trust for the middlemen, and many times, they were sold to the imperialists without their knowledge.

In 1834, the British government in India introduced what came to be known as the 'indenture system', through which Indian labourers could go overseas to work on the colonial sugar plantations on fixed-term contracts. From 1834 to 1920, the recruitment of Indians to work on the colonial plantations of various islands was organized through this system. The model of Indian indenture system was borrowed from a practice that originated in Europe in the thirteenth century, but it became a common practice in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries... Under that system, labour was recruited for the planters by their agents to work for a certain period of time (usually five years), during which the employer was

legally obliged to provide fixed wages, medical attention and other amenities for the labourers. After the period had elapsed, the labourer could either renew his/her term of employment, or return to his/her native land. (Kumar, 2017, 2.)

However, this was the official version of the agreement or that was corrupted and became the term *gimit*. In real life, no facilities were available to the labourers. They were tortured, broken, and even some died due to inhumane travel, working, or living conditions. Medical facilities, proper hygienic living quarters or a proper amount of food were not available to them. In this paper, we will learn more about the abuse heaped on the coolies by the Colonial Raj by further analysing these Bangla (i.e., Bengali) novels- *Phoolmoti* by Krishnendu Mukhopadhyay and *Alokrekha* by Samaresh Majumdar

Origin of the term Coolie

Although the word coolie has multiple origins, all are negative, and it is a racial slur. Previously in the sixteenth century, the Portuguese travellers used this term to refer to the workers in the port.

By the later seventeenth century, the word "coolie" had transferred into English, probably derived from either *kūli*, a Tamil word meaning wages for menial work, or from *Kuli*, the name of an aboriginal tribe in Gujarat whose members were thought to be thieves. In the multilingual port cities of Asia, words easily overleapt language barriers and gained a place in many vocabularies. Whatever the derivation, well before the British arrived in Malaya the word was

used by Europeans to describe Asian workers of few skills and low status. (Lees, 2017, 55)

Historically the term is also associated with the meaning of baggage. Gaiutra Bahadur, in her path-breaking book *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, says that she also uses the term coolie as the coolies carried baggage- the "...baggage of colonialism on its back. It bears the burden of history" (Bahadur, 2016) Coolie for some meant unskilled labourers, cheap labour and so much and its association was with menial and derogatory jobs. Nevertheless, this same word gives them a distinct identity in today's academia, and non-academic literature makes their existence and identity more genuine. Calling the indentured labourers coolies makes us realise how they have been created as a product of the colonial power. However, they have survived every odd, and the literary texts that will be analysed in this paper will reveal their contribution to society and keep alive and well-fed the economic sector of the colonial power. The coolies kept going to the plantations and mines and other economic powerhouses for the colonisers without any personal benefit. They are the real warriors. This paper will analyse the lives of the warriors as reflected in the texts.

Recruitment of Coolies

An important attribute of the Indian indenture was that it was state regulated, not privately contracted. It was conducted based on a written and supposedly voluntarily accepted contract or agreement (dubbed girmitin Fiji), which the emigrants signed (or, more commonly, affixed their thumbprints to) before leaving India. In the early years of indentured emigration, the terms and conditions were not uniform; indeed, they varied widely in content and application. But by the 1870s, a uniform document was in place for all the indentured labour-recruiting colonies. The contract stipulated, among other things, the nature, and conditions of employment (dealing principally with work related to the manufacture of sugar cane), remuneration for labour on the plantations, entitlement to medical and housing facilities and, above all, the availability of a return passage to India after a period of 'industrial residence' in the colonies, usually 10 years after the date of arrival (Lal, 2019, 24).

Racism- An Essential Marker of Indentured Servitude

Eurocentric notions of the superiority of race and skin colour were the central issue of this abuse of the coolies. This abuse was stopped in the 20th century

as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948 described Indentured servitude as illegal. Scholarships are recent in this field, while earlier, many texts were written on the indentured labourers like British abolitionist John Scoble's pamphlet "British Guiana: Facts! Facts! Facts!".

Scoble termed the transportation of Indian coolies as a 'slave trade' and contended that it was heavily based on 'kidnapping' of 'ignorant and inoffensive Hindoos'... Scoble was one of many who spoke out against the indenture system. Others included William Garland Barrett, Joseph Beaumont and Edward Jenkin... According to them, considerable numbers of coolies died during transportation, the medical and food provisions were no better than those provided to slaves, and fraudulent methods were employed in the recruitment of migrants. The law under which they had to work was a kind of confinement through legal means, from which it was impossible for a coolie to buy his/her freedom. They alleged scanty wages, bad treatment on plantations, and a large number of prosecutions against workers. (Kumar, 2017, 3-4)

Coolitude

This was the harsh truth behind the coolie labourer's life. The poverty-stricken people of various villages of India wanted to leave behind their miserable reality and pursue new ambitions that will help them live a decent life. This never came true, and more burdens were heaped upon them. The result was the occurrence of what the Mauritian poet, Khal Torabully referred to as coolitude. Torabully coined the word in 1992. This word has multiple layers of meanings. It indicates the history of the coolies of various places that are interrelated, and this term wants to create a shared history; to create a large community that will include all coolies and their history. It is a subcategory of thalassography (study of sea, bay, gulfs, etc.). In this context, it is very similar to Aimé Fernand David Césaire's negritude of the 1920s. Coolitude tries to foster interaction among the descendants of migrants i.e., the coolies and make them a part of a larger community of people whose history and fate has been similar. Some were even jahaji-bhai (a term used for shipmates travelling together). The term, coolitude, empowers the descendants of the coolies in the countries where they are still treated as second

class citizens. According to Khal Torabully, on why he coined the term coolitude, “I chose this word because the coolie was essentially one who replaced the slave in the plantocratic society” (Carter & Torabully, 2002, 144). The word slavery always comes indentureship is mentioned. This will be further analysed in this paper.

Indentured servitude was serfdom at its worst. The coolies were mistreated, had no contact with the locals, and could not escape due to the hilly terrain and treacherous landscape. While escaping, if they were found by chance by the coolie sardars (recruiting agents or leaders), they would be flogged to death. Hence, exploitation was at its worst inside the coolie lines (living quarters) of the plantation.

Did the Coolies Return?

Indenture has made many people lose their identities and existence in the sea of colonial trouble. Crossing the black water, or as it was referred to as the ‘kala pani’ was not only a metaphorical term that meant crossing the seas will cause loss of identities of the coolies, but also it was a term that they feared the most. The people who followed Hinduism (in a collective sense) believed that crossing the ocean would cause them to lose their caste, and this fear was so embedded deep within the people’s minds that many have isolated themselves from the world. Even the cellular jail of the Andaman Islands was termed as kala pani as well because the prison housed India’s independence activists, and most prisoners never came back after crossing the Bay of Bengal (Biswas, 2014). However, migration is the most natural phenomenon, and none can stop it. Even though the migration of indentured labourers across the ocean happened due to exploitation by the imperial power, this migration changed the destinies of thousands. Thousands crossed the oceans while fearing their loss of caste and hoping that the future might eradicate poverty from their lives. Many even did not bother home for fear of losing their caste and social status in front of their kin. Most were not welcome back in their village. Nevertheless, men and women intermarried among various castes and communities, and that made them more vulnerable. The caste conscious Northern Indian people would not accept the labourers back to their native village. Many returnees would come back and see that relatives have occupied their homes, or for some, the family priest would ostracise them from their village and send them back. The women suffered the most as their husbands would dump many for fear of losing their caste. Many would be given the wrong

address of their husband’s family village or given money and then left forever by their upper caste husbands (Kumar, 2017, 191-193). This forced diaspora created a new category called the coolies. Even the forced internal migration created the same category.

Internal Migration Vs External Migration of the Coolies

Internal migration within India and external migration from India to other colonies were a part of the Indenture system. Not only the British but the Dutch, French and others followed suit. The whole indenture system operated along the same lines of exploitation. The misuse of power and mistreatment of coolies were prevalent for both kinds of migration. In the Indian context, both these migration forms became a part of India’s reality. Some people were sent to the tea gardens or coal mines within the country and others to sugarcane plantations, tobacco plantations or other plantations to various South-East Asian countries, the Caribbean, various countries of Africa, and the Guineas etc. Both these forms of migration are represented in Indian vis-à-vis Bangla literature. In the texts described above, the internal and external migration is represented through the lives and working conditions of the coolies. *Phoolmoti* by Krishnendu Mukhopadhyay is about a coolie girl who migrates to Dutch Guinea from a village in North India (probably the Bihar region of British India). Whereas the novel, *Alokrekha* by Samaresh Majumdar, represents migration from various parts of India to tea plantations of Dooars.

Labour history tells us that imperial powers always welcome docile bodies for cheap labour purposes, and the migrant workers provided this impetus. They came from various parts of the country (for internal migration) to plantations or mines and from other Asian or African countries to the colonies (for external migration). The first coolies from India went as labourers in the various colonial sugar plantations. Later, the influx of coolies increased as more and more people wanted to change their destinies and joined the coolie trade.

The majority belonged to tribal groups of Central and Eastern India. Kaushik Ghosh traces how the British conquest of Bengal’s ‘wild frontier’ (the Chotanagpur-Santhal hill territory), physically and economically dislocated its inhabitants. Colonial policy-makers were determined to ‘pacify’ this turbulent region. Migrants from the plains who

operated as moneylenders, traders, and landlords assisted the colonial state in this endeavour. (Sharma, 2008, 1305)

These middlemen i.e., sardars or arkathis (coolie recruiters or chief agents) were very much to blame along with the colonial powers for the creation of the indenture system.

The first Labour Act was passed in 1863 which was to regulate the transport of native labourers emigrating to Assam valley as well as their recruitment through Arkattis (licensed recruiters). Under the Amendment Act of 1870 the Sardari system of recruitment was also recognized. As reported by the Bengal Administrative Report for 1867-68, 22,800 were imported labours and only 11,633 were local labours. (Kar,219)

Laws were enacted, and many other laws were passed as well to keep the labour force under control; to control the internal migration system. This was very much like the external migration system. It was two sides of the same coin.

Interactions of Indian Coolies with Other Coolies

Indentured servitude was not related only to South Asia. Chinese labourers started moving to the Americas in the early 19th century. Later, they went to several colonies of Cuba, Peru, colonies of Southeast Asia, and the West Indies. Like the Indians, they moved between the binary of black and white. Chinese coolies were the earliest coolies in the whole colonial, capitalist exploitation method of creating bonded labours. Chinese and Indian coolies would share the same space and time in several instances. These lines from the book, *The Coolie Speaks* by Lisa Yun, reveals a lot.

Great Britain imported 64,000 Chinese coolies to work the Transvaal gold mines in South Africa in 1904. The ensuing solidarity of Chinese labor with Indian labor, though still formulated along ethnic lines, led to a shared movement of Chinese- Indian passive resistance led by Leung Quinn and Mahatma Gandhi, who was in South Africa during this period.²⁴ Chinese and Indian labor also overlapped in parts of the Caribbean, such as in Guyana and Trinidad. However, Indians comprised

a significantly larger number of the coolies imported to the British colonies, with many also being sent to the French colonies. The Chinese were also sent to the British and French colonies, but were mostly sent to the Spanish colonies. The British dominated the Indian coolie trade, but American, French, Spanish, and Portuguese involvement, on the other hand, was most prominent in the Chinese coolie trade. (Yun, 2008,8)

Although the Indian coolie trade was mainly controlled by the British, there are instances when other colonial powers have also recruited Indian coolies and imported them into their plantations. The same happens in the novel *Phoolmoti*, where the indentured labourers from India are recruited to Dutch plantations.

Phoolmoti- A Novel about External Migration from India

Krishnendu Mukhopadhyay (1964-) has been writing since his youth in little magazines. Since 2005 he has been writing regularly in Anandabazar Patrika. Some of his famous short stories are- “KhejurKanta”, “Chhobir Mukh” etc. He won the first prize in Deshraha syagol poprotijogita for his short story “Brohmokomol”. Some of his short stories have been translated into the Marathi language. He also received the Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay smarok Sahitya somman in 2013. He is a very well-known novelist as well. His novels are very gripping and exhilarating. His first novel was *Radhika*. He is an engineer by profession, and therefore in his novel *Phoolmoti* we find many references to data, coding, augmented reality and much more. This novel was republished in January 2020, and previously it was published in 2015. Mukhopadhyay’s novels blur the line between the past and present. In his novels, history and the present reflect each other. It can be found in his novels like- *Phoolmoti* and *Progyasutro*.

The novel, *Phoolmoti*, revolves around Abel van der Berg who comes to India for a student exchange program and stays some days extra to find his “virtual princess”, Phoolmoti Mai. As the novel comes to an end, we come to know that Phoolmoti Mai was an indentured labourer from some part of northern India who saved the ancestors of Abel- Markus van der Berg and Emily van der Berg. She became the symbol of ultimate heroism and represented the power of love and self-sacrifice. This young girl saved the young pregnant Emily along with her husband Markus from

Markus's uncle, who was trying to kill them for power and wealth. Phoolmoti Mai's Bhojpuri songs were sung by the family over generations. Abel learned such songs and about Phoolmoti from his aunt who nearly worshipped Phoolua and called her Mai or mother with respect. Phoolmoti, the young widow teenage girl from a remote village of India, became the goddess of the van der Berg family not only because she took care of Emily and her unborn child but because while Emily and Markus were escaping Paramaribo they were attacked by his uncle, and she attacked him spontaneously with an act of unmatched courage. In turn, Hendrik van der Berg killed Phoolmoti on the day Emily and Markus left for an unknown future. This novel is not just about the condition of indentured labourers who left for Suriname, but also about the condition of plantation life from the perspective of the colonisers and how it has affected generations after generations. Abel's worshipping of Phoolmoti Mai represents another side of colonisation. He worships Phoolmoti if he is in any trouble from getting a scold from his teacher at school to various other difficult situations in his life. Among his serious dreams are becoming one with his lover (who is a sex worker in a brothel in Amsterdam), narrating her the story of India and visiting India. For him, India was a symbol of Phoolmoti Mai; the indentured labourer- a coolie. Mukhopadhyay has deconstructed the notion of India, the country's identity and has represented it from the eyes of the coolie, from the migration of indentured labourers. Rarely, in literature, India has been seen through the eyes of the indentured labourers.

Although at the same time, polyphonic qualities of the culture of the coolies were ignored by the colonisers. Their pluricultural, multilingual cultural expressions were heterogeneous, and they were very much ignored by the colonial powers. In *Phoolmoti*, Phoolmoti belonged to a village from Bihar (British India), and she spoke Bhojpuri. However, while Abel came to India and was searching for his Phoolmoti Mai, he was constantly ignoring the diverse cultural forms of the country and was relating it with the identity of Bhojpuri and Bihari. On the one hand, his respect and affection for his "virtual princess" made him equate the whole of India with his very own imagination of Phoolmoti Mai, but on the other hand, it is very much a coloniser's arrogance.

Recruitment and Life inside the Plantations

The novel is written in the form of Abel's diary that he is writing on his tablet while travelling to Amsterdam from India. He is writing this so that he can properly

narrate his Indian experiences to his beloved while sitting with her on Texel Island. His unnamed beloved is a sex worker in Amsterdam like the woman he met in Kolkata- Rosie, aka Mitali. He could bring out the beautiful human being within Mitali who has become rough and shrewd with years of a job that she does out of compulsion. Similarly, it is obvious from the narration that he wanted to bring out the lover and human from his beloved, who as well had to sell her body in return for food. These women in his life were not very different from Phoolmoti, who and her father similarly had to leave her village, her best friends, her known world in the hope of feeding themselves. Hunger-the basic instinct of living beings can make one commit actions or undertake events that can change them forever for better or for worse. For Phoolmoti and Bapu, who lost their family in poverty, boarding the ship to Suriname as indentured labourers, aka coolies were the last resort to save themselves from dying of debt and hunger. However, little did they know that death was waiting with its trap on the island of Dutch Guiana. Hendrik, Markus van der Berg's uncle, killed Markus's parents and was helped by Emily's father Aldert Bugard, in this heinous crime because Markus's parents wanted to do some good for the slaves from Africa; they wanted to make a human life for these slaves. Their son and his partner, too, believed in this dream and wanted to do the same humane acts of kindness for the indentured coolies who were brought to Suriname when slavery was abolished, and the slaves from Africa were leaving their inhuman jobs. These dramatic events in the lives of the van der Berg family show how the planters revolted against the planters themselves, and being a human and doing good for the coolies became impossible. Sensitive and kind people were killed, were ostracised and their downfall was evident. Even the coolies were the scapegoats in the dramatic rivalry and enmity among the planters. The former African slave, Kofi, and Phoolmoti's father, Ramashish, lost their lives due to the internal enmity between planters. They were killed on the whims of the planters to fulfil their own needs. Kofi was a former African slave, and his wife Allma care for Emily. Their encountering the coolies bridges the gap between the slaves and the coolies. On the other hand, Phoolmoti, too, died at the hands of a planter. The coolie bodies were considered objects for pleasure and work. They were not considered human beings. These bodies were treated as machines for production. They were needed if they could serve their purpose; their mind never mattered as if, for the colonisers, it did not exist. Even in death, the coolies had to pay off their debt with their bodies. Ramashish became indentured

labour as he was unable to pay his debts in his village in India, and his only dream was to live debt-free. In Paramaribo, he paid off his debt with his death.

The novel, *Phoolmoti*, defines the comprehensive history of how Suriname adopted the indenture labour system when bringing back slavery became impossible. In the beginning, many planters were against recruiting Indian coolies for their sugarcane plantations. Nonetheless, later they accepted employing Indian coolies like all other European colonies of the 19th century. The Indian coolies like Phoolmoti and other villagers from her village were given proper living space by Markus van der Berg. Unlike in other plantations, Markus's plantation had proper huts and living spaces. Markus even wanted to educate Phoolmoti and took her to his home when Emily started living with him. They cared for her like their own daughter. Even the language barrier did not stop them from expressing affection. Both learnt languages and rituals from each other. However, others were not lucky, like our fictional Phoolmoti. Torture, rape, and violence were a part of the coolie's everyday life. At times in many countries like Fiji,

'Coolies' were given small rooms to live in. Each of them was twelve-feet long and eight-feet wide. If a man had his wife with him, they were given this room; otherwise, three men or three women were lodged in a single room...The provisions that was provided by the state was insufficient for a 'coolie' working ten hours a day on the estate... women had to face more hardships than men in the plantation (Kumar,2017,174-175).

These lines are said in the context of the plantations of Fiji. Nonetheless, the state was alike elsewhere. Phoolmoti turned out to have better living conditions because of her association with Markus, who brought her into his home as he knew his uncle, Hendrik, would take advantage of a young coolie girl. Along with working for more hours than men, even during pregnancy, women were always vulnerable in the hands of the colonial masters. Rarely, there were people like Markus who would treat a coolie girl like his own daughter. In that respect, Emily's father's plantation had much worse conditions where coolies were living than the van der Berg's plantation.

Kala Pani

The Indian Ocean is considered a space where the coolies reinvent themselves- it is a space where people change forever; the journey is the notion of change. The ships not only acted as a space for intermixing of various caste, creeds, and communities, but life-long friendships were also formed. Many were sexually assaulted on the ships, while many died while travelling. The ship was the first step towards indentured servitude; it changed the destiny of the coolies forever. One such ship that marked the arrival of indentured labourers in the Dutch Guiana of Suriname was Lalla Rookh in the year 1873. It landed in the port of Paramaribo with hundreds of coolies of Indian origin (Mangla, 2016). In the novel, *Phoolmoti*, Phoolua aka Phoolmotimaiya, the protagonist of the novel, came into this ship. The characters are fictional, but the journey aboard the Lalla Rookh happened. In the novel, Phoolua, along with her father, Ramashish, wanted to escape the burden of poverty and debt and therefore boarded the ship along with their other neighbours. They felt they were lucky to have been chosen as coolies, but their innocence failed them. The reality hit them after they came to Paramaribo. Escaping Dopohari village was the primary aim of Ramashish, who, after losing his wife and sons have gone into more debt, and Phoolua accompanied her father as she did not want to stay alone in her village.

Ramashish's only dream was to go debt-free, but he had no idea that the agent he was worshipping was none other than a middleman working for the colonial government and these people were not transported to a British colony but an entirely different colony of the Dutch colonisers, the colony of Suriname. The coolies had no idea that they were being taken to a different form of a colonial country, and for them, the concept of British or Dutch both were the same. Moreover, Abel Van Der Berg, tells us that Dopohari is a vague idea of a village-there may or may not be a village of that name. Many such names and identity markers of the coolies were lost as they were unable to communicate with the imperial power.

Calcutta aka Kolkata – a junction point for indentured servitude (both external and internal)

The novel, *Phoolmoti*, makes the Indian city of Kolkata a cultural catalyst where Dutch colonisation, indentured labourers from the northern part of India, the modern city of Amsterdam, everything come together into a potpourri. Kolkata becomes a space where years of difference dissolves. Abel finds himself and his Phoolmoti Mai in this city. The Mai-Baap

memorial statues in Kolkata's Suriname ghat was unveiled in 2017. This is the place where Abel finally found some peace by touching the water of the holy Ganga River, the river that bought Phoolmoti Mai to Suriname, who saved Abel's ancestors and helped in the continuation of the family. The ghat and the city of Kolkata becomes a symbolic space of migration, of indentured servitude. The ghat becomes the site of memory for the indentured labourers. It is a place where the intersection of experiences of migration takes place. The same happens in the tea gardens of Dooars, as reflected in *Alokrekha* by Samaresh Majumdar. Calcutta becomes the junction point where marginalised people from agrarian and remote areas were brought and then shipped off to various colonies outside India or were sent to various tea gardens within India.

Alokrekha- a novel about internal migration within India

Bangali writer Samaresh Majumdar (1944-present) is one of the foremost writers from the Indian state of West Bengal. He won Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 1984 for his epic novel, *Kalbela*. Some of his famous writings are- *Dour* (his first novel that was serialized in the *Desh* magazine), *Kalbela*, *Kalpurush*, *Satkahon*, *Teerthojatri*, *Buno Haansh*, *Kulokundolini* etc. *BunoHaansh* was made into a film of the same name. He also wrote for young readers, and he is credited with creating the detective character of Arjun for his young readers. Some of his best-known works for young readers are- *Joyontir Jongole*, *Dui Dike Ak Arjun*, *Manush Pachar*, *Kalapahar*, *Derdin*, *Nababaganjer Narakhadak*, etc. He won several accolades and awards for his contribution to Bangla literature. Majumdar has been a prolific writer who has captured the essence of tea garden literature in his writings, especially in his novel, *Alokrekha*. He spent his childhood in the tea gardens of Dooars in the district of Jalpaiguri, and this lifelong association with tea gardens is also reflected in his novel. *Alokrekha* was first serially published in *Deshin* 2019, and later in January 2020, it was published in the form of a novel.

Alokrekha is a story about a tea garden in the modern Jalpaiguri district near Assam and West Bengal border. It narrates the life inside a tea plantation and people who are dependent on it from the perspective of British planters, Bangali babus (originally the Indian clerk that later developed into the babu culture), as well as the coolies from various parts of Bihar or Nepal. It is a picture of the reality of the plantations during the early years of their formation in the Dooars area. It is a novel

where exile lives together with otherness.

Life of India's Tea Coolies

The first tea plantation was set up in the Dooars region of Bengal in the year 1876. This novel starts a few years after the first tea plantation of Gazalduba was set up by the British tea planters. *Alokrekha* is revealed through the eyes of Shibnath, the Bangali Babu, and Ayan Scott, the Scottish tea planter. The coolies' lives are also reflected in this novel through various events; almost all the events reflect their miserable situation. The coolies were brought from various parts of Bihar (of undivided British India) by the arkathis by conning them with the dreams of filling their stomachs with food. The coolies came with the hope of earning some money and dreamt that one day when the tea plantation would produce tons of tea, then their job would become permanent, and their lives would change, but this dream did not last. The novel started when the tea garden where Scott is the head manager was just starting out as tea plantations. Tea seeds were just growing inside the nursery, and coolies were cutting the canal from where water will flow to generate electricity that will run the machine where tea production will take place. The story progresses with the starting of the tea factory and plantation of the sapling on the main fields. Nevertheless, this is not the main plot, and the main story is the story of the coolies and all those associated with them. The linear progression of the story reveals the development of the Dooars tea plantations in the late 19th century. The hardship of life for both the coolies and the planters along with the sardars, labour suppliers, clerks, arka this etc., reveals the history and development of India's famous tea plantations.

Recruitment of the Tea Coolies and Life Inside the Tea Plantations

The coolies were treated in every revolting and horrible way possible. They were given living spaces in coolie lines where they lived in dilapidated huts that were many times unable to protect them from wild animals like wild elephants. Like the clerk, Harekrishna, and his daughter had to take refuge in Shibnath's home after their hut was attacked by wild elephants. The male coolies wore nothing but a small loincloth, whereas the women wore saree to cover their starving bodies. They were given a minimum amount of food that made them hungry all the time, which led them to hunt wild animals, snakes and even bats. Hunger becomes a major character in the novel. It drives the plot as educated men like Shibnath would come to search for

a job in a tea plantation inside the untamed forests of Dooars whereas Harekrishna would come with his young daughter in the unknown land for a job so that they can have a proper meal and a warm bed. Coolies who were recruited by arkathis from various remote parts of Bihar stayed due to the sense of hunger; hunger made them accept every torture, every pain. They were caned badly, especially by the white managers. In *Alokrekha*, the assistant manager of the plantation not only used to cane or beat the coolies but used to torture their women in the most horrendous manner imaginable to the civilised world. The white, civilised man tortured the supposedly barbaric, native woman in inhumane ways. The coolie body was a commodity for the patriarchal, colonial structure. It was not only cheap labour, but a means to satisfy their general frustration while living in the wilderness of the plantations devoid of most social engagements and for many white men, devoid of sexual pleasure. In the novel, there have been many instances of coolie women dying due to the assistant manager's raping them in the most inhumane ways; from attacking their bare bodies to tearing out their nipples from their bodies. It is not sexual pleasure that made these white men rape these coolie women, but an assertion of patriarchal and racial attitudes. The body of the women coolies carries the discourses of the indentured regime under the colonisers. The performative aspect of gender is found in the kinds of work the women and men are supposed to do inside the plantations. Tea leaf plucking for women, digging earth for men etc. A similar performative aspect of gender is normalised by Ayan Scott's assistant as if the female body of the coolie exists only to satisfy his sexual pleasure. On the other hand, the colonial planters did not rape the daughters, wives, or other female members of the Bangali babu's. Instead, these women like the head clerk's daughter had to commit suicide because she was not ready to marry an old man her father had chosen for her. The Bangalimiddle class was conscious more about their social prestige than about the welfare of themselves and their family. They would fight about being bangal-ghoti (the latter belongs to the eastern part of Bengal and the former to the western part of Bengal), for example, from the shopkeeper to the head clerk, everyone was obsessed with it. People judged each other based on their caste and place of origin. Prejudices against themselves made them not help each other in times of trouble. Shibnath, our protagonist, was a progressive man. His views on child marriage, the purdah system, equality for the coolies, or helping the needy and not biasing against any human being based

on his race or community separated him from the rest of his brethren. The same features were found in Scott, the tea planter. Scott's sympathy for the coolies and his helping the coolies in times of need were viewed by the other colonisers in a very derogatory manner. For the readers, the characters of Scott and Shibnath bring relief in an otherwise grim, realistic novel.

The indentured labourers and the Indigenous people

The indenture labourers were not always viewed with respect by the indigenous population living around the tea plantation region. In Dooars, around the tea gardens, the Adivasis used to mock the tea coolies. For them, the tea plant was a poison tree and working in the tea gardens would make their gods angry. They even looked down at the coolies for their association with the tea gardens. The coolie status came with bondage, and this angered the locals, and they would run away from plantations, and this led the colonisers to bring men and women from distant lands and bind them into the suffocating bonds of indenture.

Cultural Assimilation inside the Plantations in the context of both Internal and External Migration

Migration has been a constant and influential feature of human history. It has supported the growth of the world economy; contributed to the evolution of states and societies, and enriched many cultures and civilizations. Migrants have been amongst the most dynamic and entrepreneurial members of society: people who are prepared to take the risk of leaving their homes in order to create new opportunities for themselves and their children. (Koser, 2008, 9)

Hence, migration had some positive changes and effects as well. Their impact was large on the host society. Songs, lullabies, dance, art, languages, and other forms of human expressions were created when the migrant culture engaged in a dialogue with the host culture. As it happens in tea gardens of India, a new language develops that is the result of the dialogue between the migrants coming from various parts of India, i.e., central and eastern India and the locals living in the area near the plantations or coal mines. In literature, such instances are found in texts like- *Khadan Samagra* by Ghanashyam Chowdhury, *Aarkathi* by Bhagirath Mishra etc. In *Phoolmoti* and *Alorekha* as well, there

are instances of languages getting mixed or cultures mixing, forming a hybrid culture. In *Phoolmoti*, Abel's family engulfed the Bhojpuri culture over generations, whereas the Modeshiya language of the tea gardens was the result of the intermix of the Madhesi language along with other languages of various tribal communities. Even when the other clerks or labour suppliers or coolie drivers or sardars spoke with their white master, they used a mix of Hindi, Bangla, English, and other languages of various indigenous communities. Language first grasps the culture change; it becomes the first site of intercultural accumulation.

The Other Side of Indentured Servitude

Keeping them in isolation in foreign lands, making them live a life with elements not suited to them and testing their ultimate physical, and mental limits was a major part of the identity of the coolies. This is reflected in the texts *Phoolmoti* as well as *Alokrekha*; there is another part of the indenture system, though rare, it is present. Many peasants wanted to go overseas for opportunities that they were unable to get inside the country. Many peasants from the northern part of India were even familiar with the indenture system and wanted to go abroad for work possibilities. Many people negatively viewed indenture; in its real way, but for many, in whose villages there have been returnees of the indenture; they would support the overseas journey. Many believed that a coolie would come back richer and that made them embark on a journey across the Kala Pani or the black water (Kumar, 2017, 28). For many women, indentured servitude was the only way to escape patriarchal subjugation. It was a way for them to emancipate themselves. Indenture became an easy outlet for young widows, or women who have been ostracised by society for various reasons or for women who have had affairs outside their marital bond. These were true for a handful of people, but for most it was not.

Conclusion

The texts- *Phoolmoti* by Krishnendu Mukhopadhyay and *Alokrekha* by Samaresh Majumdar (in novel form), had been published in 2020, the year that left our lives devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This year has been a very different year where the loss of lives has brought us to the realization of how vulnerable human beings are in front of nature. However, human beings realize it after wars, pandemics, natural disasters, and so many more incidents and then forget as well. Indentureship was a man-made disaster that destroyed

lives and families, but still, the Homo sapiens never understand the futility of their actions. Capitalism, along with colonial power structure, went on creating the disturbing history of the coolies. People understood the consequences later, and none knows whether the torture and exploitation of the vulnerable will end or not. It is time human beings change their corrupted, power-hungry attitude and start treating all as equal and treat all labourers with equality.

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