

## Indian Indentured Labour Migration and Abhorrence

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This article probes into the nuances of abhorrent attitude of the Indians towards migration to overseas British colonies as indentured labour. This probe is conducted by citing the reference of Fiji in its particular context of the procurement of indentured labour from India. The abhorrence towards migration beyond the Indian cultural, political and geographical boundaries had been always there in the Indian traditional society. The determining factors for migration in any society are innately related to the circumstances that force the people to opt for migration to achieve betterment in their life situations, which sometimes culminates into temporary settlements and sometimes permanent settlements in the country to which they emigrate. The notion of unwillingness or abhorrent attitude of Indian indentured migrants, especially during the British rule in India, is interpreted diversely as per the conveniences of the administrators, authors and historians of both past and present. Hence, the historical scrutiny of abhorrent or repugnant attitude of Indian emigrants is needed to be dealt with in its specific context of Indian indentured labour emigration system operated by the British in colonised India. In this article, the focus will be on the notion of *Kala pani* (black water) and the belief of the people against crossing the *Kala pani*, which became the cause of odium for emigration.

In colonized India, during the recruitment of Indians as the indentured labourers for migration to the distant colonies to do manual works in the cultivation fields, it was observed that a feeling of odium prevailed among the Indians towards migration to other countries. Not only overseas migration, but also internal migration was not welcomed in Indian society, especially in north India. Indians disliked emigration because of the then prevailing social mindset against moving out of their native places and defying social norms. Certain misconceptions out of superstitions, and religious beliefs contributed for this odium against emigration. This was a common norm that prevailed in north India where the society was based more on 'Brahminical order'<sup>1</sup>. This sort of conservative and parochial social order discouraged migration whether it

was internal or overseas. In this regard, K. L. Gillion had mentioned that ‘there was strong repugnance to emigration in north India and for this reason it had to be much more highly organised than emigration from Europe.’<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to the above notion regarding emigration of the Indians, many historians of India have refuted the existence of such odium that was known as crossing the *Kala Pani* as a taboo. Within this social circumstance in a historical context, an unprejudiced historical writing of Indian migration, especially with reference to the recruitment of Indian intended indentured labour for overseas colonies, can be produced with a holistic perception towards the actual situation and the process of recruitment of the indentured labour from India. It is very much necessary and significant to depict an impartial historical narrative to know the truth about the recruitment of the Indian emigrants.

K. L. Gillion had produced an extensive work on the topic of Indian migrants to Fiji. He wrote, ‘...without the stimulus of organised recruiting of the volume of emigration from north India, it would have been negligible, except from the Punjab.’<sup>3</sup> In this context, it is necessary to know about the Indian odium and related myths towards emigration, which gives a general idea about how Indian emigration to overseas colonies was perceived at that time.

In the context of the odium of the Indians for emigration, a statement was made by an ‘Emigration Agent’ (EA) of the government of Fiji in 1896, which gives the historians a clear and sharp perception about the role of ‘*Kalapani*’ (Black Water, specifically, crossing the sea as a taboo) on this matter. Some historians considered the notion of *Kalapani* as an important factor for the odium of the Indians. This became the central point for the historians while they ponder over it as a notional acceptance or the refutation of the same. The following statement of the Emigrant Agent depicts a clear picture of migration at that time in India:

‘Emigration of any kind, above all that to the colonies beyond the seas, is most unpopular. In many villages the recruiter dare not to show himself for fear of personal violence, and everywhere he is the prey of the police and court officials of the lower grades. The Indian peasant will not emigrate excepting he is actually compelled by stress of circumstances: he

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<sup>1</sup>The poets of ‘Hindi Literature’ in the nineteenth century presented such pessimistic approach towards migration. They include Bhartendu Harishchandra (*Kavivachan Sudha*), Pratap Narayan Mishra (*Brahman Patrika*), Chaudhary Badrinarayan ‘Premghan’ (*Nagri Neerad*) and Balkrishan Bhatt (*Hindi Pradeep*).

<sup>2</sup> K.L. Gillion, *Fiji’s Indian Migrants: A History to the end of indenture in 1920*, 1962, pp. 39

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 39

prefers to struggle on in his native village, a victim of ever present poverty varied by seasons of actual want'<sup>4</sup>.

Indian repugnance to emigration, particularly to the overseas countries, was highlighted not only by the officials like the Emigrant Agents, but also great English historians like William Crook observed the same. William Crook observed that the Indian conservative society never desired to break the innate social course of their cultural life. He writes,

'The fact is that the Hindu has little of the migratory instinct, and all his prejudices tend to keep him at home. As a resident member of a tribe, caste or village, he occupies a definite social position of which emigration is likely to deprive him. When he leaves his home, he loses the sympathy and support of his clansmen and neighbour; he misses the village council, which regulates his domestic affairs; the services of the family priest, which he consider essential to his salvation. Every village has its own local shrine where the deities, in the min destructive, have been propitiated and controlled by the constant service of their votaries. Once the wanderer leaves the hamlet where he was born, he enters the domain of new and unknown deities, who, being strangers, are of necessity hostile to him, and may resent his intrusion by sending famine, disease, or death upon the luckless stranger. The emigrant, again, to a distant land, finds extreme difficulty in selecting suitable husbands for his daughters. He must choose his sons-in-law within a narrow circle, and if he allows his daughter to reach womanhood unwed, he commits a grievous sin. Should he die in exile, he may fail to win the heaven of the gods, because no successor will make the due funeral oblations, and no trusted family priest be there to arrange the last journey of his spirit. So he may wander through the ages a starving, suffering, malignant ghost, because his obsequies have not been duly performed.'<sup>5</sup>

The above mentioned myths created village conservatism and acted as the barriers resulting in Indian repugnance to emigration. These myths were deeply rooted in the minds of the Indians, which were noticed by the Emigration Agents, Protector of Emigrant and the English historians. On the basis of the analysis of the period of Indian Emigration System (1834-1916), it came to light that the recruitment of Indian indentured labour was based either on false assurances by the agreement or on the false pretences of the recruiters (Arkatis). The recruitment was not conducted by the free-will of the emigrants. The oppressed and the uprooted classes were targeted and the mobilization for the recruitment

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<sup>4</sup> *Emigration Progs to C.S.*, 18 September 1896, Council Paper 15/96.s

<sup>5</sup> William Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces of India: Their History, Ethnology and Administration*, (London, 1987), p. 326. Also mentioned by Brij V. Lal in *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through Indenture in Fiji* (Melbourne, ANU, 2000) p. 122.

was done among them with false hope of obtaining better livelihood or employment prospects at distant places. The false hopes were accepted by the poor because of their adverse economic circumstances, which was caused by the penetration of the 'new British industrial pattern and its technology, and the emerging land-relations under their land revenue policies'. As a repercussion of these new economic developments emerging in the nineteenth century, it made 'Indians of all castes to readily forsook their traditional occupations, and turned to those that offered better prospects'<sup>6</sup> beyond their desires or barriers of their traditional social restrictions. Census reports reveal, "For many it was agriculture and general field labour".<sup>7</sup> 'For some who were unable to eke out an existence in the village, migration offered an attractive alternative'.<sup>8</sup> As mentioned earlier the Indians had strong odium towards emigration. European historians highlighted the myths, which were creating the odium.<sup>9</sup> But the British Government introduced the 'Indian Emigration System' (IES) in order to fulfill the labour demand raised by the European colonies. This was then called as the system which was 'highly organised [structure] than emigration from Europe.'<sup>10</sup>

Among the Indian traditional rural people, the religious perception of *Kalapani* was definitely, one of those reasons that restricted them from crossing the sea for any kind of attractive prosperity, even if offered in accordance of their suited work. On the other hand, historians such as Kapil Kumar and Brij V. Lal, have rejected the *notion of Kalapani* creating any hurdle for migration. Kapil Kumar denies the notion of *Kalapani* and considered it as a construction of 'colonial psyche'. Brij V. Lal considers that 'the interdict on crossing the *Kalapani* did not apply, to any meaningful degree, in Western and Southern India where there has always been a strong seafaring tradition. Further, it was supposed to be applied only to the twice-born (dvija) castes, especially the Brahmans. Most of the indentured migrants were, belonged to non-dvija castes'.<sup>11</sup> Even if many Indian historians have rejected the notion of *Kalapani*, many other historians have accepted the notion of '*Kalapani*' as the determinant cause that influenced the decision towards rejecting

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<sup>6</sup>Brij V. Lal, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> Census of India, Vol. 15, Part 2, 1911. Its table XVI provides a detailed statistical analysis of occupational mobility among different castes in Uttar Pradesh (UP).

<sup>8</sup>Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> Crispin Bates in his study under the title of 'Coerced and Migrant Labourers in India: The Colonial Experience' published in *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies*, Number 13, 2000, Considered such reasons as Indian myths. However, the significance of such myth as determinant of migration cannot be completely denied due the deep-rooted village conservatism of Indian society.

<sup>10</sup>Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, pp.39.

<sup>11</sup>Brij V. Lal, p. 123.

migration to overseas colonies. A. L. Basham draws our attention to such an influence that ‘...forbade or discouraged ocean voyages cannot have been followed by more than a small section of the population’<sup>12</sup>. ‘To travel was to risk breaking caste rules, those relating to food for instance, and to lose caste on the *Kalapani*, the terrible black water which, if crossed in defiance of God or nature, would surely bring retribution. Like peasants elsewhere, the Indian peasants, particularly in north India, were far removed from the ‘economic man’, the abstraction on which Indian emigration policy was ultimately based, and his resistance to leaving his home was reinforced by his religion.’<sup>13</sup> Official records too clearly evinced about this trend.<sup>14</sup>

In reality, Indians did not positively look upon the overseas colonial Indian emigration. Particularly it was the case with the north Indians. It was not only the notion of ‘*Kalapani*’ that was restricting the people towards overseas migration, other factors too acted as the barriers in this regard. This finding is in opposition to the earlier mentioned observation of Brij Lal who refuted the notion of *kalapani* as a barrier for emigration.<sup>15</sup>

There were many religious restrictions that existed for hundreds of years that brought an interdict on foreign visits among the Indians. This was the case especially with the Hindus of north India. Certain exceptions were seen so far the trading class was concerned. Apart from this class, the other people who crossed the black water (*Kala pani*) lost their castes. It is due to this reason that the recruits were selected from either of disreputable status or mixed castes and religions or the widows. In addition to these recruits, the rest of the Indians who migrated consisted of the poor and oppressed classes. They did not have any option of livelihood other than distant overseas migration. At that time, it was also rumored that the Indians were sent to the overseas countries for the purpose of populating those countries or with the intention of converting them to Christianity.<sup>16</sup> In a report Pitcher had stated, ‘We have an officer in Oudh telling us of the police sending back a batch of emigrants to their homes by warning them that they “ were all going to be made Christians” ’.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> A. L. Basham, *Notes on Seafaring in Ancient India, in his Studies in Indian History and Culture*, (Calcutta 1964), p. 163.

<sup>13</sup> Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> Cd 5193, 1910,29.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Pointed out in the Report by Major Pitcher on emigration from the North-West Provinces and Oudh, India E.P February 1883, A.1-12; report by G. A Grierson on emigration from Bengal and Bihar, India E.P. August 1883, A.9-15.

<sup>17</sup> Revenue and Agriculture Department (Immigration, Fiji), Proceeding no. 64 to 73, April 1882, File no. 35. (Deputation of Major D.G. Pitcher to Enquire into the present System of Recruiting labourers for the colonies)

As mentioned earlier, Kapil Kumar and Brij V. Lal rejected the idea of *Kalapani* creating any hurdle for Indians in their emigration.<sup>18</sup> However, the British official records ascertained that Emigration agents frequently found that ‘there seemed to exist a spirit of dislike, amounting in some cases to opposition, towards emigration. Representation had been made which showed that emigration was a thing rather to be prevented than encouraged’.<sup>19</sup> On the basis of these records, this can be ascertained that the notion of ‘*Kalapani*’ and village conservatism had somewhere influentially created obstacles in emigration of the intend Indians, especially in north India (as quoted earlier, A. L. Basham has admitted this fact). The writings of many historians (K. L. Gillion etc.) and official records have accepted that such notional values were highly determining the decisions of the Indians regarding their mobilization from their native villages to other distant places, more specifically to the overseas countries. For the purpose of getting rid of this problem, a properly networked, organised, consolidated and reformed structure of Indian emigration system was introduced in 1834. This system was subsequently amended to maintain an uninterrupted flow of labour for the fulfillment of labour shortage in the overseas British colonies. It was obvious that ‘without stimulus of an organised recruiting, the volume of emigration from the north would have been negligible’.<sup>20</sup>

The above mentioned historical analysis confirmed the fact that the Indians, who were living in a society where a parochial culture was followed, remained repugnant to migration, particularly overseas migration. In addition to this factor, other factors like peasant conservatism and the joint-family culture also acted as obstacles that created aversion to migration, mainly for overseas migration.

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<sup>18</sup>Brij V. Lal and Kapil Kumar rejected the notion of *Kala pani* and straightaway denied that crossing *Kala Pani* (black water) brought any form of interdiction in overseas migration. Some historians considered the notion of ‘*Kala pani*’ as a construction of colonial psyche (Kapil Kumar).

<sup>19</sup> Revenue and Agriculture Department, Pros. No. 71½, April, 1882 (Emigration-page no. 530)

<sup>20</sup>Gillion has also pointed that the need of organised labour emigration system was needed for continuous uninterrupted flow of labour supply, and in the absence of such a system; they might not have achieved the required number of labourers. See, Gillion, p. 39.