

# REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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## Lecture 51

**Lecture 51: Coolie Migration**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, today we are going to talk about the Coolie migration and its history with respect to the Indian subcontinent. So, I would like to begin with a quotation from a person named Munshi Rahman Khan. So, Munshi Rahman Khan says the following: 'We came from India to do service here, completed girmit, referring to agreement, with difficulty and then toiled on government fields as well.' My district is Hamirpur in Allahabad division.



My village is Bharkhari in Bimbar police station. With the good and bad of the land and the year, I came to Dutch Guyana on the 13th of April, 1898, finished my girmit of five years at the field of lust and rust. I served as Sardar for 20 years under manager Horst.' So, uh, Rahman Khan was an indentured labourer in Suriname when he stated this.

This entire statement, you know, talks about a system called girmit. Girmit is a colloquial term for agreement. It describes a system popularly called girmit. Like I was saying, you know, this man was talking about girmit or agreement, as we officially know, through which people went to Dutch Guyana or Suriname to work as plantation labourers in 1898.

More than 1 million Indian workers left their native country to work in the sugar plantations of British and European colonies in the Caribbean, in Southern Pacific and Indian Oceans during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Vijay Mishra is a critic who has worked extensively in the field of diaspora, Indian diaspora. So, Vijay Mishra states that the Girit ideology can be read within the theoretical framework of the old diaspora. So, as Vijay Mishra notes the term Girit or Giritiya, these terms are exclusive to the experiences of the indentured population of Fiji Island and they also marginally refer to the plantations of the South African Indians. The Girit ideology has a historical depth, it has a historical context and a metaphorical resonance.



Although the understanding of Girit is limited to Fiji and South Africa, it also extends itself to what Terry Eagleton would understand by the term ideology. So, Terry Eagleton describes ideology as something which transcends itself to affective, unconscious, mythical or symbolic ideology. Right. It is a kind of concept or understanding that, you know, is born out of our affective, unconscious nature, and sometimes a mythical or symbolic interface with facts, with experiences.

It could be our unconscious or even a symbolic perception of certain things. This leads to the formation of what Eagleton calls as ideology. So, the understanding of Eagleton's ideology is based on something wherein people may come to, you know, invest in their own unhappiness while creating socially necessary illusion. So, this we are going to emphasize socially necessary illusions, right. So, it is a kind on ideology people invest their

own kind of collective psyche, their own collective understanding, and create maybe an illusion, which is socially necessary. This illusion grows out of the common memory of a

community's distant and ancient land that has been lost in the case of the diaspora. So, a kind of illusion about the host land as juxtaposed with the homeland.

**Introduction**

- The understanding of Eagleton's 'ideology' is based on something, wherein people may come to 'invest in their own unhappiness' while creating socially necessary illusions. This 'illusion' grows out of the common memory of a community's distant and ancient land that has been lost (qtd. in Mishra).
- This distant land is a metaphorical home that resides in the memory of the indentured labourers. Initially, this memory was transmitted through 'oral' narratives, until it found its manifestations in written language and visual modes of representation.
- Referring to the Trinidad experience of the indentured labourers and reminiscing the 'oral' past, V.S. Naipaul in his Nobel lecture states, '[We] are pretending – perhaps not pretending, perhaps only feeling, never formulating it as an idea – that we had brought a kind of India with us, which we could, as it were, unroll like a carpet on the flat land' (qtd. in Mishra).



Both of these understandings, once again, may not correspond with reality every time. However, there is a collective investment and a collective agreement on how people want to accept, how people want to perceive both the host land and the homeland. So, from there, from this symbolic association, from this myth developed about a particular geopolitical space, the ideology is formed. So, this distant land, which is metaphorically one's home, resides in the memory of the

indentured laborers, is touched, is kind of intercepted, or it is intervened through a common understanding, through an ideological investment, right. So, initially the The memory of the distant land, the memory of the homeland, was transmitted through oral narratives until it found its manifestations in written language and visual modes of representation. Referring to the Trinidad experience of the indentured laborers and reminiscing about the oral past, V.S. Naipaul, in his Nobel lecture, states the following, I quote, 'We are pretending, perhaps not pretending, perhaps only feeling, never formulating it as an idea.'

that we had brought a kind of India with us, which we could, as it were, unroll like a carpet on the flat land, unquote. So, in his memoir titled Prologue to an Autobiography, V.S. Naipaul, who had grown up in the Caribbean island, documents the story of a group of migrants in the summer of 1932. The indentured laborers, who carried the illusion of home, were also promised a glorious return to their homeland with riches that they earned from the plantations by the agents and the recruiters. So, there was always this distant homeland beckoning, and they would dream of returning to their native space with plenty of riches that they had earned by working in the plantations.

Once the contract of labor was over, it seemed that the return home with riches was an extraordinary promise made to these subaltern, essentially lower-caste and lower-strata people from India. So, most of the people who would travel to the Caribbean, to Fiji, and to all these different places as laborers, they would essentially be from the lower strata of Indian society, mostly the lower-caste people from India. So, it was quite impossible to materialize that ideal dream of going back home with plenty of riches. So, V.S. Naipaul narrates the incident of how, in 1932, a ship called SS Ganges sailed from Trinidad to India, carrying Indian indentured laborers to fulfill promises of returning home.

However, it eventually came back to Trinidad, having collected more immigrants from India. So, this is how it goes. SS Ganges again set off for Calcutta with other passengers. Seven weeks later, the Ganges reached Calcutta, and there, to the terror of the passengers, the Ganges was stormed by hundreds of derelicts previously repatriated, who now wanted to be taken back to the other place. India, for these people, had been a dream of home, a dream of continuity after the illusion of Trinidad.

All of India they had found was the area around the Calcutta docks. Our own past was like our idea of India—a dream. So, we see that in the case of the indentured laborers going from India to the Caribbean and the Fiji Islands, they touch the host culture and their home culture through a dream, through an illusion, through a kind of makeup—not a fabrication, but an ideology. Which makes, you know, the land quite beside itself, which makes the picture quite beside itself. It does not really correspond with reality.

It is their understanding of home, and it is their understanding of the host land. They are slightly displaced from the actuality. The repeated mention of dream and illusion is noteworthy here. Migration alters how indentured laborers and migrants perceive both the home and the host countries. So, the home corresponds with the dream, whereas the host country corresponds with illusion.

Trinidad has been an illusion for the Indian migrants because it has not lived up to its promises or, in other words, what the migrants expected of it. Due to migration, India also became a dream to the migrants—one that is not really their reality anymore. The coolie migration was a result of British colonialism. Before British rule, peasant migration in India was restricted to internal migrations. However, due to the abolition of slavery in 1833, the number of coolie laborers grew.

So, the indentured system was a ready replacement for the slavery system in various sugar plantations. These plantations played a significant role in the development of the

economies of countries such as Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa, Guyana, Trinidad, and Suriname. From the 1830s onwards, the peasants of India became peasants of the British Raj. With the advent of industrialization, we see that there was a change in the quality of life of the peasants. The peasants turned into mill hands.

**Introduction**

- The coolie migration was a result of the British colonialism. Before the British rule, peasant migration in India was restricted to internal migrations, but later, due to the abolition of slavery in 1833, the coolie labourers grew.
- The indenture system was a ready replacement for the slavery system in various sugar plantations. These plantations played a significant role in the development of the economies of countries like Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa, Guyana, Trinidad and Surinam.
- From the 1830s, the peasants of India became peasants of the British Raj.
- With the advent of industrialization, the peasants turned into 'mill hands,' who were later sent to plantations around the world as 'sugar hands.'



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Later, they were sent to plantations around the world as sugar hands or labor hands in sugarcane plantations. So, India at one point was called the mother country for coolies, the mother country producing coolies. The word 'coolie,' when used by the British Raj for the indentured laborers, was taken as a racial slur. So, post-independence in India, the term 'coolie' was imbued with two different meanings among the descendants of indentured laborers. So, the 'coolie' retained two different significations, two different connotations, down the generations of the indentured laborers.

'Coolie' had a debatable origin in India. It was used to address a specific group of laborers who were hired to lift and transport heavy loads. It took the status of a *corvée*. *Corvée* refers to unpaid intermittent forced labor, where these coolies, these laborers, would often be made to work in unpaid or underpaid conditions in the hilly areas. While some descendants of the coolie laborers have since been ashamed of their coolie identity,

and they consider distancing themselves from the coolie identity because coolie is almost synonymous with untouchables. On the other hand, we find other descendants, you know, another type of descendants who celebrate it. So, while some descendants of the coolie labourers distance themselves and are ashamed of the coolie identity because it is almost equal or equivalent to untouchables in India, others, yet others celebrate it. So, Coolie inheritors having a past of indentured families such as the prolific Guyanese poet Rajkumari Singh and acclaimed writer Gaiutra Bahadur have taken their Coolie identity

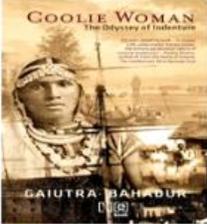
with retrospective pride. So, it becomes a source of pride, it becomes essential aspect of their identity defining their past, who their ancestors were.

So Bahadur states in her renowned work entitled *Coolie Woman, The Odyssey of Inventure*, which was published in 2013. And I quote from her work, Coolie may bear a jagged edge like a broken bottle raised in threat. But it also ricochets still down dirt lanes in the Guyanese village where I was born in far more complicated ways, in greetings that are sometimes menacing but also often affectionate and intimate, signifying a sense of shared beginnings. It bears the burden of history, unquote. Bahadur Gaiutra states this Coolie diaspora is synonymous with a movement to reclaim the word Coolie, to invest it with pride and subvert the old stigma.

And this is at least a generation old, right? Before I was born, the Guyanese poet Rajkumari Singh issued a call, "Proclaim the word COOLIE. identify with the word, proudly say to the world, I am coolie," unquote. So, Bahadur Gaiutra actually almost takes pride in the legacy that has been bequeathed to her by a writer like Rajkumari Singh, and she says that this resistance by the coolie diaspora is at least a generation old.

**Coolie Diaspora**

- Bahadur Gaiutra states –“A movement to reclaim the word coolie, to invest it with pride and subvert the old stigma, is at least a generation old. Before I was born, the Guyanese poet Rajkumari Singh issued a call: “Proclaim the word! Identify with the word! Proudly say to the world: *I am a COOLIE*!”
- Mauritian poet, Khal Torabully, drew a parallel to ‘Negritude’ and formulated the concept of ‘Coolitude.’
- The concept of ‘Coolitude’, ‘deconstructed the opprobrium attached to the coolies of the Empire and emphasized the specificities of the first generation Coolie experience, together with [the experiences of] their descendants spread globally today’ (Kumar xiv).



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It started with the pathbreaking work of Rajkumari Singh, and it actually encouraged all of us from the Coolie diaspora to reclaim our past, to reclaim our identity, and, you know, proclaim the word and proudly tell the world that, yes, we are from the Coolie diaspora. We belong; we are children of, you know, forefathers who worked as indentured laborers, as coolies. So, it is a way of removing the stigma that is associated—that has been traditionally associated—with this term. Mauritian poet Khal Torabully actually draws a parallel between the term 'coolie' and 'negritude' and formulates the concept of 'coolitude.'

So, that is the term Torabully coins: 'coolitude.' The concept of coolitude deconstructs the opprobrium attached to the coolies of the empire and emphasizes the specificities of the first-generation coolie experience and together with the experiences of their descendants spread globally today, right? So, Khal Torabully first laid out the fundamentals of coolitude in his book of poetry. The poetry book was titled 'Cale d'étoiles: Coolitude,' published in 1992.

It was later published by Seagull Books in English as 'Cargo Hold of Stars' in 2021 and translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson. Torabully coins this term 'coolitude' and emphasizes what Ballengee would call, I quote, 'the foundational coolitudian symbols of the ship.' The voyage and the plantation as central to an ever-disorienting yet ever-familiar coolie-centric oceanic memory. So, rather than any, you know, negative association, the term 'coolitude' talks about the voyage, the journey, the disorienting experiences, the challenges that a laborer faces when there is a geopolitical spatial shift—a person travels to another geopolitical space, another location to earn money.

All the experiences that are associated with the coolie life are kind of collected and, you know, burdened into this term 'coolitude.' 'Coolitude' is actually kind of pregnant with the meaning of a coolie's difficult experiences, tiding over the conditions, you know, in a new life, in a new country, with a new identity, right? So, Torabully points out that this collective memory spans time and space. The trauma of continuous displacement, the treacherous journey of moving across the sea, the difficulties faced upon arrival in a new land,

and the constant processes of creolization heavily impacted the current experience of post-indenture Indians around the world. So, when we talk of creolization here, we refer to a process of blending elements from different cultures to create a new culture. This was something inherent to the experience of the indentured laborers or the coolies. According to Jason Muller and Joanna Abel, Torabully does not define the concept of 'coolie' in terms of exclusion. Rather, the term has been used in a figurative sense and illuminates a specific phenomenon of globalization, suggesting the globalization of migrants who are searching for work and a better life while crossing the sea.

So, Torabully's portrayal of the journey of crossing oceans is unique, as it refers to the poetics and the saga of these Indian populations who crossed the Kala Pani, or the black water, as it was popularly called. The focus on the transoceanic journey brings in maritime symbols. The maritime symbols are rife in these documentations. The central

image of coolitude revolves around the metaphorical implications of coral, in fact, the 'chair corail,' referring to the coral flesh, which stands for or represents the hybrid relationalities in island cultures.



How the caste system of India, for example, would be completely, you know, mixed up in the jahaji culture, in the ship culture, and further how these people would be dispersed and shuffled, their identities shuffled into hybrid relationalities in the island cultures. All these things, all these factors inform the term coolitude. So, Muller and Abel say that negritude and coolitude are connected by two ideas. One is the reconciliation of the descendants of the oppressed that support the efforts to come to grips with or to come to terms with the historical tensions between the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade and that of the coolie in Creole societies.

And then second is the idea of conceptual negotiation and a constant redefinition. So the scholars therefore study how the descendants of the oppressed reconcile the efforts made to come back in terms with the historical tensions between the Atlantic legacy of the slave trade and the legacy of the coolies in Creole societies. These two, you know, kinds of practices are being paralleled, being seen as analogous practices, and then the idea of conceptual negotiation and redefinition, right.

So, this is something that interests the study made by Muller and Abel. Then the diversity of language is significant in reading Torabully. So, the author talks of a transformative and shifting identity, an identity that is in a state of change, flux. When migrants are moving from one side of the ocean to another, they are not merely getting transferred; rather, they are transported to a different identity and linguistic structure.

To quote Torabully, no longer the Hindu man from Calcutta, but coral flesh from the Indies. Right. So as Torabully notes that, these people are no longer the Hindu man from Calcutta, but coral flesh from the Indies, right? From being a human, they have been reduced to almost the coral flesh.

They are part of the maritime life. Everything that they possess, you know, is invested towards working in the sugarcane plantations, harvesting sugarcanes. So, their lives are transformed into sugar hands, labor hands in the sugarcane fields. The traumas and extent of psychological and psychosocial tensions of trans-oceanic crossings of Indians get its manifestation through the language of coolitude. The trans-oceanic painful journeys and Kalapani crossings by the migrants who are in desperate need of work have transformed the identity of these migrants altogether.

So, reference to Kalapani in the Indian context is associated with the cellular jail in Port Blair, where the British would send most of the anti-colonial leaders, the leaders who fought against colonization, the leaders who fought against the British Raj, who the British would call as terrorists, all these so-called terrorists of native origin would be sent to Port Blair. So, Kalapani always had this historical negative connotation coming down from the British period, the period of colonization. In the 20th century, the Indian freedom fighters were sent to Port Blair by the British colonial administration. Right.

*Kala Pani Crossings*

- The reference to *kala pani* in India is associated with the cellular jail in Port Blair. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian freedom fighters were sent to Port Blair by the British colonial administration.
- *Kala pani* ('Black Waters') in diaspora meant the forbidden sea between India and America. In and around the 1830s, a large-scale migration of indentured labourers took place by crossing the *kala pani* to work in sugar plantations.



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All these freedom fighters who were arrested would mostly be sent to the Cellular Jail. So, Kalapani—Blackwaters—literally translates to Kalapani. In diaspora, it would mean the forbidden sea that stretched between India and America. In and around the 1830s, the large-scale migration of indentured laborers took place by crossing this Kalapani to work in the sugar plantations. So, the phrase Kalapani was initially applied in the Indian Penal Code of the early 19th century.

Later in Trinidad, the term suggested a loss of caste—losing one's status or caste in society. It referred to the social status experienced by the migrants who had left India. Right. Going to Kalapani was tantamount to losing one's caste, and that was a similar kind of experience the migrants faced once they had left India for Trinidad, the Fiji Islands, and so forth. So, factors such as starvation, chronic debt, domestic violence, and caste oppression were responsible for these migrations.

The indentured laborers were recruited by the Arkatis, referring to the recruiting agents who worked for the British government. The process of caste disruption was rooted in the crossing of Kalapani. Some of the indentured laborers were kidnapped and lured onto ships heading to the Caribbean, Mauritius, or Fiji. The laborers had to undergo selection tests to prove their ability to work in the sugarcane plantations. Before sailing to work in sugar colonies, they were provided with emigration passes stating their name, sex, age, identification marks, village name, caste, and date of departure.

An estimated three months later, they were required to cross the Kalapani or the black waters of Indian Ocean and Atlantic and reach the destination. The indentured labourers would reach Calcutta from Bihar, from other parts of Bengal as well as from Uttar Pradesh and they would then be deported mainly from the Khidirpur port or the Khidirpur dock on Hugli River. Three months in a boat would usually result in the mingling up of people belonging from different castes. They could be Brahmins, they could be Shudras, they could be untouchables coming from different sections and different regions of the Indian society, the large Indian subcontinent.

And in this regard, critic Brinsley Samaroo has coined the phrases Brahmin by birth and Brahmin by boat. So, we see the following, men and women from the villages of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar looking around in the receiving depot and seeing no one who could attest to their true origins and they gave themselves new names, which indicated the upward direction which they now wish to pursue. They were now Singh or Lion, Sher or Tiger, Rajkumari or Princess, Maharaj or Great King, Mahavir or Great Warrior. There were now many new Brahmins. We see that there are now many new Brahmins by boat rather than by birth because they were leaving a history of caste exploitation, starvation, oppression behind them and there was no one to see how life would turn out in the future.

In the boat and in the islands onward, they could actually rename themselves. That life we could.. one could say.. it wouldn't be wrong to say that the life in the ship was like a bricolage. It was a heterotopia once again, where anything could happen. It could unfold

n number of possibilities, n number of meanings. One could make out of one's identity what they wanted.

They could just become an upper caste by adopting a new name. So, identities were being reshuffled in the migration process. Post-partition, it was almost impossible to return to greater India, mostly due to social exclusions and affordability. So, India remained a dream—a distant dream—for these coolies and their descendants. The descendants of this diverse diaspora have, therefore, formed a unique social equalization.

So, we see that the ship becomes a space where identities can be reshuffled. It is a heterotopia. It is a bricolage where people can assume new identities, and the diverse Coolie diaspora is, therefore, uniquely equalized. There is a unique social equalization going on by making one's co-immigrant a Jahaji Bhai or Jahaji Behen outside the caste system, which would function mainly within the Indian subcontinent once they depart.

Once they leave the Indian subcontinent, they become Jahaji Bhais and Jahaji Behens—a kind of equal relationship outside the caste hierarchies they had previously experienced. So, with this, I would like to conclude my lecture here today, and let us continue further discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.

