COOLITUDE

AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE INDIAN LABOUR DIASPORA

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Anthem Press
No doubt, Coolitude is the song of a forgotten voyage. But it is also more: the coolie odyssey is the ultimate voyage: the essence of journeys and the essence of Man. The struggles of the coolie, his disappointments and his hopes, are the echoes of a universal human experience. Créolité, indienocéanisme and Caribbean créolité are enriched and redefined when related to coolitude, which gives them new venues of meaning and perspectives in many fields. Coolitude thus entails a fresh attitude and new definitions, capable of giving these theories a new impetus and unprecedented configurations.

The Coolie Odyssey: A Voyage in Time and Space

"The Beyond is, first of all, for the coolie who settles, a confused poetics, pregnant with silence, looks, unsaid words. This last-comer was forced to situate himself in this new cultural challenge where the other is an ambiguous figure, bearer of signs of reconnaissances and annihilation, and capable of wrecking symbols. The game of anonymity, based on the absence of social landmarks, pushed the coolie to the bottom of the ladder, out of speech."


The metaphor of the voyage was played out throughout the coolie's life. From the first crossing of the kala pant – that forbidden sea journey – the migrant was cast in the dual role of adventurer and victim. Coolitude explores the concept of the ocean as a nodal moment of migration, a space for destruction of identity, yet also one of regeneration, when an aesthetics of migration was created. This chapter revisits the recruitment of the coolie and the experience of sea-crossing, detailing the expectations and experiences of the overseas migrant, the raw emotion of transition and upheaval, of uncertainty and struggle, the evolution of another identity beyond India.

The Moment of Departure – Coolie Choices and Voices

The testimonies of migrants frequently bear witness to a pre-existing decision to look for work away from their native village, to join the armies of rural Indians tramping the roads looking for seasonal employment, before the fateful meeting with a recruiter that was to lead them much further afield, to a distant colony. Ekhadosee reported having left his home in Midnapur to look for work at Calcutta when he met a man who promised him a monthly wage of ten rupees. The man lodged him at Bam Bazar for a week before tutoring him as to how to pass the
registration: ‘I was taken to a Saheb but before that was tutored to say that I was going of my own free will and accord - six rupees was given to me, out of this two was taken by the Duffadours, who for two rupees purchased for me a chest and some chorelis, two rupees remained with me which I used in purchasing necessaries while on board for my subsistence - I seldom ever got food from the ship's people - I would never venture to go on board ship to the Mauritius - the promised service was in Calcutta and not the Mauritius.’

The Many-faced Recruit

Je suis chamar des plaines du Gange Pallan Palli
Déjà esclave du Canara -
A Andhra je playais sous le joug du Misrada Tiourel
Prêt a quitter la terre brûlée de Meerut
Je me déclarai aventurier assaiffé de l'or des colonies
Pour me consumer dans les cannaies de Saint Alary
Je suis le mutin des révoltes des Sepoyes
Le brahmane vaincu du royaume d'Oude

K Torabully, Chair Coral, Fragments Coolies, p. 53.

I am a chamar from the plains of the Ganges Pallan Palli
Already a slave from Canara
At Andhra I struggled under the yoke of Misrada Tiourel
Ready to leave the burnt earth of Meerut
I declared myself an adventurer, thirsty for the gold of the colonies
To be consumed among the canes of Saint Alary
I am the mutineer from the Sepoy Revolt
The vanquished Brahmin from the kingdom of Oudh

An early recruit to Mauritius, the Bengali woman Djoram, recounted a typical story of immiseration and mobility within India. Already a migrant to Calcutta, she was there convinced by a recruiter to embark on a ship to take service - only once aboard did she, and many other migrants who made these pioneer journeys in the 1830s, become aware of how far their new employments were from India:

‘I was born at the village of Amtah about three days’ journey south of Midnapore. I left my home at Amtah about four and a half years ago, and came to Calcutta for service; about two years after my leaving home, my father was drowned in an inundation, and my mother came to Calcutta with my two brothers; we lived together at Khidderpqore; I lived with an ayah for one year, cooking for her and serving her on two rupees per month; finding she could not support me, she taught me ayah's work, and I served a Mr Martin for about a year, when Mr Martin left for some other country; I was then out of employ; I remained two months, and then took service for the Mauritius; this is about two and a half years ago; a baboo, whose name I do not know, and a duffadour called Jungli Havildar entertained me . . . I was sitting in a tailor's shop at Bhowanipore when this Junglee Haldar and the baboo came to me . . . I was told I could get ten rupees a month wages, food and clothing, and that I was to serve a gentleman and lady who were proceeding in the ship I was to embark on; I asked how far Meritch was; they said five days' journey, and that if I pleased I could remain in service there or return; they thus deceived me and got me on board.’

Karoo was enticed to Calcutta with the promise of work on road repairs, and when the promised job did not materialize, was, like many others, inveigled into the emigration depot:

‘A man of the name of Golam Ally, who is a duffadour, went to my country. He gathered fifteen men and brought them down to Calcutta, he had three men with him with badges on. He asked us “What are you doing in the jungle? Come to Calcutta, and you will get employment for repairing roads, for which you will receive pay at the rate of four rupees per month, besides diet” . . . When we arrived here, he told us that no employment on the roads could be got; “You had better go forward and you will find plenty of employment.” He mentioned that we should go to the Mauritius.’

Vulnerable individuals, especially women who had left their homes after a dispute, as in the case of Ratna, interviewed in Fiji, were easy fodder for unscrupulous recruiters:
'My man left the house after he had been rebuked by my father-in-law. I took my child and went looking for him in Ajodaji. I spent five or six days there, I did not know where to go and where to look for him. I was told that my husband had gone to Calcutta. I went to Calcutta by train in search for him. I was told that he had already left two or three days earlier. I went to the wharf and there I saw a steamer, some people took my son off me, and threatened me. I was put into the depot with my child and stayed there for two or three days before embarking on the ship.'

Calcutta-born Maharani later told interviewers that she escaped to Trinidad after being abused by her husband’s family in India.3

A Natal Indian, Aboo Bakr, testified to personal knowledge of coolies recruited under false pretences:

'I know an Indian woman, a Brahmin, she belonged to Lucknow; through a quarrel with her mother she made a pilgrimage to Allahabad; when there she met a man who told her that if she would work, she would be able to get twenty-five rupees a month in a European family, by taking care of the baby of a lady who lived about six hours’ sea journey from Calcutta; she went on board and, instead of taking her to the place proposed she was brought to Natal.'4

Even into the twentieth century, when migration overseas was a well-known phenomenon for the socially disaffected and economically marginalized, it was still possible for recruiters to trick individuals into migrating, including young men of relatively affluent backgrounds. In some cases their parents, particularly if literate and well-known, were able to raise the alarm fairly quickly, and institute the mechanisms of British bureaucracy on their side. Thus, when the son of Gopinath Pandey, a village headmaster from Uttar Pradesh, was tricked into going to Natal and embarked on the steamship Pongola, his father wrote a letter to the port emigration authorities. The letter reveals his disgust and distress at the manner of his son’s embarkation for Natal. Gyapershad, the son, was a 17-year-old student, described by his father as ‘a promising lad’:

'. . . on the occasion of attending to some ceremonies at his maternal uncle’s house he was decoyed and criminally misrepresented by some recruiters of professional roguery at Cawnpur to join the Coolie Depot preparing emigrants for the Colonies.

That the affection which I as an old father bear to him has almost not only paralysed me but also his old mother and young wife recently married, on account of his having been snatched away from our paternal care and guardianship . . .

Under the circumstances I am constrained to reach your honour in the sanguine expectation of your being gracious pleased of adopting prompt measures for stopping the said Gyapershad my son at any of the intervening stations available to the SS Pongola in transit from Calcutta to Natal and for taking him back to Calcutta to me and for thus saving his old parents’ critical life.

P.S. It is sickening to hear that I am a Brahmin and my son Gyapershad has been misrepresented to be Rajput (Thakur) for sheerly serving the evil purposes of the recruiter.’5

Even where migrants had a good understanding of their destination, resentments and misrepresentations as to working conditions and wage rates could still occur. In 1914 a group of Punjabi migrants to Fiji reported that they had left India:

'. . . on the inducement and representations of Wali Mohamed and Atta Mohamed, castes Sayed, residents of Karnana, tahsil Navanshar, District Jullundur, Punjab. They have been sending our people during the last five years and on each steamer 45 or 46 men are being emigrated while they take Rs 35 as their commission for each individual . . . we were made to understand that in Fiji we can get work on daily wages at 5/- but regret to say that even 2/- can be hardly earned – thus we have been suffering much. We had no previous experience of such tricks and they are deceiving to the people and are also against the law.’6
Folksongs from the colonies of Indian settlement testify to the resentment felt at deceptive recruiters:

Oh recruiter, your heart is deceitful,
Your speech is full of lies!
Tender may be your voice, articulate and seemingly logical,
But it is all used to defame and destroy
The good names of people.7

A song from Fiji curses the arkatis, or subordinate recruiters:

I hoe all day and cannot sleep at night,
Today my whole body aches,
Damnation to you, arkatis.8

If early migrants were deceived as to the real distance of their destination, and later indentured recruits disappointed in the opportunities proffered, in the peak years of migration, during the mid-nineteenth century, would-be emigrants could find themselves the prey of rival recruiting agencies that thwarted their attempts to go to a particular colony where they may have had friends or relations. Chummun left his village intending to go to Mauritius, around 1860, with a relative who had already been to the colony when, at Raniganj, they were met by a munshi 'who advised us to go to Bourbon and offered to take us to the Bourbon Depot. He succeeded in inducing my companions to follow him. He said that Mauritius had become a bad place for Coolies and that Bourbon was much better. He said that Mr Caird had gone away and that the Mauritius Depot was locked up.9

Jhurry gave a statement to the Calcutta Magistrate in April 1861 that revealed that he had instigated a chain migration to Mauritius, but that his own brother had been unable to accompany him, having been lured to the Trinidad depot by a recruiter:

'I was ten years at Mauritius. My masters were Hart and Bissy, of Grand Port district. As they were very kind to me, I came back to recruit Coolies for them. I have five men with me now, who are disposed to accompany me. They come from Arrah Zillah. My

brother left Arrah to come and join me. He was enticed away by an arkotty who took him to the Trinidad depot. I endeavoured to communicate with my brother, but was prevented by the arkotty who had charge of him. I have heard that my brother has been sent away to Trinidad.'

Another recruit, who had friends in Mauritius, left Sherghotty to go to that island but was taken by a duffadar to a place called the 'new Mauritius depot'. Only after he had been registered as an emigrant did he find that it was the Demerara depot:10

'When an inspector of emigration visited Thanjavur in 1866, he found numerous abuses of their position by recruiters. Mootooasamy Pillay had a sign in front of his house inviting would-be migrants for Mauritius to enter his premises. On investigation, he was found to have a licence for Ceylon. In a reversal of earlier deceptions, which saw recruits intending to work inland, being taken overseas, Ramalingum, a recruiter ostensibly working for the Mauritius depot in Madras, was dismissed from his post in 1871 when he was found to have been taking recruits to the local Godavery works instead.11

The various stories that lay behind migration decisions are encapsulated in Mahadai Das’ poem:

They Came in Ships

Some came with dreams of milk-and-honey riches,
Fleeing famine and death:
Dancing girls,
Rajput soldiers, determined, tall,
Escaping penalty of pride.
Stolen wives, afraid and despondent,
Crossing black waters,
Brahmin, Chamar, alike,
Hearts brimful of hope.

'They Came In Ships' by Mahadai Das in Dabydeen & Samaroo (eds), India in the Caribbean, 1987, p. 288.
Children were particularly vulnerable to entrapment, and as indenture contracts could be signed from the age of ten years and upwards, minors could find themselves engaged to an estate overseas for lengthy periods. In 1882, a small boy, Dawoodharree, was found to have been recruited from India for the Sans Souci estate in Mauritius, along with a group of men. He pleaded with the Protector of Immigrants to cancel the engagement, but the estate manager was unrelenting, claiming that:

'Dawoodharree was engaged at the same time as five or six other men who came from India with him, that he was aware that he was going to Mauritius to contract an engagement for five years, that his passage as well as the passage of the others, had been paid by the sirdar of 'Sans Souci' estate, and that the amount disbursed for this purpose by the sirdar had been refunded by the estate.'

The Protector initially ordered the estate to provide a certificate of discharge for the boy together with a cheque for forty rupees to provide for his repatriation, but after enquiring into the case, concluded that Dawoodharree should be made to work for one year, after which his engagement could be cancelled if he so wished.12

It was also common practice for recruiters to station themselves on the roads leading to centres of pilgrimage. Luckless travellers finding themselves without funds were another source of labour for the arkatis and duffadars. Mootooosamy Pillay left his home to attend the Kundri festival held in the mosque of Meera Sahib. On his return, at Karrical, he met a recruiter who induced him to emigrate. Vitilinga Naicken was travelling to Madras to see his sister when he became ill at Pondicherry. Taking lodgings there, he was assisted by a stranger who 'came thither and gave me some hot water. He took care of me two days, and then led me to his own house where he kept me about a month and cured my sickness. He then heard my story and said ... that if I went to Bourbon I could acquire money and return home, and that he would also accompany me.' Nagamootoo Padiatchy's stated reason for emigrating was almost banal: 'About eleven years ago a quarrel ensued between myself and my father. Displeased with my father, I thought of going to the Mauritius, and accordingly went to the bazaar street of my village.' Inevitably, he there met a recruiter's agent who was only too happy to undertake the necessary formalities on his behalf.

Come, you from the Grand Peninsula
Into the small isle of France.
Come to dance the immense twilight,
To purify your face and your senses.
Here is Money island Rupee island.

Just lift a stone and be rich.
Here the master is a friend
Come for all the gold of Dwipa Aropi.

The envoys told me
Come to Mauritius
And take Savannah and the Gunner's Quoin

To cover the ocean of the Indies
Our vessel will glide ten days only,
Nearer to you than the beat of blood.
The ocean? Worry not; sweet like the lover
When our vessel will reach the last breakers.

And I knew after two moons in drowning
Time was the consumption of times.
And I anchored in Durban, Dina Mergabine,
Singapore, Fiji, the West Indies, in the dust of waves.
To be scattered in the gales of continents.

K Torabully, *Cale d'Etoiles, Coolitude.*

Some migrants were deceived into going overseas in the mistaken belief that they were being recruited by the East India Company. Ramdeen stated:

'I was a syce at Barrackpore; Juggernaut, another syce, induced me to go to Mauritius. Juggernaut also went and died there. He told us Gillanders & Co were sending men to Mauritius, and induced us to go to get service. I came by myself to Calcutta, and
the others were collected from other parts near Calcutta, where they had come in search of employ; fifty out of two hundred and fifty were Dangahs... There were some Ooreahs also... We were told that we were engaged to do the Company's work.'

When Ramdeen was asked what he understood by 'company', he replied that he knew of only one company, 'the government of this country'. He declared that he and his fellow migrants would not have gone if they had known it was not for company service.\textsuperscript{13}

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\begin{quote}
You have learned the legendary store
of men lost in the orchard of gales,
fallen in water like five black cents.

And the monsoon has reaped you in its ropes
when the last pagla of the village spoke
of a book as strange as a shipwreck.

K Torabully, \textit{Cale d'Etoiles, Coolitude}
\end{quote}
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The Indian Government officially took a neutral stance on the emigration question, but the misleading notices posted by emigration officials in the pay of the overseas colonies at major Indian ports seemed to give the impression that the local government was the employer because they stipulated that migrants were under the protection of the 'Company'. In 1852, for example, the Emigration Agent of Mauritius at Madras circulated a notice in the Tamil and Telegu languages which asserted that recruits could earn good pay, be well fed, housed and clothed at Mauritius, thereby being able to save all the wages earned over five years, with a free return passage at the end of that time. The notice concluded 'These are the advantages that a kind Government secures to all those who are desirous to proceed to the Mauritius, and emigrants are strongly advised to select this colony rather than the foreign settlement of Bourbon where the Honourable Company cannot look after their interests.'\textsuperscript{14}

A considerable number of individuals were attracted by the idea of Company service. Contrary to traditional views of the Indian tied to his village, researchers have established that 'population mobility was inherent in

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\begin{quote}
The Disenchanted Sepoy
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\textit{Je suis une non-valeur}
Inapté au travail de la terre
Sheik est mon nom grinçant contre la graisse
De porc dans les cartouches ennemies
Paria crachant la graisse de vache dans le barillet
\textit{D'Enfield}

K Torabully, \textit{Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies}, p. 55.
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the social order and the peasantry lived in a state of flux.'\textsuperscript{15} Kolff has demonstrated the existence of a military labour market in India even in the pre-capitalist period, with sultans, rajahs and Mughal emperors all recruiting for large state armies from among marginal peasants. By the nineteenth century, it had become common practice for inhabitants of certain districts to supply the new rulers – the British – with military recruits. Yang's study of Saran district in Bihar, for example, reveals that the district had provided the British Army with 10,000 sepoy recruits by the mid-nineteenth century. He shows that where migratory trends developed, various types of labour, including seasonal work and overseas indenture, would be taken up and concludes that the rural migrant displayed considerable skill and sophistication in his migratory choices: 'Whether he moved, where he went, and what he did all testify to his capacity to operate under some degree of risk and uncertainty in order to create a safe investment... there has always been movement in response to better opportunities.'\textsuperscript{16} It was money which lured villagers like Tirvengadum and Marooha to the French Indian Ocean island of Reunion. At Pondicherry Tirvengadum was assured by the recruiter Carpeyee that overseas labourers returned 'with plenty of money'. Madooda was told that he too, would become wealthy, if he went abroad.
Accustomed to travel for and with their work, sepoys were among the first to take up the challenge of overseas labour. Rengasamy Naicken, who went to Mauritius with the first batches of recruits in the 1830s, described his background thus:

'I was formerly employed as a sepoy under the Danish Government of Tranquebar. After the annexation of that settlement to the company territories, I obtained a Vesharipoogaship in the Tranquebar talook. As my younger brother was living at Singapore and as I was desirous of paying a visit to him, I resigned the Vesharipoogar's post and went there. After a lapse of one year, I returned to my native land and was without employment. A native of Karrical of the Vellala caste was acquainted with me. He said he was going to Mauritius and desired me to follow him. I consented to it, and went along with him to Karrical.'

Manick, who stated that he was a former sepoy of the 'Indre ka pultun (52d N.I.)', decided to migrate in the belief that he was continuing in the service of the British 'sahib log ka hote' (government or company work). Having served his indenture overseas, he was philosophical about the experience: 'I am very willing to go back to Mauritius, it is a very beautiful country; but the Frenchmen are very bad. Give me food, and I am very willing to go.'

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**A Recruit**

*Il était de Tanjore,*  
*Aventurier de l'or*  
*Et tambour-major*  

K Torabully, *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies*, p. 85.

He was from Tanjore  
An adventurer seeking gold  
And a drummer.

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The volume of migration overseas fluctuated according to rival opportunities at home. Thus in the early 1860s when the local tea companies launched a recruiting drive, the emigration agents for the overseas depots reported a slowing down in their admissions due to 'great demand for labourers for Assam and Cachar and the unsparing application of capital in procuring them'. By contrast, in 1865, when the tea planters had scaled down their recruiting operations, and this coincided with a partial failure of crops in some districts of Bengal, a renewed impetus was given to overseas emigration.  

A complex combination of local food production problems and labouring opportunities help to explain how and why coolies in some areas made the decision to migrate. Yamin's study of Ratnagiri district has revealed that the highest rates of migration occurred from the khoti or 'landlord-held' villages, which were characterized by 'greater poverty and intra-village inequality'. Moreover, she notes 'the power of the khoti landlords over their tenants increased between 1820 and 1880 as a result of the introduction of British concepts of property to India through the courts'. Thus she concludes that the structure of landholding is a crucial factor in the understanding of the volume of migration from particular regions.

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**Escaping from Famine into Namelessness**

*J'étais d'Agamoudia de Cammalas de Pallys de Pallas*  
*J'étais Sheikmoudine Sheikboudou*  
*De Tottys de Vannois de Vellagas*  
*I'ai fini la misère des paillotes de Fyzabad*  
*De Cavares d'Amblacacas*

*A la liste j'ajoute l'absence des pluies*  
*A Rajpontra Sournane*  
*La rarefaction des grans ou disettes*  
*D'Arcot de Timmuely de Chinglepet*  
*Et les archives des miettes*  
*Quoi me privèrent du combustible de mon nom.*  

K Torabully, *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies*, p. 52.
I was from Agamoudia, Cammas, of Pallys, of Pallas
I was Sheikmoundie Sheikboudeaux
Of Tottys of Vannis of Vellagas
I fled the misery of the straw-huts of Fyzabad
Of Cavare of Ambalacas

To the list I can add the drought
In Rajpoutra Sourane
The rarefaction of grain and famine
In Arcot in Tanievely in Chinglepet
And the archives of dust
Which deprived me of the fuel of my name.

The role of natural disaster in sponsoring emigration has been remarked upon by numerous studies of Indian economic history. In September 1849 French recruiters looking for coolies on the Coringhey coast found no difficulty in amassing recruits at a time when floods had ravaged the delta and starvation was stalking the countryside. Even when the local British Collector intercepted the French contingent and interrogated the migrants, most persisted in the wish to go overseas. In 1854 one of the colonial Emigration Agents at Madras noted that ‘the failure of the North East monsoon rains of 1853 having been followed by a similar drought in June and July, the natives of the grain districts abandoned their lands in large numbers’. 19

Ramalingum testified that problems occasioned by drought conditions in his home district precipitated his migration to Mauritius in the late 1830s:

‘I am a pulley by caste and a cultivator of the village of Tharannore, lying to the west of Trichinopoly, about the distance of an Indian mile. About six years ago, there was a scarcity of rain and I was obliged to quit my country in search of work ... I went to Trichinopoly where a Maistry of the name of Appavoo told me that he was going to Pondicherry with a number of Coolies for the Mauritius, and that if I wished to accompany him there, he would give me five rupees per mensem beside one measure of rice per day ... my circumstances obliged me to agree to the terms, and to join the party of Appavoo, which consisted of thirty persons ... Appavoo took us all to Pondicherry, whence we were shipped for the Mauritius thro’ the means of one Curpate, a rich female of that place.’

The notion that the Indian peasant preferred overseas indenture to life as a poverty-stricken labourer at home is articulated in this folk song from northwestern India:

Born in India, we are prepared to go to Fiji,
Or, if you please, to Natal to dig in the mines.
We are prepared to suffer there,
But brothers! Don’t make us labourers here.


Whatever the causal factors, once a migratory stream was established, the steady trickle home of returnees, particularly those with savings, often sufficed to induce others to follow them. Juggon, who returned from Mauritius in 1860 to recruit his fellow villagers, was one of many men in the service of overseas planters who helped to maintain the momentum of indentured migration: ‘I am a return Mauritius Cooly. About a month since I left Cyah with 17 coolies whom I had collected for the Mauritius Depot in Calcutta ... I prefer Mauritius to Demerara or Trinidad because I am acquainted with the place and have a brother there’. Some returnee recruiters made several trips to different colonies. At Chittoor, the emigration inspector, Manley, came across a returnee named Chengleray Naidoo collecting more emigrants. The man had already been to Mauritius, Bourbon and Guadeloupe, accompanying his recruits. He held a recruiter’s licence and lived in the Madras suburbs. 20

Gill Yamin’s study of labour migration from the district of Ratnagiri in Maharashtra notes that chain migration seems to be part of the explanation for the high rate of migration from the district: ‘there is convincing, if scattered and anecdotal, evidence to suggest that a process of “chain migration” was developing in the district in the nineteenth century, with
family and village members following each other in the same migration route.' She reveals that it was not the lowest, untouchable castes that migrated in the greatest numbers, but rather the main agricultural castes, Maratha and Kunbi, which is borne out by data from the immigration archives in Mauritius.21 Under the influence of returnees, therefore, by the mid-nineteenth century a broad sweep of castes and classes was consenting to emigrate.21

The influence of relatives and returnees is apparent from the deposits of indentured labourers. Chummun was one of a band of twenty who set out for Mauritius on the advice of 'a relative of mine who had just returned from that Colony.' Moorzan had made several trips home to Calcutta and with her brother had recruited numbers of her countrymen and women. Jhurry declared that he was recruiting his villagers on behalf of the plantation owners where he had worked for ten years to repay their kindness to him. However, his brother who had left Arrah to join him had been 'enticed away by an Arkotty who took him to the Trinidad Depot. I endeavoured to communicate with my brother, but was prevented by the Arkotty who had charge of him. I have heard that my brother has been sent away to Trinidad.'22

The degree of effort which migrants, particularly returnees, were prepared to make to re-emigrate to a particular colony is exemplified by the story of Cassiram Jugannath. Sent back from Mauritius with another nine men to recruit in Bombay, they arrived with their wives and families there only to find that the depot had been closed, and emigration from that port suspended. The recruiters and their bands remained for almost three months in Bombay waiting for a ship that might be able to take them to Mauritius. During this time, one of the ten recruiters died, and another declined to continue. With no passage to the island forthcoming, the eight remaining recruiters resolved to travel to Calcutta on foot. They set out in November 1855, but after a quarrel broke out amongst them at Nassick, Cassiram Jugannath returned to Bombay. He was eventually embarked on the Futtay Mobarak in 1856.

The reverse scenario demonstrates the importance of returnees in sponsoring further chain migrations. After a series of severe epidemics had decimated the population of Mauritius combined with a decline in economic prospects resulting from falling sugar prices, the news of the colony's problems did not take long to circulate among would-be migrants in India. In 1871, the colony's Emigration Agent at Madras was reporting 'I am sorry to say that . . . there is a growing dislike towards the island, from malicious reports circulated by disaffected return emigrants.'23

Disaffected return coolies could thus effectively spike chain migration. Their information quickly spread rumours about adverse events in the colony – demonstrating the effectiveness of coolie information networks. Muthusamy, a sirdar from Natal who was sent back to India to recruit his countrymen ruefully reported that he had manage to collect only seven Indians:

'I would have done better if one Venkatachalam had not arrived in my village in the meantime from Natal. He was drawing there 4s. a month. He returned about two months ago. He told the villagers [about] the present agitation in Natal. He warned the villagers to take care of their children, chiefly young women. He made the people believe that some sirdars are purposely come to India to take away from their kith and kin some young women of fair complexion to get rich husbands in Natal, and thereby get some large amount. This was a talk all over.'24

Munusamy Naidu, another sirdar from Natal, who was one of several sent to India to recruit for the colony around 1911, provides a striking testimony of the filtering down of anti-indenture agitation to the Indian villages, and how through his simple honesty he sought to surmount such propaganda efforts:

'In India, everybody – young and old – did spit on sirdars. Sirdars are treated like pariah dogs – not as gentlemen . . . I am not a young man to stand all abuses, to receive kicks and blows from the public. I belong to a respectable family; I do not like to bring on my family any sort of disgrace. I knew fully well that I will be treated most disgracefully and mercilessly if I were to go into the interior villages and interfere with strangers. My master's advice was not to speak untruth, not to exaggerate Natal and its advantages, not to force Indians to emigrate, etc. I spoke to my own people. I told them the whole truth. I secured in April last
some Indians and sent them to my master. I patiently waited in my village. All the time I was treated by the villagers very respectfully. They knew that I was one of the sirdars. They also understood that I was not influencing by false statements and pretences any Indian to emigrate. Of course, Tamil notices, printed, warning the public not to emigrate to Natal were freely distributed in my village. These notices did not interfere with my work. I must admit that these notices contained some true statements. I do not think I ever induced a stranger to emigrate to Natal. When time came for my departure to Natal my people about four quite willingly started with me. No one in the village raised any sort of objection. I got a name for myself and my estate.'

Even at times of anti-indenture agitation, returnees could influence close relations to migrate. As V Sampson reported, on returning to India in 1911, in the midst of agitation against emigration: 'I thought that my stay in India will be of no good at all. I asked my wife to go with me to Natal. First she refused. Gradually by kind words I got round her and she came my way. Through her I got her sister and two more Indians to emigrate. I told my wife and her above relations that we are going to a place called Natal, which is a paradise.'

Whatever their motivations, returnee and sirdar recruiters could only take their recruits to the relevant depots - there was still bureaucracy to be undergone and, it was alleged, foul play afoot and bribery and corruption galore. A Mauritian sirdar, Matadoo, complained in 1864 that, having recruited seventeen men, he was obliged to pay a bribe to the Madras contractor, Soobrayen, in order to get his men admitted to the emigration depot at the port:

"All the coolies who wish to come to Mauritius have to apply to Soobrayen or Barthe Sadoo, who are called contractors and sometimes Perria Maistries (Great Recruiters). They divide and engage the men as they like. Mr Burton [the Emigration Agent] knows nothing about their doings. He employs them and pays them; but he probably does not know how they ill-treat and cheat the emigrants who pass through his office. They are supreme masters in the office. Six of my men were put into other gangs against my will. I consented because I was told that I would otherwise not be allowed to embark.'

If the destiny of the migrant was an uncertain one, the lot of the family left behind was in many cases even less enviable. The trauma of relatives left behind is articulated in the following letter received by Jaipal Chamar in Jamaica, from his son in India:

'Whenever your letter comes I wish I had wings And could fly away to see you. Your destitute sister has no one and I am looking after her. She has gone blind crying for you. She now lives only with the hope of Seeing her brother's face. And my mother after receiving your first letter cried for ten days and died.'

Family separations could last much longer than the initial envisaged period of migration. The five-year contract could become a ten-year renewal, and migrants frequently stayed on in the overseas colonies, re-indenturing or acquiring property and a profession. When Ramotar's brother finally caught up with him in Mauritius, after an absence of three decades, he was understandably anxious to claim him:

'Having heard that my brother has come to Mauritius as a Coolee, I have, most respectfully come to see you about his delivery. He is the only brother I have, and I have not seen him for upwards of thirty years. I have a great desire to take him with me; I have therefore most humbly come to see you and beg to inform you that I will pay for his delivery, what a proprietor will pay to take him. I earnestly beg you to let me have him instead of a proprietor for he is the only brother I have.'

Folk songs are another rich source of anecdotal information of attitudes towards migration and the pain of those left behind. A folksong from Uttar Pradesh bemoans the poverty that was often the lot of those who lost a close relative to the emigrant ship:
'From the east came the rail, from the west came the ship,
And took my beloved one away...
The rail is not my enemy, nor the ship,
O! It is money which is the real enemy,
It takes my beloved one from place to place.'

Another song recounts the anguished childlessness of a woman whose husband has migrated:

'All my friends have become mothers,
And I remain lonely and childless . . .
For twelve years you haven’t written a word . . .'  

A third song depicts a woman toiling alone in the fields:

'Here, in these lonely fields,
I, the unfortunate, alone work,
My lord being in a distant land,
Who will tell me "Thy lord has come"
The day of my happiness has dawned.'

For those migrants recruited fraudulently, hoping for work in India, the sea voyage was an object of fear. While some Hindus believed that crossing the kala pani or black waters would lead to a loss of caste, others, from inland villages, who had never before seen the sea, were simply terrified of boarding an ocean-going vessel. Abheeram's deposition, in 1843, provides an illustration of the depth of this fear. Like many caste Hindus, he refused to take cooked food while on the journey of several weeks, subsisting on a meagre diet of grain and uncooked rice. A native of Cuttack and a cultivator, Abheeram had accepted a job offer, which he believed to be in Calcutta. Discovering that he was bound for the Mauritius he recounted:

'. . . on my way to the ship I refused to go but the Duffadars told me that there was no fear as the Mauritius was only eight days' journey. I told the Duffadar Bulram Singh that I would never venture going on shipboard. He told me to keep quiet and to tell the Sahibs if questioned that I was going of my own free will and accord and to convince me that there was no fear. He the Duffadar said that he would go on the same ship with me to the Mauritius. As long as I remained on board I lived on the Chorah that I had got and occasionally a small quantity of dry rice.'

Radhamohun Das, of Tripura, steadfastly refused the temptation to eat food cooked on board by men who were not of his caste: 'while on board -- I subsisted on the Chorah that I had, occasionally rice cooked by Muselmans was offered to me which I refused to take, being a hindoo I would not consent to lose my caste'. So traumatized by the experience was he that Das pleaded to be allowed to go home: 'I beg permission to be allowed to return to my country where I would prefer going door to door begging for my livelihood yet would not consent to go to the Mauritius. Purtaub Singh of Orissa likewise stressed that he had had not intention of going 'to such a distance at the risk of losing my life and my caste'.

Mahadai Das recalls the notorious names of the first ships that transported the 'Gladstone' coolies in the mid-1830s to Guyana:

K Torabuly, Cale d'Etoiles.
'From across the seas, they came.  
Britain, colonising India, transporting her chains  
From Chota Nagpur and the Ganges Plain.  
Westwards came the Whitby,  
The Hesperus,  
The island-bound Fatel Rozack.  
Wooden missions of imperialist design.  
Human victims of her Majesty's victory.'²⁹

| Hands beat against water  
| Hands beat a rhythm against waves  
| Hands are hardly wet in water  
| They sweat – oil of body and skin  
| Pores, pores  
| Against crystal water  
| Etchings of waves  
| Register the crossing  

'Atlantic Song' by Cyril Dabydeen in  
India in the Caribbean, 1987, p. 295.

Arnold Itwaru has likened the voyage of coolies to the middle passage of slave journeys:

'Middle-passaged  
Passing  
Beneath the colouring of desire  
In the enemy's eye  
A scatter of worlds and broken wishes  
In Shiva's unending dance.'

Even where migrants were aware that the journey on which they were embarking necessitated a sea voyage, the length of the trip, several weeks to the Indian Ocean colonies in the mid-nineteenth century, and longer for Pacific and West Indian islands, was a shock to many, and unaccustomed as they were to life on the ocean, spent in often miserable conditions. A song from Surinam remembers the difficult time of the voyage:

'Several months on the ship passed with great difficulty.  
On the seven dark seas, we suffered unaccustomed problems.'³⁰

Mon pays n'aura pas de statue  
de l'homme d'orage aux pieds nus  
J'ai brisé ma langue contre mémoire  
Quand la nuit trichait avec la mort  
Au jeu des bateaux et des ports.

K Torabully, Cale d'Etoiles Coolitude, p. 16.

My country will have no statue  
Of the man of storm with bare feet  
I broke my tongue against memory  
When night cheated against death  
At the toss of boats and ports.

It was not uncommon, in the early years of indenture, for migrants to hurl themselves off the ship while still in the Hughli river, and cases of men lost overboard feature regularly in ship logs. After a few weeks, the temptation to get off whenever the ship docked in a port proved overwhelming. In 1860, when the Junon, bound for Martinique, docked at Reunion, the Indians, suffering already from want of food on the lengthy voyage, understandably expressed a desire to disembark. They went on hunger strike, until the captain was obliged to intervene and put down the mutiny with vigorous measures.³¹
The Sea-Journey to the Antilles

Vos navires à voile lézardaient
La torpeur équatoriale. Salézés
Aux escales du Cap et Sainte Hélène;
Epidèmes flanaient rictus à la Mort émaciée.
Ma quarantaine aux îles des Saintes
Prolongée vos 100 jours de l’Inde aux Antilles –
Je dis voyage entre giramons et salaisons
Poisson salé chutney carri de poisson.

K Torabully, *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies*, p. 61.

Your sailboats crawled
Through the equatorial torpor. Grim
Stop-overs at the Cape and St Helena;
Epidemics engendering emaciated death
In quarantine at the isles of the Saints
Prolonging the 100-day passage from India to the Caribbean.
I say voyage between pumpkins and salted fish
Snook chutney and fish curry.

The loss of caste and the discomfort of sea-sickness were not the only fears which preoccupied the nineteenth-century indentured migrants. Fire and wrecking on treacherous reefs or in heavy storms stalked the emigrant ships. In 1851 the *Kurramany*, carrying 354 migrants from Calcutta, caught fire while still in the Hugli river. Setting out in a steam ship, some hours later, searching for survivors, Dr McClelland described the west shore of Saugor island as `literally strewed with dead bodies.‘ He counted 80 or 90 at that spot alone. Only 97 recruits escaped the conflagration.  

### Shipwreck

Everything slackens in a wreck:
So many coal porters wash their necks
In dawn’s smouldering specks.

K Torabully, *Cale d’Etoiles*.

In the following poem S Nandan harks back to a coolie voyage on the *Syria* in 1884 that ended in disaster when the ship was wrecked:

‘O my children’s children
Listen to the voices from the Syria
Drowning the silence of the sea?’

### A Death on the Voyage

Je veux parler pour le frère mort
Jeté par-dessus bord.
Il venait de Bengalore,
Rêvait d’un meilleur sort
Au pays de l’aurore.

K Torabully, *Chair Corail, Fragments Coolies*, p. 85.

I want to speak out for my dead brother
Thrown overboard.
He came from Bangalore
Dreamt of a better life
In the land of promises galore.

Totaram Sanadyha, who wrote a memoir of his indenture experiences in Fiji, described the voyage in the following terms: ‘Twice a day we were given a bottle of water each to drink. Then no more, even if we died of thirst. It was the same about food. Fish and rice were both cooked there. Many people suffered from sea-sickness. Those who died were thrown overboard . . . After three months and twelve days we reached Fiji.’

### Migrant Epiphany

Shadows whisper when clouds flutter:
All comes to a halt to tell the heart of my trial.
When night was a tabla of flesh
I was made to see the staircase of shells.
I grasped the real reason of my voyages.

K Torabully, *Cale d’Etoiles*.
In ‘Coolie Odyssey’, Dabydeen vividly evokes the arrival of a boatload of coolies in the Caribbean, contrasting their high hopes with their wretched appearance:

'The first boat chugged to the muddy port
Of King George's Town. Coolies come to rest
In El Dorado,
Their faces and best saries black with soot.
The men smelt of saltwater mixed with rum. The odyssey was
plank between river and land,
Mere yards but months of plotting
In the packed bowel of a white man's boat
The years of promise, years of expanse.'

Whilst indentured migration differed from the slave diaspora in that the separation of families was the exception rather than the rule, there were cases where, often due to illness of one family member, spouses or parents and children were separated. When Narayanan was allotted to Umzimkulu estate in Natal around January 1907, his wife and young daughter were kept at the immigration depot on account of illness. By September of that year he was extremely anxious as to their whereabouts:

'To this day I am ignorant of the whereabouts of my wife and child, or as to whether they are living or dead.
I have often enquired, week after week, from my employers,
and they have said they know nothing about her...'

He stressed that she was not a concubine, but 'my legal wife, married in my native village of Thenani, Thirunamallai, North Arcot, and I am therefore suffering day and night untold agony in thinking of my wife and little one.' No one had thought to tell Narayanan that his wife and child had been repatriated to India in April 1907 as 'invalids'. Whether he ever caught up with them again is not recorded.

Arriving single women were often kept at the depot until single men, looking for a wife, claimed and were accepted by them. In other cases women were assigned to specific plantations where indentured labourers would be expected to take up with them. Maharani, a Brahmin widow in Trinidad, described her reluctant 'courtship', arranged through the mediation of the plantation manager:

'Maharani you want de man
I say no
E say why
I say
I go go India
Just so I tell him
E say y fall sick an ting
You have no body
You have to take somebody...'

In my ship's hold nudging the stars,
You knew waves would weave me
To the furthest instant of my destiny
Beyond you, me and myself.
In your eyes moistened by sea mist  
You reclaimed a land — you shouted hell  
Without many ports for my children,  
For all of my kith and kin. 

K Torabully, Cale d’Etoiles.

‘My wife in saffron  
hooked to the nautilus,  
My fairy in mehendi  
tied to the foams  
my love in myrtle  
stolen from the fish’s wings.

My book of departure  
is purer than death . . .’

K Torabully, Cale d’Etoiles.

‘Cooilee’s dreams are pulley’s rust  
Scattered from ropes to rolling wreck’

K Torabully, Cale d’Etoiles.

2

Thrice Victimized:  
Casting the Coolie

The coolie has always been negatively portrayed. Contemporaries dismissed labour migrants as the ‘sweepings of Calcutta’s slums’; the contracts they signed victimized them further, by identifying them as a societal ‘other’ — a prey to prison, pariahs amongst free men. As coolies settled in the countries which had imported them as plantation labourers, they began to feature in literary accounts, but were always redolent of exoticism, images of alienness, barbarism and fatalism casting them permanently in their lowly agricultural role. The hind sight of historians has served the coolies little better: they have been assigned the status of ‘neo-slave’, stripped of caste, culture, even of family in some accounts. This chapter deconstructs the changing stereotype of the coolie.

Contemporary Views of the Coolie

The overseas Indian labourer entered the perception of the colonial planter and administrator in the early decades of the nineteenth century as it became clear, from increasing agitation in Britain, that slavery as a system was doomed. Intellectuals of the period, however, were convinced that European men were constitutionally incapable of dealing with labour in tropical climates. Earl Grey’s comments typify the thinking of the period on this matter:

‘In all European countries, the necessity of supplying their daily wants is, to the labouring classes, a sufficient motive to exertion. But the case is very different in tropical climates, where the population is very scanty in proportion to the extent of territory; where the soil . . . readily yields a subsistence in return for very little labour; and where clothing, fuel, and lodging, such as are there required, are obtained very easily. In such circumstances there can be but little motive to exertion, to men satisfied with an abundant supply of their mere physical wants, and accordingly