

**MATERIALITY AND CULTURAL PRAXIS:
RETHINKING AGENCY OF INDIAN INDENTURED
LABOURERS AND THE INDO-CARIBBEAN
DIASPORA**

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Introduction

From the seventeenth century, Britain acquired sugar-producing plantation colonies in the Atlantic littorals. The three predominant ones included Trinidad, Jamaica, and British Guiana. Territorial expansion by Britain included the acquisition of Jamaica and Trinidad from Spain in 1707 and 1797, respectively, and British Guyana from Holland in 1814 while the Indian subcontinent became a Crown colony from 1858. Post abolition of slavery in 1834, Britain utilised its colonies as the source and destination for indentured labour. Thus, Britain sourced labour in an indentured capacity from one of her largest colony, India, and sent them to the plantation colonies in the Caribbean islands. The transition from slavocracy to post-emancipation sugar industry raises questions related to imperial discourses on nation, race, and class. Once the slaves were emancipated, the empire needed a reformation to keep the monopolistic Caribbean plantations operational and lucrative. The introduction of a fresh labour force from overseas colonies including India and China served a dual purpose; firstly, indentured workers saved the Caribbean sugar industry from demobilisation and the secondly, there was a recalibration of the hierarchy which naturalised and sustained cultural hegemony. The colonial construction of African and Indian identities was vital to formalise Indian indentureship. Imperial ideologies continue to promote race hierarchies that view Europeans to be superior to Asians and Asians above African races leading to conflicts. Under the shadow of institutionalised racism, Indo-Caribbeans experience a severe loss resulting in psychological imbalance - grief, guilt, and inadequacy. The loss or gap experienced by the migrants is similar to an infant's initial feeling after the severance of the umbilical cord, a gap that is eventually filled by creating a symbolic connection that bridges the process of cultural mourning. Symbolic replications in the form of observing traditions, having comfort food, listening to chutney music, and reciting Indian myths, and folklore can help reconcile their grief and find the capacity to assimilate.

Indentured literature depict the coolie experiences and the exploitative conditions in the plantation society. The primary novels written by authors with Indo-Caribbean

ancestry demonstrate the ethnoclass hierarchy operating in a post-abolition plantation regime, the collapsing economic structure, and the realities of the New World system after King Sugar retreats from the West Indies. The theoretical framework of the thesis is oriented towards the material culture of the Indian indentured labourers through select fictional and paraliterary texts to reimagine the ways the disenfranchised people resisted the dominant modalities of colonialism and emerging capitalism. The traditional knowledge systems and basic ways of living acted as Promethean tools to reassert agency and significance on the global canvas. I will outline the major works in contemporary material culture study that promoted and challenged my understanding of the production, distribution, and consumption of material and immaterial entities by indentured workers and the Indo-Caribbean people. Multiple dimensions of materiality including landscape and infrastructural entities along with clothing, cuisine, and personal artefacts help us understand cultural practices and identities which navigated the infringing capitalist-colonial regime.

The Indian labourers were not entirely free workers. They were contract-bound *girmityas* - a term derived from the word *girmit* meaning legal agreement. This system was neither slavery nor complete freedom but an intermediate position. Various aspects of East Indians in the Caribbean have been studied including their history, culture, religion. A great deal of attention has also been given to their story of recruitment, emigration, settlement, repatriation, and resistance. By comparison, scant attention has been paid to the material culture of Indian indentured labourers in the British Caribbean plantocracy and the subsequent Indo-Caribbean diaspora. The chapters of my thesis highlight the materiality of Indians in the Caribbean and redefine the mode of agency in selected novels by authors who share Indo-Caribbean lineage namely, Shani Mootoo, Peggy Mohan, Ramabai Espinet, Lakshmi Persaud, Sam Selvon, David Dabydeen, Niala Maharaj, as well as literary non-fiction texts including *Coolie Woman* by Giautra Bahadur, the autobiography of Munshi Rahman Khan, and Verene Shepherd's *Maharani's Misery*.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 discusses the mega-commodities including — human body and labour, sugar, and ship — which were intimately connected and vital aspects of the trading system.

Materiality is primarily concerned with the conjoined relationship between the subject and the object which can be translated in the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised in the case of indentureship. The first section of this chapter discusses the commodification of the Indian indentured labourers, mainly in respect to how their labour was exploited and commodified through structural scaffolding and the way their body and agency was dehumanised. Although indentureship was conceptualised and endorsed as volitional trade in labour, imperialist restructuring in places like India had already created a vast pool of unemployed and desperate labourers waiting to be absorbed in the global capitalist colonial circuit. It is possible to consider the Indian indentured worker with multiple revised discourses on ‘commodities’, ‘race’, and ‘labour’ to examine the cultural, political, and economic life of Indians in the Caribbean. Despite clear distinctions between indenture trade and slavery, the plantations were owned and operated by the same people who were slave owners and drivers, naturally it was difficult for them to evolve from pre-existing discursive practices. The first section of the chapter addresses how the boundaries of human and non-human were significantly obscured through hegemonic forces and enabled the commodification of the indentured body, debilitating their agency.

I discuss the significance of the actual mega-commodity, sugar, which was the pivot of this entire trade system. Sugar first arrived in Britain in the 12th century and it was primarily consumed as a spice and a medicine. This glaring shift from the presence of sugar in medicinal practice to extensive consumption as an ingredient pushed Britain to exponentially increase cane cultivation and sugar production and distribution. The transformation from a luxury good being locked in royal vaults to becoming a part of the daily diet of every working-class family all over the world since the 1900 was the driving force behind the growth of the sugar industry. As a global commodity, I have assessed the history, the role, and many facets of cane sugar in shaping the culture and identities of Indians in the Caribbean. Questions

related to the realities of sugar production; the impact of sugar in the history of colonisation and labour-related migration; and the social and economic consequences of the decline of the sugar industry on West Indian society have been points of assessment in this section of the first chapter.

The slave ships were repurposed as coolie ships, invested with new symbolic meanings and remade into a vehicle of transformation from which new selves and new identities emerged. The experiences of the indentured labourers on board the ship include abuse, disease, death, and sporadic mutiny that echo of slaves but over time, indenture ordinances provided protections and allowances that made the coolie odyssey bearable and reduced the number of casualties and crimes. The ships not only acted as a space for intermixing of various caste, creeds, and communities, but life-long friendships - shipboard relations referred to as *jahaji bhai* or *jahaji behen* were also formed. These vessels were the first step towards indentured servitude and gives us the entire import of the concept of 'coolitude'. I have highlighted the life in the dockyards prior to boarding and after reaching the Caribbean shores which acted as border zones and saw complete collapse of social norms; I have discussed the horrific conditions on ships through the works of Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*, Munshi Rahman Khan's autobiography, Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin*, and documentary texts such as *Handbook for Surgeons Superintendent in the Coolie Emigration Service*, and *Maharani's Misery*.

The belongings of migrants act as a powerful capital to adapt and create meaning in a foreign land. These objects of memory form a discourse on the cultural survival, reconfiguration of identity, and the formation of community. The objects imbricated with memory, emotions, and history which reflect the cultural knowledge and psychological welfare of the Indians in the Caribbean. In the second chapter, I consider the meaning behind the domestic space and objects, clothing, jewellery, and related accessories; and the third chapter solely explores the context of food and culinary practice in the fictional and paraliterary works that helps us contextualise the lives of the Indo-Caribbean people. The commodities help them cope with the profound loss and degeneration by acting as transmutable objects of their past lives and their homeland.

Although the indentured trade was officially a voluntary migration, the widespread abduction and deceit involved in recruiting the indentees, seized their opportunity from taking treasured belongings. Most indentured labourers made the transatlantic voyage without a single belonging and only a few, who voluntarily enlisted, carried utilitarian commodities. However, what is considered utilitarian and essential differed from person to person and this is another intriguing facet that helps us in determining several aspects — class, gender, mental faculty, and the intention of making a return passage — about the indentees. Moreover, the limited time and circumstance of the Indians before leaving their homes to travel to the British indenture bureau or the dockyard gives us an insight into their personhood by examining the material objects they sought and chose to carry with them. Material belongings take on additional meaning since they were a time-bound labouring force, majority of them arrived with an objective to work for a period of five to ten years and return to their home in India. Consequently, the Indians had no reason to discard their old ways of living and adapt drastically to host culture. British planters also created a larger trade network to sustain the indentees by supplying Indian goods and foods that made up for their material dispossession and social deprivation.

Chapter 2

Material objects and practices take on a very different meaning within the space of home and material life of the Indian migrants and Indo-Caribbean diaspora can be recognised by considering the way commodities were moved and carried to new homes, objects that were repurposed or locally produced, and how they made them feel ‘homely’ or ‘unhomely’ which is a Freudian concept, later reconceptualised by Bhabha through a post-colonial perspective. The election of home as a key research site for the contemporary material culture and pattern of consumption goes to show the importance of the location and the prominence of the domestic objects in the process of re-instating in a multicultural metropolis. Indo-Caribbean people imbibe multicultural values and Western religion and education but their ancestral culture seeps through the aperture of acculturation. Domestic space and household commodities of Indian indentured labourers and later Indo-Caribbean diaspora embodied a greater significance and a nuanced textual analysis enunciates the

connection with family and memory, replication of home and culture, and the experience of trauma and acclimatization.

I discuss how jewellery and clothing can effectively communicate individuality, ethnicity, conformity, and agency. Jewellery acted as a formidable form of agency for the Indo-Caribbean women who found a strong sense of proprietorship and financial independence. Indian men also demonstrated exceptional craftsmanship that helped them transcend their indentured identity and establish the Indians as a socially and economically indispensable ethnic group in the West Indies. People wearing cultural attire outside their native or ancestral land often envisage a “glocal” version of their garments and ornaments. The concept of amalgamating the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ is key to understanding the multiplicity in the identity of Indo-Caribbean people and the dynamic social association. Ornaments and attires are defining factors in cultural affinity as well as individual expression. It becomes especially significant for the indentured labourers since they took control over their bodies which were otherwise dehumanised and commodified.

Chapter 3

If one were to open and see the *jahaji*-bundle or the luggage the indentured workers carried, we would invariably find various food items such as seeds of fruits, roots of vegetables, spices, utensils, and portable culinary objects, ferried across the *kala pani*, along with culinary knowledge and gastronomic habits. Ingestion patterns, culinary knowhow, cooking apparatus, and spaces all encapsulate a cultural capital which becomes highly volatile when a large number of people from specific socio-cultural backgrounds are transplanted in an unfamiliar space. The foodstuffs and culinary items played a crucial role in stabilising the huge Indian indentured population in the Caribbean plantocracy. Indian women established their agency through culinary skills and overcame the varied impediments such as social and religious restrictions, lack of proper culinary paraphernalia, and the availability of fresh produce and proper spices. With the gradual passage of time, Indian migrants and diasporic families experienced cultural miscegenation that gets conspicuously manifested in their foodways. My primary texts including Richard Fung’s incredible documentary titled *Dal Puri Diaspora* discuss the domestic, ceremonial or cultural,

and the religious consumption pattern. The foodways of Indians in the Caribbean underscores the confluence of the past and the present, the local and the global, and tradition and heterogeneity.

Chapter 4

The preceding chapters of commodity culture have established an obvious and resounding trope of women's contribution to the institution and preservation of the Indo-Caribbean community from the early days of indentureship to the contemporary multiracial West Indian society. Fictional works from authors with indentured legacy or belonging to the Indo-Caribbean diaspora is a suitable strategy to gauge the volition, voice, struggles, and agency of the "other", who formed one-fourth of the mass immigrant workers. This chapter elaborates on different forms of female agency in light of the transatlantic and transcultural contingencies by exercising alternate forms of resistance and agency. The ratio of the number of female indentees to male on board the ships kept changing due to the increasing gendered violence in the Caribbean plantations and it ultimately settled upon 1:4. This shortage of female labourers and the reluctance of Indian women to indenture resulted in double the rate of remuneration for recruiting women as compared to men. Ironically, female indentees were paid half or two-thirds of the wages of men for plantation work. This shows the paradoxical status of women throughout indentureship which they navigated by continuing and infringing upon traditional knowledge systems. Exploration of female relations and activities are marked with feminisation such as the conveyance of cultural mementos, functional commodities, reforming new home spaces, forging female solidarity, practicing and sharing cultural knowledge, providing communal services, and facilitating familial connections. . Female complexities and functional idiosyncrasies of voiceless subalterns were categorised as regressive but with postcolonial critique, I have tried to show how Indian women resisted dominant global structures and narratives with their traditional knowledge systems.

Conclusion

The traditions and ideologies which were transported from India were tailored to adjust and assimilate in the host society and contributed to the development of a unique Indo-Caribbean culture. A study of the attempts at syncretising the Indian culture in the Caribbean through legal policies over time is necessary to answer questions about the constitution of Indians in the colonial state as well as the independent West Indies. Given the hostile host conditions and contradictory geographical landscape, the exact transplantation of Indian culture was difficult. Hence, Indians tried their best to emulate modified cultural practices, religious beliefs, and ideologies which materialised into a pastiche cultural heritage. The implication of intermingling and sharing accommodation among Indians of varying caste, religion, and district affiliation created an umbrella “Indian” identity in the plantation society.

The subaltern history including labour migrants and their descendants are denied agency in the general imagination and scholarly observation. This monograph is dedicated to rethinking the history and genealogy of Indian indentees by studying their material culture as a key aspect to more important topics like social structures, cultural enactments, religious grammars, and kinship. Despite their dysfunctional, precarious and susceptible conditions, the Indian attempted resistance and carved out a singular trajectory supported by daily routines, material culture, and social arrangements.