

“Bhootlane Ki Katha”: Living in the Coolie Lines and Construction of Dignity, Health and Well-Being 1830-1920

The oeuvre of indentured mobility from India has been studied within the historical framework of socio-economic forces leading to transmigration and the effect on the life-systems of the labourer in the plantation colonies within the cusp of (un)free servitude. It was argued by the British colonial powers that coolie migration was a relief measure of population redistribution and using the labour capital lying idle in India due to the dwindling status of the indigenous agrarian economy. But how this pool of labour was aspired to migrate has often been left unquestioned in the discourse on indenture except for the oft reference to the Arkatis or indigenous recruiters who resorted to nether means of maliciously influencing the docile prospective labourer by creating a utopian image of ‘plenitude’ of food-wealth-pleasure in the plantation colonies in the habitual occupational zones of ‘peasant times’. The paper tries to link these dots of market hallucination that arose out of the mystical logic of faith associated with the imagination of the better-life in transmigration and the dystopian reality in diasporic life that created a pragmatism of reverse utopias of memory regeneration through the associative material culture in the geo-cultural landscapes of ‘indentured archipelago’. The Baudrillard-Freudian-Foucauldian nexus of desire-body-pleasure is used to show how consumption of imagination itself became a ‘system of objects’ that created a trickle-down effect of soft-economies as the non-market factor of push in forwarding the pathways of permanent labour flow that ultimately became a harsh reality and disillusionment of imagination realised in flesh in the destination colonies in the megalomania of maladies in everyday life of the coolies. The material culture of the living spaces including both the clinical and non-clinical space of habitation and work provided the substrate of experiences in comparison of the homeland and workland that the idea of dignity in Coolie migration can be constructed based on Sinclair’s argument that ‘living spaces are an extension of ourselves: our hopes, fears and vanities’. The comparative descriptions to portray the living realities generated a (un)conscious pool of deliberations situating the social processes within the regime of reason of labour mobility in colonial India. Here the comparison through imagination generated its own webs of trust and the appearing faultlines tried to generate its own structure of reason giving that gradually cascaded into what Tilly probably identifies as a social activity. The title of the paper is inspired by the autobiographical narrative of Totaram Sanadhya which carries a vivid description of living in the coolie lines in Fiji. The aim of the study is not to serve the purpose of history by making a critical analysis of indentured labour mobility and reinforce its nationalist critique but to lay out the details of the integrative notions of care in health and in social well-being through a study of the spatial imaginations and realities of living designs and the accord and discord in the continuum of utopia and dystopia as two polarities functioning through expectations and actuations reflected in fictional or autobiographical literature and official reports in indentured migration from India.

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