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in Indentured Mobility 1830-1920**

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Rituparna Datta

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Rituparna Datta *

The name: What does one call thus? What does one understand in the name of a name? And what occurs when one gives a name? What does one give then? One does not offer a thing, one delivers nothing, and still something comes to be which comes to giving that which one does not have....What makes the proper name into a sort of sur-name, pseudonym, or cryptonym at once singular and singularly untranslatable?

– Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*¹

Totaram Sanadhya, an indentured labour in Fiji, on his return to India, with the help of Benarsidas Chaturvedi, published his memoir *Fiji Dweep Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh* (1914) on his experiences of living in the coolie lines and working as a *Girmit* labourer in Fiji's Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), his ordeal of twenty-one years in Fiji. In 1893 he reached Fiji and was taken to a CSR estate in Nausori in Rewa district in Fiji, and all 140 coolie labourers excluding Totaram were allotted a house in the coolie lines by the overseer, and as no empty *kothri* (room) was left to be occupied, Totaram had to be accommodated in the *Bhootlane*, a desolate living quarters at the end of 26 coolie lines which was initially the residential quarters of the Indigenous Fijian labourers of CSR. But after the death of four Fijian labourers due to illness, the rest of the Indigenous labourers abandoned the place, and since then, no one lived there. Hence, was called the Bhootlane as no one agreed to live there and neither dared to pass by the houses in this section of the estate. Even if anyone was allotted a room in this Bhootlane, upon learning about the past of this labour quarter, the worker would leave this place. Totaram was allotted a room in this Bhootlane and the overseer categorically said that he must live there for five years until the end of his contract. If he leaves this accommodation, he will not be provided with another living quarter, and any such act of desertion without the permission of the estate authority will lead to incarceration. From this Bhootlane, Totaram started his indentured life in Fiji and eventually the experiences became his memoir *Bhootlane Ki Katha (The Story of the Haunted Lines)*.² Ironically and metaphorically, the memoir not only represented the extractive capitalist nature of the indentured labour system within the imperial plantation economies, but Bhootlane which can be literally translated as ghost/haunted lines, here referring to the labour quarters, where the indentured labourers were housed also details the life systems of the Indian contract labourer within the architectural patterns/layouts of the plantations, a regulated space, which was so constructed/selected/planned/designed to monitor, measure, and preserve the labour

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capital and sedentarise labour mobility within the estate systems of sugar cropping and factory work to enable an easy availability of a docile workforce whose bodies were preserved to labour tirelessly in the cane fields and only allowed to rest and recuperate in the coolie lines to return to work once again. In other words, a systematic calendarised system of mediated health-work relations functioned in the estates, “[t]he usual time of labour is from sun-rise to sun-set, with two hours relaxation for meals, except during the season of crop, which lasts six months in the year, when they are required to work as many hours as necessary.”³ Housing the labour in these coolie lines, deprived of any modernity in a Modern Age under the care economies of a Modern Empire, in particular, and plantation/estate architectural patterns, in general, were no less than a Benthamian Panopticon⁴ that viewed the subjecthood of the indentured labourer from the perspective of “calculated investments in their physical capacities”⁵ and transforming it through a utility-capacity based approach of work and jobbing pattern, which was no less gendered in allotment of work, that eventually was not only leading to a boom in sugar production but a commodification of suffering and sensorial experiences of loss and nostalgia that gradually became part of the anti-indenture movement and remained perennially etched in the sociological repertoire of the living mechanisms of not just their lives under contract system of labour but also conditions that stimulated the built-in environment of the generations to come in their diasporic life. Although one should be cautious while reading these narratives of “textual reality as a total reality” and especially more so for memoirs, as the caveats of selfhood overshadow the objective present, yet these narratives open the canvas of experiences that values the individual and their opinions and experiences, what historians of indentured labour systems designate as *Girmit ke Anubhan*, that necessarily claims a place in the meta-narratives of history to understand how the Empire as a deep mechanism affectively moulded and modified the living patterns in the plantations within the cusp of “shelter” and therefore, rather than focusing on why the indenture took place, it looks more into the experiences therewith.⁶

The oeuvre of indentured mobility from India has been studied within the historical framework of socio-economic forces leading to transmigration and its effect on the life systems of the labourer in the plantation colonies from the perspective of (un)free servitude. It was argued by the British colonial powers that indentured migration was a relief measure of population redistribution by using the labour capital lying idle in India due to the dwindling status of the agrarian economy. But how this pool of labour 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.” Although it cannot be arguably said that deception, kidnapping, and forced recruitment survived the system for nearly a century and the choice to migrate under varied circumstances was a reality, but it cannot be denied that the idea of abundance like “*Tapu mein pathar ulat ba, ta sona mili*,”⁷ and illusions of permanence by moving away from their current environment acted as a motivating push to migrate even if it was crossing the *Kalapani*. If one 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, one can understand the pragmatism of reverse utopias of memory regeneration through the associative material culture in the geo-cultural landscapes of “indentured archipelago.”⁸ To understand the psycho-social space of indenturehood one has to locate the migrant labour experiences as Brij V. Lal calls between labourers “as actors in their own rights” on one hand and putting the “tragic and sensational...cases of deception...nothing really exceptional...[to] rationali[s]e those unhappy events that did occur...[and] awareness of similar experience elsewhere should put the role of deception in

Indian indenture into perspective” on the other.⁹ and when looked through the Baudrillard-Freudian-Foucauldian nexus of desire-body-pleasure, the consumption of imagination itself became a “system of objects” that created a trickle-down effect of soft-economies, as the non-market factor acted as a 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 reflected in the megalomania of maladies in everyday life of the migrants. 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 migration came to be constructed based on Sinclair’s argument that “living spaces are an extension of ourselves: our hopes, fears and vanities.”¹⁰ If one cautiously questions who these “ourselves” are in the indentured mobility, then the two axes in the hierarchy of the labouring process would be the labour migrant, often called the Coolie in resemblance of the system of indenture, and the Empire both implicating and replicating the other; and how far can they claim “their” right to these living spaces. When considered through a prism of hierarchy of needs, the Empire with its control over capitalist mode of production and machinations became the benefactor or giver or provider and wielded the unquestionable right and control over the physicality of the labourer including their habitation, while the labourer on the other hand was accorded the position of a worker to grow crops and convert them into consumable goods but was deprived of the right to control or claim or manifest either in the labouring or non-labouring spaces.¹¹ The official correspondences regarding the coolie lines and the contradictory descriptions of the anti-indentureists to portray the living realities generated a (un)conscious pool of deliberations situating the social processes within the regime of the reason for labour mobility in colonial India. Here the comparison through imagination generated its own webs of trust and the appearing fault lines tried to generate its own structure of reason that gradually cascaded into what Tilly probably identifies as a social activity. Hence, the living space of indentured labour—the transit routes and depots/sub-depots in India before boarding the ships, living conditions aboard the ship while journeying to the overseas plantation colonies, coolie lines, post-indentured living spaces—becomes a methodological tool to lay out the details of the integrative notions of care in health and social well-being through a study of the spatial imaginations and realities of living designs to understand 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. The living spaces of the indentured labourers, although designed to commodify labour power, they were much more than being seemingly static conditions of rest and work and were dynamic spaces that contains much of the substantive history of the indentured mobility than the conventional sources of history or the political interpretation of the system could have provided.¹² When studied thematically the habitation infrastructures and patterns, and critically analysed as ubiquitous and persistent remnants of cooliedom, they become more vibrant as the architectures of life and lived experiences. The living quarters of the labourers are not only the beginning of the connection of the diasporic life of the migrants but symptomatic structures of hierarchical power relations within the bonds of the Empire. Living spaces thus become the embodiment of emotions that are seldom voluntarily desired but present with their inertia in the connectedness of living spaces within a societal structure—the relation of the physical body of an individual to the locale and the social being with its locality. These localities, therefore, had an embedded sense of what it meant to be Indian in a foreign country, creating community life in the diaspora by the Coolies as “free subjects”¹³ of the colony but under the subjecthood of the paternalistic rule of the Empire that was constantly adjusting, adapting and adding new meanings and connotations to these locations what David Harvey suggests as the

uniqueness of location and individuation of these locales defined by bounded territories in absolute spaces that gives way to its unique performativity as a spatial zone of human habitation and creation of a “relational space.”¹⁴ A new heterogeneity was created in these plantation locations, a space that went beyond the simple enumeration of plantocracies as defined by capital, but also a hybrid variety of subalterened biopolitical space that was on one hand Indian in essence that could be physically identified with the living patterns and practices common to Indian like transforming the open spaces in the coolie lines into congregational spaces or later in post-indentured times building temples or following material practices that were quintessentially Indian like using the art of *leepaying* (a mixture of cow dung and water applied on mud walls and floors in a house), building *Tapia* house or *jhoparee* by way of devising a unique blend of hybrid Indianness that merged the local interests like the Ganga Talao in Mauritius, whilst making these geographies of Indian indenturehood a comprehensible space of production of new material culture.¹⁵ New interactions in a foreign land were creating newer intimate and discursive spaces connecting India through the fundamental centre-periphery connection of home and abroad where these housing structures/living spaces need to be seen at a cross-section of domesticity and labouring regimes through “remembered association” with the Indian landscape of homeland.¹⁶

These labour colonies and later the diasporic settlements, as absolute space and relative space, therefore, became physical identifiers of the classification of the population. Gradually the two phases of the settlement pattern could be seen in the plantation colonies depending on the nature of residential status: a) “period of the emergence of the Indian community” when they were arriving in the colonies as temporary settlers working as coolie labour, and; b) “period of consolidation of the Indian community” when they were becoming permanent settlers as they did not return despite the possibilities of repatriation.¹⁷ In either of the processes, the Indian labour, over time, what Lamming had called, was slowly converting and humanising the plantation landscape.¹⁸ J.M. Higginson in 1851 mentioned Indian labourer as the “life blood” of Crown possession in the productive economy of the Empire and any interruption in the labour flow from India would lead to the decadence of cultivation in Mauritius.¹⁹ John Anderson while writing a treatise on the history and geography of Mauritius mentioned that the Creole and Coolie population, both Chinese and Indian, have made an indispensable presence in Mauritian society.

The number and variety of altars, Chinese places of worship, mosques, and temples, that continually meet the sight, prove, better than language can do, the mixed character of the population.

This district [Flacq], after Port Louis and Pamplemousses, is the most populous in the island. At the close of 1857, upwards of eighteen thousand Indians were gathering in the produce of its prolific soil....the bright verdure of its undulating cane fields extending far into the interior, chequered by numerous sugar mills, and neat abode of planters; and it is pleasant to reflect, that not only the culture of this soil is now obtaining attention, but also, the culture and development of moral, and intellectual faculties of its teeming population....It contains several well defined villages, and numerous localities, where houses and shops, Indian, Creole, and Chinese, are springing up by the roadside.

[In Plaines Wilhelms] The Indian labourer, however, predominates. He is the tiller of the ground, and is everywhere to be met with. His lot, in Mauritius generally speaking, is an easy one, his temporal wants being well attended to, and his daily task, in general (when he pleases) soon accomplished. He seems, quite to understand this; and on the expiry of his agreement with his employer, either set an extravagant price on his services, if they be required; or cultivates land, and sells the produce on his own account: or returns to his native country, with more money, and healthier and better clad than

when he left it; no doubt well satisfied—though perhaps pretending the contrary—that he had ever immigrated to Mauritius.²⁰

Such descriptions of *taming* the coolie labour and improving the health and social condition including the moral behaviour of the imported labour of “unfortunate creatures”²¹ by meeting their “temporal wants” of food, clothing, accommodation, and medical necessities, and converting these meek labourers into a class protected and nurtured by the Empire was rather common in official correspondences and reflects the colonial mindset of augmented care that was pseudonymously stabilising this otherwise itinerant footloose labour. “Understanding” hence itself became an agency of migration from India when visualised as coequivalent to satisfaction of want became an operative mechanism through the image of plenitude as opposed to “want” and also changed the moral nature of responsibility of labour migration from simple repopulating the barren lands by migrants as tillers of the soil to migration for well-being of the self—a shift that enlarged the moral capacities of the Empire to monitor and maintain the wellbeing of their “subjects” which gradually converted into freewill in mobility as “access” to better livelihood was positioned apriori envisioned in this colonial project of migration. Thus, abundance was always a central theme of the arkatis in recruitment while replaying the visual field of the destination colonies. The Immigration Ordinances were specific about the quantification of care (ration, accommodation and medical care) to be taken of the migrants enroute the destination colonies as “impressionistic evidence” of rationality behind migration and any deviation would at times lead to the cancellation of the contract as recruiter. The 1902 Ordinance specifically mentioned that a recruiter’s license can be cancelled if he failed to provide suitable accommodation [Figure.1]. It was the duty of the recruiter to meet the necessity of food and shelter in abundance and the “sub-agents aimed to keep them *kebusb* (happy) and in good health.”²²

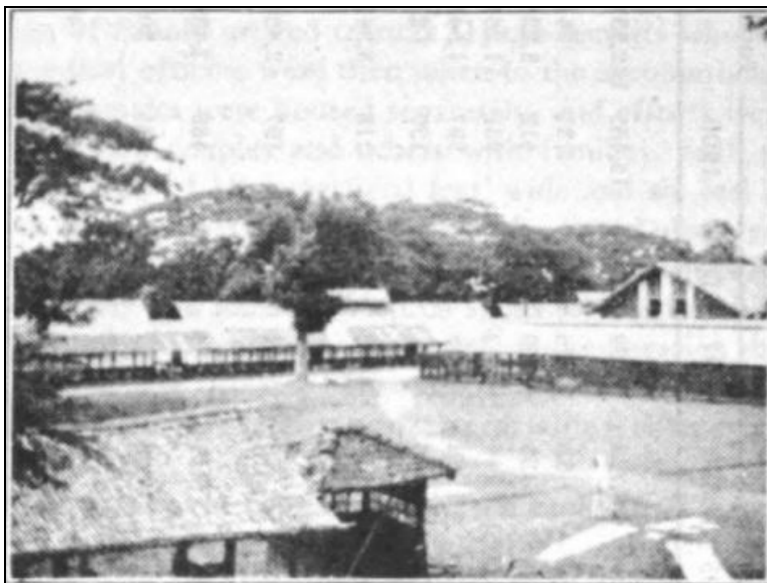


Figure.1: The Coolie Lines, 61, Garden Reach: View from the Isolation Hospital on the Wall, © Brij V. Lal, *Girmityas: The Origin of Fijian Indians*, 32.

In a letter to Lieut. Governor Walker regarding the Immigration Ordinance of 1848 for West Indian Colonies, the Duke of Newcastle said that it is “[m]y own impression...that, whatever becomes of the contributions to return passages, it will be the best wisdom of the colonists to adopt the more liberal course of allowing the immigrant, after five years of bonâ fide labour, on payment of an equivalent, to take his place among the free labouring population of the colony.”²³ Thus, shelters/settlements/housing remained a constant theme of discussion in the administrative circles both in identifying the system’s flaws and improving the ailments of the migrant labour. So, if one has to understand the trajectory of indentured labour practices, it is important to reflect on how these temporary living spaces transformed into place-making practices with the settlements once again becoming the “tangible reality ‘out there’” and although the narratives were fragmented and constructed by people with different ontological positions, one which can be polarised between the right to tell their own story like Totaram on the one hand and narratives from Empire with the predilections of care and control on the other, these residential structures substrates a plethora of multiple truths instead of a unified truth to situate and locate the variety of socially situated truths, not limited by anxieties of what version of reality to privilege.²⁴ Thus, Bhootlane of Totaram invoked a *dramatis personae* with a sensorial smorgasbord that silently addressed the wooing lives of the labour migrants and as Derrida says “one can hear the question of the name resound there where it hesitates on the edge of the call, of the demand or of the promise, before or after the promise,” on the one hand, for the colonial administration it was a criterion of just providing the basic amenities of work to maintain labour conditions. The living geographies of *girmitya*, especially the coolie lines/lanes, as spaces of habitation, the design in practice has remained relational rather than concrete absolute structures and the linear lines of labour quarters, in its everyday practices of living evolved a different grammar of performativity.²⁵

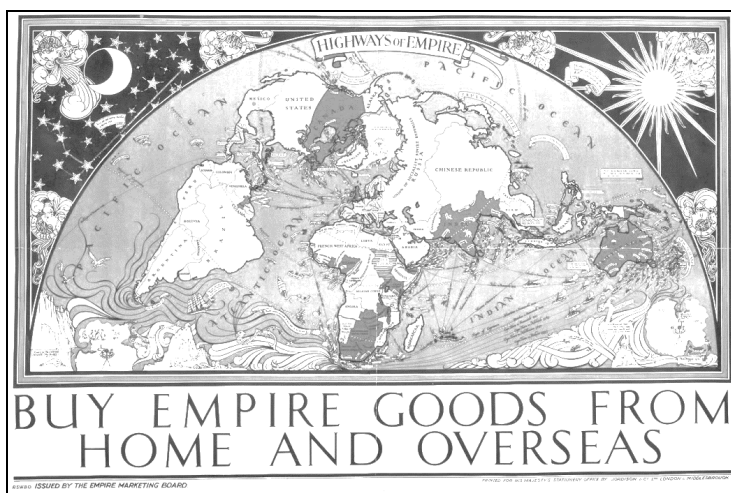


Figure. 2: Highways of Empire by Macdonald Gill, Empire Marketing Board Poster, 1927, Public Records, National Archives, Kew, CO 956/537 and CO 956/144, <https://beta.nationalarchives.gov.uk/explore-the-collection/explore-by-time-period/interwar/empire-marketing-board-posters/>

The personification of these living spaces which were active with participatory dynamism of the labour and the capital, work and resistance, gradually was accorded, to borrow from Spivak, a voice of its own that consciously registered the lives lived therein. Hence, these “minoritized spaces” to

quote Laguerre gradually developed their own epistemologies of specific territories, and coolie lines and depots which were once considered silent spaces of oppression that put a pause on the life of the labourer also emerged as ethnic enclaves of social space and what apparently looked as undifferentiated spaces of the material culture of the coolies once they left *Hindoostan* who also left their caste by crossing the Kalapani, was more deeper, than that might be thought to have occurred by simple detachment from the land.

Transmigration when considered as the delimitation of social categories like caste, gender, etc., yet functioned as a social mix where the community as *jahaji bhai* and *jahaji bahen* was moving towards a new social group formation connected through the camaraderie of pain, was also according new meaning to these territories of plantation geographies, and new social activities through new locales were being moulded as a provisional attempt to group and fight oppression, which at the same time was pluralising the notions of Indianness. The time spent together overboard the ships while travelling across what Sunit Amrith calls the maritime highways of the Empire [Figure.2],²⁶ these fluid geographies of mobility and the anxieties of what awaits their arrival was creating an interconnected identity of the *jahaji*, i.e., creating new symbolic identities emerging out of the spatialities of crossings: “*Kawal nagariya mein tohura baserwa, Hamre gaile wa re kab ayeri batohiya, Din/e din mahina, Paniya hi paniya, Pohuch gaile Fijiya mein Siriya jahajiya.*”²⁷ *Basera* as the left-behind natal home remembered through longing was essentially different from the labour quarters like the depot, quarantine centres, or the coolie lines which were meant for careful stacking in an orderly manner labour and does not involve the emotive connections that one feels with the natal home that are embedded in the natural surroundings of their home and hearth and foremost their family and relatives that makes it a home. When looked upon the lives of the indentured labourers as the *Coolies of the Empire*,²⁸ these experiences of differentiating the natal home and labouring quarters have remained universally interwoven in the carpet of global histories of cooliedom and the individual agency in the remembering and connecting to natal home have remained as the space between the global history and microhistory of indentured regimes with regional variations.²⁹ This differentiation of home (*desh*) and labouring in foreign lands (*pardesh*) can also be found in the contemporary novels of Dwivedi,

Aj budh hai. Pardesiyon ke mata-pita aur patni chitthirasa sahib ka rasta dekh rahe hain. Sar pe lal pagadi, pair me patti kandhe par chamade ka baig latak raha hai. Yah baig nahi hai yah logon ki asha aur nirashao ka khazana hai. Dur desh Rangun, Canada, Natal aur Mauritius me garibon ke rakt ke kamaye huye rupaye bhi isi me ate hai. [Today is Wednesday. Parents and wives of emigrants are looking out for the postman. A red turban, band around the ankles and leather bag is hanging on the shoulder. This is not a simple bag. This is a treasure of the hopes and sorrows of the people. This very [bag] brings the money earned by the sweated labour of the poor in countries as far flung as Rangoon, Canada, Natal and Mauritius.]³⁰

A colonial resident in his account of Mauritius considered “labour as a marketable commodity” and the Hill Coolies had the fair right to invest their labour “so long as they can do so with safety, under the protection of the government” to set an exemplary practice of “good conduct” in front of the liberated African not only terms of labour and cleanliness but good behaviour that would add to the general welfare of the colony. Prospects of prosperity of the Crown colonies brought the consequential reliance on the double pronged welfarism through mercantilism of commodity dependent on imported labour and protection of the same through prevention of abuse under the observation of Protector of Emigrants and an 1842 communication mentioned that if any colony will not receive any release from the National Treasury if they failed to provide the “proof of satisfaction” that the laws and regulations prevailing in India that were beneficial to the

labourer were in operation in the colonies and such are not “repugnant” with the existing regulations. The welfare of the labourers was no momentous question of experimentation of abolition of slavery but a conscious effort to avoid the unnecessary discouragement of prevention of labour importation. Lord Stanley mentioned that in absence of foreign labour, the fixed capital in the sugar colonies will render useless and eventually the colony will retrograde in wealth necessitating “effective securities that the emigrant shall be, in the fullest sense of the term.” In advising the Government of India, Lyall and Lushington wrote convincingly promisingly that the resumption of Indian emigration would rest on free will in emigration and that the “health, comfort and welfare of the emigrants shall be fully provided for, both in passage and in the colony...left to your judgement...if you should consider it hostile to the real welfare of the people of India.”³¹ The epistemological restructuring of labour by providing the comforts including accommodation en route on ships and in the plantations, and safety of health was meant to provide a sense of fixity to the circulating itinerant labour and a collective sense of control creating a capitalist landscape of power where class relations were manipulated, dominated, transformed and negotiated in the social landscape that shaped the nature of social relations in production cycle of commercial cropping.³² The multidimensionality of these labour lines should be located as it stood between freedom and bondage in the transitory phase of labour from slavery to contract labour. These mere infrastructures were points of recognizable overlaps between community functions as these labour lines were mini settlement brimming in ethnicity and kinship relations alongside operation of industrial capital that considered worthy of investing in its preparation, upkeep and maintenance giving a sense of both production and reproduction of life and work.³³ Section V of 1837 Act passed by Government of India mentioned that no immigrant can board a ship without Government permit which was issued after satisfactory examination of fixed tenure of five years with guaranteed return passage and was allowed to board the ship that had a “satisfactory state of accommodation, food, medical attendance.” Any breach of law was surmised by penalty of Rs.200.³⁴ C.P. Lucas described Mauritius as “heritage of conquest” that relied on Free Trade policies contributed greatly to the resource trade of Great Britain in sugar. The one market, one commodity policy greatly boosted the importation of contract labour from India to Mauritius as unlike the West Indian counterpart after the expiration of slavery, the inhabitants were descendants of African slave population whereas in Mauritius had sizeable population of free labour from India and the predominance was registered in the 1881 Census numbering to 359,874 out of which 370,000 remained stationery for nearly half a decade making them 69 per cent of the population including the migrants and those born in the colony.³⁵

Although the Indian indentured labourers were sharing bonds of assimilation as they reached the overseas plantations yet the complete erasure of caste, class, and gender hierarchy was a more nuanced process. An 1838 letter to the Colonial Secretary G.F. Dick in relation to the *Committee of Inquiry on Indian Labourers* in Mauritius mentioned “[w]hen their complaints are noticed, we find them to be—‘interference with their prejudices with regards to cooking,’ a point of material importance in the estimation of the Hindoos;—‘insufficiency of time allowed for meals’—‘dissatisfaction with their work’—‘insufficient accommodations’...‘want of proper medical attendance.’”³⁶ In 1840, Justice Anderson after his visit to twelve estates in Mauritius sympathised that coolie laboured under overworked with unjust severity and,

their lodgings either too confined and disgustingly filthy, or none provided for them, and in case of sickness, the most culpable neglect was evinced in withholding the accommodation, advice and attendance which the utter helplessness of the sufferers so urgently required. None of the

establishments had sufficient hospital accommodation, and the expense of the public hospital was always urged as an excuse for not sending them there. That the Indians' prejudices were never considered; their deplorable state of destitution in their own country was always urged as an argument in favour of their improved condition here (Mauritius) without any reference to the change which takes place by their emigration from comparative idleness and indolence, with the full enjoyment of all their natural prejudices, to severe and unremitting labour under many painful restrictions.³⁷

The political economy of indenture was constantly remodelled by the social adjustments of actions and reactions of the migrants. Migrants in the initial years of the beginning of the system were victims of their own limitations about the geography, climate and location of the plantation colonies and the conditions that they have to encounter in the colonies. The reports of the disappointment and destitution of the system marking it as the *New System of Slavery* that eventually developed a fatalistic attitude in absence of a realistic image of the ecological frontiers of migration. The unfamiliar ecological frontiers brought close encounters with new diseases, homesickness and psycho-social problems of adjustments. The rudimentary housing system of the bygone era of slavery, overcrowded barracks, new diet heralded a new sense of arrival did cause a strain on the migrant.³⁸ In the *Report of the Royal Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the Treatment of Immigrants in Mauritius, 1875* mentioned that prior to the Ordinance 30 of 1858, there was neither the promise nor the stipulation to provide the immigrant Indian labourer with "lodgings" although it was a customary practice to provide living quarters to the free labourers by housing them in the pre-existing structures left empty due to the abolition of slavery as the system had the mandatory practice of providing living quarters for the slaves. Hence the Indian immigrant in 1836 on arrival in these plantation estates in Mauritius found large log-hut prepared and available for their reception in Mauritius, a practice legalised and regularised in accordance with Ordinance 40 of 1844, No. 6 of 1845 and with the brief interlude of the repeal of the order in 1865 it was once again reinstated vide Article 24, Ordinance 31 of 1867, "there was no law subjecting the proprietors of estates to provide lodgings for their immigrants, whose only redress, in cases of neglect to find them in lodgings during that time, must have been by an action upon their contracts of engagements."³⁹ The legal provision of accommodation of the labourers was left vague to interpretation by inclusion of the clause to provide "sufficient and wholesome lodging according to the usage of the colony"⁴⁰ without providing an exact connotation for what was meant by sufficient and wholesome, especially considering the differences in practices of (social) living, traditional notions of purity and pollution, family practices, cultural belongingness and most importantly the materials/local resources available to prepare the housing infrastructure in the plantation colonies and its characteristic difference with the homeland practices of the migrants. Neither did it propose what was the meaning of "usage" considering the long decades spanning the indenture system and practices that change over the time impacting social scenario of the colony especially after the introduction of imported labour. Although migrants were moving within the subjecthood of the Empire which was in itself an amalgamation of region vastly different in transcontinental practices of living only unified by the sepulchral image of Empire and the notion of rule by an elite that was European in essence and hence found it complicated to understand and appreciate the indigenous practices of the migrants and their adaptability in an altered landscape. The difference in acceptability on either end of the continuum in life practices of the European way and the Indian way was embedded in the understanding of social hygiene and community practices of living and utopian burden of the redressal of "filthy habits" of Indians either by way of putting a stop to them or counteracting them in some way.⁴¹ In Mauritius, the four distinct type of accommodation allotted for the labourer depending on the nature of their engagement of work contract, occupation and location of settlement in the colony depending on whether the

engagee was a contracted indentured labourer working in the plantation or a non-plantation labourer and accordingly different types of accommodation were provided: a) residential quarters by the plantation owners as camps made of stone, palisades or corrugated iron roof or self-made thatched huts with a near resemblance as one see them “above the Ghauts and in Mawuls, none so good as the houses of the well-to-do riots in Guzerat, the Deccan and the Southern Maharatta country” b) living quarters by job contractors which can be compared to “chawls” in the Bombay and Concan, c) accommodation in the camps of the Surveyor General Department, Railway Department for work on roads, railways and depending on the temporal nature of work, the living quarters were temporary residence with no order or plan in built environment, d) the residence of the free labourers which was on the rise w Morcellment. These rent-free accommodations despite being the living quarter of migrant labourers, only the plantation sites were under the supervision of the Protector of Emigrants and were subjected to regular inspection by the Medical Inspectors only for the Hospital arrangements and not specifically the lodgings to remedy the condition of living by way of improvement. Since there was no law governing the nature of accommodation or furnishings to be provided therein, mostly the Inspector with limited powers of observation/inspect and devoid of any adjudicating powers of redressing the wrongs could only report the fact to the Stipendiary Magistrate who in person as Mr. Renouf mentioned could not be a judge and a prosecutor at the same time, the lacunas. Since any petition required to be backed by evidential proof of circumstances by person other than the Inspector resulted in dismissal of the claim as either they were remedied by the time of visit by the constater to verify the complaint, like hospitals running dry on pharmaceutical supplies would be restocked, or in case of the labour camps the unhealthy condition of the huts/lines were cited as condition growing out of the habits and customs of the Indians in contravention to the customs of the colony and Indians who were so opposed to adapting the healthy customs and living practices that Indians can never adapt them. Hence the responsibility of the insufficiency living conditions in the camps as unhealthy were satisfactorily proved to be not due to the absence of wholesome lodging as per the customs of the colony but due to the misappropriation of the designated space as the living practices of the Indians. By 1871, out of 75 complaints registered against the entrepreneurs/masters/contractors, only 11 of them were proved. The rest were rejected either due to the impossibility to prove their contravention to the customs of the colony or “that it was more difficult to satisfy the Magistrate than the labourer that the lodging was indifferent, unhealthy.”⁴²



Figure.3: The Peasant of the Period: His Hut and His Implement, Azamgarh Settlement Report, Brij V. Lal, *Girmityas: The Origin of Fijian Indians*, 81.

The difference is understanding the notion of the filth and squalor as often mentioned in the records was due to the different usage of living spaces in Indian and European living patterns. While the prior systems rested on separation of space based on traditional notion of waste and purity providing each structure an independent operational identity creating segregated spaces with domesticity, whereas the European living patterns were formed on integrative notion of interconnected space of domesticity within a single area of utility. The Oriental Imperialistic gaze in understanding the Asiatic/Indian ethics and way of living opinionated the view in regulating the living spaces as per the “customs of colony” [Figure.3]. Mr. Daly said,

As to the camps, I found a great many of them, according to my English notions, very dirty and squalid, though on some estates there is, I think, a great attention paid to decency. But as a proper answer to the question depends so much upon what may be the state of the people in their own country, I do not think I am competent to judge as to whether such a state of things enables the Indian to “live in comfort.”

And, when desired to compare them with the villages in which the Indians live, of their own building, in Mauritius, he said:

I think then on many estates they are in a very miserable plight. Comparing what the Indian does for himself, their condition is miserable indeed. But I think I ought also to add that an Indian will live in a place which an European will condemn, and that he will never grumble about the want of ventilation or drainage.⁴³

The problem of sanitation and cleanliness in the labour quarters was unanimously been considered as a difficulty as Beyts mentioned was putting the “law in motion,” as the 1875 Royal Commissioner Report consider the rot of problem was in identifying the person responsible for the maintenance of system of cleanliness. The problem of cleanliness of the estates was a question of practices versus procedures. Often the planters put the blame on the recruiters for not cautiously

selecting the class of Indians suitable for adapt to the customs of the colony suitable to migrate in It says,

Mr. Baudot considers the owner, as the occupier of property. To us it seems very clear that either the Indian might do it (but he is not very likely to do so) by proceeding against the planter , or that the Sanitary Inspector should do it , who , we learn from Mr. Antelme , visits and examines the camp, and sees whether it is clean or not; and is bound to report the camp to the Inspector of Police when it is not clean; but we do not find that he ever does it . 2083. In fact, the difficulty the Magistrates encounter is in the laws of the colony.

The improvement of the dwellings depended on the proprietor of the estate. Sometimes he would delay the repairs citing resource crisis or absence of man power as repairs required rehousing the labour temporarily in different location which on the occasion of overcrowding the proprietor found difficult to comply. At some occasion, the labour will be asked to repair their own household with the resources supplied by the estate. In Fiji sometime repairs were aligned to cane cutting time so that the dried husk could be used for thatching. Sometime the improvement of the housing condition was directly linked to the market profits of cane, Gabriel Fropier writing in 1864, mentions that, despite the dismal state of the dwellings and the difficulties in ascertaining the time of repair of the dwellings the Coolies never complained.⁴⁴ In Mauritius the planters were not willing to enforce a strict sanitary policy or community hygiene as they believed that the Coolies were averse to any kind of interference in the daily practices and any habit if forcibly enforced might motivate the Labourer to refuse to reengage or reindenture and Mr Rennards believed indentured labourer

will transfer their services to persons who will not interfere with their peculiar customs and habits. The Asiatic immigrant will always be the last person to complain of the dirty condition of his village or camp; and, indeed, his clothing and personal appearance too often show a marked disregard to that great comfort, cleanliness...On the whole of the estates of this district, the immigrants are allowed to rear poultry in any quantity and to keep as many cows, goats, pigs,...as they choose.

Livestock breeding in or near the labour quarters or keeping vegetable refuse that were placed in one particular section of the camps generally allowed by the plantation owners were greatly discouraged by the Sanitary Inspectors as it was considered creating nuisance that required intervention and in July 1869 Mr. d'Emmerez de Charmoy commenting on the Rivière Dragon camp said that although the camps were comparatively cleaner but by 1870 the Magistrate proclaimed that such practices brings only filth and should be “suppressed” by Inspector of Nuisances. Individual camps like those at Pamplémousses, Federica, had group of individuals called the manure gang operating under the chief Sirdar who would look after the cleanliness of the camps by collecting and converting organic waste into manure, especially looking after the quadrangle area as the free space open for children, animals to the fullest liberty. Although the condition of the isolated huts built by the labourers themselves in the estate and at times, the migrants were not even provided with construction materials but was allowed to borrow materials from nearby estates, in such huts, even their poultry and goats moving astray rendered the place dirty and uninhabitable. The stealth in the huts were also caused due to lack of proper ventilation as most of the huts/barracks would have one door. Rennards attributed the death of six labourers in 1865 to the insufficient ventilation and requested for addition of a window instead of keeping the door as the single aperture of ventilation that would contribute to the comfort and wellbeing of the occupants of the residential quarters. Even in the dwellings of the job contractors who employed indentured labourers for non-plantation work,

they resembled upper storey dwellings lie those visible in Port Louis formerly occupied slaves, although the rooms were sufficiently ventilated but due to the number of men staffed in one room sometimes as many as seven in one shed leaving little space for air flow between the floor and ceiling of each gallery, the living condition was suffocating with extreme heat building up around 8:00 a.m. and noon time. In Mauritius, the 1875 Royal Commissioners Report gives a brief description of layout of Mr. Barraud's establishment and however crowding resulted in lack of privacy and heat effect on the labouring bodies.

[It] consists of three rows of dwellings, or, rather, sheds, 53 feet 4 inches long, and 17 feet wide, substantially built of stone, with corrugated iron roof. A wall runs down the middle, under the ridge - pole, which divides each shed into two. One of these sheds has only seven compartments in each row. The divisions are not covered up to the wall - plate, and are but barely high enough for privacy, though still furnishing in each row sufficiently airy and ventilated rooms, 9 feet 5 inches long, by 6 feet 3 inches wide, and 7 feet high, open above to the ridgepole. The two other sheds furnish accommodation, if it can be so called, of a remarkable description. A passage the whole length of the shed is cut off, 3 feet 6 inches wide, and, on the side opposite the wall of the shed a wall is built, 6 feet 2 inches high, and on the top of that a ceiling of planks is laid, which forms a gallery the whole length of the shed, 5 feet wide, and 5 feet 7 inches high to the ridgepole, and 4 feet 10 inches at the lowest spot, where the balusters run along the front of the gallery. On each of these galleries seven single men sleep. The heat of these galleries was extreme at 8 A.M., and must be excessive at noonday. There were two flights of stairs to ascend to this gallery, one at each end of the shed. The lower storey, or part under the gallery, was divided into ten rooms, 6 feet 2 inches by 5 feet 4 inches, with a door 5 feet 4 inches high, and no other ventilation than what came in between the top of the door and the ceiling. There were ten of these rooms; and in each of them husband, and wife, and children, were supposed to live. The fowls they possessed had coops at the end of the passage. There was no cooking carried on in these sheds; that was done in a separate shed fitted up with hearths and hearth - stones, as usual in India. Establishments in Port Louis.

The other camp that we will describe belonged to the Albion Dock Establish. It stands on high ground , and is a large stone building , 115 feet long by 33 feet ing to the (inside measurement) , three storeys high , and , in outward appearance, something like an old slave logie and a warehouse. The ground floor has five blocks of eight rooms, with four rooms at each end. The rooms are 8 feet 3 inches by 7 feet 6 inches, and 5 feet 9 inches high. The open space to the ceiling, about 8 or 9 feet, is left for people to sleep upon, or stow away vegetables, wood, and rubbish. The first and second floor have a gangway 5 feet wide down the centre , and ten blocks of four rooms each , with four rooms at each end . The rooms on each floor are 7 feet by 7 feet 6 inches, and those on the second are 7 feet high, with arrangements similar to those on the lower floor as regards the top of the blocks and the ceilings. There are seven larger houses in the yard, and a cooking - shed and cooking - places in different parts of the yard, with sheets of curved iron to keep the wind from the fire. in these establishment. The supply of water in these establishments is good. In one of them - that of Water - supply Mr. Stanley, a wharfinger -- it might be thought too abundant, as in wet weather it stagnates in many parts of the yard.⁴⁵

While the dilapidated state of the labour lines was considered to be responsibility of both Indian labour who could not overcome the prejudice of their customary practice, it was also due to the lack of eagerness on the part of the plantation owners to maintain these places as habitable structures. While the colonial administration aimed to provide a wholesome accommodation, they were also proud to introduce the use of dry latrines for use by the labourers and the experimentation came with much success as the adaptation was visibly seen in the estates in Mauritius with fewer

exception especially in the rural districts, and “that the habits and customs of the Indians are so opposed to those usages, that they never can be made to adopt them.”

The Eurocentric vision of the indentured landscapes, according to Durgahee, made it difficult to voice the subalterned lives in the plantation geographies effacing the experiences of the immigrant labour as antics of the archaic in the plantation geography. Hence while for the elites the structures of improvement were emancipatory, whilst it also displays the disparities of privileges in the experiences of migrant and the emancipated labour. The migrant labourer were humanising the barren terrains of Mauritius and the extensive use of the Indian immigrants in diversified economic activity within microclimates suitable for sugar production, that by 1881, Napier Broome the Governor of Mauritius described it as a large manufacturing town with the density of population similar to Saxony and Belgium, yet were considered as Mary Hobbs describes the Indians in Mauritius as the *worst* type who “left their own country in disgrace and when seen in their new home only to sink more deeply in degradation and wickedness.” The approach of historical geography to read the material spaces as Durgahee puts forth was a story of spatiality by way of recognising “ways in which people experienced the space around them which had a profound effects on the quality of their lives”—a colonial space when looked through the archipelagic approach connects the gap of subaltern connections in a divided global space giving new collective meaning and interpretation to “customs of the colony” as ensemble of system that interconnects the sugar colonies of the Empire to the imperial organisation in its spectrum of both malleability and materiality.⁴⁶ One should also be cautious to read these girit experiences of adaptability through the prism of cultural insularity and false consciousness of unidirectional identity markers through anxieties of migration, but should be read as a kaleidoscope of collective memory jostling between the past and the present circumstances of migration—experiences that developed with a new sense of agency and identity that evolved out of the intimate encounters of life in a proximal landscape that was both physically exacting and emotionally demanding.⁴⁷

Unlike Mauritius, indentured labourers were housed in coolie lines that resembled barracks as the newly acquired colony with no precedence of slave labour did not have a precedence of slave quarters. These labour lines “‘enabled the desired positioning of bodies and spaces’, essential in creating a functioning and efficient plantation economy.”⁴⁸ On arrival, labourers in the Fiji plantations are allotted rooms with double accommodation, only when it was a family of man and wife that required privacy of space, where they allotted separate rooms for accommodation. According to Totaram, the Nausori plantations, there were twenty-six coolie lines. Each coolie line had twenty-four *kothris* (rooms), and each room was eight feet wide and twelve feet long, with separate living spaces for men and women.⁴⁹ According to Brij V. Lal, a single room would accommodate up to three single men or a family and compares the coolie lines to “congested plantation barracks,” and such congestions were so rampant that it even percolated the popular culture in *bidesia*, “The six foot by eight foot CSR room that, Is the source of all comfort for us. In it we keep our tools and hoe, and also the grinding stone and the hearth. In it is also kept the firewood. It is our single and double-storey palace, in which is made our golden parapet.”⁵⁰ Accommodation in the plantations was the responsibility of the estates owner who was the employer of the labourer. As the British government received continuous complaints of misinformation in recruiting coolies by the intermediary recruiters, it was mandatory through the Immigration Ordinances that the recruitee be informed in their own mother tongue the clause of recruitment by the agent and the contract be signed in the presence of the stipendiary magistrate of the state they were recruited from. Psulldham signed his contract in front of the Collector as the recruiting agent explained in vernacular that the Raj/Sarkar i.e., the Empire of the British government “will be a father to him, giving him house-

room in health medicine in sickness, and warm clothes for the long journey over the dark water.”⁵¹ On paper, these dwellings were sufficiently hygienic and spacious to house the coolie in a healthy environment for their contract period of five years and were designed so to succinctly improve their overall moral and physical well-being during the time of their contract. Often the colonial reports on the effectiveness of the indenture system on the Indian labourers would mention that these labourers returned well fed, well clad and in good health under the care of the empire in the colonies and looked much more refreshed and returned in good health than the emaciated bodies that they came with, “as a whole he is justly treated.”⁵² Parliamentary discussion on the draft Immigration Act for British Guiana constantly mentioned that the labourer on arrival should be immediately allotted to work in the estate plantations, it was the responsibility of the immigration agent to allot the labourer a suitable dwelling and lodging “at the expense of the colony, until the means of earning their own subsistence can be procured for them. The Governor may by such notice cancel the indenture of any immigrant if the immigration agent shall report that the accommodation provided for such immigrant is bad or insufficient, or if on any other ground he shall consider it requisite.”⁵³ The constant amendment of the Immigration law and correspondence between the immigration agents, Protector of Emigrants, planters and Indian immigration administration in Britain with reference to accommodation in the colonies, apparently highlights the carefully crafted care regimes of the Empire to protect the Indian labourer from any exploitation. In 1855, John Russell in a letter to Wodehouse with regard to the dwelling conditions of the labourer wrote,

Under the present system of allotment, the Governor is enabled to prevent the allotment of any Coolie to an estate not adapted to Coolies, either because the locality does not suit their health, or because the manager does not understand their treatment, or because proper provision does not exist for housing them, or supplying them with hospital accommodation or medical care. But if the mere payment of a price by the planter is to be considered as giving him an absolute right to receive the services of a Coolie, and for a full period of five years, it will be much more difficult for the Local Government either to watch properly over the Coolies’ interest in his original allotment, or during his period of service to exercise for his protection the power of cancelling his contract. In framing an ordinance on this subject, it will therefore be necessary to guard against any misconception on the part of the planter as to his right to the services of any immigrants, unless the Governor has satisfied himself that the estate is suitable, and that proper provision has been made for the reception and care of the immigrants.⁵⁴

Although, the Immigration Acts were meant to provide a protective cover against the indiscriminate exploitation of labour and curb the rights of the planter on absolute control of the labourer, however, hospital records of the plantation estate and personal accounts of the indentured labourer speak of a different narrative. Privacy, decency and overcrowding in the labour camps in the plantation colonies remained a constant complaint. Shortage of space, filth, dirt, smog, and an uninhabitable environment especially leading to cholera and malaria were recurrent themes in the description of these coolie dwellings. It had been a common practice during slavery especially in the British Atlantic, to dehumanise slave labour not only in their working and living conditions but also by comparing them with animals to designate their lower social worth and the right of the employer to squeeze out their labour being considered equal to a beast of burden and often better than a cat, dog or a mule.⁵⁵ Such descriptions of dehumanisation of labour were equally prevalent during the indentured contracts that social scientists and historians have equated the regime with as *New System of Slavery*. Totaram’s room in the Bhootlane was surrounded by tall grass, the dense foliage was sufficient to make its overgrown presence in the area, that if a person entered them, one would lose

vision of anything but the tall grass infested with mosquitoes and crickets. His room smelled of desertion and looked desolate and abandoned with a pile of mud craftily built by the rats who were living there, often dogs would come to rest, and this room would soon be Totaram's address in Fiji for five years. It took him tireless labour of four hours to clean this room. After the room was clean,

I spread the blanket and sat on it. Just when I sat down, mosquitoes from the tall grass outside, hungry from several days, clung to my body in hordes. There was no place on my body left open. Bumps rose all over my body from the bites. I became very itchy. Panicky, I went outside the room. After a short while I saw two rats running around inside the house, on whose backs the mosquitoes were gathered like locusts. The helpless rats ran into their holes. The mosquitoes also went into the holes, behind the rats. Having gone into the hole they brought the rats out again. The bumps from the mosquito bites swelled to the size of rupees. I made smoke inside the house, and with this effort, saved my life from the mosquitoes.⁵⁶

As Totaram realised that his living conditions in the coolie lines and restricted life depended on the overseers and legal mechanism of the Empire system had already bound him to the Bhootlane, he said to his fellow-labourer, "*Accha to phir Hari iccha jo bona boga so boga. Jab lane ka bhoot aomega tab dekhunga. Wah to lane ka bhoot hain, mein Company ka bhoot hoon. Is bhati dono bhoot o ka yudh boga. Agar mein jeet gaya to bhooto ke lane se nikal bahar karunga.* [Very well. It is Krishna's will then. Whatever will happen will happen. When the ghosts of the line come, I will face them. They are the ghosts of the line, I am the ghost of the company. In this way there will be a battle between two ghosts. If I win, then I will throw the ghosts out of the line.]"⁵⁷ Like Totaram, Baba Ram Chandra, Munshi Rahman Khan and many unnamed immigrant workers, indenture was their *karma*. Totaram's *kasht* (pain) according to Kelly was a feeling of powerlessness trapped in the extractive system in a foreign land that he himself compared to a life in exile.⁵⁸ A Fijian *bidesia* song describes the affective modalities of the kothris on the health of the labourers, "*Kali Kothariya Ma Bite Nahin ratiyon to, Kiske Batai Ham Pir re Bidesia, Din rat Bite Humari Dhukh Me Umariya Ho, Sukha Sab Nainua Ke Nir re Bidesia.*"⁵⁹ Description of dismal conditions of the dwelling space in the estate was common. In Labasa estates of CSR, each room would accommodate three male labourers. Each room would have one vertical wooden bunk bed attached to the wall with three bunks, one for each single occupant and supplied with one sheet and a blanket.

The lines were built in a clearing south-west of where the mill is today. They were like barracks: long buildings, with corrugated iron roofs overhanging on either side to provide shelter, and wooden walls without windows. After 1908, public kitchens were constructed but so close to the lines that smoke blew into the rooms. Each line had thirteen rooms on each side and each room measured ten feet by seven feet. The floor had an irregular surface and it was left to the immigrants to level and gloss it with cow dung and clay as they had done in India. The rooms were separated by a partition which ended three-quarters of the way to the ceiling. The rest was covered with wire netting. Anyone could climb up the partition and look down into the next room. Toilets were placed some distance from the line. A partition across the middle of the toilet divided it into two sections, one for females, the other for males. Toilet facilities were nevertheless better than expected and generally better than those in India. Some new lines were erected after 1908, particularly at Batnikama and Matnilabasa, and their style and dimensions were prescribed by law. The rooms there measured twelve feet by ten feet but the number of occupants in each room remained the same.⁶⁰

Medical officers would often visit the estates to see the hygiene and health conditions prevalent in the estates. Indentured Indians. The multiple reports of the medical officers or those of

the Inquiry Commissions by the British Empire over the span of the indentured system between 1830–1920, satisfactorily failed to represent the actual situation of the coolie lines in the estates. With regards to the complaints by the Indian labourers in Mauritius to the Coolie Inquiry Commission in the 1838, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society mentioned that the gaps in information between the complaints registered from the coolies and the ones conveyed to Justice Anderson “‘which does certainly not appear to have been sufficiently noticed.’ That speaks in volume of the worthlessness of the reports transmitted to him.”⁶¹ According to Anderson it was the “culpable neglect” of filth and confined lodging and accommodation that resulted in sickness and mortality in Port Louis resulting in “utter helplessness of the sufferers.”⁶² Writing almost decades apart in Fiji, “inquiry” into the living conditions by the medical inspectors barely changed its shape.

We were never told about the arrival of the big doctor. Once or twice a year, a new sahib would suddenly appear, peep into our rooms, shake his head, lift his nose to smell something, point to the overgrown grass to the accompanying sahib, talk very fast gesturing at our toilets, and then walk away smartly. Sometimes he would ask us whether we liked the place. We would complain about the overcrowded room, about theft, about heavy work, and other hardships. Once he was gone, our complaints remained only complaints and nothing came out of them.⁶³

Overcrowding in lines and dehumanising conditions of labour primarily can be noticed in the environment in which the labour was emplaced and cascading social evils like jealousy, polygamy, murders suicides etc. that followed especially emanating from the dwellings when seen through a gendered lens, especially when the privacy and inner life of domesticity was compromised due to overcrowding. The patterns of allocation of rooms to married couple and single labourer without any dependents and the logic moral principle reflects the constraints of gender on sexual liberty of women and patriarchal control of women’s decision-making power in the household. Although a family with three children were provided with a separate room, in certain instances, only a walled partition would separate a residential accommodation of the family unit and that of a single male resident. The partitions were flimsy and inadequate that one could climb up to see the family on the other side. Most of the labourers in the initial years of migration were single male migrants and the loneliness of their sojourn was heightened when they saw their co-labourers moving to the plantation with their families. Family as a unit of labour was more cherished in the later stages of indentured migration to stop the social evils that spread in the islands due to the interracial engagements of the Indian Coolie and Creole population. Hence, through subsequent Immigration Acts, a fixed proportion of women were to be recruited as a physical safety valve to the moral evils in the islands. It was thought that bringing more women to the plantation would eventually stabilise the labouring community. Many even registered marriages on their arrival on the islands. Yet instances of debauchery, desertion, and elopement remained a constant feature of the system. It was argued that the number of women recruited was always far less than their actual necessity in the islands. Women recruited were mostly employed to clean the cane fields or in packaging sugar in the factories whereas the hard labour was left to the males. In Grenada, the employers would provide separate huts to a married man with “a separate room for himself and his family.”⁶⁴ Wife murders and using cutlass as a weapon of murder, have long permeated the popular narratives of the indentured regime. According to Russell, as pointed out by Brij V. Lal, the supposedly immoral character of coolie women in plantations who were accused of ruining the moral structure of the plantations, the sexual jealousies leading to wife murders can be traced to nature of dwellings provided to the coolie labourers.

Russell identified was “propinquity” or the “next-door-opportunity,” and this pointed directly to housing conditions on the plantations. All plantations were required by law to provide their indentured labourers with 'suitable' and hygienic dwellings. On paper, the provisions for housing looked the very model of spacious living, at least as far as plantations were concerned: one adult to every 300 cubic feet of space or three adults or a family of four to a room of not less than 900 cubic feet of space. Worse still, married couples and bachelors shared adjacent quarters and there was no room for privacy. Partitions were not carried to the ceiling for the purpose of ventilation but were topped with gauze wire. Whatever privacy one enjoyed was the result of the understanding and sympathy of one's immediate neighbours; recognized social conventions were in short supply in the crowded plantation lines. Recommendations were made to separate married and bachelors quarters...“they were not generally implemented.”

Left to their own devices in matters of social and cultural life, the indentured labourers devised their own strategies to cope with loneliness and unaccustomed chores, and these could unwittingly disrupt families. Some cohabiting couples, out of pity or for companionship, accepted single men into their rooms as boarders. This was often done after notifying the plantation management and occasionally the police. Sometimes, single men, for whom the evening meal was “one of the very few pleasures at their disposal paid a certain sum to a married couple to cook for them.”...Casual visits and temporary arrangements sometimes developed their own momentum, became entangled in emotional and sexual relationships, and led to tragedy.⁶⁵

Loneliness and reckoning of home were considered as one of the reasons to sexual jealousies in the plantation and the disproportionate ratio of the sexes as the cause behind the wife murders and other crimes in the estate. Andrew-Pearson report on the condition of the indentured labour in Fiji criticised the immorality of the system arising out of the disproportionate recruitment of male and female in the colonies alleging that if one woman had to serve three men then sexually transmitted disease like gonorrhoea, syphilis and the immorality and promiscuity of the women recruited is to be seen as the essential flaw of the system rather than of character of women. Countering this argument while acknowledging the flaw of the system Biskham Escott, Governor of Fiji in 1917 said that the “absence of home life resulting from the housing of the immigrants in the ‘lines’ have been...distinct evils of the system” and continued to bask in the counter argument of positing the sanitary and health condition of the Indians especially the children better in the colony than in the homeland and the had the right to settle in the colony wherever land was available and stated that 115,635 acres of and was under the ownership of 11,044 Indian families reflecting the prosperity of the Indians in Fiji and the skills of agriculture acquired during their period of indenture adding to their prosperity does not merit the system of its undeserved condemnation.⁶⁶ The early decade of the twentieth century especially the First World War years, when shipping lines were greatly affected due to the ongoing war housing the labour especially with regards to the repatriation of free indentured labourer at the end of their contract and the debate on the end of the system itself became major concern for the planters. Discussing the remedial responses to Andrews Memorandum on the prevailing vices of indenture system especially on Venereal Disease prevailing in the system to which the Indian opinion was “greatly perturbed, it states that reconstruction of the coolie houses to give adequate privacy to the married quarters of the labourers, no young unmarried overseer should be to be placed in charge of young unmarried women, children below age of 15 in the coolie lines will not be allowed to work, young unmarried hospital attendants, cohabitation with girl below 12 will be a penal offence and validity of Indian marriages duly celebrated according to religion without question of age. However, since the Fiji Government believed that cancellation of indenture in the times of impossibility of return due to war and considering that free indentured

labourer were better off due to availability of land, stated Henry Lambert, the requirement of the proposed remedies of house and hospital accommodation of Indian Population in Fiji was doubtful.⁶⁷ Questioning the necessity of regulation of the housing condition of the Indian labourers in Fiji a comprehensive study of the existing rules on housing labour in India was carried on four distinct sectors: a) plantation labour in Duars and Assam, b) factory labour, c) mining labour, d) railway labour and reference was drawn from the Indian Factories Act, Burma Wolfirma Rules, Duars Committee, Bengal Mining Settlement Act 1912, Jalpaiguri Labour act, Assam Labour and Emigration Act, Railways department about the pre-existing laws and statutory provisions when there was a rift between the labour and the rest of the community.⁶⁸ In comparison to the experiences of labouring classes in India, J.E. Ferard, Under Secretary of State for India, in 1919, following Hardy's logic of lesser choices in mobility in Fiji, in response to Lamert's letter, mentioned that sanitation in India is managed at the local level and certain sectors like railways and factories in Upper India provide "fair accommodation" for their workers. However, the requirement of regulations to monitor the conditions of residence of Indian labour in Fiji might seem "unnecessary" in India, as labourer in India have the auto mobility to seek job under better conditions partially also motivated to receive certain standard of desired accommodation and "method of life among the labouring classes." But in Fiji, due to the war crisis and paucity of shipping facility at disposal, the Indian labourer was left with little choice of mobility in terms of employment and housing, such regulations were necessary to ensure moral and physical well-being of the Indian inhabitants and urged to include free Indian labourer with the purview of such reforms.⁶⁹ Separation of sexes and providing closed privacy to married couples through provisions of separate living to reduce illness/disease and social evil reflects the Victorian morale of controlled gendered bodies under patriarchy and freedom of sexual choice changed into promiscuity lest considering these women as prostitutes or women of loose morale. Dr. Harper interpreted Andrews' statement of Indian women "serving" men as "sexual intercourse to the majority of the coolies in the coolie lines in which she lives as well as various outsiders...She is in fact demoralised." Such interpretation was considered as written in moment of impulse rather than a mature reflection of will. Senior Medical Officer, Montague, working in Nukulau depot mentioned that most registered marriages before leaving the depot and remain in the relationship, single women were only considered prostitute, however, "there is some sly immorality between these settled women and other men, as shown by the 'lodger' system and its attendant sexual intercourse, with or without husband's connivance, as source of assault that occur."⁷⁰ The coolie lines were not simple structure of housing and replenishing the labour but transformed into deep channels of exaggerated generalisation of female character based on the performativity of cohabitable space. F. Hall, Medical Superintendent Makogai, separated this generalisation of cohabitable space from the right to cohabitation, as such choices does not reflect a life of disrepute but the choice to "settle down with one man and perhaps a paying boarder with whom she probably cohabits; beyond these two she is quite chaste."⁷¹ E.G.E Arnold, District Medical Officer in Lautoka, considered Harpers interpretation as "exaggerated generalisation" of disproportionate ratio of male and female immigrant labour that is conducive to immorality and polyandry. Commenting on the relation of the coolie lines and the promiscuity of the Indian women, he wrote,

The close quarters and lack of privacy in the "lines," loss of social conditions and restraint lead to the blunting of feeling, loss of reserve and promiscuity...The lines, the disproportion of sexes, and the removal of former restraints multiply temptations but that these conditions are wholly responsible for the depravation of an otherwise moral people and for the incidence of venereal diseases is a libel in

the Colony which is apparent to anyone who has been Indian or seen Indians before they have ever seen the lines.⁷²

The cause of spread of venereal disease remained a major concern debate as dignity of Indian women was linked to the loss of dignity and shame that such acquisition brought to both the colony as Imperial administration and the motherland that considered Indian women as victims of immorality embedded in the system. F.D. Boissiere, compared the rate of venereal diseases in Fiji was less than that of other industrial towns of Edinburgh or Glasgow and high Indian birth rate posits a significant proof against the prevalence of prostitution in Fiji and women in both lines and free settlements live “ordinary decent moral lives.” The idea of the “morality in the lines” gradually transpired into “morality of the lines” that incubated sexual promiscuity and its consequential spurt in venereal diseases. While the Fiji Government acknowledged Andrew’s suggestion of separate quarters for married couples and their families as the Indian labour lines are unfit for married couples yet the demand for “immediacy” of separate settlements met with reservation of reasonable time for execution. Andrew’s Memorandum was considered as sincere light bearer of the fact that if improvement in the housing and hospital of the indentured labour were not carried out then it will have a detrimental effect on the system even to the extremity of closing down importation of labour under the current system of indenture as suggested by Andrews since all his reform measures were meant for free Indian labourer considered that those currently under the contract will be eventually released of the same.⁷³ Madan Mohan Malaviya moved a resolution in public notice on *Negotiations with the Colonial Office and Crown Colonies Concerning the Early Release of Those Indian Labourers Whose Indenture have not Expired*. He was anxious about the unforeseen time that might take to rebuild the coolie lines for the indentured women? How they will be built? and, What protection should it provide to the women? He suggested the Fijian Government should take further steps to protect these “unfortunate” Indian women from further “compulsory degradation of themselves.”⁷⁴ Andrew’s after his visit to different indentured location formulated his own theory of “good lines” and “bad lines” based on the moral question of the evils linked to the system rather in the destination where these living quarters were located. Indeed, for Fiji he mentioned that the colony has resources and climate that is suitable to free Indian labour and make it desirable for the Indians to settle in.⁷⁵

Conclusion

These seemingly ubiquitous labour quarters were shaping everyday life of the indentured migrants in ways that marked the functioning of the entire system of indentured labour in the plantation estates. These windowless rooms with only a single entry and exit marked the designated path of work meant for the labourers in the plantation. Congregations in the evening for not just social recreation at the end of hard day of labour was also a breathing space in the open ground from these windowless living quarters. These labour colonies resembled sometimes small autonomous village system operating with strict biopolitics of discipline and punish. The coolie lines or the living places of the migrant labourer from India should be read as idiomatic expressions of totality of the living patterns in indenturehood yet the experiences were fragmented depending on the status of the migrant in the colony that failed to cut across the desired delimitation of gender, class etc. These places were not just institutionalised patterns of accommodation that reflected the national traumas when viewed from a “homeland” but were also spaces of adaptation and acculturation with the regional microclimates and microeconomy in accordance with the global commodity chains of the Empire, feeding and supplying the exotic consumerist tastes of the West. Understanding these life practices

rested on mutual understanding of semantic opaqueness of a grammatological possibilities of changing the Indian of living from its archaic ways of European sense of health and hygiene while and the other it was a non-idiomatic way of elemental living in a distant landscape with minimised control over the design and plan of the layout in a regime of regulated bodies of labour within the expectation of the extractive capital that positioned the labouring bodies in the plantation structures through a maelstrom of emotions of both alienation and adaptations as visible in the Totaram's *Bhootlane*. Social conditioning of thoughts to respond to the production needs of the Empire within a regulated temporal limit and make the body of the labourer consciously respond to the agri-plantation economies of crop production, factory-machine system, and labouring processes. In other words, the architectural pattern of the coolie lines steeped in cyclical pattern of living in the immediacy of the moment and experiences of labouring therein the fields or at rest in the coolie huts/quarters left little space for distractions, i.e., a system that organised the life of the Indian contract labourer within the conduits of potential mindfulness in prepare-produce model that at times gave rise to depression, anxiety and the health culture and support available. These labour lines must also be considered as spaces of reckoning the past and living with the present. The housing structures of the plantation labour, what Sarah Besky calls provided a persistent sense of "fixity to capitalist regimes of accumulation" as it remained as a material bond of association of qualitative experiences of life, a descriptive tool of belongingness in the tensions of exploitative work transforming these minimally adequate space of living from temporary shelters to inheritance of enticement of work.⁷⁶ The labour quarters were hub of heterogeneous requirements conditioned by the logic of hospitality of receiving and accepting the unfamiliar both by the planters and the migrants navigating through the conducts and conduits of political, legal, social and moral terms negotiating the problematic of unconditional subjecthood controlled by Empire's exercise of absolute sovereignty over the body of its subjects in its transcontinental regime.

Notes

¹ Jacques Derrida, *On the Name* (United States: Stanford University Press, 1995), xiv.

² Totaram Sanadhya, and Banarasidas Chaturvedi, *Bhootlane ki Katha: Girmitya ke Anubhav*, eds Brij V. Lal, Yogendra Yadav, and Ashutosh Kumar (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2012).

³ British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, *Emigration from India: The Export of Coolies, and Other Labourers, to Mauritius 1842* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

⁴ From Jstor on Assam Coolie Lines and Benthamian Panopticons

⁵ Ian Baucom, *History 4° Celsius: Search for a Method in the Age of the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1.

⁶ Totaram Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and The Story of the Haunted Lines*, eds., and trans., John Dunham Kelly, and Utra Kumari Singh (Fiji: Fiji Museum, 2003), 7–9, 19.

⁷ Sarita Bodhoo, *Geet Gawai: Bhojpuri Folk Songs in Mauritius* (New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, and Diaspora Research and Resource Centre, 2023), 39.

⁸ Reshaad Durgahee, *The Indentured Archipelago: Experiences of Indentured Labour in Mauritius and Fiji, 1871-1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁹ Brij V. Lal, *Girmityas: The Origin of Fiji Indians* (Canberra: The Journal of Pacific History, 1983), 129.

¹⁰ Ian Sinclair, *Living with Buildings and Walking with Ghosts: On Health and Architecture* (Great Britain: Profile Books and Wellcome Collection, 2018).

¹¹ For discussion on migrant labour and the right to the city, see, David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London, and New York: Verso, 2012)

¹² Sutcliffe, Anthony. 1993. "Introduction: The Giant City as a Historical Phenomenon ." In *Megalopolis: The Giant City in History*, by Theo Barker and Anthony Sutcliffe, 1-13. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³ British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, *Emigration from India*, 9.

¹⁴ "If we regard space as absolute it becomes a thing in "itself" with an existence, independent of the matter It then becomes a pigeon-hole or individuate phenomenon. The view of relative space proposes that it be understood as a relationship between objects which exists and relate to each other. There is another sense in which space can be viewed as relative and I choose to call this relational space—space regarded in the manner or Leibnitz as being contained in objects in the sense that an object can be said to exist only in so far as it contains and represents within its relationship to other objects." David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2019), 121–23.

¹⁵ Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1–25, 27–28; Philipp Zehmisch, *Mini-India: The Politics of Migration and Subalternity in the Andaman Islands* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017); Karishma Nanhu, "Historic Indo-Trinidadian Architecture: The Avocat Mud House Museum," National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago, June 1, 2023, <https://nationaltrust.tt/home/historic-indo-trinidadian-architecture-the-avocat-mud-house-museum/?v=df1f3edb9115>; "The Lost Art of Leepay...At Least One Family carries on the 'Tradition,'" Trinidad and Tobago Association of Ottawa, March 23, 2017, <https://tao.ca/news--info/the-lost-art-of-leepay-at-least-one-family-carries-on-the-tradition>; "The Tapia House," The Indian Caribbean Museum of Trinidad and Tobago, accessed July 9, 2023, <https://www.icmtt.org/index.php/information/print-resources/feature-articles/item/95-the-tapia-house>.

¹⁶ Shukla, *India Abroad*, 27–35.

¹⁷ This classification is made by Gerard Tikasingh for the Indian community formation in Trinidad. See, N. Jayaram, *From Indians in Trinidad to Indo-Trinidadians: The Making of Girmitya Diaspora* (Singapore: Springer, 2022), 48.

¹⁸ George Lamming, "The Indian Presence as a Caribbean Reality," in *Indenture and Exile: The Indo-Caribbean Experience* ed. F. Birbalsingh (np: TSAR, and Ontario Association for Studies in Indo-Caribbean Culture, 1989), 45–54, cited in, Jayaram, *From Indians in Trinidad to Indo-Trinidadians*, 54.

¹⁹ Bodhoo, *Geet Gawai*, 42.

²⁰ John Anderson, *Descriptive Account of Mauritius: Its Scenery and Statistics with a Brief Historical Sketch* (Mauritius: L.A Denny, 1858), 38, 51, 57.

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²² Lal, *Girmityas*, 26–7.

²³ "Copy of Despatch from the Duke of Newcastle to Lieut. Governor Walker (No. 175) Discussion on Immigration Ordinance of 1848," Colonies Immigration: Session: 3 February—9 April 1859, vol XVI, Papers Relating to the Immigration in West Indies Colonies, 3.

²⁴ Philipp Zehmisch, *Mini India: The Politics of Migration and Subalternity in Andaman Islands* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017); Yvonne S. Lincoln, and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Enquiry* (New Delhi: Sage, 1985), 28, 37–42,

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