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The Journey Of The ‘Coolies’

UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MIGRATION OF INDIAN LABOURS IN DAVID DABYDEEN’S NOVEL THE COUNTING HOUSE

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Abstract: David Dabydeen’s novel *The Counting House* provides a compelling narrative that examines the historical phenomenon of Indian indentured labour migration during the 19th century. This paper delves into the factors that catalysed this large-scale movement. Economic, social and political conditions in India — such as extreme poverty, exploitative caste hierarchies, and oppressed colonial policies — acted as key push factors. Simultaneously, the allure of promised opportunities, financial stability etc. in British colonies served as potent pull factors. By focusing mainly on the push alternative, this paper explores how *The Counting House* not only reconstructs a significant historical migration but also interrogates the broader legacies of colonial exploitation and cultural dislocation.

Index Terms: Counting House, Indentured labour, Migration, Poverty, Push factor

I. INTRODUCTION

David Dabydeen’s novel *The Counting House* serves as a poignant exploration of the complex historical and cultural landscape surrounding the lives of indentured labourers, often referred to as ‘coolies,’ in colonial Guyana. Reconstructing historical trade of labour transportation through intricate storytelling and rich character development, Dabydeen delves into the experiences, struggles, and resilience of these individuals, offering readers a profound insight into the complex process of export and import mechanism prevalent during the 19th century under the British imperialism.

Set against the backdrop of British colonial rule in the 19th century, *The Counting House* follows the lives of indentured labourers who were brought to Guyana from India to work on sugar plantations. The novel navigates through themes of identity, displacement, and the quest for belonging, as the characters grapple with the harsh realities of their existence in a foreign land. One of the central characters in the novel is Vidia, a young Indian labourer whose literary journey serves as a microcosm of the broader experiences of the coolie community. Through Rohini and Vidia, Dabydeen exposed the brutality of plantation life, the dehumanizing conditions of the labours during the ship journey from India to Guiana, and the enduring spirit of resistance among the indentured workers.

Dabydeen skilfully weaves together historical facts and fictional narrative, creating a vivid and immersive portrayal of life in colonial Guyana. Because of the way the system of importing and hiring labourers was put in place, the planters had total control over the Indian immigrants. The movement of labourers off plantation sites was severely restricted, decisions regarding work schedules, hours, and settlement were made without considering the traditions of the workers, and absenteeism from work for any reason was severely penalised with double-cut wages and/or suspension. The system of "near slavery" was created by all these harsh practices, where Indian labourers were defrauded, mistreated, and exploited in every aspect of their existence in the colonies. Dabydeen depicted the harsh realities of the Plantation with such remarks:

The factory’s machinery was never idle, crushing, boiling, fermenting, distilling, making sugar and rum, molasses and bagasse. Boat-loads of new coolies arrived to clear new fields or to replace those who

succumbed to diseases. Many of them died rapidly of the same epidemics, but there was no shortage of ships from India to replenish the work gangs. (67-68).

Apart from the economic exploitation, Indians were subject to racial discrimination and disabilities. Racially pejorative terms such as 'coolies' or 'coolie slaves' were used for them. Kampta, one of the characters of the novel who is also a coolie, describes the identity of the coolies in such an undermining way:

'Look. You here in Plantation Albion how long now? One-two year? Listen to me, because I born in this land and live here all my life. You gotta learn fast that you can only count what belong to you, and here you is nothing, nought, bruk-up calabash and rusty gill, you is 0. 0 plus 0 is 0. A coolie can multiply and minus quicker than whiteman can tally but a coolie is still 0. You know what 0 is? 0 is the shape of my nose-hole and mouth-hole and battie-hole, so a coolie does breathe and eat and shit day after day, year after year. Gladstone give me twenty-six cents a day so that all the 0's of my body can function till time come to die. How you will look up to the stars when Gladstone will keep your head forever bow to the root of cane?' (79).

They were housed in dingy shelters at plantation sites in complete isolation from the native population:

It was a single room in a sequence of rooms, and she could barely rest: the walls were so thin she could hear every grunt and scratch. When rain fell it dripped through holes in the troolie roof, so they had to huddle for days in one small corner, sharing it with ant and cockroach and centipede. The rain swelled the trough outside the logie which served as an open toilet and refuse dump for everyone, it overflowed, flooding the yards with worms fat and pink as prawns. (69).

Women were subjected to all kinds of exploitation and sexual abuse, they had no civic and political rights, and there were strict restrictions imposed on their acquiring property. In the coolie colonies of Albino, as depicted by Dabydeen, there is an abundant shortage of women for which Rohini started avoiding the neighbourhood coolies from the very first day of her arrival. She knew that the coolies left their countries for Guiana only and only to earn as much as they can. And, for better earnings, they can do anything and everything:

She knew there was a shortage of women on the plantation, that many of his [Vidia] fellow cane cutters would scheme with money to bribe her, or with poison to kill him, if only she consented to it. But what could she gain by them, these uncouth coolies who would throw a few coppers her way and expect to devour her in return, then when she had grown shabby and exhausted, put her out to work for other men?

She had avoided them from the time they were shepherded on to the ship in Calcutta. (70).

Despite the countless and heartbreaking stories of discrimination and impairments, the Indian labour diaspora accomplished extraordinary achievement and rose to high positions in the social, political, and economic arenas of their new countries.

The abolition of slavery caused a serious labour issue for the sugarcane plantation sector in Guyana since the former slave population entirely withdrew from plantation work because they saw it as a link to their traumatic history as slaves and disapproved of it. The Guyanese planters had little choice but to look for other sources of work, and during this crisis, Indian immigrant labourers brought in under the indenture system proved to be Guyana's relief. Indenture, Tinker states, 'provided a solution to the problem of maintaining an adequate supply of cheap labour' (21). Nearly 2 million coolies from the huge population of an India riddled with poverty, starvation, floods, and colonial exploitation were indentured and sent to numerous colonies across the world with the overarching goal of capital development and the continuation of plantation production.

Pointing out the problems during voyage Woodcock wrote:

Coolies were disposed of in the waste, between the gangways and the free castle ..., being unprotected from every change of weather and climate'. Though the coolies had to assist in the working of the ship, he ruled out the ill treatment during voyage. (Ibid, p. 152.)

Dabydeen too depicts the coolies in the ship as 'sheep' and the British as 'shepherd':

...from the time they were shepherded on to the ship in Calcutta, each man squeezing against the next at the narrow hatchways, trying to get below quickly to find the best berth. They had with them all their belongings – lengths of cloth, knives, glass mirrors, brass pots, crude bracelets and coins secreted in the hem of their dhotis, in the lining of their blankets, in their stomachs... had swallowed their wealth for safety – in calm weather they sat on deck with a pleasing look, as if listening to the jewellery jingling in their bellies; when the sea was distressed they clenched their mouths, swallowing and re-swallowing whilst all around the other coolies abandoned their stomachs, colouring the deck with massala, turmeric and dhall ... (70)

As an answer to why certain people choose to migrate, the existing historiography offers two alternative sets of responsible factors – ‘push’ factors and ‘pull’ factors. This binary alternative explanation of mobility is primarily based on emphasising the economic dimensions. However, scholarlike Colin Newbury in *Labour Migration in the Imperial Phase: An Essay in Interpretation* have been arguing for inclusion of considerable sociological dimensions in explaining the migratory patterns of societies or individuals (237).

The "push" factor alternative, which is centred on subsistence, describes migration in terms of emigrants being forced to leave their communities in search of chances elsewhere due to survival crises such as extreme poverty, debt traps, population pressure, unemployment, political subversion, etc. And this economic dimension is noteworthy in the novel as well. Rohini repeatedly illustrates how crucial "money" is to their existence even in their own land and people:

How you expect to live without money? How you expect to support children? The barber, the washerman, the bangle-seller, the drain-cleaner, the carpenter – all of them want payment or else the place ruin, latrine choke up, people eat weed or hog. As to Brahmin he will not say prayer except for four yards cloth, even though the dead body swelling and stinking up the whole village whilst waiting for him to commence ceremony. Then you got to bribe headman and policeman and rentman with corn or pulse, or else misery they make for you. (52-53).

This explanation of overseas emigration of Indian labourers was first propounded by the colonial officials and the plantation lobby who blamed the ‘superabundance of population’ for the famines and economic crisis the Indian people had to face. They conceived this as the only way out for the Indian people. Dabydeen evokes this ‘push’ factor further by depicting the poverty prevalent during the time through the Hindu festival Janmasthami.

...at festival time when Finee gathered together left-over scraps of cloth and sewed them into a costume so that Rohini could play Radha. She sewed furiously to invent an outfit which would dazzle everyone, but especially outdo Vidia's Krishna costume. Each year he played Lord Krishna, his mother sparing no expense to dye his body and decorate him in flowers. It vexed her that Finee's daughter played Radha, but it was the decision of the village council to cast Radha as the sibling of poverty, whose rise to divine favour would inspire all the other girls. Rohini automatically qualified for the part, living as she did in a ramshackle hut, its roof shedding more of its coconut branches as each year passed, and without a father to provide morality or dowry. That such a low-caste, dark-skinned, barefooted girl could be chosen by the gods to be one of the brides of creation showed that the gods cared for the wretchedness of humanity. All who suffered but remained virtuous would be rewarded in the next life. (22-23).

However, unlike the colonial supporters of the push theory, most of these scholars put the responsibility on colonial rule for creating crisis in which people were forced to migrate. Saha, for example, in his *Emigration of Indian Labour*, has very eloquently linked the negative effects of British rule in India both economic and political, to the migration of India labourers overseas (74). This conclusion is echoed by another great scholar of indentured immigration, Hugh Tinker. He observes,

So, emigration relied mainly upon the need of people to obtain relief from a situation which was no longer tolerable. The emigrants came mainly from the most overcrowded agricultural districts of India, where crop failure would plunge sections of the village community into near starvation. There was a clear correlation between the years when the departures were heavy and times when the harvest was poor, conversely, in good years, recruits were hard to find. (118-119).

In addition to these economic determinants of push alternative, there are some political and social push factors as well which contributed to the indentured migration. The significance of the political push factor is confined to just one occasion i.e. the Revolt of 1857 in the historiography of indenture emigration and that too in a limited manner with very moderate implications. Saha, who otherwise attributes the emigration to the negative effects of colonial Rule, cites it as incidental and indirect impetus (75). Only Cumpston analyses this spurt in terms of ‘British rule pushing people to emigrate’ (66). This is evident in the words of the recruiter who declares himself to be a British agent in *The Counting House*. First, he reminded the villagers that they are under the colonial rule:

This land here no more belong to Indians,’ the recruiter retaliated,... ‘and you got no power to shift me, not even with one battalion of Indian police. Everything own by British and I am agent of British.’... ‘I tell you, British coming and all-you will scoot.’... ‘Law is British now, I am telling you.’ (46).

Then, he declares the dire consequences of disobedience to the British rule:

... even since Muslim cause strife. Less than one hundred miles from here, over river yonder, war going on. Muslim slaughtering and British fighting back, killing everybody, they don't care who is sow-keeper from Hindu, who Brahmin from hill-coolie. Once you is brown, is pow! Pow! Gunshot bore hole in you and bayonet like plough in your arse.’... ‘If anyone but raise hand or even scowl at British agent, then it

is mayhem let loose in this mangy-bitch village. What British do to them Muslim rebels – hang, stab, chop, debowel – is nothing what they will do to whoever only touch British agent. (46-48)

The revolt of 1857 and the subsequent suppressive activities of British government created situation of turmoil in Northern India. After the 1857 revolt, there was a massive political and economic dislocation(Engerman, 647). This created a vulnerable work force which had no choice but to look out for other means for survival and emigration to plantation settlements came as an obvious choice for them as there was hardly any other option available at home. According to the Geoghegan Report, many people chose to emigrate as an escape from impending punishment in severe post mutiny suppression by the British authorities. In this backdrop, emigration from India reached its all-time peak.

The Push theory counts some sociological factors as well which pushed people out of their homes to distant locations. These could be family feuds., social boycott, suppressive societal restrictions, deplorable living condition (for widows, single women). However, these factors contributed in the making of the choice of certain individuals, and not the larger migratory patterns, and remained incidental factors.

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