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Writing the Polyphony of Sugar and Spices: Food Memories, Indian Culinary Legacy and Female Agency in *Kala Pani* Crossing Narratives

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Abstract: Food, along with human beings, cross multiple borders 'placing women into their globalized geopolitical contexts' (*Avakian and Haber* viii). The present article proposes to examine how *Kala Pani* Poetics articulates the complicities of food migrancy constructing women both as creators and consumers of food giving inclusivity and visibility to women who are defined as 'other'. It would investigate how food practices from the Indian subcontinent are implicated in the constructions of Indian indentured migrant women's identities by way of assimilation and acculturation of culinary practices and food ingredients in destination plantation colonies in the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean region across the black waters. It would address both food and gender from women's perspectives mapping the agency of women who show resistance to defy boundaries pushing aside their (dis)placement into definitive food terrains. Taking a cultural studies approach, the article will examine food representations in indentured diaspora literature and what food practices can tell us about the element of hybridity in plantation culture that constructs migrants' identities.

Key words: *food, culture, culinary skills, indentureship, Kala pani-crossing, migration, spices, sugar*

Long, long ago, a great ocean of milk spawned the universe, the stars were made of candied milk, the fields were bright with rice and sugar.

\- Marina Budhos, *The Professor of Light* (2017)

Food and culinary performances being a constant presence in human life are integral to women's mundane life and history. The study of food ingredients, culinary skills and techniques of cooking intersecting with complexities of women's studies, sociolinguistics of food and cultural studies mark a significant appearance in literary/feminist writings across the globe. The emerging field of food studies, in the same way as women's studies and cultural studies, is interdisciplinary and has expanded to include history, anthropology, sociology,

geography, economics and literature bringing within its purview the notion that the most banal of human activities in daily life can provide crucial information and insights on famine, starvation and hunger deaths to what is being cooked and the hearth that cooks looking closely at the culture of food. Feminist scholars have focused on multiple aspects of women's relations to kitchen and culinary practices addressing domesticity and cooking as markers of gendered and feminist perspectives on food.

Women's centrality to food discourse, food practices and food activities offers an interesting interdisciplinary study to understand women's agency in society in relation to their geo-political-cultural (dis)placement. Feminist studies have addressed women's roles in history in relation to food studies colonialism, gender, ethnicity, labour and capitalism raising fundamental questions about the inclusion of women within these contexts. Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber, in their book *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food* (2005), have brought in new approaches to the study and conceptualization of women and food, provoking new questions as well as providing some answers on 'who does what in the kitchen, for whom, with what ingredients, and on what appliances; how in their food practices women resist oppression through racism, colonialism, and globalization; how women survive starvation conditions; how ethnicity intersects with gender, race, and class through cooking, serving, and eating food' (2005: viii).

Moving out into the world, leaving one's home in search of new homes, which may or may not hold all of one's belongings, was a risk worth taking, was what perhaps the thought that crossed the minds of Indian women emigrating to sugar plantation colonies sans much knowledge that they were being indentured without any hope or promise of return. The growth of hybrid culinary culture in exile calls for much borrowing and adaptation and it is here that those women played an important role as translators of culture. *Kala Pani* poetics testifies to exilic experiences of Indian migrant women for whom food and kitchen served as the necessary ground for giving their migration an agency by opportuning reconnection with ancestral food heritage and history. Cooking bestowed indentured immigrant women across the black waters a channel for their creative expression emphasizing how the crucial elements of assimilation and creolization were situated in their new kitchen spaces. *Kala Pani* crossing narratives address food in its multiple contexts telling the meanings embedded in migrant population's relationship to food; providing glimpses into the lives of coolie women they demonstrate how women resist gender constructions as they are practiced and contested in various food sites and contexts in which their exilic struggles are located.

Focusing on the nearly forgotten stories of Indian indentured migrants who were brought to the sugar estates across the black waters for the specific purpose of labouring for the production of the sweetest commodity of all foods, sugar, this article proposes to look at the food experiences of indentured through the parameters of hunger and female culinary agency. Situating the cultural performance of sugar and spices as figurative representatives of coolie identity in indentured and post-indentureship societies, it will focus on the enduring images of Ajies who felt comfortable to maintain intimacy with their home cuisine across the black waters. In the first place, the article reads the treacherous journey of exploitation of indentured who travelled hoping for the pleasure of sweet taste offered by 'sugar' but felt bitter pain meeting grinding hardship in sugar fields across the oceans. The second part of the article engages with the reconfiguration of coolie identity in black water narratives through the interrogation of intermediary negotiations in which incredibly resourceful, inventive and industrious coolie grandmothers were engaged in and how they, placed in host(ile) lands, determined the scale of retention, assimilation and adaptation while experimenting with Indian spices in different culinary contexts.

I have evolved
From sugar cane
...
my sucrose memory
reeks through
molasses
time
Cyril Dabydeen, 'Evolution Song'

Between 1838 and 1917, indentured labourers from India were transported as indentured workers to compensate for the post-slavery labour shortage in European colonial sugar estates of Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago and other plantation colonies. Indentured emigration was triggered by contemporary poverty and joblessness caused by famine and drought that became a recurrent feature of Indian subcontinent in 1870's. Many people from a peasant-based agricultural economy in India who were forced to leave for these sugar colonies across the dreaded Black waters, where the work force became cheaper than human life, had been working as canecutters in the sugarcane fields of Northern

Gangetic plains to provide a sweetener for the tea produced by their brothers in Assam and Bengal. Anirood Singh in his essay 'Passage from India' reminiscences that his ancestors thought it better to find a job on sugar plantations across the oceans in Natal than starving in India and dying slowly from chronic malnutrition in the rural regions surrounding Agra. Historical evidence shows that many of the widows in North India led a precarious existence subjected to poverty and hunger before they were coerced into sea-crossing. Many of the destitute women who found themselves in emigrant depots to relocate their lives in sugar cane fields at the other end of the globe were beggars or pilgrims on their way to the holy sites of Vrindavan in search of food and shelter. Recruiters looked for women who had no one to provide for them and no one to stop them from going across the black waters. Bahadur testifies to the fact that there were women found starving and begging in the streets who became easy targets for recruiters who misinformed these precarious subjects 'inflating wages and conjuring lands of milk, honey and gold' (2013: 48). Ironically, those peasant communities from India who were once part of the farm system of locally grown crops including sugarcane would no longer be growing their own food and were going to be transformed into indentured labourers who had to work for low wages in order to buy food. The lives of migrant workers got shaped by colonial labour practices worsening their working conditions and earning capacity.

Kala Pani poetics brings forth the place of sugar and its sweetness in indentured migration history with a focus on the interconnections between the development of plantation slavery and 'despotism tempered by sugar'[1] with sugar as the major commodity across the oceans by relating the study of food to such major forces as colonialism, migration, indentureship and the power of plantation sugar industry. During the indentureship period, around 1880's the international market for sugar had become highly competitive and European colonizers were engaged in reducing wages while squeezing more work from the indentured labourers. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz in his book *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985), studying the history of the Caribbean region and those of the agricultural tropical products that were associated with 'European conquest', speculates 'the relationship between sugar and slavery' (1985: 29) and points to the 'men who sold their labour because they had nothing else to sell; who would probably produce things of which they were not the principal consumers; who would consume things they had not produced and in the process earn profit for others elsewhere' (1985: xxiv). Mintz observes that in England before 1800 sugar was a scarce food available only to the rich and how it later

became a *cheap* commodity with a complicated story that involved sugar's origins as a "slave" crop grown in Europe's tropical colonies for sugar cultivators were poor agricultural labourers who neither belonged to the land nor owned any land but had to work in intense heat and under great pressure to eat; they were wage earners who had been brought to the Caribbean region to work in sugar fields and factories to grow, cut and grind sugarcane. One is led to ask what their lives were made into by the conditions in which they performed all kinds of manual tasks to produce fine, pure, white granular food flavouring tea, coffee or sweetening biscuits.

That slavery played an important part in sugar cultivation was to last for centuries and its importance for sugar production did not diminish significantly until the nineteenth century when Europeans imported contract labourers for their Pacific/Caribbean sugar colonies from the Indian subcontinent where sugar was produced as much as two thousand years ago. Those island plantations were the invention of Europe who thought it promising to invest in their creation and to import vast number of people in chains from elsewhere to establish these 'colonies as producers and Europe as consumer' (Mintz 1985: xvii). Sharmila Sen points out that from the late eighteenth century onwards England began to replace many Indian spices and sugar with relatively cheap Caribbean sugar. It was at this time that Indian indentured coolies were transporting their Indian spices and recipes to their new homes in the Pacific/Indian Ocean and Caribbean sugar colonies. Since the arrival of the Indian sugar canecutters in the Caribbean region, the food and condiments of the Indian indentured population received critical attention for plantation colonies with the promise of 'sugared profit' emerged as sites of 'unspeakable taboo acts such as cannibalism' (Sen 2005: 186).

Focusing on cane cultivation and sugar production in plantation colonies, Indo-Caribbean writers look at the ways in which such elemental foods as sugar had shaped the cultural, political, economic and gender constructions in indentured lives. Indo-Guyanese author Rajkumari Singh, in her essay 'I am a Coolie', questioningly evokes the image of Indian coolies working in sugar colonies under conditions hardly better than that of slavery in juxtaposition to the idea of memory and (in)visibility thrusted on them: 'Did not these Coolies plant sugarcane, fields and fields of swaying sugarcane to give the taste of sweetness to us all and to all sorts of people all over the world? And let us not forget how often this sweetness became bitter gall to them for seeking their rights' (1998: 87). Singh also captures the image of ''rows and rows of toilers' – coolie men and women – with soft mud squelching between their toes, up to their breasts in water planting rice…the bent emaciated bodies of the

toilers…their wheezing coughing their premature old-age because of water, of bending, of intense tropic sun-heat' (1998: 86).

Since our identity is partly shaped by the food we eat, especially at 'home', it can be imagined how painful it was for indentured migrants to be severed from the very food that sustained them and moreover how hurtful it was for them to be starved for the very food that they were growing in exotic fields. It is necessary to remember Mahadai Das whose poem 'They Came in Ships' is a rather candid response to the case of famished voices sadly *missing* in academia across the globe demanding increased focus on Indian migrants' experiences who 'fleeing famine/And death' from the mid-nineteenth-century rural India arrived as indentured labourers in sugar estates of Guyana 'with dreams of milk and/honey riches' but unfortunately failed to find succor in the sugarcane fields and were found either 'dying at street-corners/Alone and hungry' or 'Starving for the want of a crumb of/British bread'. (2010: 25-27). In another poem of hers 'Call Me the Need of Rain', Das recollects how coolie migrants were forced to encounter starvation in destination colonies: 'I am starved for bread and the milk is too dear' (Das 1998: 246). The sugar estate is ironically represented in Das's poetry as equally a site of precarity as the Northern Gangetic Plains of India that were gripped by famine and subsequent scarcity of food for indentured migrants suffered as much starvation upon their arrival in destination sugar colonies as when they left Indian shores. By presenting the affecting and powerful images of 'milk' and 'honey', Mahadai Das also emplaces the concept of food as a site of class war for such images explain how colonial powers made coolie migrants feel disempowered subjected to all kinds of exploitation both in their old and new homelands.

Gaiutra Bahadur cites the evidence of infant mortalities enroute confirming alimentary deprivation: 'Infants and children lost their lives to a disproportionate degree during the crossings…On a disquietingly regular basis, surgeons listed "neglected by mother" as a cause of death. They didn't connect the many babies who died from malnourishment with insufficient or bad milk' (2013: 82). In one of the most hard-hitting of her poems 'Let Me Describe Myself' Guska Kissoon deromanticizes both food and poverty tracing (dis)association between food cultivation and deprivation: 'Food was not enough, / Clothes were not enough, /Shelter was not enough, /Nothing was not enough –/Only work and hard labour were more than enough –' (1998: 207). She further asks 'Why should they live without? /They can plant and grow more food than they can eat. /Why do they starve?' (1998: 208). While sugar was the 'rightful' fare of the colonial owners, the indentured labourers,

who worked hard to bring such sweetness to the tables of the rich, had mostly toiled on the empty stomach and their 'babies drank sugar water for milk' (Kissoon: 207). Both Das and Kissoon politicize food by drawing attention to the meagre and unhealthy diet of plantation workers; their poetry is full of disdain and contempt for the European colonizers who were the owners of these plantation fields.

Though the female coolie grandmother might be ignorant of European colonizers' struggles for power and of what significance her migration was for the sugar economy, years later twentieth/twenty-first-century coolie descendants living across the globe cannot remain blind to their ancestors 'fertilizing sugar cane stumps on a remote West Indian plantation' (Bahadur 2013: 93). Coolie granddaughters/grandsons have developed an understanding of *sugar* as part of the capitalist global market network, and they equate it with economic profits in which their ancestors had participated negotiating their displacement and uprooted condition. As we turn attention to the presence of Indian indentured migrants on sugar plantations and their relationship to food as depicted in the representations of coolie culture in *Kala pani* narratives, it is imminent to analyze the European biscuit-tin which survives not only as a material witness to the sexual exploitation of *jahajins* who were promised sugar biscuits on shipboards but also testifies its relation to the exploitation of coolies who laboured in the cane fields that produced the necessary sweetener for the biscuit factories in Europe. The production of sugar biscuits was directed to the needs of the explorers and travelers and the biscuit tins were distributed throughout the world which sustained colonial traders, sailors and officers overseas, eventually becoming part of the exploitative system of colonizers on multiple occasions during sea-crossings.

In Gaiutra Bahadur's non-fictional work *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013), the sweet, tinned biscuit emerged as a culinary witness to gender exploitation and circumnavigated the globe with indenture ships from Indian shores that carried the cheap labour force to Fiji, Mauritius, and the Caribbean sugarcane fields. The biscuit tin is placed here in the context of sociology of food acquisition and survivalism in the aftermath of famine and drought conditions; the shipboard of *The Clyde* is marked as a witness to sexual exploitation of the famished indentured females fleeing their villages to escape social stigma or starvation unaware of the fact that the tin is a byproduct of the sweetener from the very European sugar estates where they were travelling. The labourers who were going to work hard in the sugarcane fields to produce the sweetener for biscuits were denied a chance to experience the taste of sugar biscuits: 'The gifts–biscuits with sugar and other morsels not

rationed to emigrants–were paltry and pathetic, suggesting desperation, confirming deprivation' (Bahadur 2013: 66).

Sugar is sweet and liking for the sweet things can apparently be considered a normal human experience. Sugar penetrated social behaviour of the indentured taking on new meanings arising out of relationships between the production and consumption of sugar. The power to production of sugar accompanied the power to determine its availabilities that rested with Europeans; in being put to new uses, the product was transformed into a luxury called sugar biscuits. European sailors and surgeons conceived of indentured female bodies as ideal consumers of sugar which they thought they could easily tempt with the tinned sugar biscuits for the gratification of their sexual desires. The indentured female, caught in the struggles of survival, was ignorant of the exploitative systems of colonialism and the politics of sugar economy in which the biscuit tins were embedded when she was offered 'biscuit and sugar' (Bahadur 2013: 75) for sexual favours and subjected to 'trading her body for a bit to eat' (Bahadur 2013: 71) during sea-crossing. Gaiutra Bahadur testifies to the fact that coolie female's only encounter with the product took place ironically as a *reward* for having *connexion* with the white sailors/surgeons who looked upon sugar biscuits 'as barely palatable physical necessities in an alien environment' (Sen 2005: 189). Bahadur empathizes with coolie women who became victims of sexual abuse because they had no choice: 'And what choice could they truly have in a landscape of want and coercion, of biscuits with sugar and a leather strap?' (2013: 78).

In *Coolie Woman* shipboards emerge as sites of hunger and starvation providing evidence to the effect that women were dragged into sexual exploitation for want of adequate food during the middle passage. Bahadur cites an instance of how a migrant woman called Jainub 'accepted extra food from a crew member who made sexual advances to her' because 'women, according to published ration lists, received fewer chapatis than men did' (2013: 71). She testifies to 'a chance glimpse of an Indian woman, in an encounter with a sailor' (2013: 65) called Albert Stead on board the Guyana-bound ship *The Main* which was 'ferrying indentured labourers to British Guiana, but stopped unexpectedly at the island of Mauritius in the Indian ocean' on account of a scuffle and 'the entire struggle was prompted by that glimpse, of a moment between the sailor and the woman' (2013: 65). The woman probably 'narrowly escaped becoming a victim of sexual assault' while passing through the toilets but these sites 'on indenture ships served as a bizarre portal to the women aboard, where "puddings" were occasionally left as sad enticements for sexual favours' (2013: 66).

Bahadur points to occasions when this arrogant sailor had been caught repeatedly lingering around the *topazes* (sweepers) and *sirdars* serving as night watchmen who 'could act as go-betweens to the women' and giving 'one *topaz* biscuits and sugar to offer to a woman the sailor liked' (2013: 67).

Bahadur records how coolie women on indenture ships raised voice against sexual advancements of doctors and surgeons who dragged women to their cabins at night and took liberty with their bodies. Bahadur recalls how a woman called Ramjharee was handcuffed for ten hours when she refused the promise of biscuit to the surgeon who cornered her to the shipboard toilet for sexual abuse. For Ramjharee and for many female indentured labourers like her, the voyage from India was intended as a journey away from food scarcity and economic hardships yet they rejected sugar biscuits as undesirable luxuries or temptations and resisted physical intimidation of white surgeons and sailors for a bountiful but temporary appeasement offered by biscuit tins. The story of unmarried couple Sukhia and her *jahaji* Roocha was no different from Ramjharee for whereas Sukhia 'was handcuffed for trying to steal water', Roocha 'was chained to an iron stanchion for trying to steal biscuits with sugar and threatening to cut the third man's throat. It seems as if they, allies in misadventure, had conducted a raid on the ship's pantry' (2013: 93). Bahadur captures the politics of gender and sexual jealousy in which the biscuit tins were embedded for she recounts how Roocha 'accused a sirdar of giving Sukhia biscuits and sugar' having 'had clearly grasped the less than innocent connotation of that gesture' (2013: 93) on shipboard. She records evidence of a girlchild's rape from a 1907 indenture ship to Suriname where a sailor was seen giving biscuit box to a little girl Saroda (who was seven or eight years old and was described as "the prettiest girl on board") after she was physically assaulted and defiled in his cabin several times. Bahadur tells how an officer Harry Darling Cloughton, 'the third mate, in charge of issuing rations on the ship, a job with power over pantry' (2013: 68) was also accused of exploiting migrant women for biscuits:

> One, named Tulshia, was seventeen. The other, in her late twenties, would claim that she saw Tulshia "eating biscuits and things which emigrants do not get." The older woman would report that she saw the girl talking to Cloughton. She would accuse Tulshia of going to the third mate at night. Confronted with the charge, Cloughton would confess that Tulshia slept with him in exchange for a present. He would call his gift *kajatie*, mangling the word so that it is difficult to tell if he meant date palm jaggery or a cashew confection or something else entirely. (2013: 68)

The symbolic status of the sugar biscuit tin is reiterated in David Dabydeen's novel *The Counting House* where Rohini satiates her taste buds for the sugar biscuit through the

visual gratification offered by the colorful empty biscuit tin that was given to her as a reward for her work in the coolie lines of Guyana. It is relevant here to bring in Sharmila Sen's observations on the tinned product in relation to Dabydeen's novel: 'On Plantation Albion, however, the tins of biscuits which Rohini and Miriam cherish are not just intended to satisfy one's physical appetite but hold the promise of satisfying psychological desires as well. They are a bit of the imperial center suspended in sugar and flour' (2005: 189).

The biscuit tin, thus, represents the victimization of human body, female body in particular, for indentureship discourses have perceived connection between hunger and the opportunity for sexual exploitation of emigrant women; it symbolizes the exploitative economic policy of European colonizers who dexterously exercised control both over the cultivator/producer and the product that was used as a sweetener for biscuits as well as the consumer.

india has left us
alive with a cumin tongue
Eddie Bruce-Jones, 'india has left us'

Women, exiled from home, experience conflictual emotions only to discover that life becomes characterized by homelessness though food needs, interwoven with family and community, can never be ignored. Testifying to the truism that food has been the eternal migrant in human history grandmothers and spices have become common literary tropes that bespeak of exoticism although in the everyday Indian reality these were the most ordinary things that remains habitually invisible. The prevalence of culinary realities in diasporic writings have permitted the exploration of notions such as Indianness, cultural continuity and female identity positioning kitchen as a subjective space which balances cultural dislocations, displacements and erasure and at the same time claiming agency for coolie grandmothers. *Kala Pani* narratives establish the importance of the kitchen as domestic space in the elaboration of coolie female identity extending argument on how the kitchen becomes the major locus of cultural production by positioning the female characters as active agents of food history through their participation in different forms of culinary practices and oral communication of Indian recipes/food memories because 'a community's tenacious adherence to its culinary traditions in times of displacement and insecurity accounts for its equally tenacious resistance to culinary transformations or re-creations' (Mehta 2004: 108).

The *girmitiyas* succeeded in re-creating a little-India across the *Kala pani* as they ate Indian food, curried vegetables, vegetable chokha, dal, rice and roti struggling with the hidden pain if their homeland would be erased and wiped from their food memory. Most of the *Kala pani* narratives on food peg on the element of nostalgia with descriptions of kitchens presided over by grandmothers, every day cooking authentically Indian dishes presenting homeland food ingredients and recipes as nurturing and nutritious. Gaiutra Bahadur moved from Guyana as a seven-year-old to New York in 1981, yet her food memories of Guyana remain fresh as she vividly remembers Indian curries cooked and eaten in Cumberland Village of their house where in the outside 'stood our *guinep* tree, the scant, sweet pulp of its fruit encased in a green shell' (2013: 4). The narrator of Peggy Mohan's novel *Jahajin* (2007) remembers how she relished green *bandhaniya* chutney made from wild coriander grass and 'translucent stuffed dalpuris, and thick white layered parathas, common to the entire purabiya diaspora' (2007: 59) in Trinidad: 'I bit into the paper thin roti, bursting with split pea stuffing, and lapped up the spicy, juicy curry shrimps wrapped inside it' (2007: 35); and how she 'gobbled up the little fried rotis made up into sandwiches with spicy channa as filling' (2007: 36).

Brij V. Lal in his essay 'The Tamarind Tree' memorializes how his father talked of the vivid memories associated with the Tamarind Tree on the banks of the Wailevu River in Labasa which was said to have been brought by the early *girmitiyas* sometime in the 1890's while some people said it arrived much later with the South Indians because tamarind is an essential ingredient in most of the South Indian recipes and dishes and it was immaterial who brought the tree, when and how but what really mattered to the *girmitiyas* and their descendants was that 'it was a *mulki* tree, a plant from the original homeland, and therefore special' (2018: 91). His father remembered from the conversations of *girmitiyas* who had a clear consensus that 'fruits back home in India were always sweeter, the best. Indeed, everything about *mulk* (homeland) was golden, perfect: the nostalgia of a displaced people dealt a rough hand by fate' (2018: 94). In his poem 'Erased', Athol Williams dusts off the question of belongingness because he could reimagine home in exile through the revival of food imaginaries from the slums of Madras from where his ancestors migrated to the sugar plantations of Natal: 'I could smell the boiling rice and milk of Pongal, /overflowing with jaggery and cashews and raisins' (2018: 140). Articulation of such food stories involve the therapeutic exchange of emotions attached with Indian food; providing a healing space in

alien surroundings, these exchanges offer catharsis in the form of nostalgic reminiscences sustained by Indian food ingredients and food habits/practices.

Food provided sustenance to immigrant coolie communities infusing them with courage to transform the feelings of alienness into hope for new beginnings in migration. The kitchen offers sufficient supportive space to facilitate reinvention by enabling migrant women to control the culinary performance in adverse circumstances. In other words, it is significant to consider how coolie women politicize their migration by converting the confines of kitchen spaces into sites of creativity. Cooking is a feminized activity based on the traditionally woman-associated qualities of nurturing, patience and selflessness. The woman who cooks for the family continually exercises her power by situating the kitchen as a location of agency; she constructs her own place within the family as well as broader cultural frame as one who provides for the nutritional needs of others. In the coolie lanes the indentured females were pushed to think that a geographical departure and distance from India should not amount to complete abjuration of Indian food, Indian ways of cooking and eating habits and they thought of the kitchen and culinary practices from homeland as an effective route to their emancipation.

Peggy Mohan, Rajkumari Singh and many other post-indentureship writers have established close associations between culinary skills of *Ajies* and constructions of food patterns at several locations across the oceans to demonstrate how indentured grandmothers politicized kitchen space by negotiating their culinary identity that was split between their old kitchens and new kitchens, the hybridized ones. Food for them became a symbol of negotiating otherness in foreign land by establishing connection between culinary belonginess and oral transmission of Indian recipes that allowed Indian women living in migration to determine patterns of acculturation and adoption. While portraying women like Deeda and *Ajies* as reliable custodians of kitchens, *Kala Pani* poetics charged coolie woman with the responsibility of safeguarding Indian culinary traditions while creatively adapting to new and unfamiliar ingredients in the land of adoption.

Responding to food memories central to indentured female subjectivity, their sense of nostalgia for homeland cuisine and the power that comes from cooking, Indo-Guyanese author Rajkumari Singh is alert enough to the possibilities of food as a way to measure migrant women's culinary behaviour for these women intuitively understood that food ingredients, culinary skills and kitchen space allowed them the scope they needed to express

their creative powers, their culturally firm opinions about what constituted a good meal with conventional advice about the dietary habits of the indentured. Singh celebrates the coolie grandmother as a great 'culinary artist' (Mehta 2004: 112) and likens her culinary performances to *work* where food activity is carried out in accordance with what constitutes a proper meal to fulfil the nutritional requirements of the family. For instance, the ingestion of the Indian cooking ideal is reflected in this passage from Singh's essay 'I am a Coolie' where Indian grandmother's attempts to facilitate nutritious food for her family reflects the retrieval of the ethnic identity of coolie female migrants out of grandmother's kitchen memories:

> Surely you cannot forget Per-Agie our great-Coolie grandmother squatting on her haunches, blowing through the phookni to help the chulha-fire blaze so that your parents and mine could have a hot sadha roti and aloo chokha before they leave for the fields! Can't you hear her bangles tinkling as she grinds the garam massala to make her curries unforgettable? Do not your gourmet's nostrils still quiver with the smell… the one and only, unforgettable smell of hot oil, garlic, onions, pepper, geera, to chunke the dhal that was and still is a must in our daily diet?
>
> Daal, rice and baigan choka, or coconut choka, or aloo choka, or so many other delightful, simple peasant food, clean nourishing, healthy food. (1998: 87)

Careful preparation of nutritious foods with a meticulous selection of spices by indentured grandmothers/*Ajies* reveal their desire to recreate Indian flavours and aromas in destination homes to ensure cultural stability. Singh, while talking about the simplest pleasures that migrant labourers derived from ordinary dishes cooked by Ajies from fresh ingredients available at their edge, communicates her belief that those people could find satisfaction in their responsibility to provide nourishment through simply prepared foods using correct ingredients following up with the traditional recipes from homeland. She also makes it clear that people under the stress of hard labour in sun-drenched host(ile) land required more from food than its nutritional content that served to forge an emotional connect with homeland cuisine giving them strength to survive in alien land.

Singh identifies cooking as an intensely emotional experience that is intertwined with a woman's ability to communicate her sensual response to food and the way she finds deep emotional meaning in what people might see as mere ordinary experience. To keep the coolie grandmother's culinary memory alive Rajkumari Singh is exhorted to use words such as 'baigan', 'geera', 'garam massala', 'alloo', 'daal' and so on which are far more evocative than their English equivalents 'because they are fossil sounds bearing the impression of over a century-old Indo-Caribbean presence' (Sen 2005: 195). She reimagines the sensual warmth that characterized coolie kitchens enveloped by the aroma of Indian spices as well as the musical movements of bangles as grandmothers grind masalas reminding one of the

protective warmth of their bodies. The physical appeal of the food is stimulated by its capacity to provide sustenance through the accurate combination of cumin (jeera) and pepper, mixed with pungent fragrance and flavour of turmeric, garam masala, fresh garlic and onion that create a sensory stimulation which had a positive impact on the labourers' health. Such a traditional cooking and serving of food tell a tale of vital relationships between mother and family which was restorative of the nourishing effect of food that culminates in a celebration of Indian culinary traditions.

The basic tenets of caste system of Indian villages were dismissed and became irrelevant as *girmitiyas* managed to recreate new fraternity in exile as they mixed up and ate food with people of all castes. The sharing of food in the confined spaces of coolie lines had bred a bond of friendship, created a sense of companionship and camaraderie, a sense of culinary belongingness among the displaced migrants of Indian origin resulting in their communal living; this bond, in fact, started with their exilic trajectories on shipboards in the form of *jahajibahan*/*jahajibhai* relationship forged in the circumstances of great adversity. Peggy Mohan, in her novel *Jahajin*, provides illustrations of migrant women's efforts to contribute towards community cooking through their control of the kitchen. Deeda, in *Jahajin*, is endowed with such a culinary dynamism that is reflective of her sense of femininity through conventional resuming of kitchen-duties in Esperanza Estate, thus, maintaining the bond of *jahajihood* in true sense that was forged on shipboard. Deeda assumed the role of a community mother willingly taking the responsibility of cooking for Mukun Singh, his sons and daughter Sunnariya showing how daily food-preparation strengthened the ties of these women to the *jahaji* (shipmates) community for whom they cooked; Sunnariya also received training in culinary skills and kitchen management from Deeda. Mohan thinks of such culinary metaphors as essentially feminine because they attach the maternal role of coolie women with their cultural identity enabling the fourth generation indentureship writers to recuperate a female legacy of self-assertion that celebrates the lives of coolie grandmothers as role models for future generations. It is relevant to recall Brinda Mehta's observations in this context who asserts that kitchen space was 'located within a paradox of positionality, whereby women displayed complete autonomy in the kitchen on one hand while being enlisted to ensure cultural permanence as a means of safeguarding the interests of their group on the other' (2004: 109).

Indian vegetables, fruits, condiments and spices which voyaged with and introduced by Indian indentured workers in plantation colonies draw attention to a distinct Indo-

Caribbean-Fijian cultural experience, one that requires the global network to fix Indian cuisine across the *kala pani* as having distinct Indian cultural identity. Brij V. Lal recalls that 'there were hundreds of tamarind, mango or banyan trees wherever girmitiyas were to be found, in Fiji and other sugar colonies around the world, which were witnesses to their special moments of triumphs and tragedies' (2018: 92); he nostalgically 'remembered the tall mango tree behind our thatched house in Tabia which had given us the fruit for our pickles' (2018: 105). The presence of Indian seeds in the Caribbean and the Pacific regions function to specify a discrete Indian cultural identity and ethnicity that helped the indentureship societies not only to maintain connection with their culinary heritage but create a new culinary history across the globe. The seeds and the masalas with their promise of curative properties and culinary secrets brought from India are till date part of the cultural inheritance and culinary legacy of the indentured Indians in distant colonies. Brinda Mehta observes that,

> The carefully prepared pouches of spices became packets of memory that preserved the now-tenuous links with motherland by providing a fragrant reminder of home…For those who survived the trauma of the *kala pani*, spices represented the security of continuity and self-preservation through their reassuring presence, which supplied a sense of intactness and rootedness in the face of cultural alienation and social displacement. (2004: 107)

The indentured migrants carried supplies of cumin and coriander seeds, turmeric roots, mango seeds and other spices as 'personal mementos of home to withstand the brutalizing forces of exile and enforced separation' (Mehta 2004: 107). The micro stories of Esperanza Estate with its bitter gourd seeds, of 'Ramsukh, the man with the mango seeds' (Mohan 2007: 92) and of the woman carrying the turmeric root to the Caribbean in Peggy Mohan's novel *Jahajin* form part of the larger narrative of indentureship food memoirs that veer towards the reimagining of a discreet India in the Caribbean and at the same time indicate fluid culinary history of the indentured. Deeda exclaims how the presence of bitter gourd seeds in the Estate proved crucial to choose her residential space in coolie barracks: '*Karailli! Here in Trinidad! So, we were not the first ones to think of bringing seeds from home. I decided that Kalloo and I would stay there, in the barrack hut with the karailli vine next to it*' (Mohan 2007: 117-18). The *karailli* seeds that indentured transported to the land of promised riches were deftly linked to the ancestral culinary heritage of Indians that was brought to Trinidad even before the arrival of Deeda in Esperanza Estate. Deeda remembers '*Ramsukh, who was carrying different kinds of mango seeds to plant when we reached. He had been keeping the seed since summer, seeds from all the varieties that they had in his village. He said he didn't want to go to a new place khaali haath, empty handed*', and an indentured female companion travelling to Trinidad who '*was carrying some damp soil from*

muluk, and growing in that soil was a root of hurdee, turmeric. The masala that turns food yellow, and keeps wounds from getting infected. She was keeping it alive so she could plant it when we reached' (Mohan 2007: 64). Those seeds and masalas would not only disallow the migrants to erase the memory of their homeland but helped maintain the promise of a new beginning in their culinary and therapeutic incarnations in the destination colonies.

The Indian seeds and spices as well as recipes that indentured orally imported to the plantation colonies prove to be one of their resistances to the task of preserving Indianness in exile. As Peggy Mohan attempts to reach back to an originary point in Indo-Trinidadian culinary history through a creative rewriting of kitchen spaces of Deeda and others, the thorny question of authenticity of homeland cuisine muddles with the creolization of food practices in migration for sea-crossing could not markedly transform the tastes of Indians across the *Kala Pani*. Deeda, without estranging from her umbilical culinary affiliations, maintains her indentured as well as post-indentureship kitchen spaces in the coolie barracks of Esperanza and in Orange Valley respectively; her kitchen areas are marked by preparation and consumption of authentic Indian foods in Trinidad. Peggy Mohan represents a woman's conscious desire to take possession of her culinary past left behind in India, the land of her birth, and tells how Deeda could retain an intimacy with the spices and the *chulha* alongside the cooking methods which make the coolie cuisine distinct:

> Deeda was in her kitchen, cooking for lunch. Despite all her talk of liking modern conveniences, she still cooked on an old-fashioned chulha, an earthen fireplace.
>
> A pot of dal was bubbling away on the chulha, surrounded by a few homegrown sour tomatoes, and a hunk of saltfish. I had never seen saltfish cooked like this before: simply roasted with the blackened tomatoes, to be pounded into the chokha, the grilled tomato chutney. I could smell the raw onions sliced for the chokha. And then when the tomatoes and saltfish were done, I caught the sharper smell of mustard oil, garlic and pepper from the chhaunkh being fried to toss on top of them (2007: 128-29).

Ajie's kitchen of the old estate house in the novel is reflective of the independent position she occupied for herself in Indian community caught between 'the tenacious forces of assimilation and the desire to maintain culinary purity as a strategy of self-preservation' (Mehta 2004: 109). Mohan articulates a powerful sense of reading kitchen as an autonomous space for women living in diasporic situation and constitutes kitchen as a cite for cultural collaborations and negotiations: 'Ajie was always the one in charge of the kitchen, and she would quietly supervise the making of a feast, with a full Indian menu. But there was always space for a few Creole or North American items' (2007: 209) for Ajie was often seen 'making

chocolate from cocoa grown on their estate' (Mohan 2007: 197). Such in-betweenness maintained by migrant women in culinary practices reveal the balance in favour of cultural open-mindedness through their control of the kitchen.

Migrants' food habits are generally characterized by a certain extent of adaptability in the unfamiliar culinary surroundings whereby traditionally used food ingredients and spices are substituted for what is easily available and affordable. *Kala Pani* crossing opened the doors for Indian migrants to retain and at the same time to adapt their food preferences by maintaining a connection with homeland spices and recipes while adjusting to unfamiliar local ingredients such as *bandhaniya* replacing with *dhaniya* (a green herb used to prepare chutney). Coolie grandmothers' food journeys are stories from their heart whose appreciation for homecooked, traditional Indian cuisine is rooted in their personal experience of exoticizing everyday Indian dishes like (ban)dhaniya chutney as authentically 'local'. The crossings allowed coolie grandmothers, as chief preparers of food, to indulge in culinary experimentations and makeovers within traditional food spaces and accommodate Indian ingredients/recipes to the more flexible food structures/specifications of hybridized Caribbean/Fijian/Mauritian cuisines. Deeda tells how indentured labourers in Trinidad feasted on *sada* rotis, daal and curries, chokha and vegetables that they planted 'for themselves in the cane rows between the new plants. Hardee, arooi or dasheen, and reheri ke dal, pigeon peas. Chowrai bhaaji, with pink stems and green leaves, was growing like weeds everywhere around the barracks, and we cooked it almost every day like spinach. Dal, bhaat, bhaaji; that was our everyday food, especially at lunch. Dal, Boiled rice and chowrai bhaaji' (Mohan: 2007: 146-47). Initially migrants were not very comfortable with new tastes on plantations but gradually they assimilated local herbs and other food items in their kitchens; *bandhaniya* chutney points to the very porousness of such lines of culinary distinctions; a dish such as this using *bandhaniya* for *dhaniya* does more to cement fluidity in kitchen space and cultural landscape of the Caribbean.

The Indian culinary legacy seems to linger in words for describing the smells, the tastes, the sounds, the movements, the food memories, the recipes, the vegetables, the spices and other food items and ingredients in the plantation colonies. Sharmila Sen observes that at the linguistic level a distinctive feature of the language used to describe Indo-Caribbean coolie grandmother's culinary experiences is the frequent use of Indian gastronomic vocabulary derived from Indian languages. With Indian spices, culinary skills, and utensils carried across the black waters, a great majority of Indian words for food or cooking

techniques such as roti, chhaunkh, masala, chokha, curries, dhal, chutney, garlic, pepper, jeera and so on travelled alongside placing greater emphasis on the significance of culinary agency of women which reflects that travelers cannot be separated from their culinary signifiers and they remain inalienably tied to their roots.

To sum up, it can be said that the voices of coolie grandmothers who had cultivated sugar and ground spices across the oceans were ostensibly silenced by the strategies of colonial narratives; their food-stories largely remained untold and unheard until creative writers – mostly descendants of the coolies – and academia across the globe have brought together studies on cultural representations and food discourses on sugar and spices to gauge the complex irony of dreams of milk and honey for those who toiled in Caribbean and Pacific sugar estates and locates it within a more pronounced reading frame.

Note

1. The term used by the novelist Anthony Trollope to describe British Guiana's sugar plantocracy finds mention in Anita Sethi's essay 'Escape from El Dorado: a bittersweet journey through my Guyanese history' is included in *We Mark Your Memory: Writings from the Descendants of Indenture* edited by David Dabydeen and others.

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