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Indentureship, caste and the crossing of the *Kala Pani*

Judith Misrahi-Barak

Setting the Stage

In the context of the British Empire, *Kala Pani* is often associated with the 'cellular Jail' the British had established in port Blair, on the Andaman Islands. to be sent there implied the loss of caste/*varna* because of the voyage across the sea, and hence, social exclusion and tremendous psychological distress.¹ the risk of being sent across the sea was enough for the Hindu soldiers of the British raj to launch revolts and mutinies. yet, in contrast to this association with punishment, exile and sin, the *Kala Pani* must also be connected with the crossing of the 'dark waters' that took almost one and a half million Indian people across the Indian and the Atlantic oceans, to Fiji, Mauritius and the Caribbean.

Large scale migration out of India began in the 1830s when hundreds of thousands of Indians, both willingly and unwillingly, left the subcontinent and crossed the *Kala Pani* (the 'black waters,' the 'forbidden' sea between India and the Americas) to work in the sugar colonies as indentured labourers, or *bound coolies*, not only in the British Empire but also in the French and Dutch colonies. these emigrants were responding to the need for labour on the plantations after African enslavement was legally abolished in 1834 and fully terminated in 1838. some 1.250.000 emigrants were taken to Fiji and Mauritius, as well as the British, French and Dutch Caribbean (Suriname, Guadeloupe and Martinique).² Indians were also recruited later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to work in south and East Africa on the railways and in other industries, going mainly to Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, but this is better known because of Gandhi's involvement with indentured labourers in natal in the late 1890s.

it is difficult to imagine the scope of these migrations, and how they were organized. however, the archives in Kolkata, in Port-of-Spain and London do provide material that allows us to imagine what these migrations must have been like, dispensing a host of direct and indirect details about each stage of the journey. starvation, chronic debt, domestic violence, caste oppression and other such factors pushed the hopeful

emigrants away from their villages. they were recruited by the *Arkatis*, the recruiting agents working for the British, eventually reaching Calcutta by train from remote places in Bihar, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh. they were sometimes kidnapped or lured onto the ships heading to the Caribbean, Mauritius, or Fiji.³ they had to communicate through interpreters and translators, and submit to the selection tests to see if they were fit to work in the sugar colonies. their emigration passes stated their name, sex, approximate age, marks of identification, village of origin, next of kin if any, their caste, and the ship they were boarding as well as the exact date of departure. Whether they all knew if they were boarding for Mauritius, Fiji, or the West Indies is not entirely certain. however, looking at the river Hoogly, picturing in one's mind's eye the Garden Reach depots, and seeing what is left of the dockyards in Kidderpore [Khidirpur] certainly feeds one's the imagination.⁴ some three months were required to cross the *Kala Pani*, the black waters of the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic. it was long enough for all castes to mix and mingle on the ship, upper caste and lower caste, from Brahmins to Shudras to untouchables. this intermingling was so pervasive that one of the scholars doing extensive work on indentureship and the crossing of the *Kala Pani*, Brinsley Samaroo, has coined the phrases 'Brahmin by birth,' or 'Brahmin by boat':

Men and women from the villages of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, looking around in the receiving depot and seeing no one who could attest to their true origins, gave themselves new names which indicated the upward direction which they now wished to pursue. they were now *Singh* (lion), *Sher* (tiger), *raj Kumari* (princess), *Maha raj* (Great King) or *Maha Bir* (Great Warrior). there were now many new Brahmins by boat rather than by birth⁵ (20).

Borders and boundaries were crossed, identities reshuffled and reinvented. only a minority made the crossing back to India at the end of their five-year contracts. Multiple reasons can be mentioned. at the end of the nineteenth century, indentured labourers often had to pay for their passage back to India but they could not afford it.⁶ five years is a long enough period to settle down and start raising a family. once they had become acclimatized to a society where caste did not exist, or at least not with the same implications, it was difficult to adjust to India again, and the returnees were often rejected by their communities, precisely because they had crossed the *Kala Pani*. in Metiabruz, not far from Garden Reach, there was even an area where returned emigrants were stationed, waiting for the ships from the Caribbean and looking into re-indenturing themselves. repatriation occurred until the mid-1950s, a time when India was already finding it extremely difficult to manage the flows of post-partition

migrants.⁷ as Samaroo notes, “this loss of caste meant rejection and social ostracism upon return causing many to opt for *Tapuha* (island) status rather than *Maha Bharat* (Great India) ascription” (20). the descendants of these early migrants now constitute a substantial and fascinatingly diverse diaspora that takes its roots in the social equalization that took place on the ships, making the emigrants into *Jahaji Bhai* and *Jahaji Bhahins* (brothers and sisters of the boat). Many writers and scholars have explored the perception of the ancestral space, the manifold representations of ‘Mother India’, its place in the imagination of the descendants of indentured labourers, and its impact on the way contemporary identities have been shaped. stories have become deliberately constructed narratives of a homeland one hardly remembers and sometimes has no first-hand knowledge of. new sovereign identities that have developed horizontally and not vertically are now accommodated in fluid and multiple ways.⁸ Indo-Caribbean literature *per se* did not emerge in Trinidad and Guyana before the 1960s and 1970s in the independence period even if one can trace pioneers as early as the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and then again in the 1940s.⁹ But unlike the African-Caribbean novels that in the 1990s emulated the original slave narratives from the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries and the African-American neo-slave narratives from the 1960s, there was no such process with the Indo-Caribbean narratives.¹⁰ no original first-hand, full-fledged accounts were written between the 1830s and 1917 at the time of indentureship. there were letters written to journals and local newspapers, but they did not have the same scope as the original eighteenth century Atlantic slave narratives.¹¹ oral testimonies given by the indentured servants themselves or by their descendants were, only much later, transcribed and archived.¹² Indo-Caribbean writers in the latter part of the twentieth century took up fiction to try and give their voices back to the voiceless descendants of indentured labourers, sometimes getting their inspiration directly from the memories of the people who had been indentured servants one or two generations before. a few fiction writers are particularly representative of this early period: for Trinidad, V. s. naipaul (*a House for Mr Biswas*, 1961), Ismith Khan (*The jumbie Bird*, 1961) and Harold Sonny Ladoo (*no Pain Like This Body*, 1972). for Guyana, one should mention peter Kempadoo (*Guyana Boy*, 1960) and Raj Kumari Singh (‘I am a coolie’, 1973).

it is only fairly recently, in the past generation, that Indo-Caribbean literature began to catch up with African-Caribbean literature that had tended to be in the foreground and contributed to having the Caribbean defined through its Black Atlantic connection rather than its Indoceanic one. among the next generation of Indo-Caribbean writers, many names

are now well known, such as Cyril Dabydeen, David Dabydeen, Mahadai das, Ramabai Espinet, Arnold Itwaru, Shani Mootoo, Sam Selvon, Jan Shinebourne and Ryhaan shah, among others. four novels are particularly representative of the late twentieth century production: Jan Shinebourne's *The Last English Plantation* (1988), David Dabydeen's *The Counting House* (1996), Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at night* (1996) and Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003). in all four novels, the detour through history is what enables self-awareness in the present day. all four writers continue to be prolific. Gaiutra Bahadur recently entered the stage as a journalist and a non-fiction writer, publishing *Coolie Woman: the Odyssey of Indenture* (2015).¹³

indentureship, caste and crossing of *Kala Pani*

I seek to develop the thread I started with, that is the migrations in the context of indentureship, caste and crossing of *Kala Pani*, with a focus on the communication that took place then, across lands and oceans. We all know that on top of the Atlantic triangular slave trade that started at the end of the sixteenth century, and on top of the wars of conquest, the nineteenth century saw a massive development of the world as a global place because of those exchanges between continents: raw and manufactured products, and people. We also know that the construction of European nations and of the so-called new World at the time was inseparable from imperial conquest, forced transportation and enslavement, indentured labour and migration. it was also inseparable from global telecommunications, relying on the railway and postal services — invented in 1477 in France, in 1635 in England and in 1775 in America. in France, it was Louis XIth who created 'Les relais de poste' in 1477. in England, Charles I created the 'royal Mail' in 1635, and it was an essential tool of development of the British Empire, just like the railways in the early years of the nineteenth century in Australia, Canada, India and south Africa, that was used to carry weapons and organize control and armed repression.¹⁴ postal services can also be implemented to counter the imperial attempts at domination: in America, the 'postal service' was created in 1775 to support the move towards freedom from the British. Benjamin franklin was the first postmaster General until 1776. ¹⁵ there, it was the first transcolonial move, granting oneself the means to communicate without having to go through the British center. the nineteenth century was the century of the worldwide development of telecommunications.¹⁶ the device that is used to unite and engage the community can also be used to disengage from the community.

the construction of the British Empire was of course a collective endeavour but it was also the story of families and individuals who migrated to flee famine, domestic violence, wars and caste oppression, to make a better life for themselves and their people. Migrating did not necessarily mean severing all contacts: after having been the privilege of the men and women of letters and of the powerful during the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe, exchanging letters often became for ordinary families the only means to remain in contact. families who had stayed at home wanted to hear from those who had left, possibly join them. the ones who had left wanted to write back. But the families perhaps could only guess about the persons they had become, or could have become.

Epistolary writing has become the object of a whole field of academic studies, particularly among French scholars as regards the epistolary novel of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whether the letters were 'real' or 'fictionalized'.¹⁷ Ovid, Petrarch, Seneca, but also Heloise and Abelard, Madame de la Fayette, La Marquise de Sevigne, Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau are not the names I would have expected to use in a paper entitled "indentureship, caste and crossing of the *Kala Pani*". nor would I have expected to mention Richardson, Goethe, Virginia Woolf or Jane Austen. these names immediately bring in associations with the antiquity, the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and its unavoidable connections with European Enlightenment and the privileged life of social, philosophical and intellectual exchanges. they do not bring associations with colonial, postcolonial, diasporic writing. Beyond their many differences, all these writers and thinkers have in common the practice of the epistolary genre and through the letters they wrote, received and responded to, fictionalized or 'real', they elaborated their own thought and the way they wanted to construct their relations to society, to themselves and to their own literary and philosophical work. Letters have empowered a genesis of the invention of the self and of the inter-personal relation in a global world, be it through the exchange of real letters or the use of the letter as a literary device and an aesthetic mode. it became a laboratory, and the best possible translation of the self on the global stage, at least for the powerful, and for the men and women of letters, in all meanings of the term.

over the past 30 years, scholars have also been using letters exchanged between migrants and their families, interpreting them from a historical and sociological point of view and gaining insights into the conditions of the migration, of integration, of work and pay, of social relations, of political engagement or disengagement, of the preservation of the bond with the mother country, or the destruction of that bond. these letters are

also fascinating to read from the point of view of the aspirations and emotions that are expressed, always from the angle of a very specific context. private epistolary collections have been archived and made public, sometimes digitalized.¹⁸

What is so interesting is that letters take place in an asynchronous yet generally reciprocal relationship, and function as a presence beyond the absence, aiming at abolishing the distance in space and the separation in time, and remaining that quintessential diasporic artefact, sent across land and water when bodies cannot meet in the same time and space.

transcolonial Epistolary Exchanges:
the case of India and the Caribbean

yet, the context of colonial domination and transnational migration is radically different, and not enough attention has been granted to the *transcolonial* epistolary exchanges between colonies. addressees and addressers may well have been in a situation in which they would never see each other again. in many ways, whether it was sent, and received, and read, and responded to, which was far from always being the case, the letter paradigm gives to understand something of the complexities of *transcolonial* migration. the bond, yes; memory, most probably; the reaffirmed commitment, maybe, but not always. Migration has always meant physical severance. it has sometimes also meant complete disengagement, the reasons being diverse and never straightforward. the exchange of letters, or lack thereof, shows the complexity of the relationship. I have written elsewhere about the use of letters in contemporary Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean fiction.¹⁹ I want here to have a look at the preceding stage, at the pre-conditions at the time of the colonial migrations because it seems that the writers' desire to include letters in their fiction has been feeding on the historical letters exchanged or not between the Indian and the Atlantic oceans, playing with and *signifying* on them.²⁰ in the second half of this paper, I want to articulate a hypothesis about the epistolary exchanges that happened at the time of indentureship from India to the Caribbean. one may have to revise some of the general ideas about epistolary exchanges that are most often interpreted as reaffirming a personal commitment and a collective bond. it may have been true in the European context of the 'republic of Letters' mentioned earlier, or of the emigration towards the new World, but as regards the million plus emigrants who boarded the ships that took them from Calcutta mostly, and from Madras sometimes, across the Indian and Atlantic oceans as indentured labourers between 1838 and 1917, my hypothesis is that the epistolary device of engagement becomes in certain

cases a device of disengagement. the history of the bond is also the history of the breaking of the bond, and the same device is used in both cases. the reciprocal conversations one finds so fascinating between the home country and the host country may also happen to be asymmetrical and non-reciprocal. sometimes it is the lack of reciprocity that proves to be empowering. in the case of the emigrants who boarded ships in Calcutta and disembarked in Georgetown, Guyana, or Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, which is my focus here, one is struck by the paucity of archived letters, be it in Calcutta of course or even in Port-of-Spain. yet, even if it is fascinating to focus on the gaps and the lacunae in the archives, it is just as interesting to focus on the archives for what they are, for what they do contain and how they have been conceived and organized. the letters to be found are generally not written by the emigrants themselves, and are not in the original languages. historians and anthropologists most often resist the idea of working on anything but the original documents, in the original language. We have to be ready to deal with the gaps and the blanks, with the ghosts that haunt those letters, and to interrogate the issues faced by the addressers and the addressees in the new place that was cleared by the improbable epistolary exchanges across the *Kala Pani*.

at both ends of the *Kala Pani*, the protectors of Emigrants complained about the lack of letters exchanged between Indian emigrants and their families back in India. the protectors of Emigrants/immigrants in Calcutta and Port-of-Spain referred to the reports on the conditions of emigration written by Major d. G. pitcher in 1882 and by sir George a. Grierson in 1883. there are obvious reasons why there were so few letters exchanged, for instance, the lack of education of addressers and addressees combined to the deficiencies of the postal services:

[t]he immigrants when writing give their address imperfectly, and their friends in India direct the replies with even greater imperfection; hence the letters sent through the post seldom reach their destination in the colonies. the construction of the Hindustani language is in great measure answerable for the confusion in the addresses, all English words having to be spelt phonetically. the coolies pronounce and spell the names of places in Jamaica, of the ships, and of the Managers of Estates in an extraordinary manner; for example, *pashuha* for fort Stewart, *natabe* for Annollo Bay, *jukegail* for duke of Argyll, *lall lambar* for Loch Lomond, *ulbari* for Lincelles. sometimes the combination of bad writing and bad spelling makes it impossible to decipher the addresses. [...] I fully endorse [the] opinion that facilities should be afforded to the immigrants for transmitting letters and money. [...] ²¹

Both reports by pitcher and Grierson were sent to the colonial administration and suggestions were made to try and change the situation, hoping favourable reports on the conditions of emigration would

encourage more emigrants to indenture themselves. suggestions were also made by the protectors of Emigrants/ immigrants to implement schemes that would make the collection and transmission of letters and remittances easier:

I would suggest [...] that notice be given by the inspectors of immigrants, through the headman on the estate, that on a stated day when they shall visit the estates they will take the letters for transmission to India. in each letter they should enclose an envelope on which the name of the immigrant, the name of the ship that has arrived, and the ship's number should be written. [...] I am persuaded that we should soon hear no more of the relations of those who have sailed for the colonies being kept in ignorance of what has happened to them; remittances would probably be more frequently made by those in the colonies to their friends in India, and I have no doubt that it would have a powerful stimulus to emigration.²²

the result was probably not satisfactory since before the end of the nineteenth century (c. 1897) the free passage back to India was cancelled from the indentureship contract in a move to encourage labourers not to apply for repatriation.

another element that made it difficult to write back and forth between colonies is of course the language component. again, this may be obvious yet it is near impossible to picture the complications of the situation. Even if it was not only low castes that emigrated, the high rate of illiteracy among the emigrants and their relatives made it compulsory to resort to interpreters and translators before the emigration passes could be issued and, eventually, any letters written. the importance of the interpreters surfaces obliquely in all the documents and sometimes quite directly in the contracts they signed:

you will, on the morning of embarkation of the Emigrants, go on board the ship *Canning* and report yourself to the surgeon superintendent, and assist him in receiving and arranging the Emigrants below. you are specially under the orders of the surgeon superintendent, and will attend to such instructions as you may receive from him during the voyage. you will also, in your capacity as [interpreter / topaz / compounder], make yourself useful to the captain and officers of the ship, and exert yourself in promoting cleanliness, discipline, and cheerfulness amongst the Emigrants.²³

frequent mentions are made of the difficult situations they found themselves in sometimes when it was not clear under which administration they were placed, or when they were stranded, unable to come back to India once their employment period on board was over:

Much inconvenience has arisen from compounders, interpreters, and topazes engaged in coolie Emigrants ships from India to the West Indies, finding their way to this country, and demanding a back passage to India, either on the ground, in some cases, of an alleged promise to that effect on the part of the Emigration agent in India, or on the ground of destitution, appeals are made not only to this Board, but to the secretaries of state for the colonies and for India, and the result usually is, that we are directed to send the applicants back to India at the expense of the colony in whose service they were originally engaged. This, it is obvious, is a state of things that ought not to continue.²⁴ I forward herewith a copy of the letter from Lieutenant-colonel Hughes, honorary secretary to the Strangers' Home for Asiatics, regarding the case of two natives of Calcutta, by the names Shaik Noor Mahomed and Francis Cretelle, who state that they were engaged to accompany Emigrants to demerara in the coolie ship *Atlanta* in January [sic] last; and whilst residing in that place their agreements were stolen and were left destitute. They came to England in the *Atlanta*, and are now maintained in the Strangers' Home for Asiatics.²⁵

It was then up to the protectors of Emigrants/immigrants to write the letters on behalf of the emigrants or of their families trying to renew contact. It was up to them to try and translate some of the emotions expressed, or indicate there was something else than the purported emotions. Official language can sometimes be heavily destructive, it can sometimes come in handy. Once the emigrants had arrived in the Caribbean (it was also true for the ones who went to Fiji or Mauritius of course) it may have been even more difficult to find interpreters and translators to write back to their relatives. But in any case, on both sides, the translations had to be multiple and layers of interpretation inserted themselves between the families and the emigrants, the result being very far from the original emotion the addressers tried to put into words. Yet, it was not only because postal services did not function properly, or because emigrants and their families were illiterate, or because the words on paper did not match the emotions in the heart, that there was a shortage of letters exchanged. A majority of the letters may have escaped the containment of archives, having been exchanged directly, or smuggled on to the ships and then lost. One may also have thought that there was no need for the letters to be translated into English, that they could have been written in the local Indian languages and 'posted' on the ships. But because of the illiteracy of most emigrants, the scribes were still needed. Allowing letters written in Indian languages to be transported on the ships cannot be imagined: how could the colonial authorities allow communication that had not been read, verified and approved? It was after all the British Raj and, as is obvious

from the archives, the Empire did control all the details of the emigrants' lives.

there are also other reasons for the fact that 'the colonial Emigrant is notoriously out of touch with his people at home in India',²⁶ which was such a problem for the colonial administration. some of these reasons can be understood through the letters that were sent from India, received, or not, in the Caribbean, read, or not, responded to, or not. indeed, it is the families back in India who seemed desperate not to lose contact with their relatives who had chosen to leave of their own accord, or who had been lured into migrating by the notorious *arkatis*. the migration, be it the result of free will, of fraudulence or abduction, was not always known to the families, especially if the emigrant had fled a forced marriage, domestic violence, chronic debt, a family feud, etc. Most of the letters that can be found in the archives were written by the families back in India, trying to reclaim the link with the ones who had left. such attempts at reclaiming can have multiple goals: activate or reactivate memory, request to hear back a few months or a few years after migration, inquire whether the emigrant is still alive, plead for their repatriation. I want to highlight just a few examples. sometimes the protector of Emigrants translates such simple requests as the family's request for a photograph so that the emigrant can be recognized when he repatriates: "please ask ramadhin to have himself photographed so as to be recognized by his acquaintances in India and to hand you the photograph for transmission to the Maharaja of Rewa through our agent at Calcutta."²⁷

Most often the requests came from India, a father looking for his son, a mother for her son, a wife for her husband — very few, by the way, were looking for a daughter, a sister or a wife. in a few cases one can recompose the whole story:

My dear father, this is to inform you that I have received 5 letters in all from you and wrote to you twice. I am working now on the above estate as a field labourer earning from 12/- to 20/- a fortnight. I am anxious to return to India, I have no means to pay for my passage — I was robbed of £12 which I had saved. about 18 months ago I got married to a young woman (Musulman) but unfortunately we have separated. I have nothing more to say — please give my salaams to my mother, brothers, sister and all friends.

I remain, your affectionate son,
(his sig: in Urdu)

Ashaq Husain his own signature.²⁸

the protector of Emigrants becomes the interpreter, the scribe and the messenger for Tasaduq Husain looking for his son, Ashaq Husain. Tasaduq complains in 1918 that he hasn't received any responses to the

letters he wrote to his son after his departure in 1911. the response arrives from Trinidad three months later. Ashaq did receive five letters and sent two, he gives some news that will be of interest to his father: he is independent financially (works as an indentured labourer on picton plantation), has made efforts towards the constitution of a family (got married even if he separated), has been keeping his religious faith (his wife was Moslem and he gives his *salaams*). Most important, he manifests his desire to repatriate although he says he cannot afford it, and requests money to be sent for his passage. the bond is, therefore, reasserted but one cannot forget that Ashaq is not a Hindu and no element pertaining to caste is brought forward.

Through Ashaq's case, one discerns some of the other, more pragmatic and specific, reasons behind these searches. Many letters are written in the hope the passage back to India will be paid by the family, or that inheritance will be granted. the families had to know if they were entitled to any inheritance, and how it could be claimed, when they had heard the emigrant had disappeared, or was dead, maybe had even become 'mad':

I have the honour to request that you will be so good as to cause enquiries to be made as to whether Ashraf, son of Lal Mohamed, of village Damri, Thana Pachperwa, district Gonda, India, who emigrated to Trinidad and entered into the service of sheikh Miah Dymally, merchant, cedros, in Trinidad, has become mad, and if so whether he left any property to be handed over to his relatives.²⁹

Verification by the colonial authorities, thus, had to be done, the administrative conversation intersecting with the private one, the administrative and colonial language superimposing itself on the private tongue that was reduced to a ghostly presence-absence between the lines of the document. in all cases, it was up to the colonial authorities to check who was telling the truth among the different members of the family across the oceans. there were family feuds to be investigated:

in reference to your n° 581 dated 24th ultimo, I beg to state that you will be good enough to let me know whether the piece of land of my late brother Herakh Singh, situated at Trinidad, has been sold or not: a money order for rs. 120/- was received nearly a fortnight ago but my youngest brother Sahadeo Narain Singh intended to take the full amount of the order and not to give my half share, hence, the amount has been returned and hope you will kindly separate the amount from your office and to issue the same by means of money order under the following care for which I shall ever pray to God for your long life and prosperity.³⁰

and many stories were spun. Khoda Baksh's father wanted to have his son repatriated because he could not work after having had both his hands

cut off in a work accident. the colonial global web operating its control on both sides of the oceans, the yarn was revealed:

I visited Brechin castle and found that the indentured immigrant Khoda Baksh is not only in full enjoyment of both his hands but is also in the best of health. Khoda Baksh admits that he gave a false story; because he wished to go back to India and did not think that enquiries would be made before the necessary permission would be granted.³¹

When the emigrant did not answer for several years, postponed his voyage back to India several times, explained that he needed more time to settle his affairs, etc., one can understand the difficulties attached to repatriation: repatriation was sometimes desired by the families but not by the indentured labourer. the protector of Emigrants was even sometimes summoned to contribute to the search, even if it meant using force. “Lock him up!” is what an exasperated mother asks the protector of Emigrants to do with his son:

[o]n hearing that you are the only Gentleman to help the poors I appeal to your honour’s clemency [sic], similarly, if your honour also, arrange to lock him up 2 days before the steamer is to leave and return him to Madras and redress us from our suffering for a long time in 15 years.³² other cases have to do with the name changes, so very crucial in

the Indian context:

I beg to submit that one Bishun Dayal, alleged to be the son of Wazir Mahto of village Tilaiya, Thana Silau, district Patna, who had been registered at Patna on the 3rd January, 1912, embarked for Trinidad as n^o116 in the s.s. “Chenao” on the 27th January, 1912. I am sure that he is my son, and that he gave out the name of Wazir Mahto as his father, simply to evade enquiry and detection. he is a minor of about 15 years of age, and I am his lawful guardian and entitled to get him back into my custody as he was taken away without my permission and knowledge. I therefore pray that your honour may be pleased to take the necessary steps to bring him back as soon as possible and to send me the estimate of costs for the above purpose at your earliest convenience.³³ fleeing the family, changing names in order to shed for good the caste that had already been lost after crossing the *Kala Pani*, wanting to start a new life away from Indian social frames and traditions, all these elements compose the painful and complex story of indentureship as it surfaces in the letters exchanged, or not exchanged between the Indian ocean and the Atlantic ocean but sent only one way. one Bansi Dhar is searched for by his family in India. one of his co-labourers, having repatriated to India, mentions seeing him on the plantation they were working on together, except that he had come to be known as Lala instead of Bansi Dhar:

With reference to the correspondence resting with your letter n°450a/1914 of the 9th June last, I have the honour to say that Banshi Dhar is also known as Lala and that one Bhagat Kumar, who returned from the colony in february last, asserts that he saw him working at the place mentioned in my letter n°1141/129 of the 23rd March last. I shall be obliged if you kindly cause fresh enquiries to be made for Banshi Dhar and inform me of the result.³⁴

as letter unfolds upon letter, one is left with interpreting the official language, possibly translated several times. one has to read between the lines and understand the desperation of the family that is expressed behind the sentences. it is only matched by the desperation of the indentured labourers who did not always want to repatriate even when they had the opportunity of doing so, to the point of, possibly, committing suicide. such is the story of Rampher that can be imagined through one of the official letters written about him. it is believed he committed suicide during the repatriation voyage:

Although his mental condition may have appeared dull at times owing to his general debility, at no time he show any symptom or sign of a suicidal tendency. on the 28th. august he was permitted to sit on the main deck outside the hospital cabin and appeared bright and cheerful at the prospect of arriving at Calcutta at an early date. [...] after this, the hospital attendant was engaged cleaning utensils in the female ward for about half an hour and Sirdar Shibashai went between-decks. Veerappah the hospital attendant, on his return to the Male ward did not find Rampher so he reported the matter to the chief Sirdar Puran n° 580. after five sirdars had made an unsuccessful search for the missing man among the other emigrants, the compounders were informed of it just before day-break. a general search of the ship was then made with the same result. at 6.30 a.m. I visited the hospital and was informed that Rampher could not be found. [...] With the assistance of the captain of the ship an enquiry was held at which the above facts were obtained and the conclusion drawn was that Rampher had jumped overboard.³⁵

Many stories point to how badly the returnees wanted to go back to the Caribbean (see previous mention of Metiabruz). Very few scholars have focused on the complexities of such return migration, debunking the myth of the indentured labourers only wanting to go back to India.³⁶

From Loss and separation to renewed agency and Emancipation

the majority of these documents were not written by the addressers themselves but on their behalf. they have been interpreted, translated and transcribed. the letters are often monophonic discourses, going one way,

pleading one way, not getting any response. these exchanges that are not reciprocal exchanges force us to revisit the traditional categories of the epistolary genre. the materiality of the graphic space cannot exist in the same way since the handwritten letters cannot be, in most cases, handled physically. Most of the original documents have been lost. only a few have been archived. the letters are still a presence in the absence but it has created a new imaginary place, for the addressers, the addressees, and for us today. the chain of communication is also radically different because in a traditional epistolary exchange the letter is rarely meant to be conceived by the addresser, interpreted or translated by the interpreter or translator, transcribed by the protector of Emigrants, archived by the colonial services and read by the contemporary reader who is none of the entities mentioned above, and is yet again another interpreter and translator. in so many ways, the epistolary exchanges in the *Kala Pani* context have become a collective enterprise, one that is polyphonic in spite of appearances to the contrary. Many interventions have been needed to reach the final stage of the letter sent across the oceans. it is a whole chorus of voices, diasporic and transcolonial, that can be heard.

finally, I would like to point out that, just like the addresser, we are confronted to the ghostly text of the addressee who does not respond, who cannot respond, or chooses not to respond. through the disengagement one can also see a form of agency and empowerment. the epistolary device that traditionally highlights a bond of affection or love, a high degree of commitment or engagement, becomes a strategy of disengagement. in the same way, pointing to the multiple reconfigurations of the migrating self, the indentured labourers often chose to re-indenture themselves to another colony. By not writing back, they also wrote their own story of the breaking of the bond with the mother country, and of the creation of a new form of agency. it is always fascinating to examine what holds people close to their native land and people. in the present day, examining what drives them away and keeps them away is even more fascinating, especially at a time when caste is splitting India apart, with caste lines having become much more rigid than it used to be in the nineteenth century. today is the moment when it is most difficult to go back to the days when Mother India was pushing its children away from its fold, but it is the moment when such scrutiny may be most needed.³⁷ crossing the *Kala Pani* and shedding one's caste meant suffering but it was also, for many, an act of emancipation, of social equalizing, looking forward to the annihilation of caste.

Notes

1. Such crossings were forbidden to Hindus because it created a rupture from the sacred Ganges river.

2. See Clem Seecharan, *'Tiger in the Stars': The Anatomy of Indian Achievement in British Guiana 1919-1929* (London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1997): 2.
See also Steven Vertovec, 'Indo-Caribbean Experience in Britain: Overlooked, Miscategorized, Misunderstood', in *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain*, Winston James and Clive Harris, eds. (London & New York: Verso, 1993): 165-178. Vertovec recapitulates on different sources and offers a very useful cumulative table that gives the detailed numbers of Indian immigrants per country, over the different periods of indentureship (167).
Scholars generally agree on just under 240,000 Indians going to British Guyana, about 144,000 to Trinidad, 36,000 to Jamaica, 67,000 to Martinique and Guadeloupe, a little more than 60,000 to Fiji, 26,000 to Reunion island and 454,000 to Mauritius. For more precise figures and analyses one can refer to the first chapter of *Tiger in the Stars* (Seecharan 1997) and *Girmitiyas* (Lal 1983) as well as *Indo-Caribbean Indenture* (Roopnarine 2007).
3. Calcutta was the main port of emigration for indentureship candidates. It remained the British capital of India until 1911, when it was considered that Delhi would be less vulnerable. Six years later, in 1917, indentureship was declared illegal, at least officially.
4. I want to express my sincere thanks to Gautam Chakraborty, Port Security Adviser at Kidderpore, Kolkata, who took time on his busy schedule to show me around the dockyards and the Memorial to the Indian indentured labourers, erected in 2011. The book to which he contributed contains a couple of enlightening chapters dedicated to the nineteenth century Indo-Caribbean migrations: *Calcutta Port—Ageless Annals*, Anindo Majumdar I. A. S. and Gautam Chakraborti, eds. (Kolkata: Kolkata Port Trust, 2010).
5. 'Chinese and Indian Coolie Voyages to the Caribbean', *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 14, 1 & 2 (2000): 3-24; 20.
6. The Introduction to *The First Crossing, being the Diary of Theophilus Richmond, ship's surgeon aboard the Hesperus, 1837-8*, edited by David Dabydeen, Jonathan Morley, Brinsley Samaroo, Amar Wahab and Brigid Wells, reminds us of all the differences in the repatriation schemes. As soon as the 1870s the planters tried to devise ways to convince indentured labourers at the end of their contract period to commute their right to a return passage into money or land (XLIX). After 1895 they simply had to contribute to their own fare if they wished to repatriate.
7. The Introduction to *The First Crossing, being the Diary of Theophilus Richmond* devotes several well-documented and moving pages to the repatriation schemes of the 1950s (XLVII-LXI). As indicated in this Introduction, the *M. V. Resurgent* sailed from Georgetown harbour on September 4, 1955. It was carrying the last 235 repatriates to Calcutta (XLVII).
8. See the work done by Crispin Bates, Marina Carter, David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo, Vijay Mishra, Jeremy Poynting, Rajesh Rai, Peter Reeves, Hugh Tinker, Peter Van der Veer, among other scholars. See also *India and the Diasporic Imagination*, Rita Christian & Judith Misrahi-Barak, eds. (Series *PoCoPages*, Collection 'Horizons anglophones' (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2011).

9. See *Lutchmee and Dilloo*, by Edward Jenkins (1877); *Those That Be in Bondage: A Tale of Indian Indenture and Sunlit Western Waters*, by A. R. F. Webber (1917); *Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales* by Seepersad Naipaul (1943).
10. See for instance such slavery novels as *The Longest Memory* or *Feeding the Ghosts* by Fred D'Aguiar, *The Harlot's Progress* by David Dabydeen, *The Book of Negroes* by Lawrence Hill, *Cambridge* or *Crossing the River* by Caryl Phillips. In the francophone sphere one can think of *L'esclave vieil homme et le molosse* by Patrick Chamoiseau, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* by Maryse Condé. All these novels, published between the late 1980s and the 2010s, respond to the dual tradition of the original slave narratives in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries and to that of the neo-slave narratives written by African-American writers from the 1960s-1980s. For more details about this revisiting, see J. Misrahi-Barak, « Post-Beloved Writing: Review, Revitalize, Recalculate ». *Black Studies Papers* 1.1 (2014): *Slavery Revisited*; 37-55. <http://elib.suub.uni-bremen.de/edocs/00103775-1.pdf>
11. See Clem Seecharan, *Bechu: "Bound Coolie" Radical in British Guiana, 1890s-1920s*, Kingston, Jamaïque, University of the West Indies Press, 1999.
12. See the anthropological work that has been done by Kumar Mahabir, Patricia Mohammed or Peggy Mohan in transcribing some of the interviews they conducted in Bhojpuri, the language the indentured labourers had brought with them from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.
See also Peggy Mohan's novel *Jahajin* (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2007).
13. See Judith Misrahi-Barak, 'Ramabai and Gainder, Gaiutra and Sujaria are Turning Tides: Great-grandmothers' and Great-granddaughters' Odysseys and Narratives of the *Kala Pani*' (forthcoming 2018, in *Turning Tides*, Ian Randle Publisher).
14. The early Penny Post system was created in 1733 and authorized by Parliament in 1765. The Uniform Penny Post was implemented throughout the UK in 1840, introducing the first postage stamp and making epistolary exchanges more easily accessible to all.
15. https://about.usps.com/publications/pub100/pub100_003.htm Accessed December 2, 2017.
16. It is also worth noting the development in parallel of such telecommunications as the semaphore and the telegraph. The former was invented by the French inventor Claude Chappe in 1792, at a time when France needed a reliable and swift communication system to thwart its enemies' efforts to undo the Revolution. Contrary to the semaphore, which only transmitted messages, the telegraph transmitted and recorded messages at a distance. The first electrical telegraph was invented by the English inventor Francis Ronalds in 1816 while the early pioneer of electromagnetic telegraphy was the Russian Pavel Schilling in 1832. The English William Fothergill Cooke and Charles Wheatstone, a scientist and an entrepreneur, provided the British Empire with the 'needle telegraph' and had the foresight to approach the Railway companies to run their lines alongside the railway tracks. In 1837 the first telegraph line was started, then crossing the Atlantic ocean and covering the whole of the British Empire by the end of the 19th century. The American Samuel Morse also saw the logic in following the railroad lines and telegraph poles.
<http://www.britishempire.co.uk/science/communications/telegraph.htm> Accessed Dec 20, 2017.
17. See *De Rerum Natura* by Lucrece, or *Letters to Lucillius* by Seneca the Young; *Processos de cartas de amores que entre dos amantes pasaron*, Juan de Segura (1548, then 1563), which is considered as the first European epistolary novel. See also *Lettres*

persanes by Montesquieu; *L'Astrée* by Honoré d'Urfé (1607-27); *La Princesse de Clèves*, by Mme de La Fayette (1678); *Letters from a Portuguese Nun* by Claude Barbin (1669); *A Post with a Packet of Mad Letters*, Nicolas Breton (1669); the letters from La Marquise de Sévigné to her daughter (1725); *The New Héloïse* by Rousseau (1761); *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* by Samuel Richardson (1748); *The Sufferings of the Young Werther* by Goethe (1774, 1787); *Dangerous Liaisons* by Choderlos de Laclos (1782).

One could also refer to the first novel by Dostoevsky, *Poor Folk* (1844), or the only epistolary novel by Balzac, *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* (1841).

18. See the Digitizing Immigrant Letters Project under the impulsion of Sonia Cancian and Donna R. Gabaccia in 2009 within the frame of the Immigration History Research Center of the University of Minnesota.
19. I have written elsewhere about the use of letters in contemporary Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean fiction, in works by Jamaica Kincaid, Myriam Chancy, Gisèle Pineau, Patricia Powell, Ramabai Espinet, Alicia McKenzie for instance. See "Diasporic Agency and the Power of Literary Form in Caribbean Literature", *Atlantic Studies*, 9. 4 (2012): 431-446; as well as "Ruptures and Junctures: Reinventing and Repossessing the Diasporic Self in Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*", in *Repenser la diversité: le sujet diasporique*, Corinne Duboin, ed. (St Denis de la Réunion: Océans Editions, 2013): 127-139.
20. Within the Atlantic context, one can also think of Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993) where the sections 'The Pagan Coast' and 'Crossing the River' contain letters written by Nash Williams, the former enslaved African who was emancipated and turned missionary, as well as letters written by James Hamilton, Captain of the slave ship *The Duke of York* that left Liverpool in August 1752 to the Windward coast of Africa. In the first instance, Phillips used letters he found in the archives of the American Colonization Society. In the second instance, he used eighteenth century John Newton's *Journal of a Slave Trader*.
21. General Department, Emigration Branch, B Department, Proceedings for November 1884, File n°39, Serial n° 3/4, July 7, 1884, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.
22. General Department, Emigration Branch, B Department, Proceedings for November 1884, File n°39, Serial n° 3/4, July 7, 1884, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata.
23. State Archives of Bengal, General Emigration, Proceedings N°56, November 10, 1862.
24. State Archives of Bengal, General Emigration, Proceedings N°56, September 4, 1862.
25. State Archives of Bengal, General Emigration, Proceedings N°3, August 7, 1862.
26. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N° 521/497, June 13, 1908.
27. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N° 6027/1916, 1150/1916, December 21, 1916.
28. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N°149/22; 268/1918, February 21, 1918 / May 27, 1918.
29. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N°446/435, March 12, 1912.
30. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N°133, 15 mars 1910.
31. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N°589/156, 1179/1916, June 18, 1917.
32. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N° 244/1926, February 25, 1926.
33. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N°649/637, May 20, 1912.
34. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N°2966/359 - 1491/1914, August 23, 1914.
35. National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, N°72, 29 août 1927.

36. See the work done by Nalini Mahabir.

37. Dilip Menon has just written about the necessity to 'revisit its pre-1947 history of migration'. <https://scroll.in/article/856271/not-just-indentured-labourerswhy-we-should-revisit-the-history-of-migration-from-pre-1947-India> Accessed February 15, 2018.