
Representing Girmitiyas in Amitav Ghosh “Sea of Poppies” and Giriraj Kishore’s “Pehla Girmitiya”

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The term Diaspora, long used only to describe the dispersion of the Jewish people throughout the world has, in the last thirty years, elicited unprecedented interest, attracting the attention not only of the academic world but also that of the media. In everyday language the term is now applied to all forms of migration and dispersion of a people, even where no migration is involved; this corresponds not only to the development and generalization of international migrations throughout the world, but also to a weakening, or at least a limitation, of the role played by nation-states, at a time when globalization has become a dominant process. Many works have been written by eminent writers from time to time to the pathetic condition of indentured Indian laborers and especially the "Girmitiyas" (They are descendents of indentured Indian laborers brought to Fiji to work on sugarcane plantations for the prosperity of the European settlers and save the Fijians from having to work on these plantations and thus to preserve their culture) for example Totaram Sanadhya, an indentured worker, documented the story of the abuse and violence of indenture in Fiji in a report published in India titled 'Fiji Dweep mein mere LkeesVarsh (My 21years in Fiji- now published in English as 'The Story of Haunted Lanes'), and publicly highlighted the plight of the system. Barry unsworth's "Sacred Hunger", the story is set in the mid 18th century and centers on the Liverpool Merchant, a slave ship employed in the triangular trade, a central trade route in the Atlantic Slave trade. Girirajkishore's novel "Pehla Girmitiya" first published in 1999 and had won Vyas Samman in 2000 and has been translated into English by Prof Prajapati Shah as "Girmitiya Saga" and is published by Niyogi Books, Delhi looks closely and affectionately at the life of Gandhi, his years of struggle in South Africa trying to show his awareness of his own status as a girmitiya and made him identify with the fate of all girmitiyas and allowed him to fashion the tools of struggle against oppressive regimes. Amitav Ghosh "Sea Of Poppies" which was also shortlisted for the 'Man Booker Prize' in 2008 and has won 2008 Vodafone Crossword Book Award for Fiction and British Book Design and Production Award for the same year deals with two great economic themes of the 19th century :the cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for the Chinese market and the transport of Indian indentured workers to cut sugarcanes for the British on such islands as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad. 'Sea of Poppies' paints a poignant picture of the human devastation caused by Imperialism, the fertile farms of the Gangetic plain are blooming only with poppies- beautiful, deadly, denying the peasants the crops to sustain them and indebting them to moneylenders and landowners, themselves indebted to the buccannery of the East India Company. Skillfully and seemingly randomly, Ghosh assembles those, who will set sail in his narrative of the Ibis, an old slaving ship that is taking indentured laborers to Mauritius. In the novel “Sea of Poppies” and “Pehla Girmitiya” I have tried to bring out the sad plight of girmitiyas, although the close knit ties were formed between them who went to the unseen unknown lands in the same ship as indentured immigrants but still they had longing to go back to their home and very few were fortunate enough to return back to their home.

“My BahutAjah planted sugarcane/ down in the Caroni plain/ Ramlogan, Basdeo, Prakash and I, Jahaji Bhai/ brotherhood of the boat, Jahaji Bhai/ Brotherhood of the boat, Jahaji Bhai” thus read some lines from the popular Indo-Trinidadian chutney soca lyrics of Brother Marvin’s famous song “Jahaji Bhai”. The song is about the siblinghood of the boat, i.e. the close knit ties that were formed between the people who went to the unseen, unknown lands in the same ship as indentured immigrants. Indentured immigration created a diaspora

of Indians that is spread all over the world. That diaspora is different from the other Indians of the diaspora in many ways, mainly because they are “bound together by the common history of plantation economy and indentured servitude”(Maharaj). The process that had started in 1834 and continued till 1920 had resulted into the creation of a distinct set of people bonded with the force of adversity that they had faced together. In Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea Of Poppies*, the first part of the Ibis trilogy, it is Paulette who tells Deeti that they were “ship-siblings- jahazbhais and jahazbahens- to each other”(Ghosh 527). The displacement of the indentured immigrants from their home countries resulted into the placement of seed into the foreign soils that gave the crop of the diaspora, as Lal tells, its second phase of outward flow from the Indian subcontinent. In his “Immigration Lecture” that he had delivered in Hague, Lal clearly chalks out the three phases of emigration from India: “First, in the era before the emergence of European dominance, was the ‘Age of Merchants,’... The second phase was the ‘Age of Colonial Capital’ of the 19th and 20th centuries... the third phase, ‘The Age of Globalisation,’ is essentially a product of the post-World War II era”(9).

‘In search of gold we sailed to this land. Alas, our golden body melted away here. The cathartic song of first generation on ‘Girmitiyas’- the name given to generations of Indians who were forced to leave the country in the middle and late 19th century to serve as labourers in the then British colonies where they eventually settled down- has echoed in the sugarcane fields, from Mauritius to Fiji and Trinidad to Natal, for more than a century. Mahatma Gandhi called himself as ‘PehlaGirmitiya’, as a recognition of his fight for the cause of the community. He said “Girmit is indeed a state of semi-slavery.”Giriraj Kishore’s Hindi novel ‘PehlaGirmitiya’, first published in 1999, won Vyas Samman in 2000 has been translated into English by Prof Prajapati Shah as ‘The Girmitiya Saga’ looks closely and affectionately at the life of Gandhi, his years of struggle in South Africa, trying to show his awareness of his own status as a girmitiya and identifying with the fate of all girmitiyas and allowed him to fashion the tools of struggle against oppressive regimes. The sahib becomes the prime coolie, the first and foremost girmitiya in this saga. To quote from the novel:

“right there on the shore, the
men had their names on paper
girmitis; after these agreements
were sealed, they had each
been given a blanket, several
article of clothing and a round
bottomed brass lota to celebrate
their now found status as
girmitias”.(204)

Sea of Poppies presents the life of the girmitiyas on their wooden mai-baap ibis. The novel portrays their life very vividly and in its fullest detail. Hugon’s report quoted in TJC is a very close indicator of the kind of life the inhabitants of dabusa had. They were” put under hatches and guards-robbed and pillaged of the advances made to them by the Mauritian agents in Calcutta-shipped in large numbers on board vessels, without the requisite accommodation, food, or medical attendance”(152). Their sub-human plight and the mechanism of their double jeopardy in the presence of a clear-cut two tiered structure of authority over them find place in it. The white man controls the ship and runs it, but the immediate control is in the hands of the brown sahibs. The white man see the coolies in essentialistic and derogatory manner, but also do the brown sahibs like Bhyro Singh. His position is affirmed by the captain of the ship who tells coolies:” While you are on her[Ibis], you must obey SubedarBhyro Singh as you would your own zemindars, and as he obeys me. It is he who knows your ways and traditions, and while we are at sea he will be your mai-baap, just as I am his”(Ghosh 599). In the intricate hierarchy of the ship Singh asserts his superiority to the coolies of his own skin colour and nationality by distancing himself successfully from them. Not only the Subedarbut also the other members of his group do the same. Moreover, the non white leasers and even Neel see the coolies as some kind of abomination coming straight from hell. There were Indians on the ship that wielded power and also the weapons that showed tangibly who had the power. They looked at the girmitiyas as if they were animals

and used their power arbitrarily and selfishly. Subedar Bhyro Singh's treatment of the coolies, especially the way he abuses Ah Fatt and Neel is only one of many such instances. He is an active collaborator with the empire. Such persons played central role in maintaining the rule of the empire. "These collaborators were used by the colonialists but also made use of their rulers to serve their own interests... the periphery did not accept passively what the centre imposed on it but shaped the imperial impact to a large extent"(Rothermund 23).

In the novel 'Pehla Girmitiya' in Pietermaritzburg, on 7 June 1893, a 24 year old attorney, M.K. Gandhi recently arrived on South African shores on a year's girmitiya (contract) is thrown out of a first class compartment of a train from Durban to Pretoria and the rest is our history. As Mandela famously said, 'You gave us Mohandas; we returned him to you as Mahatma Gandhi.' Gandhi had come to Durban to fight a lawsuit for Dada Abdullah and Co. tasting the racial discrimination that plagued the land at that time and his subsequent experiences in South Africa, he became sensitive to the plight of the girmitiyas (bonded labours). Suspended between despair and a hope for an implausible escape to their promised land, the girmitiyas found in this young attorney a voice that would guide them to a new dawn. A flesh-and-blood human being, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is an average man who finds himself, along with many others, in a particular historical and sociological configuration that sets him off on a life-altering path-towards becoming the Mahatma. Reviewing the novel 'The Girmitiya Saga', English version of the Hindi novel 'Pehla Girmitiya' Ms. Aparna Thomas has written in Amazon.com: 'I have always been in awe of Mahatma Gandhi. But I was also curious about what kind of experience could make him the Mahatma who created history. The Girmitiya Saga is a novel that will answer such questions'.

In his interview with Sheela Reddy, Amitav Ghosh talks about "the moment of departure". These people belonged to far away from the sea and were connected to their land and milieu very strongly. It was not at all easy to make one's mind strong enough to withstand the cutting away from one's roots. In the novel, Deeti is given the choice in Chhapra. She is actually in need of a way to save her life and that of her husband and going away will be the best choice. Yet, she'll have to abandon her daughter Kabutri forever. There is also the fear of the unseen and unnamed: "How could he conceive that she would go to a place which was, for all she knew, inhabited by demons and pishaches, not to speak of all kinds of unnameable beasts? How could he, Kalua, or anyone else, know that it wasn't true that the recruits were being fattened for the slaughter?" (Ghosh 303). It is not just in Deeti that the fear based on meagre or even no information is strong and conspicuous. In dabusa, when Jhagru tells people about the ferocious wild animals and serpents of Mauritius, Paulette's telling them that it was false as there were no snakes. There were many more such fear inducing myths associated with the unknown island among the coolies. One such myth was the mimiaikatel myth according to which labourers were hung upside down to extract oil from their head in the French colonies. When the coolies in the novel reach Ganga-Sagar they feel the pull of their land the most. It is the point of no return that forces them to act irrationally and even risk their lives in their attempt to return. But return was not going to be easy. Although the term of their indenture was five years, a large number was to perish before the completion of that term, as the Subedar tells Deeti that her jora was destined for a farm on which his death was certain. Those who survived theoretically had the option of returning home, but even they were not free to do so. Their return did not benefit the plantation economy. So the magnets of the island contrived many effective ways to prevent the return of the machine who worked on their plantations. It was only the fortunate few who returned to their janambhoomi.

The idea of diaspora as migration and colonization signifies a collective trauma, a banishment where one dreams of home but live in an exile. Thus the idea of diaspora acknowledges that notion of the old-country deep in language, religion, culture or folklore and a migratory person is always linked with its past history. Ghosh's Sea of Poppies refers to the labour diaspora with its mercantile history. In this novel we find the diasporic consciousness evolves among workers and they are addressed as 'girmitiya' noticeably. The very word has come from the root of element. They were labours by agreement. Giriraj Kishore's significant book pehlagirmitiya is a substantial informant in this account and how Gandhiji identifies himself with the fate of all girmitiyas.

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