

Review Article

Odyssey and Ordeal of Indentured Indians in the Colonial Era in Ghosh's Sea of Poppies

Dr. Ganga Nand Singh^{1*}, Mr. Rahul Kumar Gupta²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vinoba Bhave University, Vinoba Bhave University Rd, Sindoor, Hazaribagh, Jharkhand 825301, India

²Research Scholar, Department of English, Vinoba Bhave University, Vinoba Bhave University Rd, Sindoor, Hazaribagh, Jharkhand 825301, India

Article History

Received: 18.06.2021

Accepted: 25.07.2021

Published: 27.07.2021

Journal homepage:

<https://www.easpublisher.com>

Quick Response Code



Abstract: This study is an attempt to assess the two-edged system of Indentured Labour that was practiced in colonized India during the pre-independence period. In this malpractice laborers were sent outside their native land for earning their livelihood, but on the other hand they were misguided and misled to misery. Each aspect of the migrant workers is discussed in detail. The implication of the indentured and why it was so will be covered. The indentured laborers have to sign a bond to work outside their native land for a limited period as a (girmitiya) and were compelled to live a miserable life, which could also be termed as social death. The critical approach to the lives of the migrant workers and their life will be taken into concern in this work. How the system still prevails in modern India in camouflage will also be the point, and what are its impact on the modern generation will be also taken into consideration.

Keywords: Ancient, Jingoism, Displacement, Bonded Labor, Malpractice, Ordeal, Girmitiya, usurped, Slavery, Migration, Agony.

Copyright © 2021 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most prolific writers of contemporary India, he writes with nobility and diction. His sea of poppies briefly describes and throws light on the life of indentured labor, system, and their emigration from their Native land in the colonial era under British rule. The reason for the plight of the workers, their social and economic condition, why they choose to be indentured, the pressure of the Britishers, etc. after being girmitiya will be positively taken into account without harming anyone's perspective.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this research paper is to unfold the socio- economic condition of India in the colonial era under the East India Company that started to build and extend colonies in various parts of India. This will also peel off the barbaric conditions that the Indians suffered during that time and highlight the acute financial crisis that facilitated imperialism and colonialism. An overview of the indentured labor system (girmitiya) will also be covered in a wide range concerning the state of the early 18th century India.

Causes of this girmitiya will further be taken into account. This write up will also summarise the abominable slavery system that continued from the early 19th century and in what way it has affected the Indians in past and present. Relevance of colonial aftermath in modern perspective would be spotlighted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Faizan Fahim, "It is a long book, with a detailed history of characters, and their journey to the ship. With a large cast and separate motivation, arc, and theme of each character, the book remains shallow in terms of story. But maybe the Sea of Poppies is not about the story, but the journey of these characters – both physically and spiritually".

Peter Berard, May 9, 2019, in his journal says that "This makes it sound like it's about the history, which it isn't entirely. It is about characters getting swept up in forces beyond their control, from political economy to love to addiction. It's also about the rough and ready adjustments people make on the fly to clashes of culture. Ghosh delights in the different dialects,

including trade pidgin and the argot of the lascars, the sailors of the Indian Ocean”.

According to Farrar, Straus & Giroux in the *New Yorker*, October 20, 2008, “Ghosh’s best and most ambitious work yet is an adventure story set in nineteenth-century Calcutta against the backdrop of the Opium Wars. On the *Ibis*, a ship engaged in transporting opium across the Bay of Bengal, varied life stories converge. A fallen raja, a half-Chinese convict, a plucky American sailor, a widowed opium farmer, a transgendered religious visionary is all united by the “smoky paradise” of the opium seed. Ghosh writes with impeccable control, and with a vivid and sometimes surprising imagination: a woman’s tooth protrudes “like a tilted gravestone”; an opium addict’s writhing spasms are akin to “looking at a pack of rats squirming in a sack”; the body of a young man is “a smoking crater that had just risen from the ocean and was still waiting to be explored.”

Though a lot has been said on opium wars, addiction and plight of people during colonial reign, this paper will attempt to explore the unexplored abominable and unfortunate system of indentured laborers.

Textual Study

Before coming of the British rule, India was generally considered as a Golden bird but after the Britishers captured India; the Indian society, its happiness, love and life became hellish. During the British rule, the colonizers forcefully tried to capture the marginalized people of Indian society for their pleasure and profit. Indians were so innocent by nature that it was very easy to manipulate them especially the ones who belonged to the marginal areas and class.

Girmitiya, Indentured labor or Slavery system- all are interrelated in the colonial impact. After the inception of the East India Company, they started to build colonies and started annexing rural areas. Thereafter, they started to befool the poor villagers and send them to distant lands outside their native land including places like Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, etc. The people were mainly from Bihar, Bengal and the drought - ridden districts of Tamil Nadu. These people had to sign a bond to work for five years as indentured laborer. Similarly, after the indentured labor system, the slavery system was also developed in many parts across the globe and is present till date but in a different form like child labour, bonded labour etc. Today, it is considered to be an evil practice in India and across the globe. In the slavery system, people were compelled to work under them with no time limit, rest and proper diet. The one who was a slave could never be free from slavery and their freedom when he or she grew old would be in death or murder only.

Talking about the Sea of poppies, Amitav Ghosh has beautifully portrayed the indentured system in his narrative. The novel is a motley array of sailors and stowaways, coolies and convicts sailing down the Hooghly aboard the *Ibis* on its way to Mauritius. The odyssey of the indentured begins at the onset and their voyage across the Indian ocean as though washes away the old family ties to encounter an ordeal in the remote islands. Circumstances compel Deeti and her second husband, a lower caste man named Kalua to escape from the atrocities they would have faced in the caste and class ridden Indian society. Here, Kalua is an ox cart puller that rescues Deeti, a widow, who was going to perform Sati after the death of her husband Hukam Singh, a worker and drug addict in the Opium Factory of Ghaziabad. Deeti as a link character is carried throughout the Ghosh’s *Ibis* Trilogy. She belongs to the upper-class society and it was a very shameful act for her family that she ran away while performing sati with the help of a lower caste man Kalua. Now, it was tough for her family to survive in their village as casteism was hyperactive at that time. So, Deeti and Kalua decided to abscond from there and disguise themselves with another name and sign as (Aditi) later in the novel on the ship, *Ibis*.

‘Girmitiya’ is a term that means agreement or bond. Coercion or Indentured in India started in 1834 and lasted up till 1922. Despite having been officially banned in 1917 by the British after untiring efforts and pressure from the freedom fighter like Mahatma Gandhi, India’s Imperial Legislative Council continued it. Talking about the endangered system that Indians suffered on a major platform, first of all, the laborers had to sign an agreement to work under their respective masters as a slave. They were sent outside their native country for 5 years. They were even promised a good profitable amount as their income for their family. They were even convinced that their traveling, logistic criteria will be on a cruise like a ship and they will be living in a proper hygiene and amiable environment, but the scene was just the opposite. They were not provided the promised facilities and not even paid what they were told earlier. As a result of the deceit, eventually the convicts were handled by the other person or agent who was in charge of them now. The recruitment of indentured laborers was done based on their physical fitness and abilities.

Similar was with the plight and pain of the female indentured laborers. Their recruitment was done based on their skills and appearance. They were generally used for housekeeping, cleaning, cooking and looking after the young ones and personal pleasures. They were even used for physical pleasures by the privileged class. And when they grew old, they were sent or sold in the market for other purposes: rather abandoned as were of no use and as if they were materials or commodity. They were persuaded to be

paid a good and handsome amount for their work, but it was not so, they were not even paid half of the wages which they were told earlier.

The lifestyle of the indentured laborers was horrible and unbearable at that time. When any of the laborers' became ill then he or she was never treated with medicines nor taken to doctors for their recovery rather they were left alone on the mercy of God and with no food or shelter. the social condition of the indentured laborers during the colonial period. The following excerpt from *Sea of Poppies* bears witness to the fact about the social condition of the indentured laborers during the colonial period:

“None of the girmityas was allowed to leave the depot to see what happened, so no one could say anything to a contrary when a vendor whispered through the fence that the boy had not been cremated at all: a hole had been bored in his skull and his corpse had been hung up by the heels, to extract the oil- the mimiai-ka-tel- from his brain” (SoP,340)

Amitav Ghosh, verily mentions the social and economic condition of the people in the *Sea of Poppies*. One of the characters Neel Ratan Halder, who was the king of the Rakshali State, on charges of forgery was also sent to jail and in jail the food which he was getting was pathetic in taste and unhygienic. The following lines express the abominable condition of the indentured:

“That he would choke on anything other than The most delicate food but already Many days had passed since he'd eaten anything but the cheapest daal and coarsest rice, small in grain, veined with red and weighted with a great quantity of tooth-shattering conkers and grit-yet his appetite had never been more robust”. (SoP,326)

Further, talking about the slavery system it has been observed to be similar to the Indentured labor system. However, on a broader perspective, the difference is that in the indentured labor system a person had to sign a bond and work under for a limited period (approx. 5 years) and was sent overseas, out of his native land of their own free will whereas in the slavery system, it is not so as slaves have no choice. At least there is a time bound or time limit because he or she is working for the benefit of his or her family in the indentured servitude contract whereas slavery is unpaid debt bondage. Talking about *Sea of Poppies*, Amitav Ghosh has portrayed the co-existence of all the characters. There are various characters in *Sea of Poppies*. With variable dialects on the *Ibis*. Upper class as well as lower-class characters mingle at a place on *Ibis* in the narrative and bias is nowhere in the air of *Ibis*. Amitav Ghosh always looks at everyone from the impartial point of view. For him, there is no caste

distinction or class conflict. As a writer and an anthropologist, he knows the value of social life and he had a keen observation of the relation between human beings and nature. So, we can find various characters of various places under one roof that is *Ibis*.

There is a slight difference between the Indentured labor system of males and females.. Men and women were not treated impartially in any respect during slavery. They were treated brutally but as compared to men, women were exploited a lot more. After being sent overseas to earn with the male members, they had to look for the overall requirements. They were brutally tortured, sexually harassed and used as entertainment material by their masters. When they grew old and physically weak, they were disregarded for their works and duties. Going back to the colonized period, the condition of Indian females workers was not good. When the British came and captured India and built colonies the condition of the Indian women started deteriorating. Even their small children were not spared at that time and were also sometimes sold for profit.

During the Colonial rule the indentured labor system was at its peak and started to uproot the culture and civilization of India. During that time the social and economic condition of India was usurped by the British. The Indians had no option rather than to follow the rules of the British government as we were being ruled at that time. Many critics say that Indians were compelled to do so. As we Indians have a habit or curiosity of adapting to any new thing which we come across, most Indians adapted to the British conditions in no time. Before colonisation, India was a country that was untouched by the technologies and developments of Britishers. But soon as the Britishers came to India, they started to capture Indians and also the fertile lands that were used for agriculture by Indians to use them for Industrial purpose and gradually to impart their own culture. They build Christian missionaries and raised Christianity. Many abominable situations were upcoming at that time making the life of Indians full of misery.

Sea of Poppies beautifully portrays the life of the characters. The people who were sent to Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, etc. They belonged to various caste, but after that they were on the ship, they were all one and known as “jahaj bhais and jahaj behens”. It is very interesting to note that all the characters are from various places and diverse identity but they behave as they are alike. When the characters are on the ship *Ibis* and traveling to Mauritius, their identity change from what they were before, like Neil Ratan Halder was the king of Rakshali but he is now a culprit, he is accused of forgery in his own state. He is now sent to live in the prison as a suspect where he came across Afatt (now the second man on *Ibis*) who is also prisoned. It is observed

that the life and name of most of the characters do change while going overseas with passage of time.

The indentured System is also referred to as the *girmitiya*. For the Indians were brainwashed in such a manner that they started to believe that going overseas meant living and enjoying a newly wealthy life, and for them it was a golden opportunity and their family members to survive. With no other option left, they started to embrace *girmitiya*. And due to this misbelief gradually their misery and poverty started as a *girmitiya*. Likewise, Deeti here, one of the prime characters feels that the ship *Ibis* was like an excellent future and one day she will be on the ship *Ibis* and her life will change. Kalua, who is the another prime character of *Sea of Poppies* also suffers from poverty and class bias. Being a low-caste man and an ox cart man of *Gazipur*, he was one of the victims of poverty. An unbelievable, inhuman and cruel incident happened in his life during a wrestling match in which he was promised a bullock-cart by the *sahib* of *Ghazipur*, but he got his first defeat and for this, he was forced to mate with a large black mare. This cruel incident bears witness to the life struggle of the marginal people that was controlled by the upper or privileged class and how such incidents inspired the indentured system.

Talking further about the life and struggle of indentured labor, it would be not wrong to say that their lives were not of their own. They were purchased by the rich owners of factories and industries which produced sugar, cotton and also of tea plantations as well as rail constructions. Migrant workers tried to oppose the *girmitiya* system but failed. Many unresponded petitions were sent to the agents of the colonial government who rather were the powerful ministers and in charge of the indentured system.

Though the indentured labor system had ended long back, the Indians still faced racism. It was reinforced by the British empire in the middle of the 19th century which led to the displacement of about 3.5 million Indians to other British colonies outside their Native places. Mahatma Gandhi played a vital role in wrecking of the emigration of laborers. He sent many letters and petitions through his men present in *Mauritius* because he had visited there and seen the plight of the indentured laborers very closely. He was deeply touched by their pain and sufferings. Even the food that was given to them was not enough to fill their empty stomach because they were brutally forced and beaten to work for 14 to 18 hours. M.K Gandhi in his "My Experimental with Truth and Phela *Girmitya*" has presented a true picture about the indentured or *girmitiya* system. He was the one whose strength and untiring efforts finally ended the horrible indentured system.

However, when we see this term in today's context on a broader platform then it is hard to say that India is free from the indentured or slavery system. Rooted in the early 18th-century *girmitiya* system generally stuck to the mentality of the Indians, due to their nature of adapting new things easily. The *girmitiya* system is even present in today's society in another new form. Today, we see rich families keeping maidens or caretakers for looking after their family and their social needs. For all these kinds of requirements, they need a person who leaves all the things behind and takes care and works for them full time. What is it after all? Undoubtedly, it is also called slavery or the indentured, indentured in the context because today in India there are also many families which are below the poverty line, and in today's materialistic life, it is very tough for them to earn and fulfill his/her family needs. So, despite all these things, they leave their families and accelerate themselves in search of work no matter whatever it may be. In my point of view, it is also a kind of slavery or *girmitiya*. But in the modern perspective, there is no constrain of time limit, they (workers) are free to leave and join new assignment whenever they want as there is no provision of bond system. But as India is a very large country, there are certain places where *girmitiya* or slavery is also present and the appeals of people for help from the state government for liberation is an evidence of the fact. Even there are some places across the globe where this system is running but it is not on alarge scale.

But the indentured or slavery system that was present in the colonial period has changed its form when considered in today's modern slavery or *girmitiya* system. It's a matter of fact that it is present today and there are some places where it exists. People who are working in multinational companies or factories or any other field do not get the job at their native areas where they are located. For it, they have to often go overseas or outside their native land for their livelihood. They work under their respective areas of interest but they have to follow some guidelines i.e the criteria for working under the following areas. They are not free from hard and fast working schedule and cannot act according to their willingness and choices. In my observation it means that they are also bound to work according to the specific terms and criteria. In other words, they also suffer a kind of indentured or *girmitiya* but in the modern context there are variable flexibilities.

Observing the indentured laborers over decades, it has been found that there are two faces of the indentured or *girmitiya* system -one side is the exploitation of the poor and the other is the financial upliftment of the governing bodies. It is always observed that one's loss is another's profit. It is psychological that one who becomes rich tries to capture and exploit the weaker for their benefit. Divide and rule which was brought by the Britishers in India

over a period ago is still infact present in our Indian societies and even it can be observed in many of the Indian families today. So, from my point of perception, it would not be true to say that the girmitiya or the indentured labor system has completely disappeared from our society. This system though abolished in the late 19th century but its branches and leaves have fallen in many parts across the globe and its not so active but yet growing in new form. We agree that this evil system needs to be abolished irrespective of the fact that there are some urgencies due to which one is compelled to do so: may be because of the profitable capital for his /her families and their due share in the society.

CONCLUSION

Being an Anthropologist as well as Historian and one of the finest contemporary Indian authors, Amitav Ghosh has an amazing feature by which he connects to the core elements of the Indian society. Sea of Poppies has opened windows into the past divulging British colonialism, subjugation of the Indians, Chinese dual character etc. which most of our generation have little or no idea about though most of us have studied in India. He builds up a healthy relationship with his characters in the play. By taking into account his works of fiction and non-fiction, we see that he generally puts his effort into showing transparency about the conditions of the marginals. All his works connect and build up a bond between the readers and the characters. Similarly, in Sea of Poppies he beautifully paints the lamentable state of the Indian society during the

colonial period. The slavery system and patriarchal society of India move live before our eyes. He introduces us to the real situation of the colonial period. Through Sea of Poppies, he brainstorms the readers to retrospect and introspect the situations and conspiracies that are even present in our today's society which have deep rooted as an aftermath from the early colonized era. It was hard time for any Indian to go through that nightmarish dying situation during the colonial rule and should be a lesson for every Indian today to go for self rule and save the integrity and sovereignty of their country and people by unitedly fighting the evils of foreign rule.

REFERENCES

- Ghosh, A. (2008). *Sea of Poppies*. Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2009.
- Ghosh, A. (2011). *River of Smoke*. Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2012.
- Ghosh, A. (2015). *Flood of Fire*. Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2016.
- *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh, Book Review | The Ship Ride (bookaapi.com)
- Review- Ghosh, "Sea of Poppies" – Too Much Berard
- *Sea of Poppies*, The New Yorker.
- Indian indenture system - Wikipedia.
- Indenture: A new system of slavery? South African History Online (sahistory.org.za)

Cite This Article: Ganga Nand Singh & Rahul Kumar Gupta (2021). *Odyssey and Ordeal of Indentured Indians in the Colonial Era in Ghosh's Sea of Poppies*. *East African Scholars J Edu Humanit Lit*, 4(7), 297-301.