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The Creation of Diaspora and its Historical Significance: A Study of Amitav Ghosh's 'Sea of Poppies'

Nandini C Sen

The Unknown Immigrant

History turning a blind eye bore him not witness;
history standing mute told not his full story;
he who first had watered this land with his sweat,
and turned stone into green fields of gold;
the first immigrant — he, son of this land,
he was mine, he was yours, he was our very own

(inscription on *Apravasi Ghat*, Mauritius)

The word *diaspora* is derived from a Greek verb that means ‘to sow’, or ‘to scatter’; its tri-consonantal root takes various forms with the addition of vowels, and gives us ‘spore’, ‘sperm’, ‘spread’, and ‘disperse’. Today, ‘diaspora’ refers to dispersed populations that, like seeds scattered away from the parental body of the homeland, do not assimilate completely but rather manage to reproduce in new sites of settlement a social formation, a culture and an identity that remains linked to the homeland.

Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* is the first of a trilogy in which a large ship, the *Ibis*, sets sail with a host of motley travellers who are forced to sever their ties with

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their motherland. As the ship sails into *Mareech Dweep* or Mauritius, the old ties of caste, class and language loosen to form a new set of relationships and cultures which are modified to suit present-day circumstances.

The *Sea of Poppies* is a stunningly vibrant and intensely human work. At the heart of this epic saga is the ship, *Ibis*, on a tumultuous voyage across the Indian Ocean to the Mauritian islands. As for the people on board, they are an array of sailors and stowaways, *coolies*, and convicts. In a time of colonial upheaval in the mid-nineteenth century, fate has thrown together a truly diverse cast of Indians and Westerners, from a bankrupt Raja to a widowed village-woman, from a *mulatto* American to a free-spirited European orphan. As they sail down the Hooghly River and into the sea, their old family ties are washed away, and they view themselves as *jahaj-bhais* or ship-brothers, who are to build new lives for themselves in the remote islands where they are being taken to. It is the beginning of a new saga where destiny rules and, yet, the human will remains equally predominant. The historical adventure is played out on the poppy fields by the Ganga and relates to the opium wars of China.

The novel begins with the creation of a *motif* that lasts throughout the novel. The ship *Ibis* appears in Diti's dream, as she instantaneously recognises it to be a portent of her future. Diti has a little shrine which not only caters to the gods she worships, but acts as a storehouse for her personal pantheon housing within it tokens of her family. With an uncanny ability to make drawings, Diti preserves her memories in crude art forms. Knowing full-well that she has never cast her eyes on a ship, Diti is able to draw the *Ibis* in which she is to sail later. She also places it in her *puja* room. The *Ibis*, thus, becomes one of the relics of the past that will anchor Diti to her motherland once she settles down in Mauritius under the strangely adopted clan name of Maddow Colver. Describing this portent, Ghosh (2008, 3) writes:

The vision of the tall-masted ship, at sail on the ocean, came to Diti on an otherwise ordinary day, but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream: how could she have, living as she did in northern Bihar, four hundred miles from the coast? Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the netherworld: it was the chasm of darkness where the Holy Ganga disappeared into the 'kala pani', the 'black water'.

In his earlier novels, Ghosh has dealt with the diasporic phenomenon in a 'Fosterian liberal-humanist' manner. The figure of the benevolent historical searcher, who continues to traverse and analyse the world from his particular vantage point and treating national borders as 'shadowy lines', continues to remain one of Ghosh's favourite *motifs*. His female searcher, Ila traverses boundaries without realising the differences between countries and, yet, is being subjected to the ignominies of racism. Thamma, in *Shadow Lines*, does the proverbial 'coming back' when she goes to her hometown in Dhaka. However, the homecoming is far from being what she had expected. Caught in the riots, she loses her son who, in a sense, sacrifices himself for the cause of humanity.

In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh attempts to recreate the voyage of the *girmitiyas* to the *Isle de Maurice* or the 'land of pepper'. The motley group of travellers comprises a fairly mismatched collection of men and women from different strands of society. The characters are fairly uni-dimensional, and they do not grow through the novel. The central focus of the book is on the ship and the parts through which it is sailing: the chapters are, therefore, titled 'River', 'Sea', and such like. Among the fairly prominent figures in this rather lengthy saga are Diti, the poor and hapless wife of an opium addict, Hukum Singh; Kalua, a *chamar*, who lives in the adjacent *basti*; Neel Rattan, the Raja of Rashkhali; Ah Fahtt, the Chinese convict; Paulette, the daughter of a Frenchman who is an outcast in English society; Zacharay Black, who is later discovered to have a *mulatto* mother; and Babu Nob Kissin, a devout Bengali in search of religious fulfilment. Together they sail on the *Ibis* and their lives become intertwined forever. In the words of Paulette (Ghosh, 2008, 356):

On a boat of pilgrims, no-one can lose caste and everyone is the same. It's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we shall all be ship siblings: *jahaj bhais* and *jahaj bahins*.

Historical Background to the Novel

Sea of Poppies is set against the backdrop of the opium trade in which the British East India Company (BEIC) indulged. Opium would be transported from the fields of Ghazipur and taken to the shores of Canton. This was a great source of revenue for the British. Ships flying the British flag began to appear infrequently around the coasts of China from 1635 onwards without establishing formal relations through

the tributary system, and British merchants were allowed to trade in the ports of Zhoushan and Xiamen, in addition to Guangzhou (Canton). Trade benefitted after the Qing relaxed maritime trade restrictions in the 1680s, and after Taiwan came under Qing control in 1683. Canton (Guangzhou) was the port of preference for most foreign trade. Though ships did try to call at other ports, they did not match the benefits of Canton's geographic location at the mouth of the Pearl River trade network and the port's long experience in balancing the demands of Peking (Beijing) with those of other Chinese and foreign merchants. From 1700 to 1842, Canton came to dominate maritime trade with China, and this period became known as the 'Canton System'. Official British trade was conducted through the auspices of the BEIC who held a royal charter for trade with the Far East, and the company gradually came to dominate Sino-European trade from its strategic position in India.

Low Chinese demand for European merchandise and high European demand for Chinese goods (including tea, silk, and porcelain), forced European merchants to purchase these goods with silver, the only commodity the Chinese would accept. In modern economic terms, the Chinese were demanding hard currency as the medium of exchange for international trade in their goods. From the mid-seventeenth century, around 28 million kilograms of silver was received by China, principally from European powers, in exchange for Chinese merchandise. In the eighteenth century, despite ardent protests from the Qing government, British traders began importing opium from India. Because of its strong mass appeal and addictive nature, opium was an effective solution to the British trade problem. An instant consumer market for the drug was secured by the addiction of thousands of Chinese, and the flow of silver was reversed. Recognising the growing number of addicts, the Yongzheng Emperor prohibited the sale and smoking of opium in 1729 and only allowed a small quantity of opium imports for medicinal purposes.

Following the Battle of Plassey in 1757, after which Britain annexed Bengal, the BEIC had a monopoly on production and export of Indian opium. This monopoly was extended in 1773 when the British Governor-General of Bengal abolished the opium syndicate at Patna. For the next 50 years, the opium trade would be the key to the BEIC's stranglehold on the sub-continent. Considering that the importation of opium into China had been virtually banned by Chinese law, the BEIC established an elaborate trading scheme, partially relying on legal markets and partially leveraging illicit ones. British merchants carrying no opium would buy tea in Canton on

credit, and would balance their debts by selling opium at auction in Calcutta. From there, the opium would reach the Chinese coast hidden aboard British ships, and then smuggled into China by native merchants. In 1797, the company further tightened its grip on the opium trade by enforcing direct trade between opium farmers and the British, thus ending the role of Bengali purchasing agents. British opium exports to China grew from an estimated 15 tons in 1730 to 75 tons in 1773. In 1799, the Qing Empire reinstated its ban on opium imports, but the decree had little effect. The Qing government, seated in Peking (Beijing) in the north of the Chinese mainland, was unable to stop opium smuggling in the southern Chinese provinces. A porous Chinese border and rampant local demand only encouraged the BEIC, which had its monopoly on the opium trade recognised by the British government, which itself needed silver to boost its economy. By the 1820s, China was importing 900 tons of Bengali opium annually, and this eventually led to the Opium Wars between 1839 and 1842.

In the *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh explores the Indian connection in the opium trade by tracing it to the opium factories of Ghazipur. He also shows how some of the Indian landed gentry collaborated with the British in this trade and shared in the massive profits made. The Raja of Rashkhali, Neel's father, had amassed a huge fortune from collaborating with Mr Burnham in the opium trade. Neel, however, knew very little of what went on, and in a conversation with Mr Burnham he discusses the trade and expresses the view that he regards it as 'immoral'. Mr Burnham, of course, defends the colonial position on the opium trade and vociferously justifies the BEIC's presence on the shores of Canton (Ghosh, 2008, 75):

'Well, then it falls upon me to inform you, Sir', said Mr Burnham, 'that of late the officials in Canton have been moving forcefully to end the inflow of opium into China. It is the unanimous opinion of all of us who do business there that the mandarins cannot be allowed to have their way. To end the trade would be ruinous — for firms like mine, but also for you and for all of India.'

'Ruinous?', said Neel mildly. 'But surely we can offer China something more useful than opium.'

'Would that it were so', said Mr Burnham. 'But it is not. To put the matter simply: there is nothing they want from us — they've got it into their heads that they have no use for our products and manufactures. But we, on the

other hand, can't do without their tea and their silks. If not for opium, the drain of silver from Britain and her colonies would be too great to sustain.'

The factory at Ghazipur is depicted as a frightening place. Even approaching the outskirts of the factory makes one nauseous, as Diti, Kabutari, Kalua and even the oxen start to sneeze as they are assailed by the fumes that emanate from the building. Diti's tour of the factory further emphasises the pathetic conditions of the men who are forced to work there as labourers. Drugged by the fumes and tortured by physical chastisement, these men exist in a ghost-like state, only to subsequently waste away in death (Ghosh, 2008, 64):

Now, once again, Deeti was taken aback by the space ahead, but this time not because of the vastness of its dimensions, but rather the opposite — it was like a dim tunnel, lit only by a few small holes in the wall. The air inside was hot and fetid, like that of a closed kitchen, except that the smell was not of spices and oil, but of liquid opium, mixed with the dull stench of sweat — a reek so powerful that she had to pinch her nose to keep herself from gagging. No sooner had she steadied herself, than her eyes were met by a startling sight — a host of dark, legless torsos were circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons. This vision — along with the overpowering fumes — made her groggy, and to keep herself from fainting she began to move slowly ahead. When her eyes had grown more accustomed to the gloom, she discovered the secret of those circling torsos: they were bare-bodied men, sunk waist deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge. Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading. When they could move no more, they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze with only their feet. These seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed red in the dark and they appeared completely naked, their loincloths — if indeed they had any — being so steeped in the drug to be indistinguishable from their skin. Almost as frightening were the white overseers who were patrolling the walkways — for not only were they coatless and hatless, with their sleeves rolled, but they were also armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, glass ladles, and long-handled rakes.

Gender and Diaspora

Women play a significant role in this novel, because it is entirely through their interventions that a code of conduct for the shipmates is decided. Gender and diaspora is a much debated issue, and the two questions most often asked are 'whether women are empowered or victimised in the diaspora?', and 'whether the lives of diasporic women are more constrained by patriarchy or by racism?' *Sea of Poppies* sees women as doers and actors with a definite purpose to their actions. The two significant women characters are Diti and Paulette. The other women, Ratna, Heeru and Sarju, too, show a lot of determination and courage in the decision they make to leave their homeland in search of a new life.

Diti is married off to Hukum Singh, an opium addict whose passion for opium renders him helpless in the situation of oppression he faces in his own home. On the night of his marriage to Diti, as he lies drugged with opium, his brother rapes the newly wed wife. Diti, who had been forced to involuntarily inhale the opium fumes, loses consciousness but later understands that she had been duped. Slowly, the truth dawns on her and she begins to hate her brother-in-law with a great vengeance. She, of course, bears no ill-will towards her daughter, whom she nurtures with love. However, upon Hukum Singh's death, when his brother openly asks her to become his wife, Diti rebels. Quietly, she sends her daughter away to her brother's place where she knows that the girl will be taken care of. Having closed all doors to escaping her rather dismal situation, Diti agrees to become a *sati* and burn on the funeral pyre with her husband. She drugs herself with opium and it is a completely intoxicated Diti who is carried up to the pyre from where Kalua, a man of the *chamar* caste whom Diti was secretly attracted to, rescues her. When Diti comes by, she is grateful for a new life she can now have with Kalua — it is as if she is reborn (Ghosh, 2008, 184):

Even then she did not feel herself to be living in the same sense as before: a curious feeling of joy mixed with resignation crept into her heart, for it was as if she really had died and been delivered betimes [in good time] in rebirth to her next life. She had shed the body of [the] old Diti, with the burden of its *karma*: she had paid the price her stars had demanded of her, and was free now to create a new destiny as she willed, with whom she chose — and she knew that it would be with Kalua that her life would be lived, until another death claimed the body that he had torn from the flames.

Paulette, too, is depicted as an exemplary woman who forsakes her *memsahib* status to join the crew of the *Ibis* in order to leave the Burnham home where she is soon to be betrothed to a judge, which is perceived as a great honour amongst the white population of Calcutta. She had a peculiar upbringing in which her father, a Frenchman, is treated as an outcast in the English society of Calcutta as he had avidly supported the French Revolution. She loses her mother at birth and is brought up by a poor Muslim boatman's wife, Tantima. Tantima's son, Jodu, becomes her brother and playmate and Bangla becomes the first language that she learns to speak. From her father she inherits a passion for botany and it is the quest for locating certain species of plants which takes her to Mauritius. Her escape from the Burnham home and her boarding of the *Ibis* under the pseudonym 'Putli' is extremely dramatic. Her ability to camouflage herself as a Bengali woman and, later, her masquerading as a man are what fairytales are made of. Though Paulette's character is singularly unique and painted in rather hyperbolic terms, she becomes Ghosh's mouthpiece to exemplify a rare synthesis of humanity: from being an outcast among the glitzy white population of Calcutta, which survives essentially on pretence, to being the *jehaj behen* of poor indentured labourers. Her love for Zacharay (the *mulatto* American) and Jodu (the poor Muslim boatman's son) exemplifies the rare spirit of humanity which propels Paulette to love across borders or boundaries and across race and class.

By depicting the women characters with definite agency or actionable intention, Ghosh seems to answer the questions articulated earlier in their favour. In times of turmoil and displacement, women are able to shake off the shackles of patriarchy and make choices based on their prevailing circumstances. However, this freedom is short-lived. Slowly, when the newly formed societies crystallise, they revert to the old order. Women are, yet again, relegated to their former position of being imprisoned within patriarchal structures.

Caste and Diaspora

One of the important concerns of diasporic Indian communities continues to be the caste system or the *varnashram* as practised within the Indian sub-continent. The *varnashram* divides the Hindu community into caste orders which forms an integral part of the identity formation of a person. Even today, many atrocities are committed in the name of the caste hierarchy and, more often than not, the caste factor features in the manifestos of many party-political candidates.

However, in the *girmit* experience, rigid caste structures tend to crumble under the pressures of creating new communities. Most researches on *girmit* communities reveal that local caste groups could not exist due to the lack of local caste-based authorities, and the impossibility of maintaining ritual purity under indentureship. Moreover, a gendered study shows that women who are treated as equal workers on plantations often choose their own partners, thus destabilising the traditional *varnashram* as practised back in India. The other argument often articulated while debating caste issues among the *girmits* is that since most people belong to lower caste categories, there is a deliberate effort to erase caste identities. Satendra Nandan argues: 'In the epic of the *girmit* people, a deeper multitudinous [vast] world is revealed. We become aware of the range of human experience: indigeneity [poverty], power, home, migration, rootlessness, survival: in short, other worlds' (Paranjape, 2001, 304). As equal workers on colonial plantations, women had more freedom and control over their own sexuality, and so were able to destabilise patriarchy with some help from the colonial system in the form of transfers and such like. The destabilisation of patriarchy during the indentureship period also led to the breakdown of the caste system. Indentured women preferred to marry men who were settled and relatively well-off, men who may not necessarily belong to a similar caste or *varna*.

Nevertheless, caste among Hindus in Mauritius is not an exact replica of that found in their ancestral villages in India. Instead, it is a simplified version. It is also different to the more elaborate caste structures found amongst Hindu, Sikh and Jain groups in East Africa, including those so-called 'twice migrants' who later settled in the UK and elsewhere. In Mauritius, it is also complicated by the several waves of migration that have taken place. Indians from different parts of the sub-continent — Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh — often live side-by-side, along with members of other ethnic groups such as Muslims of Indian descent, Creoles, Chinese and French. They have complex social, cultural and economic interactions with each other.

In *Sea of Poppies*, caste is introduced as a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, there is the perception that caste defines the whole human being; but, on the other hand, there is a very strong effort to break down the shackles of the caste hierarchy. Thus, coupled with the fact that the shipmates are being forced to sever their links with their motherland, the issue or conundrum of caste is seen as something that can be changed. A conversation between Diti and Munia is evocative of how, in the

newly created identities of the *girmits*, caste enters the equation as well. Interestingly, Diti chooses to call herself an untouchable — *chamar*, as part of her new identity. In trying to forge this new identity, Diti feels that a part of her dies and she is reborn (as if in another birth) as Kalua's wife (Ghosh, 2008, 234):

'*E tohar jat kaun ha?*', the girl asked eagerly. 'And your caste?'

'I am ...'.

Once again, just as she was about to provide an accustomed answer, Diti's tongue tripped on the word that came first to her lips: the name of her caste, as intimate a part of herself as the memory of her daughter's face — but now it seemed as if that, too, ... [had been] part of her past life, when she had been someone else. She began hesitantly: 'We, my *jora* and I ...'.

Confronted with the prospect of cutting herself loose from her moorings in this world, Diti's breath ran out. She stopped to suck a deep draught of air before starting again: '... we, my husband and I, are *chamars* ...'.

If for Diti, losing her caste identity is akin to 'cutting off her moorings from this world', for Raja Neel Rattan Halder, it is tantamount to sheer blasphemy. Neel Rattan has been falsely implicated in a case by Mr Burnham, which causes him to lose his estate at Raskhali. To further add insult to injury, he is sentenced to be transported to Mauritius where he had to serve his term as an indentured labourer. Neel's family had always adhered to certain traditions in which food could only be cooked by members of a certain caste. Though Neel's father built up a prosperous business in collaboration with the British, the erstwhile Raja would not eat with them. Neel liked to believe that his anglicised upbringing had freed him from the taboos he had grown up with. However, when faced with reality, he realises that those taboos had become part of him. As he is forced to partake of the food provided in the jail and later handles a broom to sweep the floor, Neel's ties with his former life come apart. With the loss of caste, Neel loses his sense of self. Unlike Diti and the other women, Neel is unable to pick up the threads of his former life from where they had been cast off. His voyage on the *Ibis* continues to be an endless penance as slowly, in the company of his fellow convict Ah Fahtt, Neel starts to gather together the broken pieces of his life (Ghosh, 2008, 268):

He [Neel] took the basin inside, placed it on the floor and walked away, resolving to ignore it. But in a while hunger drove him back and he seated himself cross-legged beside the basin and removed the lid. The

contents had congealed into a grey slop and the smell made him gag As he was raising his hands to his lips, it occurred to him that this was the first time in all his years that he had eaten something that was prepared by [the] hands of [an] unknown caste. Perhaps it was this thought, or perhaps it was just the smell of the food — it happened, at any rate, that he was assailed by ... nausea so powerful that he could not bring his fingers to his mouth. The intensity of his body's resistance amazed him: for the fact was that he did not believe in caste or so, at least, he had said many, many times his allegiance was to Buddha, Mahavira, Sri Chaitanya, Kabir, and many others ... — all of whom had battled against boundaries of caste with as much determination as any European revolutionary. Neel had always taken pride in laying claim to this form of egalitarianism, all the more so since it was his prerogative to sit on a Raja's *guddi*: but why, then, had he never eaten anything prepared by an unknown hand? He could think of no more answer than ease of habit: because he had always done what was expected of him. He had thought of his everyday routines as a performance, a duty, and nothing more; one of the many little enactments that were demands of a social existence, by *samsara* — none of it was meant to be real; it was just an illusion, no more than a matter of playing a part in the great charade of conducting a householder's life. And yet, there was nothing unreal about the nausea that had seized him now; it was not an illusion that his body was convulsed by a sensation of *ghrina*, a stomach clenching revulsion that made him recoil from the wooden container in front of him.

Neel's fall from grace is complete when he is forced to pick up a broom to sweep the floor of his cell. This act of handling a broom becomes a decisive action, as with it comes Neel's release from everything that he represented until now. It is as if his sense of self undergoes a complete make-over in which he is no different from 'the man in the street'. No longer is he the Raja of Raskhali with several dependents under his care. From now on, he is a convict with a toilet bucket as his sole possession. His only relation with humanity continues to be his co-convict with whom he sets sail to an unknown territory (Ghosh, 2008, 323):

If he was to keep his sanity, Neel knew that he would have to take hold of the *jharu* and scoop; there was no other way. To rise to his feet and take the

three or four steps that separated him from the *jharu* took ... [a more] intense effort as he had ever made, and when finally he was within touching distance of it, he could not prevail upon his hand to make contact: the risk involved seemed unimaginably great, for he knew that he would cease to be the man he had been a short while before.

Thus, the motley group that sets sail on the *Ibis* free themselves from the shackles of caste. However, the caste issue comes to the fore on several occasions, particularly when Diti is discovered to have lied about her caste and her marriage to Kalua. Interestingly, their union is likened to a black man violating a white woman. Ghosh plays around with these prejudices, which exist in different forms in societies worldwide. The ridiculousness of the charge and the seriousness with which the coloniser perceives his holy duty towards the 'natives', reveals the thought process on which the Raj was constructed (Ghosh, 2008, 482):

'In the *subedar*'s eyes', said the Captain, 'the murder is the least of his crimes. He says that if they were at home, this man would be cut up and fed to the dogs for what he has done.'

'What has he done, Sir', asked Zachary.

'This man', the Captain looked down on a sheet of paper to remind himself of the name, 'this Maddow Colver; he's a pariah who's run off with a woman of high caste — a relative of the *subedar* as it happens. That's why this Colver signed up — so that he could carry this woman off to a place where she'll never be found.'

'But Sir', said Zachary. 'Surely his choice of wife is not our business? And surely we cannot let him be flogged for it while he's in our custody.'

'Indeed?', said the Captain, raising his eyebrows. 'I am amazed Reid, that you of all people — an American! — should pose these questions. Why? What do you think would happen in Maryland if a white woman were to be violated by a Negro? What would you or I or any of us do with a darkie who'd had his way with our wives or sisters? Why should we expect the *subedar* and his men to feel less strongly than we would ourselves? And what right do we have of denying them the vengeance that we certainly claim as our due? There is an unspoken pact between the white man and the natives who sustain his power in Hindoosthan — it is in matters of procreation, like must be with like, and each must keep to

their own. The natives lose faith ... [in] us as the guarantors of the order of castes — that will be the day, gentlemen; that will doom our rule.'

Girmitiyas

The Indian indenture system was an ongoing system of indentured labour by which thousands of Indians were transported to various colonies of European powers to work on plantations. It commenced with the end of slavery in 1833 and continued until 1920. The word 'permit' was mispronounced by non-English-speaking Indians as 'gimit', and the individuals who signed this 'gimit' came to be known as *girmitiyas*. On 18 January 1826, the government of the French Indian Ocean island of Réunion laid down terms for the introduction of Indian labourers to the colony. Each man was required to appear before a magistrate and declare that he was going voluntarily; the contract was for 5 years with pay of 8 rupees per month, and rations were provided. By 1830, a total of 3,012 Indian labourers had been transported from Pondicherry and Karikal to Réunion.

The first attempt at importing Indian labour to Mauritius ended in failure in 1829, but by 1834, with the abolition of slavery throughout most of the British Empire, transportation of Indian labour to the island gained traction. By 1838, some 25,000 Indian labourers had been shipped to Mauritius. The Colonial British Indian Government Regulations of 1837 laid down specific conditions for the dispatch of Indian labour from Calcutta to Mauritius. The would-be emigrant and his emigration agent were required to appear before an officer designated by the Colonial British Government of India with a written statement of the terms of the contract. The length of service was to be 5 years, renewable for further 5-year terms. The emigrant was to be returned at the end of his contract to the port of departure. Each emigrant vessel was required to conform to certain standards of space, diet and so forth, and carry a medical officer. In 1837, this scheme was extended to Madras and Calcutta. However, there were massive protests against the indenture system which forced the British to promulgate laws for the protection of indentured labourers. But these laws were regularly flouted and human shipment began in all earnest. In 1843 alone, a total of 30,218 male and 4,307 female indentured labourers entered Mauritius, the first ship from Madras arriving on 21 April of that year.

The first time Diti encounters indentured labourers is when she is on her way to the opium factory. It is a terrifying experience to see men and women being herded

like cattle, and Diti shudders at the thought of them being transported across the *kala pani*. And yet, interestingly, the *girmityas* appear undaunted and unafraid despite their obvious poverty and the bleak future that awaits them at the end of their journey (Ghosh, 2008, 71):

The road was filled with people, a hundred strong and more; hemmed in by a ring of stick-bearing guards, this crowd was trudging wearily in the direction of the river. Bundles of belongings sat balanced on their heads and shoulders, and brass pots hung suspended from their elbows. It was clear that they had already walked a great distance, for their *dhotis*, *langots* and vests were stained with the dust of the road. The sight of the marchers evoked both pity and fear in the local people; some of the spectators clucked their tongues in sympathy, but a few urchins and old women threw pebbles into the crowd, as if to ward off an unsavoury influence. Through all this, despite their exhaustion, the marchers seemed strangely unbowed, even defiant, and some threw the pebbles right back at the spectators: their bravado was no less disturbing to the spectators than their evident destitution.

Diti had heard of *girmityas* before, though she had thought it to be a rumour. The sight of these men and women being led away by guards brings to mind what she had heard before (Ghosh, 2008, 72):

It was a few years now since the rumours had begun to circulate in the villages around Ghazipur: although she had never seen a *girmitya* before, she had heard them being spoken of. They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmits' — agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld.

Later, Diti and Kalua indentured themselves in order to flee the wrath of Chandan Singh; Munia joins them, as she has been ostracised by her clan, while Heeru has been separated from her husband and suffers from bouts of forgetfulness. Each *girmitya* on the *Ibis* has her own story — her link to the past. But as the *Ibis* sails away on the sea, past identities seem to fall away and new identities are being forged.

In this text, one sees that, quite often, strange identities are forced upon the *girmit* owing to the Englishman's lack of comprehension of native languages. There is also a sense of treating *girmits* as *personae non gratae*; therefore, a

careful record of identities has not been maintained. This often creates a stumbling block for researchers sourcing archival material. More often than not the details found are incomplete, wrong and sometimes even fictitious. In a rather humorous incident, Kalua, who now goes by the name of Madhu, enters the *girmit* logbook as 'Maddow Colver'.

Orality and Oral Forms

The oral narratives of the sagas of *girmits* are of immense importance in the study of the diaspora. Though most people leaving the shores of India were illiterate, they carried with them a wealth of knowledge in the form of popular songs, sayings and folklore. In the *Sea of Poppies*, the women (who are the traditional bearers of oral culture) are seen to be recreating their lost world through songs and story-telling. Thus, songs become the foundation on which a new culture is created. There were songs to commemorate each occasion (a marriage or bereavement), and the women kept alive their links with their homeland through these oral forms. Bhojpuri as a language has also survived in Mauritius and is still spoken amongst Indians there; though, in its new avatar or embodiment, it is liberally peppered with Creole. On Diti's marriage night, the women sung songs of happiness and togetherness. As the time for the couple to meet draws close, the songs become more bawdy and suggestive (Ghosh, 2008, 32):

Sakhiya-ho, sainya more pise masala
Sakhiya-ho, bara mitha lage masala
Oh friends, my love's a — grinding
Oh friends, how sweet is this spice
Ag mor lagal ba
Are sagaro badania
Tas mas choli karai
Barhala jobanawa
I'm on fire
My body burns
My *choli* strains
Against my waking breast.

As the *Ibis* sails into the sea from the estuary of the Hooghly, some migrants literally 'drown in despair'. They were to cross the *kala pani* (the dreaded

black water), the crossing of which was forbidden in their religion. The wail of despair takes the form of a prayer to the almighty (Ghosh, 2008, 374):

Majha dhara me hai bera mera
Kripa kara asrai hai tera
My raft's adrift in the current
Your mercy is my only refuge

The importance of orality is seen in the cultural recreation, as witnessed in the organisation of a wedding on the *Ibis*. Heeru gets a marriage proposal from Eka Nack, the leader of the hill tribesmen who had joined the group of migrants from Sahibganj. The migrants busy themselves trying to organise a wedding on board, their greatest challenge being to create a fire around which the couple would take their wedding vows. The wedding gets its fervour from the songs sung by a group of Ahirs. Among the Ahir men, there is also a dancing *launda*, a man trained to dance as a woman. Though the *dabusa* is not high enough for a man to stand, the *launda naach* takes place despite all constraints. Everyone joins in the singing, and images of the home they might never see again are revisited through song and dance (Ghosh, 2008, 460):

... *uthle ha chati ka jobanwa*
Piya ke khelawna re hoi ...
... her budding breasts are ready
To be her lover's toys

Conclusion

A close examination of the South Asian diaspora shows that it can be divided into two distinct phases. Paranjape categorises them as 'settler' or 'visitor' diasporas, taking his cue from *The Empire Writes Back*. Into the first category falls all the forced migrations on account of slavery or indentured labour; and into the second, the voluntary migrations of businessmen and professionals. *Sea of Poppies* being the first of a trilogy, Ghosh concentrates on indentured labourers and recreates their voyage across the seas. It is a richly woven story of a voyage where people from all walks of life come together, and the stories of their lives form the tapestry on which the novel is based. However, it is important to remember that Ghosh's attempt is fraught with imagination and his story-telling does not

approximate to reality. The life of a *girmit* was gruesome and very often they took recourse to ending their lives, as the existence of 'Suicide Point' on Mauritius is testimony to. Ghosh gives most of his characters a certain heroic status, which was, most probably, missing in the real life story of the *girmit*. More often than not, the *girmit* was sold so that the family at home could benefit from the money they got through indentureship. This sacrifice was not willed, but an enforced one due to a situation of abject poverty — it was another form of slavery, albeit named differently.

The creation of 'a homeland in diaspora' was done through the recreation of a notion of one's own homeland. The unpleasant thoughts of the homeland were forgotten in 'a longing to return'. The diasporic imagination often painted the homeland in hyperbolic terms. As Paranjape (2001, 9) argues:

The poverty of the homeland, which caused the diaspora in the first place, was forgotten or overwritten with the feeling that it was home, a place where the present alienation of the diasporic person did not exist. Because a physical return was virtually impossible, an emotional or spiritual renewal was an ongoing necessity. This was done through a process of replication, if not reproduction.

While we see an attempt in *Sea of Poppies* to 'replicate' the desire to go back to one's homeland, this seems to be missing; it is probably the case, as most migrants (save for the convicts) are seen to want to escape from their homeland.

As the *Ibis* sails onward on its journey, the 'Hindu tool box' of the migrants is opened and explored time and again in order to reconnect with the homeland. Vijay Mishra describes this meagre migrant collection (Trivedi & Mukherjee, 1996, 68):

Their homeland is a series of objects, fragments and narratives that they keep in their heads or in their suitcases. Like hawkers they can reconstitute their lives through the contents of their knapsacks: a *Ganapati* icon, a dog-eared copy of the Gita or the Quran, an old sari or other *deshi* outfit, a photograph of a pilgrimage or, in modern times, a video cassette of the latest hit from the home country.

On the *Ibis*, a little turmeric (yellow aromatic powder) from one of the *potlis*, a little *afeem* from another *jhola*, and a conversation about pickles and chutneys keep the homeland alive for all the migrant voyagers aboard.

The story of this diaspora of largely underprivileged migrants can only be told if one researches the oral narratives. Being largely uneducated, this diaspora left hardly any written form of literature. What remains, however, are the countless stories, narratives, and songs which have been passed on from generation to generation. An in-depth study of oral forms, therefore, becomes a necessity in reconstructing the stories of these early migrants. As the *Ibis* enters the waters around the *Isle de Maurice*, an era comes to an end — only to begin again with the second novel in the trilogy, titled *Rivers of Smoke*. However, the characters of this novel will continue to be remembered in Diti's shrine as the first set of people who came to inhabit this barren island. Their trauma, suffering and achievements will be recounted within the new family structures that will be created in these new climes. In the words of Homi K Bhabha (1992, 43): '... it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history — subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement — that we learn our most enduring lessons'.

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