

Deception, Drudgery and Dehumanisation : Unveiling Indenture Labour System through the Reading of Maithili Sharan Gupta's Long Narrative Poem *Kisaan*

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Abstract

Indian indenture labour started following the abolition of slavery. It was considered as a new form of slavery as when slavery in the British Empire ended, there was a sudden requirement for plantation staples like sugar and for agricultural products like coffee, tea, and later rubber. This resulted in the emergence of a new type of labour. To tackle the labour deficit, especially in the British plantations across continents, indentured labourers from India were hired. The colonial government then started recruiting inexpensive labour from South Asia and sending it to places like Mauritius, Fiji, Guyana, East Africa, South Africa, Trinidad & Tobago, Caribbean islands, etc. The British officials devised a strategy to export Indian people to their colonies overseas. The first half of the 19th century had also witnessed famine and utter impoverishment in rural areas of north India. In order to survive people agreed to leave their native land and sail to an unknown place. Maithili Sharan Gupta was an eminent poet of Indian literature. He was a prominent writer of Hindi critically acclaimed for his works like *Saket*, *Yashodhara* and *Bharat Bharti*. He has poignantly penned the agony of girmityas in his long narrative poem *Kisaan (Farmer)* in the sections like “Expatriation (Desh tyaag)”, “Fiji” and “Return (Pratyavartan)”. This paper seeks to reposition Maithili Sharan Gupta's *Kisaan* within the global discourse of indenture by illustrating how Indian poets—though rooted in the subcontinent—have artistically captured the emotional, economic, and existential dimensions of dispossession that resonate with the diasporic poetics of Coolitude.

Keywords: Indian Indentured Labour, Coolitude, Girmitya, Cultural Conflict, Cultural alienation

Indian indentured labour traces back to the colonial period of India. The Act of Abolition (1834) enforced the prohibition of slavery, which was a cheap labour

source, across the British Empire. The sugar planters put tremendous pressure on the government to revive the failing industry, which had momentarily collapsed following the outlawing of slavery as a labour source. The decision to hire and send a large number of Indians as indentured labourers to the world's sugar-producing colonies was decided by the British government. India, a British Empire "jewel in the crown," was a popular destination for low-cost outsourced labour due to its sizable low-socio-economic population so they decided to transport Indians to Fiji and Caribbean Island for sugar plantation. It was a forced migration. Due to penury many people from North India chose to sail to the overseas for survival and with a hope to return to their native country someday. These migrants were constituted of men, women and children. They were uprooted from their territory.

Prof Brij Lal has traced the history of migration of Indian to overseas. In 1834 after the abolition of slavery British government worked out on a plan to send Indians to overseas colonies as indentured labour. Sir Arthur Gordon was the governor general of Fiji and he was the first one to introduce Indenture system in India. Recruitment of labourers was operationalised by the employment of a recruiting agent and several subagents, who scoured the villages of India, drumming up hopes of a bright future and using every possible strategy to motivate labourers to go to Fiji (Lal, 1986; Ali, 2004).

The word *Girmitiya* is a crude form of the agreement which was designed by the British government to transport human labour to their colonies. It had the details of their working hours and duration of their stay on the foreign islands and the terms and conditions. *Girmit* was the vernacular term given by the indentured people to the contract they had to put their thumb upon. They could not pronounce the English term Agreement properly and their mispronunciation became a synonymous term of indentured labour today (Singh,) These people sent on the voyage were also referred as *Jahajis*. The *Girmitiyas* are indentured labourers who were forcefully sent by the British rulers in different parts of the world during the mid-19th century up to early 20th century. These workers went abroad with a mission to change the scenario of islands like Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji, Mauritius, Tobago, Kenya and so on where they suffered to a great extent by the British colonizers but got chance to recite *Ramcharit Manas* and other religious scriptures. These labourers also carried with them sacred Hindu domestic artifacts—such as pataka, gutkha, and tulsi plants—as tangible expressions of faith and identity, enabling them to recreate cultural spaces in their adopted homelands. The body of literature emerging from their descendants is collectively known as *Girmitiya Literature*.

Sometimes a commonality is observed on case of Indian diaspora and Plantation diaspora. Plantation diaspora in the phase between 1840 to 1930 was a forced

migration . These people were uprooted from their soil and thus de-territorialized. Indian indentured labour was seen by the British as being universally beneficial (Gillian,20). Between 1834 to 1920 approximately one million Indian men and women were transported as indentured labourers to different British colonies for sugar plantation. This migration was forced as well as voluntary as people chose to leave their roots for better life. Besides, the adverse conditions in India during the first half of nineteenth century were also accountable for their migration. Starvation, famine ,chronic debts , caste and gender-based discrimination and abject poverty pushed them to sail on an unknown island. After meeting on the same ship, they all mixed together and this intermingling was so pervasive that they reinvented themselves with a new identity while crossing the black water to reach new destinations. After the completion of five years as mentioned in the agreement only few families succeeded in returning to India as the span of five years is not enough to make someone financially stable and settled on a new place. These people had to face the adverse working conditions as well as cultural alienation .Most of the people as Prof Brij Lal writes were from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh

The ordeals faced by the Indian indenture immigrants are documented in the literary writings. Tota Ram Sanadhya was the first one to return India and he in his *work My Twenty One Years in Fiji* has detailed his experience in Fiji. After coming back to India, he protested against indentured labour system and lived in Sabarmati Ashram along with Gandhi ji. Gandhiji eulogised him as a true Hindu who had respect for everyone.

Besides Tota Ram Sanadhya , Sudesh Mishra, Satendra Nandan, Ahmad Ali, V. S Naipaul has written about the experience of Indian diaspora. Giriraj Kishore in his book *The Girmitiya Saga* chronicled the struggle of Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa. Abhimanyu Unuth recorded the ordeals of labourers in his novel *Blood Red Sweat* as well as in his other poems . Ghosh in his *Ibis* trilogy has highlighted the tumultuous experiences of Indian Indentured labourers. Goitra Bahadur in her work *Coolie woman An Odyssey* has narrated the history of Coolitude of her grandmother in Trinidad Prof Vijay Mishra had defined the term ‘Girmit Ideology’ in 1970 that deals with the after affects of plantation on the psyche of the descendants of indentured labourers .Prof Brij Lal has been a distinguished scholar of Girmitology. He has laid the groundwork for the historiography of girmitiyas

While these narratives span oceans and generations, Maithili Saran Gupt’s *Kisaan*—rooted in pre-independence India—echoes similar themes of toil, dispossession, and dignity, inviting a comparative reading through the lens of Coolitude. *Coolitude*, a term coined by Mauritian poet Khal Torabully, emerges from the poetics of indenture—rooted in works such as *Cale d’Étoiles: Coolitude* (1992) and *Chair*

Corail: Fragments Coolies (1999). The English word coolie is derived from a term originating in the subcontinent – *kuli* – a word which is often seen as synonymous with porter or carrier, in other words a menial worker. (Cuniah Christian et al., 100)

It strives to rehumanize the Indian indentured laborer, much as *Negritude* did for the descendants of African slaves (Bates et al., 2023). Khal Torabully observes, within the colonial lexicon, *coolie* underwent a profound semantic distortion: it ceased to denote merely a laborer and instead became a metonym for the dehumanized, barefoot beast of burden—stripped of agency and reduced to a symbol of subaltern servitude.

Maithili Sharan Gupt, born on 3rd August 1888 in Chirgaon, Jhansi, is widely regarded as one of the pioneers of modern Hindi poetry. Hailed as a nationalist poet or 'Rasthra Kavi' and a key figure in popularizing Khari Boli (plain dialect) in Indian literature, Gupt began his literary journey contributing to the journal *Saraswati*. His seminal works—*Saket*, *Yashodhara*, and *Bharat Bharti*—brought him national recognition, and his impassioned patriotism even led to imprisonment. As the first recipient of the Padma Bhushan, his legacy remains deeply entwined with India's cultural and political awakening.

Maithili Sharan Gupt's poetry powerfully reflects the nationalist spirit, deeply influenced by the Indian freedom movement. Works such as *Bharat Bharti* overflow with patriotic fervour. As a devout Vaishnav, Gupt devoted himself to crafting verses honouring Lord Rama, as seen in poems like *Saket*, *Panchvati*, and *Urmila*. Over a prolific literary career spanning five decades, he explored a wide range of subjects. His creativity blended devotional poetry with calls to awaken societal consciousness during the pre-independence era. While *Saket* extolled the virtues of Lord Rama, Gupt also illuminated the strength of characters like Urmila, Lakshman's wife, and Yashodhara, Gautam Buddha's wife, in his works. Beyond religious and historical themes, he addressed pressing issues of his time. His 1916 narrative poem *Kisaan* presents a haunting portrait of the impoverished Indian farmer, whose forced displacement echoes the plight of indentured laborers. Through *Kisaan*, Gupt offers a proto-coolitude critique of exploitative agrarian systems.

The poem *Kisaan* is composed in eight sections – Prayer (Prathna), , Childhood and marriage (Balyakal aur vivah), Domestic life (grahasthya), Everything ended (Sarvswant), Expatriation (Desh Tyaag), Fiji (Fiji), Return (Pratyavartan) , End (Ant)

Kisaan (1916) by Maithili Sharan Gupt is a long narrative poem that vividly portrays the challenging life of a peasant couple, Kalua and Kulwanti. Through their story, Gupt foregrounds the structural injustices faced by Indian farmers, who remain entrapped in cycles of poverty despite their relentless labor. Kalua, a poor farmer,

serves as the archetype of agrarian despair, lamenting the irony that the annadata—the provider of grains—is systematically exploited, silenced, and starved.

The farmer, celebrated as *annadata* (provider of grains), is ironically subjected to exploitation at multiple levels. Gupta draws attention to the pressing issue of rural indebtedness, highlighting how diligent farmers are underpaid and unable to meet even their basic needs. The poem poignantly underscores the irony that those who grow food are often left to starve, amplifying the social and economic inequities of the time. Gupta has poignantly elaborated their predicament as:

Jis kheti se manuj matra ab bhi jeete hain

Uske karta hamee yahan aansu pite hain

Bhar kar sabke udar aap hi reete hain

Marte hain nirupay hai!shubh din beete hain (Gupt 8)

Entire human society survives on farming

And we the farmers survive sipping our tears

Satisfying the hungers of all , we still cry

Helpless we die ! Alas, Good days are gone by. (My translation)

Kisaan intricately unearths the travails and tribulations of a peasant class in colonial India. Set in the historical backdrop of indentured labour , Maithili Saran Gupta masterfully sketches the oppression endured by the peasant community of India during pre- independence era. Peasants were subjected to multiple forms of oppression. The landlords exploited them by imposing exorbitant taxes and heavy taxes were levied by the British government leaving them with little to survive themselves. The plight of the farmers further got worsened with the natural calamities such as famines which exacerbated their misery. Through Kalua's poignant lamentation , Gupta brings to life the immense despair and resilience of the marginalised class as Kalua laments:

Prabhuvar ? hum kya kahen ki kaise din harte hai

Apradhi ki bhanti sada sabse darte hain

Yaad yahn par humein nahi ab yam bhi karte hain

Fiji aadi mein ant samay jakar marte hain (Gupt.11)

O Almighty ! what should we say more about our lives

We are always intimidated as if we did some crime

Even Lord of death doesn't pay a visit to us

We are doomed to die in lands like Fiji (My translation)

After the death of his father, Kalua is left to shoulder the crushing weight of his family's financial burdens. With no viable support system, he sinks into despair, mourning not only his fate but the inherited cycles of deprivation. In this moment of vulnerability, he is confronted with the offer of bonded labour—a proposition that, while exploitative, appears to offer a semblance of relief. Kalua's response is one of resigned determination, reflecting not passivity but the complex agency of the marginalized under colonial rule.

Gupt's portrayal here becomes more than a personal tragedy—it mirrors the broader reality of countless Indian peasants coerced into indenture. Kalua, though technically rooted to his village, begins to occupy a liminal space, caught between attachment to the land and the pull of forced migration. This narrative arc resonates with the poetics of *Coolitude*, wherein the rupture from homeland and the forging of a new—often painful—identity becomes the site of resilience and cultural reinvention

Begari kya nahi aaj bhi mukti hai
 Bachne ki ab yahan kaun si yukti hai
 Chhutte ab to pind, hum to desh bhi chhodte
 Sab se nij sambandh sada ko todte (Gupt, 41)
 Bonded labour! Is it not yet ended?
 What other strategy remains to escape?
 We left our village, we are also leaving our homeland
 Breaking up the intimate bonds forever (My translation)

Kalua decides to indenture himself rather than starve here in his village. Gillion aptly remarks that “Emigration from North India depended more on the threat of starvation than on the attraction of higher wages in the colonies, and potential emigrants showed little disposition to follow any other ‘economic law’” (Gillion 144).

In next section “Desh-tyag (Expatriation)”, Maithili Sharan Gupta acutely captures the ordeals faced by the desperate farmers compelled to leave his homeland. The narrative exposes grim reality of the indentured labour, highlighting how vulnerable individuals like Kalua are misled and coerced by the British officials to sign the agreement for crossing the sea. Kalua an impoverished farmer coming from a traditional hindu family, grapples with internal conflict yet he ultimately resigns to the harsh truth that emigration is his only path to survival. Gupta has also mentioned the role of Arkatis – agents employed by the British authorities- who exploited the rural people through deceitful promises amplifying the tragedy of their plight.

Sheeghra hi sahab bahadur se main milwaunga tumhe
 Naukri par maliki si main dilaunga tujhe
 Vastra, bhojan pandrah ka mahina dhaam bhi
 Kaam bhi aisa jisme naam bhi aaram bhi" (Gupt.42)

Soon I will arrange your meeting with Sahib Bahadur
And will help you secure a job like a master
Clothing, food, fortnight's wage—and pilgrimage too
A post with work that brings both name and comfort through
(My translation)

Tinker argued that indentured labour was a new form of slavery. It was a dehumanising experience for people going for this excursion. Kalua marred by utter poverty is trapped by Arkatis. Arkatis were the people who were recruited by British officials to trap the native helpless people. Kalua alerts people :

Sajag rehna Satyaveshi jhooth hai chhalta yahan
Dev veshi dasyu dal ki badh rahi khalta yahan
Prakrat paapi bhi yahan par sadhu phirte hain bane
Dekhna sarvatra unke jaal faile hain bane
(Gupt, 43)
Stay vigilant! For lies now wear truth's disguise,
While gangs of bandits cloaked in angelic robes are more audacious
Born sinners parade as monks, so beware,
Their cunning traps are scattered everywhere.(My translation)

The indenture process comprised five steps—first, the recruitment in the villages, second, being taken to the depots to complete the process before boarding the ships, then the ocean voyage, being quarantined on arrival in the host land, and finally, rehabilitation on the plantations so for the three months these migrant workers had to sail on the ship. As Prof Brij Lal documented:

Fragmentation accelerated on the ship voyage across the kala pani, the dark dreaded seas, which could take up to three months, a traumatic experience indeed for a land-locked people who had never seen the sea before. The quarters were crowded, and the provisions for the separation of the sexes not always observed. Not surprisingly, customary, culturally sanctioned space between different castes and food taboos broke down (Brij Lal ,47)

Similarly, Kalua also experiences deception, drudgery and degradation. Disconnecting himself physically from his roots, he embarks on the ship and as he

relates the plight of human pushed in the depot as the cattle are pushed in congee house. Maithili Sharan Gupt describes :

Hum coolie they aur kale gagan se jaise gire

Pashu saman jahaj mein thodi jagah mein ghire (Gupt.46)

We were labourers, as though fallen from the dark sky,

Huddled in cramped spaces on ships, like beasts confined to die.(My translation)

The journey on the sea was challenging and traumatic as well. The ship has been a metaphor in the diaspora narrative. Since this migration was not voluntary but rather compelled so it was serving as a People embarked on the ships were of different caste and creed but all had to live together so the sanctioned space on the basis of caste creed and gender broke down. As Prof. Brij Lal writes

Many were seeing the sea for the first time. In the crowded country depots and in the living quarters in Madras and Calcutta, people rubbed shoulders with those of unknown castes, something that would never have happened in the villages regulated by age-old norms and protocols of social intercourse that respected hierarchy and separation. Old adhesives of society were slowly loosening, such as the caste system.(Brij Lal , 32)

Professor Vijay Mishra explains that the journey by ship was a one-way trip that changed people forever. It was a moment when their old identity was broken, even if they didn't fully understand it at the time. Any part of their past self that survived the journey was lost again in the harsh life of the plantation, especially in the crowded barracks. According to Mishra, these two moments—the ship journey and life on the plantation—together show how deeply the old Indian diaspora was affected and changed.

So many labourers died even before reaching Fiji as Kalua describes his experience on voyage. Crossing the black water was terrific for most of them.

Bahut log jahaj mein kasht pakar mar gaye

Dhaya they jo sheegra hi sab dukho se tar gaye

Jo mara phenka gayatrin tulya sagar neer mein

Haddiyan bhar pa sake jalchar vinasht sharer mein (Gupt,47)

Many perished aboard the ship, burdened by their strife

Blessed were those who swiftly escaped their wretched life

The dead were thrown into the sea like the blade of grass

Their bones were the only food left to be consumed by the aquatic creatures (My translation)

In section 'Fiji' Kalua laments on the hostile working condition and he reflects life on Fiji is hellish. They are exploited and retributed. A little offence on their part resulted into brutal punishment. The terms and conditions mentioned in the agreement sounded lucrative but in practice, those were not followed. Kalua comments on the ill treatment of the workers as they were given half meal and physically and verbally abused. As in "The Odyssey of Indenture" Prof Brij Lal has documented:

"The Fiji Indians called it 'narak', which means hell. For indenture violated many of the values and subverted the social and cultural practices and institutions the indentured emigrants had brought with them, among its most notable victims being the caste system. (Brij Lal, 53)

Kalua's voice resounds with defiance as he implores his fellow countrymen to boycott the sugar produced from the plantation. He passionately argues that this sugar is tainted with the blood and sweat of the indentured Indians who labour under brutal conditions to cultivate the sugarcane.

Bhumi Ram jaane kiski hai shram yahan hai hamara
Kintu Videshi vyapari hi laabh uthate saara
Jad yantro ko bhi taladik bhakshya diya jata hai
Ardhashan mein humse doona kaam liya jata hai (Gupt,50)

God knows whose land is this though labour is ours
Entire Profit is earned by the British traders
Even Machines too are oiled and maintained

And we work double by providing us only half meal (My translation)

Maithili Sharan Gupta has portrayed Indian immigrants with great sensitivity. Through Kalua's narrative, Gupta universalizes the experiences of all those forcefully uprooted and transported to foreign lands. Kalua's story is filled with nostalgia, and the haunting memories of his lost homeland resonate deeply. According to Pramod Kumar Nayar, "Much of diasporic writings explores the theme of an original home. This original home as now lost -due to their exile-is constantly worked into the imagination and myth of the displaced individual and community".(Nayar,191). There is guilt and remorse and sometimes an anguish too but all these emotions surge to the feeling of patriotism as he longs to reach his country.

Tere geeton mein bhav bhara
Teri charcha mein chav bhara
Tujhme purkhon ka geh bana hai mera
Tere tatvon se deh bana hai mera (Gupta,61)
Your songs imbibe my emotions
I cherish the discourse pertaining you

Within you lies the dwelling of my forefathers

My body is also constituted with your elements (My translation)

Gupt has poignantly highlighted the plight of female workers who were paid less than their male counterparts and subjected to multiple forms of oppression. They faced sexual exploitation, with some being coerced into prostitution. Kalua's wife, Kulwanti, who was pregnant, tragically committed suicide to protect her honor.:

Prakatit karke paap vasna wah dusheel surapi

Lobh our bhay de kar mujhko laga chhedne paapi

Kintu viphal hokar phir usne durgati ki meri (Gupt,54)

Revealing his sinful lust that nefarious drunkard

Teased me by alluring and threatening

When failed , he did this with me (my translation)

Kulwanti's account represents the incident of the women who had to jump into the ocean to save their honour. As "Kunti's cry" by Prof Brij Lal and "Naraini's Story" by Jane Harvey narrate the plight of indentured women labourer who had been transported overseas for plantation. Many of the women accompanied their husbands to overseas. Their condition was more pathetic. As A Singh has reflected :

This was the fate that greeted the indentured labourers on their arrival in the plantation colonies. They would also have to face extreme humiliation at the hands of the overseers, and be treated as animals, violently thrashed and beaten, while their women would be sexually assaulted. (Singh, 46)

Sanadhya in his *My Twenty One Years in Fiji* has also documented the remark of Mrs H Dudley as :

(Women) arrive to this country timid, fearful. The life of the plantation alters their demeanor and even their faces. Some looked crushed and broken hearted, others sullen, others hard and evil. I shall never forget the first time (seeing) indentured women returning from their days work. The look on those women's faces haunts me. —(Ms. H. Dudley, Missionary)

Through Kalua, Gupt appreciates the efforts of Andrews and Pearson in abolition of Indentureship. They were empathetic. Andrews had been an activist in this direction as he wrote in his report

The report placed great emphasis upon the moral degradation resulting from indenture, whereby the women were condemned to promiscuity, the men became brutes and the coolie lines were 'more like stables than human dwellings'. Indian culture was destroyed: 'Everything that could be recognized as Hindu has departed.' Yet despite the wrongs inflicted upon the Indian labourers, 'Their patience and fortitude won their continual regard'. (Tinker ,125)

Kalua also feels obliged to Lord Harding who stood with justice. Eventually with the combined efforts of the Indian leaders like Gopal Krishna Gokhle, Madan Mohan Malviya, Annie Besant, Lokmanya Tilak under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi raised their voice against the indentured labour. Then in 1920 it was totally abolished from India.

Us ghranit pratha se mukti desh ne payee
 Phir hum logo ke liye shubh ghadi aye
 Bharat ki laute chale ja rahe hum hain
 Wo gaya hua swatantraya pa rahe hum hain (Gupt,60)
 Finally, country got freed from that disgusting regime
 Then we too met that auspicious moment
 We are returning to India

We are restoring our lost freedom (my translation)

The last section of this long poem “Ant” (the End) presents an emancipated Kalua who is zealous to plunge himself in the battle against imperialism.

In this extensive narrative poem, Gupta vividly depicts the struggles of an impoverished Indian farmer burdened with immense debt. He marries and starts a family but finds it nearly impossible to survive. Oppressed by usurpers and landlords, he is relentlessly exploited. Eventually, he is enticed by an Arkati, who promises prosperity abroad. Despite eventually uncovering the Arkati's deceit, he is already ensnared. The farmer embarks on a journey across the Pacific to Fiji, a foreign land, where he is compelled to work as bonded labor.

Conclusion

The journey of Kalua—from impoverished farmer to awakened freedom fighter—as traced in Maithili Sharan Gupta's long narrative poem *Kisaan* (1916), evokes not only nationalist consciousness but also illuminates the socio-economic forces that propelled the migration of Indian peasants during colonial rule. Gupta powerfully channels the anguish of an indentured laborer who loses everything: his home, his country, his culture, and his wife. Kalua's transformation, marked by resilience and quiet defiance, becomes emblematic of countless farmers coerced into indenture under the guise of opportunity.

Through Kalua's lament and endurance, Gupta critiques the exploitative machinery of colonialism and the dehumanizing conditions of the indenture system. The poem captures the emotional and physical rupture experienced by labourers forcibly separated from their roots and subjected to brutal plantation regimes. Kalua's suffering is not isolated—it reflects a collective trauma, one that resonates with the

historical experiences of over a million Indians transported to British colonies between 1834 and 1920.

Kisaan thus transcends its narrative to become a proto-Coolitude text: a poetic document that anticipates the themes of exile, resistance, and identity later articulated by diasporic writers like Khal Torabully and Gaiutra Bahadur. Gupt's portrayal of Kalua offers a poignant reminder of the sacrifices made in the pursuit of dignity and justice, transforming personal grief into a universal meditation on dispossession and hope.

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