

## **An Exploration of Resistance and the Plight of Indian Indentured Labourers in Reuben Lachmansingh's *A Dip at the Sangam***

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### **Abstract**

*This study debunks the Eurocentric portrayal of the workings of indentured labour. By focusing on three major Caribbean Islands: Trinidad, Guiana, and Surinam, the study foregrounds the migration process of indentured labourers and how they were able to adapt to/and resist colonial influences. The study adopts the qualitative method of research; hence it examines through a contextual reading, interpretation and analysis of the text under study. In the same breath, it references critical essays and other non-literary resources that discuss the Indo-Caribbean indentured labourer system. The theory of Migration is used to (re)present a perspective that reiterates Everett Lee's modification of Ravenstein's migration theory of push and pull factors. The study shows that though Indentureship played an important role in Indian civilization, the whole system, it is based on deception and a play of superior power over an underdeveloped society. In addition, it shows the gloomy side of Indentureship in for example: how men and women are auctioned like animals to the highest bidder; the nostalgic experiences of Indians in a foreign land; deceitful and forceful kidnap to Indentureship and the resistance to the forceful acculturation on the plantations. Therefore, the study concludes that the journey of indentureship is purely based on dominance and suppression of the Indian race, and though it offered the Indians in the presumed new world the space to create their own identities and rise above the caste system that had existed in India, the entire system is a brutal/disguised form of slavery, which the Indians resisted rather than accepted the policy as portrayed by Eurocentrists.*

**Keywords: Migration, Plights/Resistance, Indentured Labour, Suppression and Oppression**

### **Introduction**

Migration has its root in the history of mankind and it is believed to be as old as man. People moved from one place to another to discover new places, resources, and self-identities/realization in a presumed 'new world'. The idea of migration can be linked with the journey motif in

literature which in a clearer sense accentuates the depletion of resources and the need for people to fulfil their needs. In the same breath, there is also the possibility that the people might have been forcefully driven from their initial habitat due to climate change or inter-tribal war. Yet, the curiosity to unravel the mysteries of alien lands could have also pushed pre-historic humans to take the longest journeys of life (Gugliotta, 2008). So, it becomes difficult to unravel the mystery of migration across the continents of pre-historic humans and their escape from inhospitable conditions during their epic voyages.

The theory of migration becomes the centre piece of this study. Ernest George Ravenstein, a prominent theorist from the past, conceptualized migration systems. He also established the Foundation for Consecutive Research on Migration in both the academic literature and policy formulation. In the 1880s, he established the theory of migration by writing about the rules and principles of migration. His laws of migration can be categorized into three headings: reasons for migration, characteristics of migrants, and the distance they travel.

In 1966, Everett Lee modified Ravenstein's migration theory by emphasizing the positive and negative factors of any given place. He believes that, positive factors attract people while negative factors drive them away. In this regard, migration is seen as the net result of push and pull factors. Lee categorizes and explains these factors into four major groups. The first relates to the areas of origin, which state that people leave their country of origin/birth due to social, economic, or environmental issues. The second concerns the areas of destination which attract people to its opportunities. The third group discusses the intervening factors which include obstacles in the way of migration like long distances, ethnic barriers, transportation, etc., which hinder the migration process. The fourth group are personal factors like education, sex, age, and race which can either retard or facilitate migration. His migration framework is generally called the 'push-pull' theory (Passaris, 1989, p. 530).

In the context of the above, this paper analyses the Caribbean indentureship system using a content-based analysis that pays attention to the qualitative technique of the humanities. Taking into account the purpose of the research, a detailed examination, interpretation, and attentive reading of the selected text is sufficient to investigate the intended occurrences. Thus, *A Dip at the Sangam* by Reuben Lachmansingh serves as the primary source. Other notable secondary

sources include web sources and other sources that support the findings, as well as critical works, biographical, historical, and other literary material(s) like articles, journals, and books.

Pointedly, this paper examines the Indian labourer's migration to the Caribbean islands in the 18th - 20th centuries. Through history, the data of when, why, and how the process of international labour migration began is gathered. There is a common perception and portrayal in the colonial records of Indians as home-loving people who do not want to leave their birthplace. Kingsley Davis (1931), in *The Population of India and Pakistan*, points out that the population of India is immovable or static due to its caste system, the predominance of agriculture, lack of education, and other factors linked to marriage and culture. Many other writers also argue that Indians, particularly Hindus, were bound to their boundaries because of religious constrictions which forbid their followers from crossing the Kala Pani of an Indian ocean. When compared to Western countries, people of Indian origin are found to be more homesick. In 1896, British ethnographer and civil servant William Crooke presented his views regarding the unwillingness of Indian people to migrate when he states, "The fact is that the Hindu has little migratory instinct, and all his prejudices tend to keep him at home..." (William, p. 326).

The above submissions by Crooke and many other similar narratives depict Indians as stick-to-home kind of people. They focus only on the narrower views and aspects of the Indians and exaggerate to the highest point. In one of the surveys on Indian labour migrants, it was established that "Indians have never been a stay-at-home people" (Mookherji, 1962, p. 05). From ancient times, Indian traders travelled to places like Southeast Asia and East Africa. These traders used to take local labourers with them. Because of these travels, the existence of Indians in different states like; Southeast Asian and East African countries towards the late 18th century was known.

In the same bid, migration became a major subject of study in the 19th and 20th centuries. During these periods, many authoritative books were written by migration scholars on the characteristics and patterns of internal as well as international migration. The most well-known among them are K.C. Zachariah's, *An Historical Study of Internal Migration in the Indian Subcontinent, 1901-1931* (1964), Kingsley Davis' *The Population of India and Pakistan* (1951) and P.B. Desai's, *A Survey of Research in Demography* (1975). Modern historians like Thapar (2005) believe that there has always been a constant regulation of migration in ancient India. She

opines that the option of migration was always there for distressed people. Through migration, they would often change their miserable situation. She writes, “given the availability of cultivable land, peasant migration appears to have been the more common form of alleviating the pressures of heavy taxation” (p. 58). This opinion of Thapar is shared by many, including Jaimal Rai and Abhay Kant Chaudhary.

It could be rightly conjectured that a detailed explanation for indentureship and, the plight/miseries of migrants is that which is provided for by David Hare and Longueville Clarke before an Enquiry Commission of 1838. In the Enquiry Commission, Clarke narrates an incident where he got intelligent information on the plight of migrants on how they were being imprisoned in a house. On reaching the said house, he forced the guards to open the door and to his amazement, the crowd in the house, were choked to almost the number of a hundred and above persons, rushed and reached out to him “... They flung themselves at Mr. Hare’s feet and mine, crying out ‘Dohae’ [woe]” (qtd in Mishra, 2022, p. 244).

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

As a statement, the experiences of indentured labourers in the early 1830s through the 1920s have been widely documented by colonial writers over time, yet their writings have remained skewed and underrepresented of the reality of indentured labourers in the Caribbean. As a result, the offspring of these labourers started penning narratives, plays, essays, and poems pertaining to their ancestors' experiences in the arts. These literary works have been compared to past colonial writings and have presented a wide range of perspectives on the recruitment procedures as well as the persecution and suppression that colonialists faced on their estates. Since a writer cannot fully separate themselves from the impact of cultural norms and beliefs, literature remains a product of society.

This research further highlights and portrays the migration/immigration of indentured Indian Labourers to the Caribbeans between 1834-1920, their experiences as well as resistance to the system of Colonial Rule. Pivotaly, the paper investigates the India’s civilization and the migration process, before, during and even after the colonial masters. Its further examines the miseries/plights of indentured labourers in *A Dip at the Sangam* and shows the Indo-Caribbeans forms of resistance, survival, suppression and oppression in the West Indies.

## **The Experiences of Indentured Labourers**

As a means of concealment of the Indians fate in the presumed new world, the language that captured the unwilling nature of migrants to board the Kalan Pani ship is quite interesting and Eurocentric. It reports the incidence as ‘really unwilling people’ were not detained in the depots as ‘others in the depot awaiting shipment would be *infected* by this dissatisfaction’. The unwillingness of migrants is as a result of the fear of taking the long journey across the sea which is based on their experiences and that of others at the depot. In another report, a proposal was made to increase depots in the eastern part of United Provinces to have an influx number of migrants, but this was rejected because there is a calculation that the number of deserters would increase. The homes of the emigrants were near the United Province and if the migrants were anywhere close, they would get the true state of indentureship like; confinement, punishments, moved/transferred at will, and the subdue, it will increase the fear of the migrants excessively which will lead to desertion.

It would have been expected that the dehumanization of ‘coolies’ would have ended when they reached the plantation colonies, but they were further paraded before the planters so that the latter could pick the ‘coolies’ they liked. This servitude reminds one of the experiences of slavery because the experiences of the coolies are not farfetched with African slavery before its abolition and the sprout of indentured labour. Jane Swinton, who made the journey on the *Salsette* with her husband, Captain Swinton, notes that:

They made the best appearance they could when the planters came to select them (It looks very like slavery). They were put into boats in sixes and sevens like cattle, and sent to their different destinations (Swinton, et al., 1859, p. 8).

Anytime the ‘coolies’ arrive on the plantation and it is noticed that they do not look attractive enough to potential buyers, they would be set aside a bit longer and fed fattening food to improve their state of being to buyers. The Migrants were auctioned for French colonies while Reverend P. Beaton, who spent several months in Reunion, noted that Captains often sent a boat ahead to the plantations, to relay the news of ‘coolies’ arrival, and that “planters hurr[ied] from the country” to the port, where the auction took place. While describing the process of auctioning, Beaton points out that, “the auctioneer [was] eloquent in pointing out the good qualities of his goods, and the coolie knocked down to the highest bidder”. He also highlights that, there was a

class of spectators who ‘invested’ in coolies, just as they might have invested in other commodities. Aside from the auctioning of migrants, the process of commoditization is reflected in the language that planters used to argue for a reduced price of ‘shipments’ in those cases where ships had suffered high mortality. This often leads to prolonged discussions about whether payments needed to be made for all migrants embarked in Calcutta, or only for those who were successfully landed in the colonies.

The incessant brutality of Indians led to the revolt of 1857 which became the first Indian war/attempt for independence against British colonialism. The Britishers tags this attempts as ‘the Sepoy mutiny’ while the Indians see it as a momentous rebellion against colonialism. The upheaval began at Meerut in May, 1857 and spread across northern and central India. The Indians lost the battle, as their local weapons could not match against the heavy ammunition of the Britishers. Indian leaders were killed, exiled to work as indentured labourers, or put behind bars at the penal colony of Andamans. Naipaul highlights the role of Rani Lakshmibai an Indian who was part of the rebellion in *The Jhansi Legacy* thus: “a real threat to both the company and the Empire” (62). Lakshmibai represents fearlessness and resilience, as it is only natural that when the few elites begin to notice the injustices and the suppression of their people, they have to fight back with all they have, even though some of them know they will die in the process. PK Balachandran writes that Lakshmibai was the combination of Intelligence, courage, and administrative ability. She proclaimed very bravely,

we fight for independence. In the words of Lord Krishna, we will if we are victorious, enjoy the fruits of victory, if defeated and killed on the field of battle, we shall surely earn eternal glory and salvation (Balachandran, 2007)

Lakshmibai lost her life in Gwalior while fighting the British troops at the age of 23 but Hugh Rose, her enemy admitted that she was “remarkable for her beauty, cleverness, and perseverance, she had been the most dangerous of all the rebel leaders. The best and bravest of all” (qtd in Balachandran).

Considering the opposition mentioned above as well as the hardships faced by Indians, Leo Waibel (1941) outlines and emphasizes plantations;

A plantation is not only an agricultural undertaking; it is also an industrial enterprise. It not only produces agricultural products; it also prepares them and makes them fit for transportation ... Plantations are almost always large estates of several hundred to several thousand acres. These large areas require, as do the associated factories, a great number of labourers. The labour problem is thus of paramount importance to the plantations (p. 156)

When the labourers reached the British shores, the workers were quickly assigned to various plantations, scrutinized extensively and scattered. The European argues that, they never separated family members, which was a familiar inclination under slavery. But the writings of descendants of indentured labourers debunk these claims by arguing that families were separated though not on a larger scale. Indians from the same neighbourhood or region are not allowed to be in the same employment locations. In the novel “*A Dip at the Sangam*,” Shankar says:

With our emigration passes ... You remember in Calcutta when an official entered each person’s name, caste, and village on a document? They will use those to separate husband and wife, friends, and people from the same village ... Like they did in India, like they did with slaves the old divide-and-rule policy ... Now we can never speak our dialect and unite against the ruler (p. 65)

The sole aim of breaking or separating families and friends, husbands and wives is to puncture whatever unity that exists between them. The planters ensure that each plantation has different groups and distinct ethnicities rather than one ethnic group. On most plantations, labourers speak various languages and dialects like Bengali, Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, and Telugu, among others. They are further alienated based on their language, region, or relations to restrain any opposition against the managers. Most of the labourers were illiterate, so they became vulnerable in communicating with the English managers. They are unable to express their complaint to the protector of emigrants.

In addition, Labourers usually start work before sun rise and end work at sunset. Life on the plantations is full of suffering and anguish. Drivers, Sirdars, Overseers, and Managers would endlessly inspect the workers as they work. For being slow, the workers were often beaten in the process. The coolies/Indians get to understand “that it was foolhardy to hope for easy money; they would have to toil hard for every pittance. And they did” (Lal, p. 148). Many of the

labourers hoped they would not do much work to earn a great deal of money as indentured workers. But this is not the case as they arrive at the plantations, they later realise how unjust the management is towards them. They happen to be trapped in the shoes of ex-slaves. The stick that is used to beat and 'tame' the slaves is now used on the coolies. Their accommodation is in the "early slave barracks," which is known and referred to as nigger's yard (p. 71). The plantation is not as they imagine it to be, for they were promised differently from the reality in place. The labourers sometimes attempt to escape from the hard daily punishments. Also, the coolies become homesick at various plantations. To escape these ordeals, the ignorant labourers out of desperation try to go back to India on foot even though they know they came by sea.

The novel further depicts the suffering/plights of the Indians that are inflicted by other Indians who are known as the Drivers. They have served their years of indentureship and now work in favour of their managers (Europeans). *A Dip at the Sangam* portrays Mathusamy as an Indian driver who frequently beats Shankar "the whipping got so bad that blood soaked through Shankar's shirt" (p. 77). Mathusamy himself has served as a coolie worker long before Raja and others. He is of the lower caste in India. The indentured scheme afforded him the opportunity to change his status. His migration empowered him and he attained the Drivers position in charge of an estate from a onetime outcast and powerless man of India. Methu as fondly called in the novel rules the high-caste labourers of whom destiny have placed under his control. He exercises his power without remorse or considerations of any kind. That is why Raja who is from the high-caste, a Hindu resists him strongly when Mathusamy tries to whip him. Raja openly rebukes him for beating people mercilessly. Raja reminds him of his position in India by saying: "in India, lower castes like you would have been clearing lands of weeds and rats, not whipping a high-caste man like me" (p. 77). Indentureship becomes an escapist platform to the lower caste people for there are no limitations to their achievements and aspirations like any other Indian at the plantation. The Dalits or Shudras are the most oppressed group in India, they sign up themselves as coolies to become successful in the plantation colonies. It is only in foreign lands that a Dalit will be able to rule the Brahmins. Because of the long caste traditions in India, the lower caste exhumes revenge through brutal beatings of the high-caste Hindus when they find themselves in high positions in the plantations.

Furthermore, after the Indians arrive at the plantation in Lachmansingh's *A Dip at the Sangam*, one of the African men mocks them thus, "coolie babu! massa goin' break your back. We

finished with that long time, man” (p. 62). African ex-slaves endure great hardship as a result of the brutal slave trade and they no longer believe in the British government that has oppressed them. Based on these experiences, they rightly know that the Indians will face the same ordeal of mistreatment as they have done at the hands of the Britishers. This predictions or foresight became true when the behaviours of plantation owners did not change with the abolition of slavery for, they continued treating Indian labourers just the way they had treated slaves.

Raja spent one and a half months among the Arawaks after which he returned to the plantation because of his desire to complete his contract and to return home. On his return, the manager and the overseers, decide to punishment him for being absent. The manager declares his sentence thus:

    fifteen lashes on the back with the cat o’ nine tails ... plus a fine of one guilder, to be paid over eight months. Add the six weeks he went missing to his indentureship term (p. 116)

Immediately the above proclamation is made, Raja is fined, punished, and his contract prolonged for no fault of his own. Raja is neither a rebel nor did he escape the plantation willingly. Just that he lost his way, while obeying the orders of his masters and for this, his absence from the estate is tagged as an unlawful act. In an attempt to have a soft landing, Raja employs his African Driver Kwame to speak in his favour. Kwame voices his helplessness by pointing out to Raja how the White man never listens to the Black man. The plantation system is well structured and the existence of the Drivers and the Overseers is in the middle between the managers and the labourers. Driver/Overseers are powerful in the eyes of the labourers but feeble under British management. The punishment of Raja is similar to slavery which is a terrible form of punishment for a coolie:

    they seized Raja, tied his hands behind his back with vine, and took turns dropping lashes over his body. They laughed when he winced and groaned. By the time the whipping ended, he’d already collapsed among the cane stalks, his face buried in the dirt (p. 75)

Again, the gruesome treatment and suffering of coolies by the managers is dreadful and inhuman. Raja’s groaning from severe pains becomes a form of entertainment for the rulers.

They laugh when he moans. This cruelty does not end immediately after the beating. Mathu is also ordered to “rub pickling salt into the wounds, and let the culprit dry out in the sun” (p. 117). This inhuman treatment shows how inconsequential the Indians are, in the sight of the Britishers.

Equally important, Labourers were required to work for about nine hours each day by law with the exclusion of Sundays unlike the West Indian colonies which saw Monday as a holiday. Regulations about timing rules were never followed by the planters. Labourers “worked from daybreak to nightfall, from four in the morning to seven in the night, and far beyond their capacity” (Tinker, 1993, p. 190). The task system is more favourable as it gives independence and self-respect. Drivers do not beat those who work by task nor scrutinize them. Every morning, the task labourers are given a task to complete at their own pace, for they have a better experience than other labourers. Some of them normally complete two tasks a day, due to their diligence and most times they get their tasks completed by the afternoon.

In an attempt/quest to resist colonial rule in India, so many lives were lost. *A Dip at the Sangam* highlights a major resistance that is tied to history in the novel. The revolt of 1857 which comes with the gruesome murder of many Indians is mentioned thus:

In the eyes of the British, I’m a big fish. The last straw for me was when the British sent Mangal Pandey to the gallows back in 1857... after he was hanged by the British for treason, I became a student leader... the sepoys wanted to overthrow the British ... many students supported them... I joined others in a secret training camp-a vacant warehouse ... Sepoys drilled us in loading and firing Enfield rifle-muskets and revolvers until it became second nature, even taught us techniques to extract information (p. 130)

As pointed out above, a detailed account of a story within a story is told by Shankar to Raja about his militant skills and how he and few others resist colonialism. His indentureship is only to conceal his identity as an anti-British rule fighter. He is a university dropout and the reason why he drops out of the university is because he feels he is fighting a just course for India’s freedom which can be said to be in line with colonial resistance to indentureship. His friends were “strap across the mouths of cannons. They, however, had me clean up the bits of brains and body parts after” (p. 131). This also dates back or in league with history where the punishment for anti-British rebels was to tie them up to trees/poles and shoot them to pieces through the

mouth of cannons, meant for killing multiple people at war. Their leader is hanged for treason and Shankar is imprisoned until he escapes the prison and signs up for indentureship (p. 131). This shows that, the Indians do not just fold their arms and allow the Britishers to dwindle their economy and coerce them into slavery. They fought the Britishers and lost the battle because they were fighting a presumed superior power with sophisticated weaponry.

Also, Shankar's real name is "Sagar Singh" (p. 131). Shankar is his indentured name. We get to see Shankar's militant skills when Raja tries to escape with him for treatments at the Arawaks. Unfortunately, the agents that were sent to monitor and arrest Shankar after his years of indentureship suddenly appeared:

Hands up, both of you, the agent-in-charge, the taller of the two, said. You Sagar Singh? He waved the gun at Shankar ... Shankar grabbed the second agent's weapon just as Raja head-butted the leader, knocking him to the ground and causing his weapon to fly through the air ... cocked the hammer of the revolver with his left hand and pulled the trigger... (p. 158)

The deeds of Raja and Shangar demonstrate that Indians are not inferior to British colonists, as they can oppose their control using the same power (arms). The only reason they lost was because they lacked the British army's armament.

Additionally, the Arawaks whom the Britishers consider primitive show a high sense of intelligence and resistance to colonial suppression. Lachmansingh's portrayal of the Arawaks depicts the intelligence of Indians before colonial infiltration. They fought the Britishers when they tried to take their precious stones like, diamonds and gold. Ar'wak a man of the Arawaks, who escapes from indentured labour with the help of Kwame says:

They handed us wooden bowls and forced us to pan the gold for them. One night, we got them drunk on Parakari, Ar'wak broke into a strange giggle, threw the gold back into the river and escaped (p. 105)

*A Dip at the Sangam* highlights the resistance of Raja Singh throughout the novel. The novel portrays a society that is not perfect but that which is capable of making positive and negative choices. In the case of Raja Singh, he is forcefully signed up for indentureship. Due to his powerlessness, he becomes a victim of circumstance. His helplessness is shown throughout the

novel but that does not deter him from resisting the Britishers even at the cost of punishment. Raja's resistance is shown in the following instances: "Mr. Roger, Number 198. My name is Raja, Sir" (p. 64). Raja here refuses to acknowledge the foreign given name. It is a common practice of the colonialist to change the names of their captives. By doing so, the Britishers are exerting their superiority, laying claims of ownership and reducing the Indians to nothing (mere property). The refusal of Raja to identify with the name Roger is a direct resistance/protest to the Britishers. It also shows that, few might have sold their birth rights to the colonialists, like the soldiers that dubiously hand over Raja for silver to be indentured. *A Dip at the Sangam* is saying that there were still others like Raja who have refused to bend to the whips of the colonialist by holding on to their identities. The resistance of the few like Raja might seem almost insignificant, however; it has become one of the reasons why Indian diasporic literary aesthetics is studied today. This is because characters like Raja were able to preserve and pass the cultural values of ancestries to generations.

### **Conclusion**

Since 1834 to 1920, Indian indentured labourers also referred to as contract or coolie workers were employed on sugar plantations in the British, Dutch, and French possessions. This study centres on the unequal representation of Indian opposition against the British colonizers, plantation owners, drivers act, recruiters, agencies, and Sardar's exploitation. Because they were illiterate and from impoverished homes, the labourers were stigmatized. Due to the language barrier on the working plantations, they were unable to take legal action, yet they were able to battle the British during the Revolt of 1857. The Indians were unable to defeat the British in their resistance, but they were nevertheless able to oppose forced cultural and marital fusion by upholding their identities and, to a large degree, marginalized those who chose to elope with Africans or British people. When they crossed the Kala Pani Waters, the majority of Indians brought with them their customs, religion, and knowledge of plants and herbs. Their culture thrived in the Caribbean as a result of these attitudes. The overwhelming difficulty at the plantations causes an unpleasant situation where labourers compromise to survive and complete their years of contract. Their ability to adapt to their environment thanks to their compromise provided them hope for survival. The Indians can start again in the ostensibly new world while maintaining their identity in this rendition.

Due to the broadness of indentured works, this research, as against Eurocentric positions, only focused on a prose fiction that highlights resistance and portrayal of experiences and plights of Indian indentured labourers as they migrate to the presumed new world. This study accepts that there are other works written about indentured labour migration in different plantations like Mauritius, Fiji, and Natal which have not been explored by this research. The research, therefore, concludes that against Eurocentric writings, the Indians continuously resisted the policy of forceful assimilation and a quest for cultural extinction as against marcid acceptance. They were able to maintain their identity and forge a name for themselves by writing to debunk Eurocentric scholars' lopsided portrayals and to also show levels of resistance even when those are not enormous.

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