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Violence, Resilience and the 'Coolie' Identity: Life and Survival on Ships to the Caribbean, 1834–1917

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ABSTRACT

This essay looks at the migrants' long journey from India to the plantation colonies, and examines the life on board ships in great detail. In doing this, it makes the overall argument that the oceanic journey was of great significance in the formation of the 'coolie' identity, as a lot of the 'emotional work' that was required to transform the migrant into a 'coolie' took place in the depots and on board ships. In this sense, life on ships was both a microcosm of, as well as a precursor to, the life on plantations. The essay also sees violence – not just in its physical or 'spectacular' forms, but also in its routinised forms – as a crucial agent that broke the migrants' old sense of self, allowing them to reassemble the fragments and assume the 'coolie' identity.

KEYWORDS

Violence; coolie; ships; identity; resilience; plantations; colonial; resistance

The landing of the first few 'coolie ships' in the plantation colonies is often remembered as a momentous occasion by descendants of indentured labourers. In Trinidad and Tobago, the landing of the *Fatel Razack* is celebrated each year as 'Indian Arrival Day,' and, in Guyana, the day on which the *Whitby* landed has been declared a public holiday. In 2015, on the occasion of the 170th anniversary of the arrival of Indians in Trinidad, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar noted that it was 'a national occasion that reminds us of the indomitable strength of the human spirit, especially in times of challenges and adversity.'[1] While the speech is full of well-worn clichés favoured by politicians, similar sentiments have also been expressed in blogs, newspapers, and magazines. These writings, while pointing to the horrors of the journey, also highlight the unassailable spirit of the first stream of migrants, with one of them noting that 'it is easy to imagine' Indians on board ships straining to catch a glimpse of the strange land which was going to be their new home.[2] These writings might be partially correct in their understanding of migrants' emotions, but one must be cautious in projecting our 'easily imagined' reactions on to

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a people whose affective universe had been turned upside-down during a long and arduous journey (lasting up to five months) under extreme conditions. The present essay will show that we must, first, understand the experiences of migrants before going on to speculate on their emotional state.

Apart from the use of historical empathy, another unproductive but common tendency – in academic and non-academic works alike – is the impulse to compare coolies' experiences with those of slaves. One can comprehend the emotional charge that fuels this comparison, especially when it is made by scholars who see themselves as descendants of indentured workers. However, it can often lead to the tendency to make broad generalisations, while also, paradoxically, enabling a tendency to pick and choose bits of information that are useful in making comparisons. In the context of the ship's journey, too, it is easy to discern parallels with slavers in the middle passage: it is common knowledge, for example, that lack of food was a major issue; that ventilation was extremely poor in the 'tween decks, where all 'native' passengers were crammed together; that there were frequent outbreaks of disease; and that there were instances of people jumping overboard to escape the terrible conditions on ships. While it is important to highlight these horrors, the tendency to constantly repeat them can numb readers to their impact on individual migrants. One way of countering this numbing effect is to invert the prism: in other words, to understand the conditions on 'coolie ships' through the emotions and experiences of migrants, not the other way round. While this has been achieved in some ground-breaking recent work by scholars like Giautra Bahadur – and this essay borrows a lot from them – it adopts a different perspective by giving primacy to the oceanic journey in understanding the 'coolie' identity.[3]

In doing this, the essay will place the idea of violence at the centre, arguing that it played a crucial role in the formation of the migrant's new identity. It sees violence as a blunt instrument that broke the migrants' old sense of self, allowing them to reassemble the fragments and assume the 'coolie' identity. It must also be mentioned here that the present essay uses the idea of violence not in a narrow physical sense, but in a broader, more expansive way – as has been done by scholars like Veena Das.[4] As a result, we will discuss not just 'spectacular' forms of violence, but also routine and everyday forms, including the routine ways in which 'coolies' were objectified and dehumanised. Further, we will look not only at physical confinement, but also the fear of intruding into spaces 'owned' by the Other; and we will discuss not just cases where infringements of an individual's dignity occurred, but also those instances where deprivation of any sort – nutritional or otherwise – took place.[5] Our overall argument is that a lot of the 'emotional work' that was required to transform the migrant into a 'coolie' had already taken place in the depots and on board ships. In this sense, life on ships was both a microcosm of, as well as a

precursor to, the life on plantations. This argument will unfold through discussions in the three sections of this essay: the first section will look at the dehumanisation of migrants; the second will look at the normalisation of violence on board ships; and the final section will look at the new solidarities, relationships, and survival strategies adopted by migrtants. All of this is done not simply by listing conditions on ships, but by looking at them through the migrants' perspective.

Dehumanising 'Coolies'

As is well known, when potential migrants began the journey to the port of Calcutta, they were told enticing stories about the great future that awaited them in the plantation colonies. *Arkatias* (or recruiters) used ingenious strategies to convince potential migrants of the benefits of migration. For instance, to convince migrants that they had made the right decision, recruiters planted their agents into groups of travelling migrants, who pretended that they were travelling to the plantation colonies themselves. Hugh Tinker notes that these people were known as 'decoy birds'.[6] In most cases, it was only at the immigration depots in Calcutta that migrants got a real sense of the future that awaited them:[7] through interactions with other migrants, but also through the treatment meted out to them at the depots. Returning migrants were a particularly potent influence in this regard, having had first-hand experience of life in the colonies. Officials saw them as a troublesome group, with the annual report for emigration for 1880–81 cautioning against the 'presence of mischief-making ringleaders, who are generally old returned emigrants.'[8]

Despite the need to reassure potential migrants, though, depots continued to spend the minimum necessary for the upkeep of migrants. What allowed them to continue with this practice was the fact that rules governing ships and depots were noticeably tilted in favour of shipping companies and importing colonies. This made it possible, for example, to keep people waiting in the depots for weeks or months before they were finally picked up. An enquiry commission, set up in 1838, noted that the length of stay at Calcutta could be anything between fifteen days to two months.[9] This is not to deny the fact that efforts at improving the situation were made from time to time; for example, it was ordered, during the 1870s, that migrants could not be kept waiting at the depots for longer than a month, but this rule was often flouted in practice. For example the annual report for 1876 noted that people had been kept waiting for 41 days in the Mauritius depot,[10] while the very next year it was noted that it was possible for agents to transfer people from one depot to another without getting their consent.[11] Besides this, immigration agents could restrict the movement of people and keep them in confined conditions

until it was time for the ships to depart.[12] Grierson, in his authoritative report on emigration, was at pains to show that migrants experienced no *bandish* (confinement), but it was common knowledge that their freedom of movement was severely restricted. Annual reports on emigration, for example, noted that desertions occurred in greater numbers at depots where the restrictions were weak, implying that depots that fared better on this score had stronger restrictions in place.

Perhaps the most dramatic testimony regarding forced detention was provided by David Hare and Longueville Clarke before the enquiry commission of 1838. Clarke narrated an incident where he was informed of potential migrants being imprisoned in a house. When he reached the house and forced the guards to open the door, 'nearly one hundred, or upwards of a hundred persons rushed out … They flung themselves at Mr. Hare's feet and mine, crying out 'Dohae' [woe]'.[13] Further, the inhospitable conditions in which migrants were kept at the depots in Calcutta is reflected in the figures for 'deserters,' or migrants who changed their minds. in 1909 – a typical year, one might add – there were 111 potential migrants who changed their minds, 58 who were 'claimed by friends', 199 'wards' (including women) who had to be released as they were related to the released male migrants, and 72 deserters.[14] The language used to describe those who refused to board the ships is interesting too. For example, the same report goes on to say that 'really unwilling people' were not detained in the depots as 'others in the depot awaiting shipment would be *infected* by this dissatisfaction'.[15] At another place in the report, when a proposal was made to organise depots in the eastern part of United Provinces – the region that furnished the largest number of migrants – it was rejected on the grounds that there would be an increased risk of desertion 'if the main depot were situated so near the emigrant's home.'[16] The overall impression that one gets from these reports is that people were confined, punished, and moved/transferred at will, causing them to become subdued and excessively frightened. In his widely-publicised report on the abuses of the indentured system, C. F. Andrews noted – based on his interviews with 'coolies' in Fiji – that potential migrants at the depots felt 'fear, suspicion and alarm … but also a sense of helplessness, like that of an animal who has been caught in a trap and has given up the useless struggle to escape.'[17] It is not surprising to see, therefore, that some migrants felt an irresistible urge to break out of confinement at the depots, or during the initial days of the ship's journey, by either deserting or jumping overboard. James Smart of the Bengal Pilot Service, responsible for tugging ships through the Hooghly, noted in1838 that:

> During [the] passage on the river several of them jumped overboard, I can't say how many, for they were never mustered, but every night almost some went overboard – I saw two men myself jump overboard, and I don't think they reached the shore.[18]

When officials and port authorities were forced to offer an explanation for such incidents, they came up with the rather cynical theory that those who jumped overboard never had the intention of travelling all the way to the colonies – they had only boarded the ship for the monetary advance (usually five rupees) that all migrants received.[19] However, old hands in the trade, such as James Smart, recognised that it was much more than that.

This desperate and frightened emotional state of 'coolies' is reflected in an accident involving the *Eagle Speed,* which set sail for Demerara from Calcutta on 19 August 1865. A day after departure, as the ship was being towed through the Hooghly river towards the sea (as was the usual practice), it sprang a leak.[20] Despite this, the Captain of the ship decided to keep heading towards the sea – perhaps because he wanted to give more time to his crew to recover from their drunken state. After all, as a report in *The Examiner* noted, 'three or four of the crew were still in liquor, though not as drunk as on the previous day. The second officer and the boatswain were not sober … some of the men were sick, some suffering from drink, and others from fever'.[21] Eventually, even the pilot steamer broke down, and passengers were put to work at the pumps from four in the afternoon until three the next morning. All this was to no avail, though, as even neighbouring steamers, which could have easily saved everyone, did absolutely nothing at all. With death slowly approaching, the sound of shrieking passengers filled the air; many clung desperately to the gangways and bulwarks, and some threw themselves into the waters on top of hencoops.[22] In the words of a report published in *The New York Times,*

> They were left to a fate too horrible almost to be pictured. All Tuesday afternoon and night they watched death slowly approaching them, – the ship sinking lower and lower, the sullen waves creeping nearer and nearer to them, the breakers washing off the exhausted, and the strong battling with death, and climbing higher and higher on the masts. The dawn of Wednesday brought the unhappy beings no ray of hope, and at 7 o'clock they were swallowed up by the waves which had so long been waiting for their prey. Two steamers came from Calcutta and found three little children clinging to the top of a mast.[23]

This horrible tragedy reflects a couple of things. First, the loss of 'coolie lives' was of no consequence to those whose financial fortunes were not directly linked to the trade. Second, port authorities (and the Indian government) were very reluctant to impose measures – such as denying permission to wooden ships to carry passengers – which would have hurt the financial interests of shipping companies. Most importantly, it reveals the frightened and subdued state of the migrants, who allowed all twenty-four members of the European crew, and the Captain, to escape unhurt, and obediently followed the order to man the pump.[24] It is worth noting that the accident involving *Eagle Speed* was not the only instance of ship wreckage that year, though the loss of lives in other cases was relatively small.

These deaths were completely avoidable if the regulations had been implemented a bit more strictly, but there was very little bureaucratic will to do this. Indeed, the issue of improving conditions was a perennial in official correspondence, but these discussions never translated into action. Within the long list of routinely-flouted regulations, the ones that are the most striking include: the continued use of sailing ships until the end of the nineteenth century, despite steamships becoming the norm by then; the unwillingness to buy ventilation machines, notwithstanding the testimony of some officers that 'the smell below [was] so dreadful … that the sickness [arose] entirely from bad smells';[25] and the continued avoidance of the route through the Suez Canal, as the toll at the canal would have added to the cost of the journey.[26] A number of ingenious explanations were offered to justify these policies – it was argued, for example, that a longer route was better as it gave migrants more time to acclimatise to a different climate,[27] or that the longer journey allowed diseases to die out before the ship reached the plantation colonies.[28] Another recurring theme was that the mortality was high not because of the poor conditions on ship, or because of the longer journey, but due to the 'coolie's' strange constitution. As one of the reports noted:

> The coolie is an ill rice-fed, ague-suffering animal. When launched into the sea-climate, his system takes on a change of rate; some of his natural or accustomed (life dependent) vital acts cease or alter, and thus, in one direction or another, he goes on to show his (so called) diseases: diarrhoea, dysentery, cholera, cough & c. – viz., those which must and do happen in or of him, and which in truth are the natural states or tendencies in his body.[29]

The state's willingness to accept these rather inadequate explanations reflects its eagerness to please commercial sections. This, together with the intense rivalry between shipping companies such as Nourse, and Sandbach, Tinne & co. – leading to attempts to undercut each other by lowering costs[30] – created a situation where the question of passengers' welfare was simply not given much importance. In such a scenario, it is no surprise that passengers on the *Eagle Speed* felt desperately helpless.

The dehumanisation of 'coolies' continued after reaching the plantation colonies, where they were paraded before planters so that the latter could pick the 'coolies' they liked.[31] Jane Swinton, who made the journey on the *Salsette* with her husband, Captain Swinton, noted 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.[32]

In those cases where 'coolies' did not look attractive enough to potential buyers, they were kept on board for a bit longer and fed fattening food. These examples of selling migrants through auction are more readily available for French colonies. Reverend P. Beaton, who spent several months in Reunion, noted that

Captains often sent a boat ahead of them, to relay the news of 'coolies'' arrival, and that 'planters hurr[ied] from the country' to the port, where the auction took place.[33] Describing the process of auction, Beaton noted that 'the auctioneer [was] eloquent in pointing out the good qualities of his goods, and the coolie [was] knocked down to the highest bidder.'[34] He also noted that there was a class of speculators who 'invested' in coolies, just as they might have invested in other commodities.[35] Apart from auctions, the process of commodification 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 led 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.[36]

A similar commodification was reflected in other incidents that occurred on a regular basis. To give just one example of this: in 1884, when a ship called *Lalcham* experienced technical problems near Trincomali and was stranded there, a replacement ship was quickly arranged in Calcutta, but the Captain showed no eagerness to reach Trincomali and collect his passengers. Instead, the ship kept waiting in Calcutta for several days, trying to pick up additional 'coolies', so that they could act as replacements for the ones who had already died or showed signs of illness.[37] The 'coolies', it appears, were easily replaceable – those who died or fell ill did not cause much worry, unless their numbers breached the limits of what was seen as 'reasonable' or 'acceptable'.[38]

This commodification was resisted by passengers using several strategies. However, 'coolie ships' from India do not appear to have witnessed many cases of 'spectacular' resistance, compared, for example, with ships carrying Chinese migrants. Discussing the latter, Evenlyn Hu-Dehart notes that mutinies were quite frequent right from the inception of the trade, but, 'by the time the trade ended in 1874, [they] had become endemic'.[39] One of the most well-known cases of mutiny occurred on the *Kate Hooper,* which was bound for Havana in 1857 with nearly six hundred emigrants on board. During the mutiny, 'coolies' set fire to the ship, and the crew could only regain control after killing four of the mutineers and hanging the ringleader.[40] Similar incidents occurred on board other ships like the *Flora Temple* and the *Sea Witch.*[41] While there were no such instances of dramatic violence on ships carrying Indians, their dissatisfaction was expressed in other ways. These can be seen more clearly in the depots, where a wider range of strategies was available. For example, the strategy of desertion was often used by potential migrants, with one annual report noting that a substantial number of people deserted the Suriname depot because they were kept waiting while immigration agents scrambled to find more female migrants.[42] Another strategy was of finding alternative employment, with the same annual report noting that there was a

jute mill right next to one of the depots, and migrants often crossed over the partly-destroyed wall separating the two if they heard that the mill was paying higher wages.[43] However, despite the use of these strategies, one must not convey an erroneous picture of complete autonomy at the depot. Indeed, the restrictions at the depots often gave migrants a foretaste of what awaited them in the ships and the plantation colonies.

Of Routine and Spectacular Violence

If life in the depots came as a jolt to migrants, their experiences on ships were nothing short of catastrophe. Right from the moment of embarkation on the ship – to which migrants were escorted by *Chowkeedars* (guards) surrounding them on both sides – the picture on the decks was that of people steeped in misery and sorrow. Abdullah Khan, a 'native' doctor on one of the ships in 1838, noted that during the first few days

> They were all crying on board the ship. [The Captain] … .used to lock them below the hatches at 4 o'clock … .If they cried for being kept there he brought some of them out and ordered the first Tindal to give them a dozen with a rope's end.[44]

This atmosphere of misery and grief was noticed by others too. In a short story published in *Everybody's Magazine* in 1925, which was based on the author's previous experience of the 'coolie trade', the protagonist (a ship doctor) noted that 'there was a certain amount of weeping and wailing. This was to be expected among emigrants … I had never yet passed down the river on an outward-bound coolie ship without experiencing this scene'.[45] It was also during the initial few days that the terrible state of passengers began to dawn on ships' officials. In his journal of the *Salsette's* journey to Trinidad – to be published later by anti-slavery activists – Captain Swinton made very matter-of-fact notes on the cases that he encountered. Nine days after the start of the journey, he made the following entry:

> A little orphan girl, four years of age, died in a state of great emaciation; she was in this state when put on board, with an aunt, only ten years old, to take care of her. An old woman brought a baby, two years old, quite dead from starvation, having taken no food, and having lost its father and mother before embarkation … Three children, from six to ten years old, were sent on board without parents. Saw a little boy dying on deck; a most dreadful creature; won't eat.[46]

Swinton continued in his matter-of-fact tone, noting, only a few days later, that 'an infant died, and a girl twelve years old; also a fine lad, sixteen, gasping.'[47] According to him, these deaths occurred primarily due to weakened or ill 'coolies' being allowed to embark by immigration agents, but also because of the lack of appetising food. Indeed, he noted at one point that 'coolies' were 'sinking for want of food suited to them'.[48] His wife, dubbed Florence

Nightingale in the preface to the journal, distributed food amongst the ill from the stock reserved for the European crew, but, in nearly all cases, this was too little too late.[49] Indeed Giautra Bahadur, in *Coolie Women*, cites several cases where the lack of appetising food was felt so acutely that objects such as sugar or biscuits began to be used by the crew as currency for buying sexual favours from immigrant women.[50]

Issues related to diet and water were much more common during the first few decades of the trade, as is apparent from the evidence given by migrants at various commissions of enquiry during the course of the nineteenth century. For example, Ramdeen, a *sirdar*[51]who made the journey in 1840, noted that:

> We were in great distress for want of water on board ship; I had myself at one time to pay a rupee for each *lotah* [a utensil] of water; I did this four times during the voyage. We did not get enough to eat either, and we had occasionally to bribe the serang with the money we had of our six months' advance, to give us more.[52]

The situation certainly improved in the 1860s, as the Indian government was forced to contain the high mortality on ships,[53] and also because it became necessary to respond to the effective campaign against indenture by anti-slavery societies in Britain. However, despite some improvements, one needs to be careful in presenting a completely positive picture of 'coolie diet' on ships, as some scholars have done.[54] New regulations definitely had a positive impact, but a lot depended on their implementation by crew members, who, in most cases, were racially prejudiced. Further, ships' surgeons continued to enjoy a substantial degree of discretion in choosing food for migrants. An example of this was brought to light in 1880, when the excessive mortality on *Ellora* was traced to the poor choice of diet by Dr Hardwicke. Upon inspecting migrants in Demerara, the Medical Inspector passed the damning verdict that Dr Hardwicke had 'half-starved his coolies' - a verdict that was seconded by the Surgeon-General of British Guiana.[55] The testimony given by Dr Hardwicke and others reveals that he had substantially changed the migrants' diet, replacing cooked breakfast with dry food, and doing away almost completely with curries and gram.[56] He justified this later by arguing that there were several cases of dysentery on board, and that 'farinaceous [or starchy] diet was more suitable for … dysentery than the curries containing hot and irritating condiments or grams.'[57] Following this incident, some officers suggested that the discretionary powers of ship-surgeons be taken away, but not much appears to have changed in this regard. In fact, Dr Hardwicke stuck to his old ways, becoming the subject of yet another round of official discussions in 1883, when his ship *Bayard* experienced high mortality.[58]

Photograph entitled 'coolie children at breakfast'[90]

It is possible to understand this nutritional deprivation in various ways, but this essay agrees with Nancy Scheper-Hughes's conceptualisation of it as a form of routinised violence. In her anthropology of hunger, she makes the striking observation that this form of violence is often normalised in situations where they are all-pervasive – to the extent that Scheper-Hughes had to leave her 'field' and go back 'home' to 'recover [her] sensibilities and moral outrage at "the horror, the horror"' of what she had experienced.[59] One could argue that it was, at least partly, this normalisation that led to the relative lack of official attention to the conditions on ships; or to the fact that ships' Captains deemed it acceptable to inflict cruel acts or punishments on already-anxious and emaciated migrants.

Together with these deprivations, migrants also had to constantly negotiate other forms of violence. One of these, which has received some attention lately, is the issue of sexual exploitation of immigrant women. While we have referred to this in the paragraphs above, a closer look at a couple of incidents will help

underline the ways in which such violence was experienced. One of the most scandalous cases that received substantial official attention was the one involving Maharani, a migrant woman who was raped by three crew members on board the *Allenshaw*, and died a few days later (on 27 September 1885) due to injuries sustained during the violent episode.[60] A commission of enquiry was subsequently set up to examine the incident, with the suspicion falling on Robert Ipson (an Able Seaman hired in Calcutta) and his accomplices. The testimony that was subsequently given by Ipson and his fellow-seamen shows that innocuous actions performed by Maharani – such as spending time on the upper or 'poop deck', or the fact that she was seen talking to the surgeon – were read as signs of her sexual availability.[61] Interestingly, Ipson and others had no hesitation in accepting that they were 'skylarking' with women; indeed, even the Captain of *Allenshaw* readily accepted that he occasionally 'slapped [immigrant women] on their buttocks to make them get out of the way' –reflecting how acceptable such predatory behaviour was.[62]

In the end, the commission sentenced Ipson to a few weeks in jail for disobeying his superiors, and the charge of rape was dropped completely. Maharani, on the other hand, cried inconsolably through the night of 26 September and died in the morning, while being comforted by her friend Mohadaya. The ship's surgeon, once again, was the omnipresent Dr Hardwicke, who expressed surprise at the fact that Maharani had refused to come to him despite being at the brink of death.[63] While Dr Hardwicke might have been surprised, Maharani's reluctance in speaking to a European officer is totally comprehensible to anyone willing to understand the climate of violence and intimidation on the ship, and how little it took to tar the reputation of an immigrant woman.

Another incident of a similar kind – though there was no murder involved in this case – occurred on a ship called *Main* nearly two decades later (1902). A commission of enquiry was set up in this case too, but, once again, not to investigate the multiple episodes of violence against women, but because some seamen had refused to accept the punishment awarded by the Captain. The man at the centre of this episode was Stead who, along with his friends, was accused of 'interfering' with female migrants. When the Captain ordered that he be put in chains, Stead threatened to retaliate. Eventually, in a very dramatic moment, the doctor had to point a revolver at Stead, saying '"any violence and I will fire!"' In response, Stead opened his coat and said '"shoot," and then several of the crew said, "there will be bloodshed if you put the man in irons."'[64] Following this, the ship was turned towards the nearest port of Mauritius, and the events were examined by a committee of two officers. However, not only was the charge of molestation and 'interference' not investigated, but even the charge of mutiny was withdrawn (and replaced by the lesser charge of insubordination), as investigating mutiny would have taken much longer and hugely delayed the ship.

Despite the very different concerns of the committee, the evidence given by 'native' *sirdars*, female migrants, and the ship's officials is useful in understanding just how normalised and rampant sexual violence was. A number of people, for example, testified that Stead and his friends stood in such a position on the upper deck that they 'necessitated the women going to the latrine having to pass them'.[65] The Captain confirmed this, noting that they were always hanging about the women's closet, despite his stern warning that they were not to 'loll about' the main hatches or the latrines.[66] The most damaging evidence was provided by Thomas Lyon, the Quartermaster of the *Main*, who had previous experience of sailing with Stead and his friends. During that journey too, noted Lyon, 'their conduct was pretty bad … and they were allowed to do just as they liked, loafing about and speaking to the coolies.'[67] Lyon's evidence shows that the sexual aggression on the *Main* was not an aberration – in fact it happened because the crew were emboldened by the fact that previous actions of a similar kind had been completely excused by authorities. This is reflected in Stead's demeanour while giving evidence before the committee: when one of the members asked him about his conduct with respect to female migrants, he simply laughed, as if his misconduct was a mere joke.[68]

Indeed, Stead and his accomplices were not completely wrong in seeing such crimes or misconducts as trivial matters; this is the idea that enquiry committees sent out when they treated insubordination as a grave issue, while setting aside incidents of rape or other sexual crimes. In the absence of any redress, it appears that migrants – especially female migrants – were left at the mercy of fate, though even there the dice was loaded against them. After all, it took only a handful of racially prejudiced crew to make the journey intolerable. In the case of *Main,* Stead and his few accomplices were able to terrify a number of females, including Habibullah, Jainab, Tulshia, Goolsum, Sarjoodai and Janki. The testimonies of these female migrants show that they were often treated by crew members as if they were the ship's property. They were also likely to be ambushed no matter which part of the ship they were in. In fact, some crew members even ventured on to the passenger decks to force themselves on the women. In the words of Bhugwanti, who was testifying in connection with the molestation of her friend Habibulla:

> I remember the night before we arrived [in Mauritius]. I was sleeping in the 'tween decks with Habibulla and Chabraji. I saw the second mate come down. He came down three times. The first time he walked about and went away. The second time he walked round and went away. The third time he held Habibulla by the hand, and she said 'don't hold my hand, or I will complain to the baboo'. He also put his hand on her breast.[69]

In another case on the ship *Hesperides* in 1883, one Turner – a seaman on the ship – went to the 'tween decks at 8.30 pm and threatened to stab the nurse in consequence of her preventing him from interfering with the single women.[70]

What might have further emboldened the crew in cases such as these was the fact that most victims were reluctant to admit to molestation or rape, as this could reflect badly on their sense of honour. This explains why Habibulla denied that the second mate had put his hand on her breast.[71] What is also clear from such events is that passengers on ships were so subdued and frightened that no one came to the women's rescue even though some of these incidents happened in front of all migrants on the 'tween deck.

One of the things worth highlighting is the link between violence – or the likelihood of it – and the spatial politics of the ship. Even though crew members were often bold enough to venture into the 'between deck, and act in the way that the Second Mate did, migrants were extremely aware of the fact that the 'tween deck was their space, while the upper deck 'belonged' to Europeans. So acute was this awareness, and the fear of venturing into the space owned by the Other, that some passengers preferred to urinate in the passenger deck instead of going upstairs to access the latrines.[72] Women, too, ventured to the upper decks only in small groups, especially when they had to use the latrines at night. There were also instances where migrants who, feeling suffocated in the crammed 'tween decks, 'bought' some time on the upper decks by paying one of the *Chowkidars* (guards).[73] The lines and territories were, therefore, clearly marked, and migrants could ignore them at their own peril. Like so many other ideas that coolies were 'tutored' into on board ships, the idea of spatial demarcation would also travel with them into the plantation colonies.

Official Discourse and the 'Coolie' Identity

In his seminal works on identities, Stuart Hall makes the important point that the process of forming identities is never completely finished or completed; that it is less about 'who we are' and 'where we come from' than about what we might become; and that 'identities are constituted within, and not outside, representations'.[74] All of these ideas are applicable to the formation of the 'coolie' identity, which was an ongoing, contentious and prolonged process. However, this essay does argue that the ship (and the depot) were liminal spaces where a substantial part of the 'emotional work' needed to transform identities had already taken place. In other words, these were spaces where the migrant was 'tutored' into ways of living and thinking that were to become the mainstay of their lives in the plantations. Additionally, borrowing from Hall, this section will make the final point that the 'coolie' identity was constituted within the interstices of dominant forms of representation. This is not to claim that the identity was formed in response to the dominant colonial discourse – such an argument would be very limiting and restrictive in its understanding of migrants' agency. We will argue, instead, that migrants creatively re-adapted or re-worked elements of the dominant discourse to suit their own ends.

One fascinating example of this is the creation of new relationships and, concomitantly, a new sense of self, which occurred even as the colonial machine was working incessantly to dehumanise migrants. It is true, for instance, that authorities classified migrants in ways that erased their pasts and even their names. As Grierson noted, the classificatory schema used at the port and the ships ensured that migrants were easily traceable if their registration number, ships' name, and the year of embarkation were known – there was no need, therefore, to know the names of individual migrants.[75] However, migrants used the salience of these bits of information to forge new solidarities, one of which was the relationship of *Jahaji bhai* or *Jahaji Bahin* (brothers or sisters of the same ship), which has received some scholarly attention. Indeed, 'coolies' continued to be identified using these scraps of information even after they had reached the plantations. For example, when a woman called Ujoodha had to be discussed, it was necessary to mention that she was 'number 123, ex-ship Oasis, arrived in 1865.'[76] The crystallisation of relationships around these scraps of information was further reinforced by certain unwritten conventions, for example the convention that 'friends were not to be separated unless unavoidable' while allocating migrants to estates.[77] All of this, together, led to such strong ties between *jahaji bhais* and *jahaji bahins* that they began to act as substitutes for old family ties that migrants had left behind.[78]

Also, as we have noted above, 'coolies' were subjected to routine racist violence on ships. As migrants spent more time on the ship and in the plantations, they began to acquire a finely-grained understanding of hierarchies – both official and racial – and were able to use this to their own ends. For example, the *Main* employed a mostly mixed-race crew from Calcutta, because European or Indian workers were not available at the time of departure. It appears from the evidence given by the Captain that this was far from ideal, as seamen of mixed-race were considered to make undisciplined and poor workers. The report of the enquiry commission noted, in this regard, that:

> There can be no doubt, from past experiences, that it is most objectionable that any portion of the crew of an immigrant ship should consist of black or coloured men, but that it should be either wholly European, or, should this be impossible, the employment of lascars should be resorted to.[79]

This awareness of the supposed inadequacies of the 'coloured' crew percolated down to the *Sirdars* too, who either physically confronted such crew members or threatened to report them to higher officials if they tried to 'interfere with women'. On the day of the mutiny on the *Main*, a *Sirdar* found a crew member giving biscuits to a girl named Phooleria; the *Sirdar* took the biscuit from the woman and tried to bring it to one of the officers as evidence, but the crew-member snatched it from him and threw it overboard.[80] In another case, when the ship's steward ambushed Jainab near the latrines and caught

her by the hand, a *Sirdar* came to her rescue and 'made [her] go down' to the 'between deck.[81] Instances of this kind can be multiplied, but, to cite one final incident that occurred on *Hesperides* in February 1883: Hira Singh, a *Sirdar*, reported the boatswain directly to the Captain for raping a woman called Tichna; the crew member, in this instance, was particularly belligerent and said 'he would do it again if he had the opportunity'.[82] However, the very fact that this particular *sirdar* was able to use his understanding of official and racial hierarchies to fend off predatory behaviour of the crew, is noteworthy. It is also evident that *sirdars* took the idea of protecting women placed under their 'care' very seriously, even if it meant confrontations with the crew.

Before we end, it is important to make one final point regarding the fashioning of survival strategies by re-working or using dominant discourses. If there was one feature that defined the 'coolie' trade, it was the absolute deluge of stereotypes that were being constantly manufactured and put into circulation throughout the nineteenth century. Amongst the stereotypes that jostled for space in the official mind were: the over-sensitive Indian 'coolie', the immoral coolie woman, the aggressive Chinese 'coolie',[83] the hard-working 'hill' coolie,[84] and so forth. Comparisons were often made between various kinds of indentured workers, which further reinforced these stereotypes. One author noted, for example, that 'the Indian, unlike the Chinese, who is very hard to kill, had many ways of dying. Men and women thought nothing of … commit[ing] suicide if roughly spoken to or found fault with unjustly!'[85]

These stereotypes were, of course, instruments of domination, but it is possible to argue that they could be re-used to circumvent restrictions or demands. In his wonderful work on the forms of resistance adopted by lascars, Aaron Jaffer makes the interesting suggestion that lascars fully grasped the fact that, to European officers, they were simply a faceless mass of indistinguishable workers. They were, therefore, able to use this to their advantage in finding ways of avoiding the brutal work-regime on ships.[86] In the entirely different context of indenture, though perhaps in somewhat similar ways, the intense violence faced by female migrants – at the depot, on the ships, and in the plantations – led them to adopt all kinds of strategies to find a measure of security. This included marrying in the depot or the ship,[87] or the strategy of changing partners to gain a degree of autonomy.[88] While it is difficult to say if women were using 'sticky' stereotypes regarding their immorality to their advantage, it certainly appears that these notions led to the state and the plantocracy giving up on their desire to create 'stable families' that could supply future reserves of labour; even legal authorities, or courts of law, which were very mindful of the supposed sanctity of family life, appear to have come around to the idea that this sanctity was impossible to uphold in the plantations.[89]

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to closely analyse events, scandals, or accidents to unlock the black box of 'coolie' experiences and identities. In doing this, it throws light on the idea of 'coolie' resilience, and disentangles the various strands of the process whereby migrants dealt with dehumanisation, commodification and violence on ships and elsewhere. The use of these strategies, and the numbing effect produced by constant exposure to violence, allowed migrants to show a certain degree of resilience. The resilience was further strengthened due to the formation of new relationships and solidarities – a process that had already started in the depots and on board ships. It is interesting to note, in this context, that port officers and immigration agents begin to refer to migrants as 'coolies' at the depot itself; It almost feels as if, merely by expressing a wish to migrate, the migrant was suddenly and miraculously transformed into a 'coolie'. For the 'coolies' themselves, though, the transformation would occur on the ships – and later– when the full import of what 'coolitude' meant began to sink in.

One of the other arguments of this essay is that, as 'coolies' spent more time on the ships and in the plantations, they were able to use their growing knowledge of the gestures and ideas of their 'masters' to suit their own ends. The fact that this knowledge was put together in very challenging conditions made it more acute in its understanding, and more astute in its judgement of how useful certain strategies could be. They were complemented by new solidarities and relationships, which became stronger through a longer exposure to violence and challenging circumstances. Some of these new relationships could end up becoming so strong as to exert a pull on migrants who returned to India. It was this pull that, arguably, convinced them to go back to the colonies, not the supposedly great pay and living conditions that officials claimed as the chief reason. There is much that needs exploring with respect to these relationships, and with respect to 'coolie' identities in general. In exploring it with respect to the oceanic journey, this essay has, hopefully, made a contribution to studying the changes in 'coolies' own understanding of their selves and their lives.

Notes

1. http://www.ndtv.com/indians-abroad/trinidad-and-tobago-marks-170-years-of-arrival\-of-indians-767243 [accessed on 24 January 2021].
2. https://web.archive.org/web/20080302004135/http://www.indocaribbeanheritage.com/content/view/17/38/ [accessed on 24 January 2021].
3. Bahadur, *Coolie Women: The Odyssey of Indenture* (Hurst & Co, London, 2013).
4. See, especially, Veena Das' work on violence, including her *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (University of California Press, 2007); *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Oxford University Press,

1993); see also her edited collections, for example Das, Arthur Kleinman *et al.* (eds.), *Violence and Subjectivity* (University of California Press, 2000); Das, Kleinman *et al.* (eds.), *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery* (University of California Press, 2001). Other works that are especially relevant to our discussion include Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Stanford University Press, 2006); and Nadia Latif, 'It was Better during the War: Narratives of Everyday Violence in a Palestinian Refugee Camp', in *Feminist Review*, vol. 101 (2012), pp. 24–40.

5. I borrow this idea from Nancy Scheper-Hughes' brilliant work entitled *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (University of California Press, 1992). See especially the chapter '*Delírio de Fome:* The Madness of Hunger', pp. 128–166.
6. Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920* (Hansib, 1993; first published in 1974), p. 134.
7. This is not to say that they were not already aware of the poor work and living conditions in the colonies. As is well known, there were several stories that were circulating about the mistreatment of labourers in the plantations, including the rumour that the real reason behind the migration was that the British wanted to use the emigrants' skull to extract an oil called *mimiai ka tel.*
8. *Annual Report on Emigration from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies, 1880–81* (Bengal Secretariat Press, 1881), p. 11.
9. *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Supreme Government of India to Enquire into the Abuses Alleged to Exist in Exporting from Bengal Hill Coolies and Indian Labourers, of Various Classes, to other Countries* (Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1839), p. 18.
10. *Annual Report on Emigration, 1876-7*, p. 3.
11. *Annual Report on Emigration, 1877-8,* pp. 4–5.
12. George A. Grierson, *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency* (Superintendent of Government Printing, 1883).
13. *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Supreme Government of India to Enquire into the Abuses*, p. 79.
14. *Annual Report on Emigration, 1908-9*, p. 16.
15. *Ibid,* p. 17. Italics mine.
16. *Ibid,* p. 20.
17. C. F. Andrews and W. W. Pearson, *Report on the indentured labour in Fiji: An Independent Enquiry, Part I* (Star Printing, 1916), p. 22.
18. *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Supreme Government of India to Enquire into the Abuses*, p. 92.
19. *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Supreme Government of India to Enquire into the Abuses* p.39.
20. Rudyard Kipling's story, titled 'An Unqualified Pilot' describes just how dangerous navigating through the Hooghly was, and the perils of being a young sailor on a pilot ship.
21. 'The Wreck of Eagle Speed', *The Examiner*; Issue 3011, 14 October 1865, p. 646.
22. 'A Horrible Catastrophe,' *The New York Times,* 29 October 1865.
23. *Ibid.*
24. 'The Wreck of Eagle Speed,' *Ibid,* p. 647.
25. Swinton, *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Immigrants from Calcutta to Trinidad by Captain and Mrs. Swinton, Late of the Ship 'Salsette'* (Alfred W. Bennett, 1859), p. 8.

26. Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India* (Superintendent of Government Printing, 1873), p. 61.
27. Arguing against this logic, the Marine Surveyor at the port of Calcutta noted in 1889 that he 'failed to see what advantage it can possibly be to keep them cooped up on a ship for three months instead of two or less': Letter from R. Bushby, esq., Marine Surveyor, to the Protector of Emigrants, dated 3 April 1889. In British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (hereafter APAC), *Public and Judicial Department Proceedings,* file no. IOR/L/PJ/6/253, not paginated (hereafter n. p.).
28. *Annual Report on Emigration, 1882-3*, p. 14; see also APAC, *Public and Judicial Department Proceedings,* file no. IOR/L/PJ/6/41, n. p.
29. Pearse, *Notes on Health in Calcutta and British Immigrant Ships, including Ventilation, Diet and* Disease (John Churchill & Sons, 1866), p. 35.
30. In his history of 'coolie ships' White noted, in a lighter vein, that 'Nourse shipmasters heartily disliked expenses': White, *Ships, Coolies and Rice* (Sampson Low, Marson & co. Ltd, 1936), p. 39.
31. The Immigration Agent-General, together with the Medical Inspector, carried out the inspection of migrants before 'allotting' them to plantations. See, *British Guiana: Ordinance Number 25 of 1891,* pp. 6-7. In appendix to Surgeon-Major Comins', *Note on Emigration from India to British Guiana* (Bengal Secretariat Press, 1893).
32. *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Immigrants*, p. 15.
33. *Six Months in Reunion: A Clergyman's Holiday and how he Passed it, Vol. II* (London, Hurst and Blackett, 1860), p. 59.
34. *Ibid,* p. 59.
35. *Ibid,* p. 59.
36. For one such case, see *Parliamentary Papers: Copies or Extracts of any Correspondence between the Colonial Office and the Governors of the West Indian Colonies and the Mauritius, with respect to the Condition of the Labouring Population of such Colonies, both Native and Immigrant, and the Supply of Labour, Part I* (British Guiana – Jamaica -- Trinidad), (House of Commons, 1858), pp.190–94.
37. *Annual Report on Emigration, 1884-5*, p. 17.
38. This commodification and dehumanisation of 'coolies' happened to an equal extent in the Chinese trade. One of the most striking examples of this was that emigrants were 'marked with a stamped or printed letter on their breasts to indicate their destination, such as 'C' for California or 'P' for Peru: Kevin Brown, *Passage to the World: The Emigrant Experience, 1807–1940* (Seaforth Publishing, 2013), p. 120.
39. 'La Trata Amarilla: The 'Yellow Trade and the Middle Passage, 1847–1884', in Emma Christopher, Cassandra Pybus and Marcus Rediker (eds.), *Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World*' (University of California Press, 2007), p. 176.
40. Knoblock, *The American Clipper Ship, 1845-1920*: *A Comprehensive History, with a Listing of Builders and their Ships* (McFarland & co., 2013), p. 157.
41. Knoblock, *The American Clipper Ship,* p. 157.
42. *Annual Report on Emigration,1882-3*, p. 4.
43. *Ibid,* p. 9.
44. *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Supreme Government of India to Enquire into the Abuses*, p. 49.
45. Siler, 'The Store in a Bottle', vol. 52 (April 1925), p. 21.
46. *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Immigrants*, p. 5.
47. *Ibid,* p. 6.

48. The Captain's wife doled out some mutton broth, arrowroot, chicken and rice, even though she was not allowed to do this according to the emigration rules: *Ibid,* p. 6.
49. *Ibid,* p. 6.
50. One of the most striking examples is the harrowing case of the 8-year old girl Saroda, whose father prostituted her in return for biscuits and cigarettes: *Coolie Women,* p. 67.
51. Appointed informally by the ship and port authorities, these were the leaders of each small group that emigrants were broken into.
52. *Copy of papers respecting the exportation of Hill Coolies, received from the Government of India; in continuation of those presented to the house of commons on the 11th day of February last* (House of Commons, 1861), p. 45.
53. In the 1850s and 60s, epidemics broke out on board several ships bound for the West Indies, causing 50% mortality on some vessels. This led to calls for improving conditions: Geoghegan, *Note on Emigration from India*, p. 49
54. Ashutosh Kumar, 'Feeding the Girmitiya: Food and Drink on Indentured Ships to the Sugar Colonies,' *Gastronomica*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2016), pp. 41–52.
55. Letter from J. G. G. Grant (Protector of Emigrants), to the Under-Secretary to the Government of Bengal, General Department: *National Archives (United Kingdom)*, *Colonial Office*, File no. C.O/384/146, Part 2, p. 267, paragraph 7.
56. *Ibid,* p. 267, paragraphs 11–12.
57. *Ibid,* p. 267, paragraph 12.
58. Letter to the Secretary of State, dated Simla, 14 July 1883. *Ibid,* p. 309.
59. *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (University of California Press, 1992), p. 16.
60. Verene Shepherd's work *Maharani's Misery* is based on this incident. The discussion of the incident in the present essay will be based on the long appendix to her work, which extensively reproduces the evidence given by various officers and 'coolies' before the enquiry commission: *Maharani's Misery*. This evidence can be also found in APAC, *Public and Judicial Department Proceedings,* file no. L/PJ/6/176.
61. Evidence given by Ipson: 'Appendix 8', *Maharani's Misery,* p. 103.
62. 'Appendix 17', *Ibid.,* p. 130.
63. 'Appendix 1', *Ibid*, p. 83.
64. Captain's testimony, in G. Swann and A. G. Judge, *Report of a committee appointed to look into the incident on Main* (1902): APAC, *Public and Judicial Department Proceedings,* file no. L/PJ/6/600, n. p.
65. Surgeon's testimony, *Ibid* (n. p.).
66. Captain's testimony, *Ibid* (n. p.).
67. Quartermaster's evidence, *Ibid* (n. p.).
68. Report on the conduct of the third officer, *Ibid* (n. p.).
69. Bhugwanti's testimony, *Ibid,* n. p.
70. Enclosure number 1, Report of the Committee of Enquiry, 16 February 1883: APAC, Public and Judicial Department Proceedings, file no. L/PJ/6/96, n. p.
71. Habibulla's testimony, *Ibid,* n. p.
72. The Immigration Agent-General noted that 'coolies' were allowed to 'relieve the calls of nature on the deck on which many of them slept'. Perhaps this was tolerated as it would have been difficult to force such a large number of reluctant coolies to follow orders: *Accounts and Papers of the House of Commons, Colonies: Immigration, vol. 16, 3 February – 19 April 1859* (House of Commons, 1859), p. 224.
73. *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Supreme Government of India to Enquire into the Abuses*, p. 225.
74. Hall, 'Who Needs Identity?,' (Sage, 1996), pp. 1–17.

75. *Report on Colonial Emigration from the Bengal Presidency,* Appendix/Diary, p. 20.
76. Anonymous, *Coolie: His Rights and wrongs: Notes of a Journey to British Guyana, with a Review of the Ststem and of the Recent Commission of Inquiry* (Strahan, 1871), p. 307.
77. *Ibid,* p. 197.
78. Mohan Gautam notes that men who made the journey in the same ship formed a kinship that continued to develop long after they had landed, to the extent that they occasionally promised their children to each other in marriage: 'The Construction of the Indian Image in Surinam: Deconstructing Colonial Derogatory Notions and Reconstructing Indian Identity', in Mahin Gosine and Dhanpaul Narine (eds.), *Sojourners to Settlers: Indian Migrants in the Caribbean and the Americas* (Windsor Press, 1999), pp. 125–81.
79. Paragraph on the crew's conduct, *Report of a committee appointed to look into the incident on Main*.
80. Evidence given by the ship's surgeon, *Ibid.*
81. Evidence given by Jainab, *Ibid.*
82. Entry for October 18 in the official log book, British Library, *Public and Judicial Department Proceedings,* file no.: L/PJ/6/96 (not paginated).
83. The much more frequent cases of mutiny on Chinese ships certainly had a role to play in the formation of this stereotype.
84. On Hill coolies, see Andrew Major's 'Hill Coolies': Indian Indentured Labour and the Colonial Imagination, 1836–38,' South Asian Studies, vol. 33, Issue 1 (2017), pp. 23–36.
85. *Coolie Ships and Oil Sailers*, p. 58.
86. *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2015), p. 70.
87. See Bahadur, *Coolie Women,* p. 73. See also *Coolie: His Rights and Wrongs,* p. 253.
88. Prabhu Mohapatra examines stereotypes regarding women, and the occurrence of wife murders in his 'Restoring the Family': Wife Murders and the Making of a Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labour in the British Caribbean Colonies, 1860-1920,' *Studies in History*, vol.11, Issue 2 (1995), pp. 227–260.
89. It was thought this was the case because women came from the lower class, and that many of them were widows without friends, or prostitutes. Attempts were made to recruit women of a 'better class', and it was thought that this could only be achieved by getting rid of unlicensed female agents and creating a better class of licensed female immigration agents. However, these ideas never came to fruition: Grierson, *Report on Colonial Emigration,* pp. 31–33.
90. From Basic Lubbock, *Coolie Ships and Oil Sailers* (Brown, Son & Ferguson Ltd, 1935), p. 38.

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