“How exciting and unusual to come across a multi-disciplinary approach to the understanding of Indentureship, and the Kala pani crossings in particular, giving space to historical and literary analyses as well as to musicology and the study of Cinema. What is especially superb is the involvement of Indian scholars from India, given that Indentureship and its legacies are hardly remembered in academia there. The highly ambitious and praiseworthy attempt of this book is to give Kala Pani Studies significance, thus enabling a rich relationship with Middle Passage/Atlantic Studies.”

David Dabydeen, Guyana’s Ambassador to China (2010–2015); Guyana’s Ambassador to UNESCO (1997–2010); Director, Ameena Gafoor Institute; formerly, University of Warwick, 1984–2019)

“The Kala pani paradigm has been central to me for the past 30 years. It enabled me to elaborate a matrix of new cultural visions and social relations. It fostered an archipelagic humanism of diversity to emerge in the Global South, enhancing a creative praxis in post-indentureship. In keeping with the Kala pani episteme, this collection deftly explores the dark waters aesthetics. In the wake of a growing interest for indenture in academia, it constitutes a remarkable chapter of present-day transdisciplinary scholarship, making representations, memories and histories of the ‘coolie’ trade more fluid.”

Khal Torabully, poet, film-maker, and author of ‘Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora’

“This volume is an essential read for anyone interested in the Indian diasporas formed in the wake of the indentured labour system. It is a pioneering analysis, crucial to the mapping of the recently formed ‘Kala Pani studies’. The importance of those ‘Kala Pani Crossings’, though much-ignored in India, is weighed and explored, highlighting the centrality of the moment for the writing of a new national narrative for India.”

Françoise Le Jeune, British Imperial history, Nantes University; co-convener of DIASCOM
“The essays in this collection provide a rich and nuanced account and analysis – from literature to cinema and from narratives to songs – of the histories of crossing the Kala Pani. Kala pani Crossings certainly enhances India’s understanding of the nineteenth-century Indian labour migration overseas under the indenture system.”

Ashutosh Kumar, author of the ‘Coolies of the Empire’
KALA PANI CROSSINGS

When used in India, the term *Kala pani* refers to the cellular jail in Port Blair, where the British colonisers sent a select category of freedom fighters. In the diaspora it refers to the transoceanic migration of indentured labour from India to plantation colonies across the globe from the mid-19th century onwards.

This volume discusses the legacies of indenture in the Caribbean, Reunion, Mauritius, and Fiji, and how they still imbue our present. More importantly, it draws attention to India and raises new questions: doesn’t one need, at some stage, to wonder why this forgotten chapter of Indian history needs to be retrieved? How is it that this history is better known outside India than in India itself? What are the advantages of shining a torch onto a history that was made invisible? Why have the tribulations of the old diaspora been swept under the carpet at a time when the successes of the new diaspora have been foregrounded? What do we stand to gain from resurrecting these histories in the early 21st century and from shifting our perspectives?

A key volume on Indian diaspora, modern history, indentured labour, and the legacy of indentureship, this co-edited collection of essays examines these questions largely through the frame of important works of literature and cinema, folk songs, and oral tales, making it an artistic enquiry of the past and of the present. It will be of great interest to scholars and researchers of world history, especially labour history, literature, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, diaspora studies, sociology and social anthropology, Indian Ocean studies, and South Asian studies.

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INTRODUCTION

*Kala pani* crossings: India in conversation

_Ashutosh Bhardwaj and Judith Misrahi-Barak_

When used in India, the *Kala pani* reference is often associated with the cellular jail in Port Blair where freedom fighters and other dissidents were sent by the British colonial authorities in the early 20th century. When used in the diaspora, it refers to the large-scale migration out of India in the 1830s when hundreds of thousands of Indians, both willingly and unwillingly, left the subcontinent and crossed the *Kala pani* (the ‘Black Waters,’ the ‘forbidden’ sea between India and the Americas) to work in the sugar colonies as indentured labourers, or *bound coolies*, not only in the British Empire but also in the French, Danish and Dutch colonies. These emigrants were responding to the need for labour on the plantations after African enslavement was legally abolished in 1834 and fully terminated in 1838. Some 1.25 million emigrants were taken to Fiji and Mauritius, as well as the British, French and Dutch Caribbean.¹ From 1860 Indians were also recruited to work in South and East Africa on the railways and on sugar plantations, going mainly to Kenya, South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania. This migration has gained more detailed records and attention because of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s involvement in Natal in the late 1890s, an involvement that is now being critically reappraised as it deals with his relatively lesser-known views on, and practices of, racism during his South Africa years.

This history of the crossing of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans towards African and American shores between 1834 and 1920, when the system of indentureship officially came to an end, of the ensuing creolisation and of the literature and the arts that have emerged out of it, has now been well researched. How fiction and non-fiction, scholarly, and non-scholarly writers have been feeding on each other’s work in the past forty years is quite remarkable, and the times of oblivion and neglect seem to be over. In the early 21st century, a new momentum has been gained, under the impulsion of a new generation of writers.

Having been set up in the wake of the abolition of Atlantic slavery, the Indian indenture system immediately became the object of much contemporary criticism, mostly from politicians and humanitarians who had fought against the Atlantic slave trade in the British abolitionist campaigns. In the

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Introduction to his recent *Coolies of the Empire—Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies 1830-1920*, Ashutosh Kumar remarks on the fact that the pamphlets and anti-slavery polemics ‘seem to have run their course by the 1870s when the indenture system became fully institutionalised by colonial officials on the Indian side’ (4). If there were hardly any contemporary first-hand writings apart from a few letters written to local newspapers, the colonial archive in India was replete with reports, pamphlets, gazettes, letters exchanged between the Protectors of Emigrants and the Protectors of Immigrants, and other accounts and official statements. As regards fiction and non-fiction publications, one has to be satisfied with early narratives written from a British colonial perspective, albeit one inherited from the abolitionist campaigns.

Kumar gives a detailed overview of the different stages of oblivion, neglect, and renewed interest. He mentions pioneering historians such as I. M. Cumpston or K. L. Gillian for their research on, respectively, the early emigration from India and Fiji Indians during indentureship. The foundational moments in indentureship historiography are quite rightly said to have come with the publication of Hugh Tinker’s work *A New System of Slavery* in 1974, Vijay Mishra’s and of Brij Lal’s *Girmitiyas: The Origin of the Fiji Indians* in 1983. Both historians’ contributions were major, each in their own way, and modified scholars’ approach to indentureship and indentured labourers. If Tinker insisted on the direct continuity between the Atlantic slavery and the indenture system, thus situating himself in the wake of 19th-century pro-abolitionists, Lal positioned himself as a direct descendant of Fiji girmitiyas, those Indian emigrants who had left India on a contract (girmit) to work on the sugar plantations. As Kumar reminds us (7), Lal also debunked the myth according to which only untouchable or low-caste individuals or communities indentured themselves, showing on the contrary that the emigrants who indentured themselves reflected the spectrum of castes as they existed in the villages of Bihar, Bengal or Uttar Pradesh.

Brij Lal was at the forefront of scholars who committed to putting the ‘Black Waters’ on the geographical, historical and mental map of scholars and general readers. Once a foray had been made in the late 1970s and 1980s, other scholars followed suit. From a historical or anthropological standpoint, Basudeo Manguru, Brinsley Samaroo, Kumar Mahabir, or Clem Seecharan have done important work about the Indian migration to the Caribbean and its impact on Trinidad and Guyana. Vijay Mishra and John D. Kelly have done extensive research on the Indo-Fijians, and the many developments the labour migrations led to within the context of the Indian diaspora at large. Crispin Bates has researched extensively South Asian labour migrations, often in collaboration with Marina Carter whose focus on Mauritius is well-known and highly valued. Gaurav Desai is one other scholar who has been building bridges between continents, namely Africa and Asia. Their work has had a tremendous impact on scholarship and has opened new avenues in history and social sciences as well
as literature, encouraging more scholars to develop the knowledge about those labour migrations and indentureship, and about the creolisation that ensued. Gradually, scholars working on indentured labour and the legacy of indentureship have carved a space for themselves, alongside, or sometimes against, South Asian studies, Diaspora studies, Indian Ocean studies.

Like the Black Atlantic in its own time, it now seems that *Kala pani* studies have developed as a major field across disciplines and continents, one whose focus is the cultures that have been affected by the early *Kala pani* crossings. Of course, it is anchored deep in history and social sciences, but the readers of this volume may want to consider the hypothesis that it is through literature, fiction and non-fiction writing and analysis, that the field has gained in depth and won its spurs several decades ago. Pioneer writers and poets such as Mahadai Das, Peter Kempadoo, Ismith Khan, Harold Sonny Ladoo, V. S. Naipaul, Raj Kumari Singh, to name only a few in the Caribbean context, paved the way forward from the 1960s and 1970s. Cyril Dabydeen, David Dabydeen, Ramabai Espinet, Arnold Itwaru, Shani Mootoo, among others, have redefined the contours of one’s attachment to a single home, a single nation, a self that would be single. One of the earliest South African writers descending from indentured labourers, Ansuyah Singh, was also followed by many others who have not only acknowledged their indentured ancestors but have written about the legacy of the sea crossings from India to Africa—Imraan Coovadia, Achmat Dangor, Farida Karodia, Shailja Patel, Agnes Sam, among others. K. S. Maniam is another name that should be mentioned among the Malaysian writers who have inherited their *jahaji bhai* and *jahaji bhain* ancestry, claiming this brotherhood and sisterhood that was formed on the ships. The well-known and well-loved francophone Mauritian writers Nathacha Appanah, Ananda Devi, Shenaz Patel and Khal Torabully also feature prominently on this short list, which leaves out so many other writers. Even as they belong to the wide Indian diaspora, these writers are very specifically the inheritors of the indentured migrations. They are all searching for ways to create new literatures that would strive towards multi-layered conceptions of home, self and national belonging. Torabully has pioneered the *Kala pani* paradigm beyond simply putting indentureship history and aesthetics on the map. More than thirty years ago, he was already elaborating it as a fluid matrix of cultural visions that takes its energy from an archipelagic episteme of diversity. We need Torabully’s inclusive coral poetics today more than ever as a political praxis of post-indentureship creativity (Torabully 1992, 1996, 1999).

Comparing the work done at the end of the 20th century and in the early 21st century with the work done in the earlier period, it is striking to see the evolutions and the difference in focus. The debate is much less dominated by questions relating to indentureship as ‘a second slavery’. The Indians who indentured themselves are not considered only as victims anymore. If one takes the gender perspective that Brinda Mehta, Mariam Pirbhai,
Gabrielle Hosein, Lisa Outar and Patricia Mohammed, to name but a few, have adopted a powerful reinterpretation of history towards an increased emphasis on women’s agency and empowerment has been taking place, particularly in the case of the women who migrated and indentured themselves. More emphasis has also been put on labourers who chose to re-indenture themselves, or re-migrate to other colonies, or simply refused to be forcefully shipped back to India, even if it meant committing suicide. More emphasis, still, has been placed on the reshuffling of social parameters, looking into the multiple ways migration gave the girmitiyas opportunities to escape family pressures, rigid socio-economic structures, caste oppression, gender discrimination, and sexual exploitation. Finally, there has been a noticeable shift towards including the indenture migrations within diaspora studies while at the same time preserving the specific status of Kala pani studies.

However, even if the historiography is now abundant and detailed, even if the academic criticism that has been published has made the creations in literature, film and the arts shine brighter, it is the diasporic point of view of the countries the indentured labourers went to and settled in that has prevailed. Ashutosh Kumar had already remarked there was ‘a curious lacuna regarding indenture as far as nineteenth-century mainstream Indian political and politico-economic discourse [was] concerned’ (4), such an important historical moment hardly featured anywhere in historical discourse in 19th century India. And yet, it seems that by the time M. K. Gandhi, having fought for the rights of migrant Indians in South Africa, returned to India in 1915, the tragedy of the indentured labourers had found a firm and sympathetic expression in literary works emerging from Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the area that had witnessed most of the migration. This was also the time when modern Hindi had been taking its standard form and a standardised grammar, and a large number of politicians had begun promoting it as the national language of India. The language witnessed a vigorous literary activity as well as activism, and its practitioners greatly contributed to the ongoing national movement. Consequently, several major journals such as Chand, Madhuri, and Prabha dedicated large sections on the distressful condition of indentured labourers in Mauritius, British Guiana, Fiji, and South Africa.

One of the pioneering writers, notes the scholar Kamal Kishore Goenka in an essay on Premchand, was Pandit Banarasidas Chaturvedi who wrote several influential works on the indentured in the 1910s, including the seminal work Pravasi Bharatvasi (The Migrant Indian, 1918). In this book, notes Goenka, Chaturvedi observed that the Indian Coolies named Mauritius as ‘Mirich Ka Mulk’ (i.e. the country of green chilly) because of the harsh treatment they had faced on the island. For the reader uninitiated in Hindi, it is instructive to note that the words Mauritius and Mirich have a distinct phonetic similarity, and the early migrants who devised the term Mirich to describe a cruel foreign land had scored both a political as well as a linguistic point. It seemed that the word had gained wide currency and was not
limited to mere colloquial usages. The July 1912 edition of the prestigious journal *Maryada* had an essay by Swami Manglanand, who had spent several months in Mauritius, about his bitter experiences. Manglanand repeatedly referred to Mauritius as ‘Mirich Ka Tapu’.

The theme was then taken up by the great Premchand who, as a resident of Eastern UP, would have personally witnessed the migrations. His short story, ‘Do Bailon Ki Katha’ (The Tale of Two Oxen, 1931), is about the poor farmers in India, and yet he manages to insert a mention of the ‘poor condition of Indians in South Africa’. In his iconic novel *Godan* (1936), there is a reference in a conversation in an agrarian household about an ‘escape to Mirich’. The phrase, it seems, had entered the trading language of the area.

*Chand* was arguably the most influential Hindi journal of that era; its special issues on various nationalistic themes were keenly anticipated and enthusiastically received. *Chand* devoted an entire issue (January 1926) to the issue, with Premchand’s short story ‘Shudra’ being the highlight. In this story, a young woman from Eastern UP sets out in search of her husband who had disappeared soon after the marriage. Instead, she becomes a victim of fraud and finds herself on a ship that is taking many other similar passengers to a distant colony. Upon reaching the new shore she finds her husband who had been similarly trafficked to the land long ago. However, the reunion comes with a fresh set of cruelty that eventually pushes the couple to end their lives. In just a few pages Premchand covers several aspects of the migrant crisis; an attempt to overcome the caste barrier and the promise of better financial prospects as reflected in the man’s escape; the trafficking that makes the woman and many of her co-passengers the victim; the cruelty of the new life.

Goenka calls ‘Shudra’ the first work of Hindi fiction on the indentured, and notes that this could well be the first Indian work as well. By pointing at obituaries on Premchand published in Mauritian journals soon after his death in October 1936, Goenka also notes that the novelist was well-known in the island country and his works had reached the Hindi-speaking population.

India became independent in 1947, and if one thought that the issue of the indentured labourers would now be vigorously taken up both by scholar and writers as well as policy makers, it wasn’t to be so. The issue that had found significant space in Hindi literature and folk tales and songs for several decades, the issue one of whose advocates was India’s most influential leader, that was articulated by Hindi’s most influential writer, suddenly faded out of printed literature—and in government policies it had perhaps never found any space. One of the political battles M. K. Gandhi eventually fought for the Indians in South Africa did not find any resonance in Independent India. Similarly, Premchand’s works have spawned a large body of research and scholarship, but this theme somehow did not generate enough academic interest in subsequent generations. The lives of several thousands of those who left the nation for distant shores suddenly disappeared from the
discourse as the nation marched towards freedom. In retrospective, it can easily be argued that if the migrations had firmly remained in the literary imagination and government formulations in the years following the independence, the diaspora story could have been enormously richer than the one that emerged when the Indian state finally woke up to them several decades later.

The 20th century scholarship took decades to put indenture migrations and indentureship on the global map but one has to admit, indentureship has not been a focus of interest in India itself, it is not well known by the general public, it is not part of the school or university curriculum, it is not part of many diaspora festivals in India, few academics based in India or in South Asia research it or write about it from the perspective of India, only a few have studied the return migrations, hardly any writers, filmmakers, or artists have explored the complexities of the Kala pani, etc.

There is thus a curious imbalance in the fact that while the diaspora literature written by those whose forefathers had left India to work in various colonies as indentured labourers during the British rule has been a topic of major academic and political discourse, very scant attention has been given in India to those members of the early diaspora and to their descendants. Their stories and memories have found expressions in various forms, they continue to exist in popular imagination, yet they do not figure in curriculums or political manifestos. People in India, be they academics or not, are often unaware of this history that is not that distant from us who live in the 21st century. Even if not all of them are National Heritage Sites, there are quite a few museums, memorial sites and other ‘sites of conscience’ set up in the diaspora. One can think of the Historical and Cultural Heritage of Aapravasi Ghat in Mauritius, the Indian Arrival Monument on Plantation Highbury in Guyana, the Nelson Island Heritage Site in Trinidad, the ‘Lazaret’ (quarantine centre) of Grande Chaloupe on Reunion Island, or the commemorative monument along the Saramacca river in Suriname, among others.6

In October 2014, at its 195th session held in Paris, the Executive Board of UNESCO confirmed they would support the initiative of Mauritius to set up the Indentured Labour Route Project (ILRP). The ILPR is steered by an International Scientific Committee including professionals in various fields (history, anthropology, Archaeology, heritage, etc.). Under the Presidency of Vijayakshmi Teelock, G.O.S.K. (Mauritius) and Vice-Presidencies of Maurits S. Hassankhan (Suriname) & Brij Lal (Australia), the International Scientific Committee met for the first time in October 2017 to establish a plan of action with the view to research indenture and promote the dissemination of its history. To gain a greater understanding of the global impact of the indentured labour system, activities and projects include the creation of memorials and events, the setting up of an international database on indenture, as well as endeavours to create synergies with the Slave Routes Project that was launched by UNESCO in 1994. The aim of the ILPR Committee
is also to ‘tighten the links among countries where indenture took place and better appreciate the existing historical interrelations between these countries’.  

Comparatively, India can only boast the Museum that was set up in 2009 by the Kolkata Port Trust (the Maritime Archives and Heritage Centre). The Trust also set up the Memorial to the Indentured Labourers in 2011 and the Surinam Memorial in 2015. But hardly any diaspora festivals refer to the 19th century migrations, apart from the First Pravasi Film Festival in Delhi, for which ‘Coolie Pink and Green’ by Trinidadian Patricia Mohammed was selected for screening in January 2010. India has also not been involved in any of the activities of the ILRP, nor does it feature anywhere among the projects, as if India was not concerned by indenture nor impacted by its legacies. When international research institutes or networks such as the AHRC-funded ‘Becoming Coolies: Rethinking the Origins of Indian Ocean Labour Diaspora, 1772-1920’), DIASCOM (Diasporas, Communities, and Displacements in Colonial and Post-Colonial Contexts 19th–21st centuries), or the Ameena Gafoor Institute for the Study of Indentureship and its Legacies are set up, Indian scholars living and working in India are few and far between.

Contrast this with the focus the new diaspora commands both in popular imagination as well as the state’s policies. In the last three decades, beginning with the push towards globalisation made by the PV Narasimha Rao’s government, successive governments at the centre have attached greater significance to NRIs. Having realised the economic, cultural and diplomatic potential of the Overseas Citizens of India living in the countries like the USA and the UK carry, the government has been trying to woo them for obvious reasons. Special schemes have been launched for them, separate government departments created for the purpose, diaspora festivals initiated. The present Narendra Modi government has been particularly keen to utilise the new diaspora to enhance its soft power image globally (Pande 2018). All this while, the Indian chapter of the old diaspora continues unheard, or not heard enough.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, however, one internationally acclaimed writer of Indian origin, an American journalist of Indo-Guyanese descent, and an Indian academic provided a game changer. Between 2008 and 2015, Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis Trilogy* was published. Gaiutra Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman: the Odyssey of Indenture* was published in 2013. And Ashutosh Kumar’s *Coolies of the Empire*, mentioned above, was published in 2017. Within less than ten years, novel writing, non-fiction and archival work, and academic research operated a striking conjunction to give *Kala pani* crossings another fresh momentum. All three authors, for different reasons, have received high acclaim for their achievements and opened new horizons. What they hold in common is a changed perspective—even if all three of them were published by global publishing houses, are writing for a global readership and using different narrative
strategies, the core of their thinking and writing lies in India more than in the diaspora. Ghosh gives us a perspective from India—the whole saga of the crossing of the seas towards Mauritius first, then towards China, with a highlight on the Opium wars. Bahadur intertwines personal history and archival research in an intricate way that takes her from the 19th century India to British Guiana to Guyana and to the 21st century India, back to her ancestral village in Bihar. What makes Kumar’s book quite unique is the showcasing of indentureship as a holistic process:

I seek to focus my attention on the social worlds and changing fortunes of these labourers from their point of origin and throughout the indenture experience. As a result, the book considers emigrants not as lost to their original villages, but as individual whose choices, aspirations and lives overseas cannot be studied without also paying serious attention to their quotidian socio-cultural life in the villages of the Gangetic plain.

The whole book also hinges on the three figures Kumar calls ‘extraordinary girmitiyas’ (14). Baba Ramchandra can be traced upon his return to India in 1915 after ten years in Fiji, when he increased his political commitment and tried to make the Indian National Congress understand the needs of farmers. Totaram Sanadya immigrated to Fiji in 1893 and wrote his autobiography Fiji Dwip Me Mere Ikish Varsh upon his return to India in 1914, with the help of Banarsidas Chaturvedi, and implicated himself in M. K. Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement. Munshi Rahman Khan was a Muslim novelist and poet writing in Urdu, who made the choice to remain in Surinam where he had indentured himself in 1898 at the age of twenty-four. In 1941 Khan wrote his autobiography Jeevan Prakash. If both Sanadya and Ramchandra were high-caste Hindus, all three, whether they came back or stayed back, were fully aware they would be facing more hazards when trying to get reacclimatised to socio-religious and caste discriminations in India. Interestingly Sanadya’s autobiography was translated by John D. Kelly and Uttra Kumari Singh in 1991 and published as My Twenty-one Years in the Fiji and The Haunted Lines, while Khan’s autobiography was published in India not so long ago (2005), in a translation by Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, Ellen Bal and Alok Deo Singh.

Thus, in the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, it seems there was fresh interest in unearthing those life-writings and translating them for a wider audience. Bahadur and Kumar confirmed the interest and brought it onto a higher plane. Visual artists like Maya Mackrandidil or Andil Gosine have also enlarged the perspective in multimedia ways by revisiting the family oral, written or visual history through photo albums or video footage, creating what Nalini Mohabir calls an
‘archive of feeling’. Some of those visual artists, such as Ananda Voogel, have brought their fresh perspectives to India.

When the coordinates of a possible discourse on the Indian perspectives of Kala pani migrations began to emerge in the transnational conversations between the two co-editors of this volume, one Indian by birth and the other a diaspora scholar based in France, neither realised the waters that would be crossed, both literally and metaphorically, in the work that was taking shape. Questions were raised—how come that this history is better known out of India than in India itself? Doesn’t one need, at some stage, to invert the mirror, to look within and retrieve this forgotten chapter of Indian history? What would be the advantages of shining a torch onto a history that had been kept invisible? Had it been neatly made invisible, by design or default, or are we once again dealing with the messy business of memory, history and historiography? What was the point of emphasising episodes most people in India were happy to forget about? What can be gained from such a revisiting in 21st century India? Why is the form of a transnational dialogue best fitted to the purpose? How can those archives of the past bear an impact on our reading of the present and influence our shaping of the future?

Bahadur, in her memoir essay ‘Tales of the Sea’ compels us to look at the 19th-century Kala pani crossings in the wake of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery, and in the context of the so-called Mediterranean ‘migrant crisis’. Be it the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Aegean Sea, or the Mediterranean, men, women and children still fall prey to global geopolitics, they are still slipped into the sea when they become useless, they still jump overboard when they lose hope. They are still stock and cargo. To say it with Fred D’Aguiar, they are still ‘food for fish’ (183). The ocean beds are still strewn with their bones. They still ‘sink without trace’ and ‘Forensic oceanography’ is bound to develop into a much-wider reaching project in the next decades.

As this volume was being prepared in the Spring and Summer 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has shaken us out of our certitudes and turned the world upside down. How tragically ironical that the phrase ‘the migrant crisis’, which used to refer to the crisis triggered in the Mediterranean in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011, now refers to ‘the migrant crisis’ triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown that was ordered on March 24, 2020 in India. Refuge seekers thrown on the roads by the million, whatever the country they are in or run away from, somehow remind us of former refuge seekers, former asylum seekers, looking for a place to establish themselves without being victimised, discriminated, or shamed. We cannot but search our present to interrogate our representations of the past and search the past for a better understanding of the present.

As we were writing the proposal for the volume to be submitted to Routledge, the images of the migrants flashing on TV screens and newspapers, labourers and daily-wagers who, having been suddenly forced to
leave the metropolitan cities they had been living in for decades, walk for several days to reach their villages, a sense of *déjà vu* grips us. This is the greatest manmade tragedy on Indian soil since the 1947 Partition, perhaps the current scale of migration has already surpassed the previous one. Let’s speculate a pattern around the three migrations this country has witnessed in three centuries. The 1830s migrations were prompted by the colonial powers for their obvious greed, though the indentured eventually negotiated it to their advantage and did manage to wrest a narrative, a house of their own. A century later, the Post-Partition migration was the complicated consequence of colonial rule, communalism and failure of Indian politics. In the 21st century, unlike the two previous occasions, the Indian state—that comprises the various governments at the centre and states, politics and society—cannot blame any outsider for the misery. The hasty decision to impose a nation-wide lockdown and the unpreparedness of various governments caused the tragic migrations and the consequent deaths of many daily wagers on the road.

What is significant for our volume is that a large number of those on the roads in the Spring and Summer 2020 are the natives of the villages and towns in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar from where a large number of the 1830s migration had taken place. Metaphorically then, those who couldn’t migrate to foreign shores as the indentured two centuries before and shifted to Indian metropolitan cities after the Partition have now been forced to return to what the state believes is their original land. In fact, some recent media articles have already viewed the 2020 migrations through the prism of indenture migration, and how the ‘untold suffering’ of the former ‘mirrors’ the latter. They even looked at the folk songs of the Bhojpuri belt in the continuity of the early 20th century Bidesia songs.18

In both cases the (im)migrants left because they couldn’t stay. They left *not* to starve, sometimes going as far as relinquishing their right to a free passage back to India.19 In the latter migration they also came *back* not to starve, and met with death on the way. Contrary to migrations that took them across borders to a newly formed country in the case of the Partition or the diasporic voyages, the 2020 Indian state has produced its own refugees, and those refugees cannot seek refugee status or asylum. If they are not state residents, they are not even entitled to welfare schemes and risk becoming aliens in their own nation, left to hover in transit between a place they have to leave to find work and sustain themselves and their families, and a place that expels them. Precarious in both spaces, legitimate in neither.

Another point of comparison is the ostracisation and the shaming that happens upon the return. The indentured returnees were exploited by the Brahmin priests who demanded money to reinstate them into their caste, whereas the COVID-19 migrant returnees are kept at a distance because they are deemed ‘contaminated’. The government authorities made them sit on their haunches and sprinkled harmful chemicals upon them; they were then shoved into filthy quarantine centres and left to die because of hunger