



For those
Indenture
who cannot speak

by Professor Ashwin Desai



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When Ratunya Mochi opened her eyes on the second day, still racked with cholera and a disease that caused scabs to form on her arms and legs - she had no idea that the place where she lay was in Africa. She did not care. She had barely survived a forced journey of over six months from Hazaribagh, her place of birth - and despite her wretchedness, now felt a deep power. Each time Ratunya's fever boiled her up from shallow sleep, she felt again the moving, the shaking of the only power she had ever known; and her eyes would become gentle. She looked into the faces of the family crowded over her, sold into sugar slavery like her, and murmured that she had 'decided to die'.

The family of Khadeen and her husband Jugmoheen and their two young children had looked after Ratunya since their arrival in Port Natal two days before. Things were tough. It was mid-November and the mats on which they lay were already steaming up the rain-water of the night before. New clouds had gathered.

Jugmoheen had lost his caste. A Brahmin, he ate, spoke and slept rolled up next to those of lower castes. He saw Khadeen - oblivious to this concern - spitting water into the mouth of the most diseased and decrepit woman he had ever seen alive. He was suddenly irrationally angry with both of them. He was impotent. He was scared. Had he known that Ratunya wanted it too, Jugmoheen would not have felt so terrible when - not more than ten minutes after he found himself muttering, 'I hope the sick one dies, so that I can be with my wife'. Ratunya Mochi rose up with a long dry retch, a choking retch hollow and loud and lay down. There was no anguish on her face, or celebration either. Ratunya lay in the dirt of Africa, under colonialism's shameful sun and died with a look of concentration.



eastern mosaic

Ratunya Modhi's story is no sadder than most of the stories of dark-skinned people who have been forcibly taken from their continents, as slaves, in some or other European scheme. Like all indentured labourers, Ratunya carried the marks of her story on the cage of her body.

Ratunya's husband, Buldeo, had been indentured in a very strange manner. An attractive woman from Shahabad, a typical *arkatia's* (recruiters) decoy, had made Buldeo and his two male friends an offer of a high-paying job as an agriculturalist 'not too far away.'



Having survived the burning pain of famine, Buldeo saw a chance to start again. Eagerly, Buldeo signed up. Signed away his life and freedom. For after that Ratunya only saw her husband once again - heading to a port that ferried indentured labourers to the sugar crops of Mauritius. Buldeo's ship, the *Shah Allum*, like countless others broke up in high seas. The *Shah Allum* began to burn. The life boats were insufficient for the 75 crew and 400 coolies. There had been a desperate struggle for the boats 'and the captain and the crew pulled away leaving the emigrants to their fate.' The captain and most of the crew were picked up by the *Vasco da Gama*, but of all the 400 indentured clinging to broken timber and debris only one was saved.

While Buldeo had been lured, Ratunya had been brazenly kidnapped. A month later Ratunya had been swapped for a sum of money at Calcutta. From there, boats sailed to South Africa. Ratunya missed Buldeo terribly. She wept inconsolably one night when she realized she could no longer remember the face of her daughter or husband; that she, Ratunya, was never going to be free again, loved again. It seemed, at first, no-one understood - although many others cried softly at night. One evening a group tried to organize. They would attack the British guards and break the gate at night for its hinges were rusty. But it was still too strong. The British officers whipped the rebellion back behind the gate.

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After two weeks at sea, Ratunya had forgotten so much of herself that even her hunger seemed distant. She gave her meagre food ration, secretly, to the two young children of a friendly couple and rather enjoyed the sense of herself becoming thinner and thinner; closer to death. Dr. W.J. Jackson, surgeon on the ship, struck her six strokes with a cane for refusing to bath. Her fetid breath and ragged clothes were a barrier to the lascars who sought to get close. When she tried to protect Latchmi from a beating because her child had messed, Jackson drew a pig on her chest, painted her face white with paint, tied her hands behind her back, and marched her around the deck for all the passengers to see. Her resistance was her refusal to fit in, to conform.

When the ship was due to land, Ratunya chanced to look in a piece of mirror. She saw behind her the kidnap, the rapes, the smiling priests, the shackles, the groping British soldiers. And then...the dawning that in death there was resistance. For as she left the ship her fever began. And so our future.

There were many indentured who died en route to Port Natal. On the Belvedere there were 29 fatalities and a further ten died on shore before being assigned to an employer. Muniyammah was one of 342 passengers on board the Umvoti that left Madras on October 16 1882. She was handcuffed during the journey. Messing the deck, she was un-cuffed. Later her husband was told she had jumped overboard and drowned. There were many Muniyammah's whose stories we do not know. This vignette employs poetic license to draw a picture of Ratunya Modhi, drawing on a variety of strands that constitute the lives of those who crossed the kala pani (black-water) but who can now never speak.

