

**International seminar on “*Kala Pani Crossings: India In Conversation*”
at IIAS (23-25 September, 2019)**

Concept Note:

“When used in India, the *Kala pani* reference is often associated with the cellular jail in Port Blair where freedom fighters were sent. 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. Indians were also recruited later in the 19th and early 20th centuries to work in South and East Africa on the railways and in other industries, going mainly to Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. This migration has gained detailed records because of MK Gandhi’s involvement with indentured labourers in Natal in the late 1890s.

Even if this history of the crossing of the *Kala pani* towards African and American shores, of the ensuing creolization and of the literature and the arts that have emerged out of it has been well researched for several decades, it has been so mostly from the diasporic point of view of the countries the indentured labourers went to and settled in. It 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 the 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.

Aims and Objectives

This seminar at the prestigious Indian Institute of Advanced Study means to throw more light on the history and the literature of the *Kala pani* from the Indian perspective, going against the notion, held by some, that revisiting the *Kala pani* would be distorting Indian historiography.

It will be the perfect occasion to engage intellectually and launch an academic conversation between India-based scholars and scholars in the diaspora from a comparative perspective, to examine the hurdles and challenges, to investigate the reasons behind such a neglect and uncover new research directions:

- why is it important today to open those pages of history again, not only from the point of view of the diaspora but also from the perspective of India?
- what are the specific conditions in which Indians left?
- how can these chapters of individual histories and mythologies be reclaimed from the colonial versions?
- the diaspora that has emerged out of the Kala Pani migrations is today the agents of soft power for India as well as the gateway for India in several regions of the Pacific and the Caribbean: how important is it for India to identify with this history as much as the diaspora does? what can be gained from such a revisiting? what's in there for India?
- what could be the impact of such a reclaiming on the present-day relationships between India and its diaspora? Is it likely to boost or complicate the existing relationships?

Significance of the seminar

Such a seminar will encourage an academic conversation between India-based scholars and scholars in the diaspora that has never happened in India; it will revisit the historiography and how such crucial history has been constructed on both sides of the Indian Ocean.

Many internationally known scholars have been thinking along those lines even though they have been focusing on the diasporic dimension of the Kala Pani crossings, but the conversation has never happened in India and never from India's perspective. With such a seminar a think tank could be constituted, thus enabling the stretching of our multidisciplinary perspectives.

The seminar will also be significant in the way it will bring together prestigious scholars based in India and of the Diaspora."

An International Seminar on "*Kala Pani Crossings: India in Conversation*" was organized at IIAS from 20-22 May, 2019. *Shri Ashutosh Bhardwaj, Fellow, IIAS, Shimla and Dr Judith Misrahi-Barak, Associate Professor, University Paul-Valery Montpellier 3, France* were the convener of this seminar. The welcome address was delivered by Professor C.L. Gupta, Vice Chairman, Governing Body, IIAS. The introductory remarks was given by *Shri Ashutosh Bhardwaj, Convener of the seminar*. Vote of thanks was given by *Col. Vijay K. Tiwari, Secretary, IIAS*.

Participants:

- Professor T. Vijay Kumar, Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad
- Professor Kusum Aggarwal, Professor of French and Francophone Literature, University of Delhi
- Dr. Arnab Kumar Sinha, Department of English, Culture Studies, University of Burdwan, Burdwan
- Dr. Vinod Verma, Associate Professor, English, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi
- Dr. Nandini Dhar, Associate Professor of Literary Studies at OP Jindal Global University, Haryana
- Shri Abhishek Saurab, Research Scholar, Department of Hindi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
- Shri Anirban Banerjee, M.Phil Scholar, UGC Junior Research Fellow, Department of English & Culture Studies, University of Burdwan, Burdwan
- Ms. Udit Banerjee, M.Phil Scholar, Department of English and Culture Studies, University of Burdwan
- Professor Archana Kumar, Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi
- Dr. Amba Pande, Professor in International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
- Professor Himadri Lahiri, Retired Professor, English and Culture Studies, University of Burdwan
- Dr. Issur Rajcoomaree, Department of French Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities, University of Mauritius
- Professor Vijaya Lakshmi Rao, Centre for French & Francophone Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
- Ms. Suparna Sengupta, Junior Fellow, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi
- Dr. Ritu Tyagi, Department of French and Francophone Studies, Pondicherry University, Puduchery
- Ms. Kanchan Dhar, Independent researcher, Pondicherry
- Dr. Joshil K. Abraham, Assistant Professor, English, G. B. Pant Engineering College, GGS Indraprastha University, Delhi
- Dr. Ridhima Tewari, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Dharwad, Dharwad
- Dr. Arpit Kothari, Department of English, Manipal University, Jaipur, Rajasthan
- Ms. Deepti Lokesh Arha, Research Scholar, Department of English, Manipal University Jaipur

- Dr. T.L.S. Bhaskar Teegela, CAO of India Centre for Migration, MEA, New Delhi
- Ms. Vipin Choudhary, Hans, 2/36, Dariaganj, New Delhi
- Dr. Praveen Mirdha, Department of English, Government Girls' College, Ajmer
- Professor Vijay Mishra, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia