

CHAPTER 3

Coolies of Shimla: Modern Slavery as Relic of the British Raj

Priya Kapoor

Abstract

Nineteenth century Coolie labour made it possible for the British Raj to establish Shimla as a sanatorium for their colonial functionaries and as summer capital in 1864. Coolie labour during the period of British governance can be traced to 16th century *baegar* labour practices in Himachal Pradesh which the British sought to modify for furthering the colonial project, rather than to eliminate, as archaic and exploitative. This chapter explores how Coolie labour practices transformed in the late 20th century. The Khans of Kashmir, seasonal migrant labour who work for lower wages than local residents have replaced the colonial coolie contemporaneously. Through archival, ethnographic, media and literature research, the chapter raises the question of why this practice, in its various forms, has been so durable. That is, from the time of colonial capitalism to neoliberal capitalism.

Keywords: baegar, British India, coolie labour, Shimla, modern slavery, colonialism, postcolonial, unskilled labour



Figure 3.1–2. Contemporary load bearers performing daily Coolie labour. Photos by author and Sunaina Arora during multiple trips to Shimla, from 2016–2022¹:

1. Introduction: From Baegar to Coolie

Since the 16th century, the princely kingdoms of the Hill States of Himachal Pradesh, known also as the Shimla Hill States in 1859–1860 once Shimla became the British summer abode, employed *begari* and *bethu*, indentured and forced forms of labour. *Begaris* and *bethu* performed almost every quotidian activity required to maintain the agricultural lands of their kingdoms, from load bearing to tilling the land. They were called on demand, unpaid, with the exception of gratuities in the form of grain and other essential commodities. *Bethu* were given land owned by landlords or ruling princes to cultivate on their behalf. *Begaris* with meagre material means and high caste bought themselves out of this practice as it disrupted their own

¹ The pictures curated here are of Kashmiri Khans who work in Shimla as coolie labour. From the goods they are carrying on their backs, the Khans have managed to remain relevant during a globalising world order, stemming from the neoliberal capitalist order. Modern day coolies, the Khans are carrying commodity goods such as name brand (all multinational industry-produced commodity goods) TVs, refrigerators, Skechers sports goods, large steel almirahs or cupboards, ostensibly to store more commodity goods. The coolies also carry essential goods, a constant from the time of colonial capitalism, the demand for which has not varied since colonial times: water storage tanks, vegetables, potatoes, coal, ply wood, timber, household goods, scrap etc. The Khans carry these commodities on their backs.

farming cycles of sowing and harvesting. Those who were low caste, with no material means, were subsumed under forced labour practices known as *baegar* and *bethu*. This chapter will discuss the social history of the *baegar* institution that lingered through the British colonial period until the present day despite multiple local reform movements to eradicate it. Coolie labour, a clever modification of *begari* labour became the backbone of the Empire, emerging from the forced labour practices of the existing Rajas and princes of the Hill States.

The princes of the Hill States – the Barah Thakurais (Twelve Chiefships) and Atharah Thakurais (Eighteen Chiefships) – ceded to the British colonialists on the promise that they be protected from the Gurkhas who were in control of the *cis-Sutlej* region from 1803–1815.² The British colonialists defeated them in a series of skirmishes known as the Anglo-Gurkha Wars³ from 1814 until 1816. The British, having blocked the power of the Gurkhas in the Hill States, in turn demanded loyalty and cooperation from the vanquished princes drawing upon their resources of *begaris* for their armies and for sundry, although persistent, labouring needs such as road construction in extreme terrain or load bearing at high altitude. When a series of local protests began against the practice of *baegar*, the British demand for domesticated⁴ unpaid labour was unfazed. They created conditions whereby both migrant and local labour would be paid nominally, and the now racial term, *coolie*, came into use for this type of labour practice that seemingly bypassed extant laws against slavery. After a series of protest movements for democratic participation in the princely states, the *begari* and *bethu* system only found their end in 1948, a year after the sun set on the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent. By that time, the practice of coolie labour was transnational and ubiquitous in the economic transactions of the British administration.

² Thakur, 'The Genesis of Suket Satyagraha and the Birth of Himachal Pradesh', pp. 231–252.

³ The Gurkhas, primarily of the Nepalese Kingdom, had been blocking the British from entry into Tibet for trade therefore the British colonial army had a special animosity against them.

⁴ I am made aware of 19th century colonial parlance by Ezra D. Rashkow's 'Wilding the Domestic: Camp Servants and Glamping in British India', pp. 361–391. The word of note in frequent colonial use is 'domesticated' — in terms of civilising untamed or tribal (barbaric and savage) people who were willing to become part of new modern forms of social organisation — willing to become domestic servants, on the way to becoming civilised. Rigorous domestic service would guarantee a chance at civilised living and acceptance in the new world order.

2. Reasons to historicise and politicise coolie labour

Marked by indentured and forced forms, India was and is a hub of labour in contemporaneous times, as during British colonialism⁵, slavery having been abolished notwithstanding. Historical accounts ascertain that coolie labour was evaluated similarly to slavery as their contracts, considered voluntary, ‘did not spare them from being treated as chattels’.⁶ India continues to promise cheap labour as a keen participant in the circuits of global capital.⁷ This may seem like significant transformation to move from unpaid, colonial, indentured, baegar⁸ labour, since the 16th century in Himachal Pradesh and its capital Shimla, to colonial and neo-colonial forms of coolie labour. Although along with the historical, we need to understand the political-cultural-economic conditions under which such labour becomes available so as to advocate for their rights and visibility in the public and political sphere of the modern postcolonial nation-state. I believe there are connections to wage distribution among unskilled low-waged labour in India with low-waged labour across the world. I also believe that conditions, coercive recruitment patterns, low wages for the most extreme forms of labour, such as loadbearing, construction, etc. have not improved. In many if not all cases, workers in the global economy are almost always migrant or undocumented, from the Global South. This mobile labour is dependent upon waged work to eke out a living and a status in the host society because they are unable to do so in their own home-states, due to custom, caste, religion, war, violence or climate change. Given these connections between the local and global, scholarship on coolie labour must be recognised as global and essential, and more particularly, colonial. An unacknowledged and insufficiently documented form of modern slavery.

⁵ After the Gurkha war, 1814–1816, the British subsumed the administration of the Shimla Hill States under imperial jurisdiction; and while condemning 16th century baegari practices, slowly directed baegari labour for their purposes. Their goal was strategic dominance of the region and to make trade and commerce thrive (Prakash and Sharma, 2014). They needed the baegaris services. For instance, the Shimla-Tibet Road, a treacherous stretch of the upper range of the Himalayas was carved out manually by baegari, coolie labour.

⁶ Tappe and Lindner, ‘Introduction: Global Variants of Bonded Labour’, p. 9.

⁷ Chenoy, Ghosh & Shukla, ‘Skill Development for Accelerating the Manufacturing Sector’; Kalwade, ‘Can Make in India Make India a Manufacturing Hub?’.

⁸ Baegar (pronounced-bay-gaar).

3. The Baegar System in the Shimla Hill States during British rule, 19th–20th Centuries

Scholars of the Indian hill states claim that ‘the begar [sic] system... which had existed in this region since feudal times, was corrupted and made even more oppressive during the colonial rule’.⁹ Shimla Hill States comprise mountainous land lying between two rivers, Tons and Sutlej. British rule would influence the division of this land where the number of the Shimla Hill States would be ‘reduced to twenty-seven’.¹⁰ The baegari system of labour was established for some of the following reasons: one, the extreme geography of the land made this human labour a necessity;¹¹ two, for political power, such as for marriage, death or other communal ceremonies. Negi surmises that with both practical and political necessities of this type of labour force, there were multiple manifestations of baegaris. Athwara baegaris took care of personal service; Hella baegaris were designated for public works; Gaonsar baegaris were allotted for political endeavours, such as carrying people, carrying personal belongings, aiding in tours, etc. There was also the Beth System for serfs/baegaris on the lowest social rung – a system of indentured labour, where people were transferred from one person/family to another ‘like cattle’.¹² Once the British won the Hill States in battle, the demarcations of baegari labour did not hold as the priorities of the Raj were expansionist and extractive-ist.

The subsequent growth and development of Shimla would result in a rise in demand for labour.¹³ The local Rajas or chieftains, in return for their titles and lands, provided their baegari labour for all development ventures to build Shimla and its environs as the summer capital of the Raj. The baegaris, under British rule transitioned to *coolies* for projects that were on a large scale and binding in nature. The Gurkhas, vanquished residents from the 1814–1816 wars with the British, also served as labour during the construction of the Hindustan-Tibet Road. The construction project, sanctioned in 1850 by British Governor-General Lord Dalhousie (1848–56), of the Shimla-Tibet Road¹⁴ (known too as the Hindustan-Tibet Road or

⁹ Negi, ‘The Begar System in the Shimla Hill States During the British Period’, p. 693.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Surefooted non-human options to cart goods have always been few for the Himalayan region. Some alternate means of transport were ponies, asses and mules; inflated skins and rafts were made for crossing rivers; Bhardwaj and Sharma, ‘The Old Hindustan Tibet Road and Kotgarh: 1815–1947’.

¹² Negi, ‘The Begar System in the Shimla Hill States During the British Period’, p. 695.

¹³ Bhardwaj and Sharma, ‘The Old Hindustan Tibet Road and Kotgarh: 1815–1947’.

¹⁴ This roadway was carved for the longest stretch out of rock through the Himalayan range – all labour was provided by indentured baegaris, coolies or the Gurkhas. Several construction workers fell to their death or died in road-making pursuits. The roadway was re-constructed during India’s war with China in 1962 where both life and money were dearly expended. Blogger Harish Kapadia, who

Highway) became an important venture, as an artery connecting several trading routes in the Himalayan region. Importantly, commerce and exchange were further facilitated through its existence as routes to connect Himachal with Tibet were solidified. Many *coolies* lost their lives carving out the highway from Himalayan rock in harsh weather conditions.

At the same time, political and grassroots opposition to indentured and forced labour began to gain momentum in the Himalayan states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Kashmir, as a result of political awareness and the establishment of various 'regional, social and political organizations'.¹⁵ The British Indian Government would respond primarily with the Model Policy¹⁶ which introduced reforms to the *baegar* and *beth* systems. Eventually, in May 1948, after Independence from the British (citing Development Profile of Himachal Pradesh, 1985) the *baegar* system would be abolished in its original form. On the face of it, the British supported the abolishment of *baegar* but they maintained *coolie* labour which was a type of reform of *baegar* as the *coolies* would be paid nominally for their work. *Baegar* essentially lived on, even after its public condemnation, as a binding variation, during colonial times.

4. Research rationale: Institutionalising the term *coolie* and *coolie* labour

This chapter is driven by an interest in the *baegar* system endemic among agricultural communities in pre-British India, with a particular interest in Himachal Pradesh, although *baegar* labour practices were equally prevalent in the adjoining mountain states of Uttarakhand and Kashmir, in the early 16th century. What had remained a singular regional practice for a few centuries caught the eye of the colonial master for the benefits it would bring to the labouring needs of the Empire. The problem was that the custom of *baegar* had begun to gather the ire of protesting local populations in the Himalayan region in the 19th century under the leadership of several reformers such as J.E. Stokes, other prominent citizens and local leaders. Juxtaposed to this uprising were urgent and attendant labour shortages in England, which gave way to institutionalisation of *coolie*-labour in the Shimla Hills during

trekked through the Himalayan road, writes that at 'Jeori-where a fork leads to Sarahan-lies a memorial to the 122 men who died [emphasis mine] during its construction' (<https://www.harishkapadia.com/short-articles/hindustan-tibet-road/>).

¹⁵ Negi, 'The Begar System in the Shimla Hill States During the British Period', p. 696.

¹⁶ The 'Model Policy' was adopted by the rulers of Shimla Hill States after its approval by the Crown Representative in October, 1944. With its adoption, all forms of unpaid forced labour were abolished forthwith. Nothing really changed in practical terms until India formed anti-*baegari* legislation in 1948, a year after the ousting of the British.

British colonisation. This leads up to the modern practice of *coolies* or unorganised load bearers called Khans¹⁷ of the 20th century in late modernity (see footnote and photos at the start of the chapter).

After global decrees to ban Trans-Atlantic slavery, it became especially attractive for Empire to sustain a domestic and transnational coolie labour pool, not yet scrutinised for its morality by other sovereign nations. Consequently, coolie labour, emergent from *baegar*, could uphold colonial power for the British Empire. Colonial labour entailing building of railroads, plantation agriculture, sea-faring Trans-Atlantic slavery was banned due to global pressure, although coolie labor was not yet banned.

Labour historians can be credited with drawing our 'attention to the historical shifts within low status work, also 'stigmatized' labour as among Dalit castes and practices that remain un-scrutinised and neglected such as certain forms of undocumented slavery.¹⁸ The understanding of slavery as global, dynamic, and discursive moved labour scholars' scrutiny from trans-Atlantic slavery (1501–1867) as the only form of slavery to be studied, to varied forms of servitude and entrapment in parts of the colonial and postcolonial world.¹⁹ Given this reality, labour historians now eschew the established social science models derived from studying slavery in 19th-century America. The Shimla *Coolies* are a 'micro-spatial history'²⁰ that has domestic particularities but connects with multiple instances of global slavery that is a consequence of Empire building.

For this study, I refer to those who worked as unskilled labour, and specifically as load bearers during British times, as *coolies*, a term still in use today in Shimla although considered taboo, racial, and uttered by locals with caution lest certain castes take offense. The term *coolie* when spoken uncritically and without irony, often betrays the user's class standing and privilege.²¹ I refer, in this chapter, to unskilled, load bearing work as *coolie labour* while referring to the Kashmiri migrants, who are known as Khans and work as primary load bearers in Shimla. Here, *coolie* is used as an adjective while labour is the verb marking coolies' role and function of performing back-breaking work on the Himalayan terrain.

Institutionalising, and in the process complicating, this racial appellation is the presence of the Shimla Municipal Authorities²², one of the oldest Municipal, civic

¹⁷ Khan in Hindi and Urdu is an honorific for a chieftain, landlord or nobleman.

¹⁸ Jha, 'Doing 'Coolie' Work in a 'Gentlemanly' Way', p. 6.

¹⁹ Burnard, *Writing the History of Global Slavery*; Bales, *Disposable People*; Bales, 'Unlocking the Statistics of Slavery'.

²⁰ Burnard, *Writing the History of Global Slavery*.

²¹ Most upper castes were exempt or able to buy out their bondage from *baegar* work. The *baegaris* then were mostly recruited from lower castes or Dalit castes.

²² The Municipal Corporation of Shimla was founded in 1822 after the first British colonial home was constructed in the hills in 1822. The first form of civic governance that emerged was policing. Water

government offices in the country, charged with registering unskilled labour that seasonally migrates to Shimla. Certain paperwork is filled out to formalise their migrant load bearing status. One of the required forms is titled *Coolie Registration* with a small fee to earn *coolies* a badge, and the other form allows anyone asking for coolie status for access to Labour Hostels built during the time of the British Raj. Both forms are attached to the end of this chapter. A recent change in governance of migrant labour now requires load bearers to report to the Police offices in Shimla. The fall of Babri Masjid in 1992, followed by a Hindutva nationalist central government, triggered the monitoring of the movement and migration of all Muslims leaving Kashmir to work seasonally in Himachal Pradesh (Irfan, blog 2013). Whereas in colonial times, the Shimla Municipality would register coolie labour, primarily Muslim male Kashmiri labour, today registers are with the Shimla Police authorities.

The durability and transformability of forced or near-forced labour from century to century, through different economic regimes: the Feudal, the Colonial and the Neoliberal, despite changing world politics, time periods and context, is worthy of examination. How has the practice changed and endured over the years despite global condemnation of all forms of slavery, active civil society institutions' advocacy for human rights and equitable labour laws in the country? Does unorganised labour in free trade (read: neoliberal) economies become invisible?

5. Method of data gathering

The data gathering process involved excavating extant archives at the State headquarters in Shimla from 2011–2013 and archives downloaded from online historian-led archive projects. In addition, the study excavates communication and media artifacts – a novel, films, blogs, photographs and fieldwork by visiting Shimla on many occasions, and conducting informal and ethnographic interviews to understand current labour relations between the *employers* of commercial businesses and services and the waged, *employed* load bearers – the Kashmiri Khans or *coolies*. The blogs are valuable narratives of ordinary folk. Blogs are the only freely accessible citizen accounts by those who have associations with Shimla, and the Himalayan mountains, having resided there for some formative years of their lives.

sources, an essential civic matter, became regulated in 1830 when William Bentick, the Governor-General was on a visit. The constitution of the Shimla Municipal Committee was formalised in December 1851 making it the oldest Municipal body in pre-independent undivided Punjab. (Municipal Corporation Shimla, retrieved Feb 10, 2024, <https://shimlamc.hp.gov.in/News/Index/33>)

6. The Municipal Archives in Shimla, 2011, 2012, 2013

Archives open up a world of contextual clarity to understand how varied and difficult the job of forced labour was in the Shimla Hills. The Municipal Archives in Shimla are located in a residential area downhill near the Chief Minister's official residence in Shimla and next to a flowing creek that brings down the garbage carelessly tossed in by residents and passersby, as well as the effluents from open sewage lines in the town. The flowing water creates a dampness that makes the files vulnerable to damage. These precarious, stacked and ordered files are documents to disputes between local village folk, trying to talk back to colonial functionaries. In addition, the archives yield information on the extraction of goods and forest resources out of the Shimla Hills: timber, trees lining highways, petroleum, railway services for passengers and carting goods, in particular potatoes and coal. Archival municipal files date from the early 1900s until the 1940s when colonial rule in India was well established. Ferment and dissension among citizens and disparate religious communities was evident through communal references in the archives. The officers for this archive repeatedly reminded me that the British took away the 'records of value' to Britain after 1947 and that I should visit the British Archives in London. I persisted in plumbing the content of the provincial archives after the exit of the British Raj in 1947, and the sort of story I could glean from the files remaining. Therefore, my piecing together of imperial history may come across as an assemblage, inconsistent and discontinuous, often overcoming the strict protocols of history as a seamless discourse.²³

7. Colonial Commodities in the archives: Petrol, coal, timber, potatoes, raw materials

British involvement in fossil forms of fuel is marked by references to early British fuel companies that made the transportation of raw materials efficacious from their point of origin to a maritime port such as Mumbai, Kolkata or Chennai (known in the 19th century as Bombay, Calcutta and Madras respectively). Establishment of companies with names widely recognised today served several roles for the Empire – they helped with marketing the colonial as a 'brand' that spelled reliability ('*British business as reliable*') and generated revenue from selling fuel. Establishing some of the first public 'multinational' companies for commodities from colonies around the world also became the hallmark of the Raj's form of control and colonial rule. References in the archive holdings, to Burmah Shell, to major roadways and

²³ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; Kale, *Fragments of Empire*.

railway lines, in the hill states of Northern India, are noteworthy. Key resources from the hills, namely coal and potatoes needed transportation, fuel and railroads. Echoing contemporary times, the emergent transnational (Burmah Shell) could not exist without the domestic and the local (coal extraction and potato cultivation).

A letter exchange between two British engineers in-charge of the Hindustan-Tibet highway plays out an explosive scenario where the villagers stake their claim to the fallen trees and timber along the path of the intended highway. The people of the village did not ask for a highway to be built nor for the vegetation to be felled for the sake of road construction. The administrators and engineers did not want to honour their request, and lay their own claim on the timber, reflective in their dictate – ‘labour and land were placed free of remuneration at the disposal of the British Government’. The particularities of what should be paid or not in the process of building the roads are quibbled in this note between the engineers who are superior and the junior engineers respectively. They both agree on the lack of British liability in this process. That is, the securing of the trees and the cost of labour ought to be defrayed by another party, namely the residents of the villages settled between the stretch of highway from Shimla to Solan. There is mention of the stately deodars, native to the Himalaya, that were disproportionately felled during this time, in the nineteenth century. Coniferous varieties were being planted in their stead. This has been a devastating British legacy as the transplanted non-native varieties of pines, that reminded the colonial expatriates of their homeland, decimated the native oak and deodar varieties leading to grave environmental consequences for the 21st century. The file is dated September 28, 1873 so it is in consonance with the time that coolie labour was being sought to clear-fell old growth trees. In reading between the lines, coolie labour was most likely employed to facilitate the transportation of the trees and the construction of the roads.

There is a stony silence maintained in the municipal files about any form of human agency mobilised for the coal that is to be transported, the roads that are to be built, or the deodars that have to be cut for timber, replantation of trees, hauling timber to be floated on the river and the labouring bodies it takes to be connected to the railroad. This silence about how labour happens, or human agency, further piques my interest in the persistence of coolie labour in Himachal. The scenario of the deodar trees and the sparring engineers displays the role that bureaucracy played in provincial lands such as Shimla as British interests in the region became more keyed on commerce and development of infrastructure to facilitate the movement of goods from the Shimla Hills to chief national ports. A story of the Hill states Rajas vanquished by the British reveals itself. The archived municipal files bring to life, the rule and vanquishment of Rajas, and the hapless denizens of Himachal villages as they assert agency in times of brute suppression, and the

sly encroachment, through bureaucracy, of British authority. British governance always overtook local resources, rather than share them with indigenous communities, at each step of the way of developing the state when they laid rail tracks, or roads, or any form of transport. The British functionaries couched their inroads into native owned territory as their 'right to be there'.

8. *Coolie* as a linguistic portal for all subaltern populations

The term *coolie*, now understood as a racial slur, came to be a common way to refer to entire subaltern populations, subjects of the British Empire, whether or not they served as unskilled labour. The origin of the term emerges from a quest for labouring needs in the colonial era. *Coolie* mainly served as a linguistic construct as coolies were ruled and governed by labour laws and policies imposed by a colonising regime in the 19th and 20th centuries. Like scholars before me, in particular Balachandran (2011),²⁴ my reference to coolie pulls together the traditional forms of labour that is indentured but also the forever mobile and unregulated labour of the modern *coolie* who still walks in search of jobs of portage on the streets and alleyways of the Shimla hills, suggesting a certain 'un-freedom' that has lingered in contemporary life.

One can gauge the ubiquity of the term *coolie*, as being a colonial subject was grounds enough to be known as one. In the 19th century, Chinese and Japanese labour in America were also considered *coolies*. Abraham Lincoln, in 1862, signed into law that 'all Chinese subjects leaving China' were regarded as *coolies*, embodying 'labourers in oriental countries, whatever may be their condition'.²⁵

The coolie labour of chief interest to me had been local and indentured within India during Empire. The literature suggests that *coolie* or *coolies* were a linguistic portal which named a colonial practice that helped the British transport heavy loads and perform back breaking labour for no cost at all in all their colonies, not just in Shimla, the urban locality of this research study and summer capital of the Empire from 1864 until 1947. The term coolie then does not signify one community, or ethnicity of a person but it works as a floating signifier for an owner or an employer, a template that takes the shape of a task, a place, or a moment in time. Whether the Raja of a small kingdom pledged the lives of their subjects, at the behest of the colonial rulers, or a middle-man rounded up their fellow villagers to sail on a ship to or from the islands – the West Indies or the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius, Malay peninsula, others, that the British needed to build on or grow plantations

²⁴ Balachandran, 'Making Coolies, (Un)making Worker'.

²⁵ Cited in Balachandran, 'Making Coolies, (Un)making Worker', p. 270.

on, for the purposes of subjugating people, they were universally known as *coolies*. As such *coolies* then became an established institution, and presence, to forward the project of Empire so as to fulfil all its infrastructural needs of building roads, railroads, cutting down forests, and as plantation labour growing cash crops like sugar cane, coffee, cocoa and tea. The domestic *coolies* serviced the country from the inside whereas the transnational *coolies* sacrificed their homes, families and communities to obey the rules of setting up colonies.

Those who were coerced or persuaded to leave home shores were unaware of their position and identity, and of India as a British colony, a recruiting ground for coolie labour. Historical records reveal: ‘the conditions under which the coolies leave India, the terms of the indentures, the legislation of the Colonies, combine to wean the coolie from his Indian home: consequently, the fittest not only survive but settle down to live in the colony, ultimately competing successfully with both the whites and indigenous natives’.²⁶

9. In the Literary Imagination: *The Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand

Popular culture, especially literature and film have immeasurable impact upon us such that these culturally impacted memories embed in us to inform our desires, beliefs, and a cache of stereotypes. Furthermore, these memories shape our tastes and offer us a sense of who we are or want to be. Intercultural Communication scholars Martin and Nakayama (2011) believe we must be sensitive to the influences of cultural artifacts because ‘for so many of us, the world exists through popular culture’.²⁷

Despite colonialism and its attendant detractors in the literary world, there weren’t many novelists²⁸ or poets who dealt with the figure of the coolie or their treatment at the hands of the imperial functionaries and their families in the 19th century or early 20th century. In that respect Mulk Raj Anand, an Indian-Anglian writer is a unique literary figure who brings out the pathos, struggle, irony and

²⁶ Pradhan, *Empire in the Hills*, p. 2.

²⁷ Martin and Nakayama, ‘Intercultural Communication and Dialectics Revisited’, p. 202.

²⁸ Saloni and Deshingkar, ‘Book review: Praveen Kumar Jha, *Coolie Lines*’, 324–326. A recent novel, Praveen Kumar Jha’s, *Coolie Lines*, 2019, written in Hindi, is a reminder contract coolie labour, the *Girimitiyas* (a corruption of the English ‘agreement’) of Bihar, was taken to other colonies of the British Empire, the Caribbean, Mauritius, Fiji, Surinam, East Africa, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, North America and the Netherlands. Despite the recency of this book published in 2019 beginning with the sentence that translates as—travellers on a ship who never returned—literary critics do not label the migration as slavery related. They describe *Girimitiyas*’ treatment (physical and mental torture by employers), poor conditions of travel and ultimate abode as ‘feudal’, ‘contractual migration’, and slave-like’ (Saloni).

pathetic reliance of the colonial state and Empire for mobility of its personal and commodity goods on a mere mortal – the coolie, in his novel of the same name. During Pre-partition India, coolies were seamen, plantation workers, factory workers, hand-pulled rickshaw bearers, highway construction workers and load bearers. The next popular cultural artifact that dealt with similar cathartic tropes was ‘Coolie’, the Hindi language film in 1983 that became an instant blockbuster. The director, Manmohan Desai and protagonist, legendary actor, Amitabh Bachchan, named Iqbal Aslam Khan in the film experienced a sharp rise in their popularity as the working class and a newly emerging middle-class saw the corruption of the post-colonial state that worked very much like Empire in not being able to provide each citizen with equal rights, dignity, status and *roti-kapada aur makaan* (the basics of food-clothing-shelter) essential to a democracy. Amitabh Bachchan (Iqbal Aslam Khan) who embodied the *angry young man* provided a way for the contemporary viewing public to attend to their own anger toward corrupt politicians and the state that could not control inflation nor establish institutions that upheld the rights and desires of its citizens. Desai, the producer and director of the film, provided all the elements of a *masala* film, a genre he represents well, in his oeuvre.²⁹

The box office achievement of *Coolie* was followed by a copycat 1995 version with actors Govinda and Karishma Kapoor, better known for their dance moves than method acting. A 2020 version of the film titled *Coolie no. 1* was released by the director David Dhavan, of the 1995 version, who decided to cast his own son, Varun Dhavan, as the lead actor in the later 2020 version with actor Sara Ali Khan. Some of these films held a slim social justice message, and built upon a formulaic comedy of errors employing popular actors. Another film to be released in 2025 in the Tamil language, also titled *Coolie*, starring superstar from South India, Rajnikant, tackled the theme of long-term vendetta, departing completely from India’s colonial history.

Anand wrote the iconic novel ‘Coolie’ (1936) at the heels of his first novel, ‘Untouchable’ (1935), foregrounding ills of colonial capitalism such as exploitative labour, the plight of the downtrodden, the treatment of lower classes and castes, that had seeped into and exacerbated the already deep differences in Indian social, cultural and economic life for the urban and rural working poor. Scholars have called the novel practical fiction.³⁰ Anand is often compared for his social realism with Charles Dickens and John Steinbeck. Anand and Dickens effectively employ a telescopic view to capture the social ills of colonial Indian society, and colonial capitalism that it seemed to have willingly adopted. Anand’s childhood was rocked too when he witnessed the momentous and monumental incident of the Jallianwala

²⁹ Pendakur, *Indian Popular Cinema*.

³⁰ Shende and Deshmuk, ‘Portrayal of the Marginalized Class in Mulk Raj Anand’s Novel *Coolie*’, p. 165.

Bagh massacre, by British troops in Amritsar where he was arrested for cutting a curfew. 'A strong feeling of indignation against the British was stoked by all these events'.³¹ We see in Anand a distaste for colonial power and how it corrupts relations among social classes within the fabric of a country. This form of fractured social relationships presages how free labour regimes of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism would cannibalise modern social hierarchies, already in the throes of inequality, class wars and race/caste/religious riots in contemporary India.

Coolie (1936) takes us through the different horrors and trials of an adolescent boy, who at the young age of 14 and unschooled, is bequeathed to his chaprasi (errand do-er) uncle's office supervisor on the appeal that he would be well taken care of and given plentiful food. Neither promise was kept. As a long list of broken promises and poor treatment by a rich family that want a young domestic servant to take on the burden of *all* housework, the novel-form sets the tone of the story, set in different locales, all of which are known for exploitative labour practices representative of different colonial modern industries and walks of life that needed scrutiny and reform.

Munoo, the newly orphaned boy from Kangra (located in the state of Himachal Pradesh), moves to the city as domestic help. Kangra, an ancient valley of the Himalayas is known well for the flight and migration of its young productive-aged men to the plains. His uncle entrusts him to an accountant who gives him the corner portion of his kitchen to sleep on and does not treat him with respect. Munoo finally runs away after he is mercilessly beaten because he mistakenly bites the accountant's daughter while imitating a monkey in child-like play. Munoo is taken in as a worker by a kind man Prabha Dayal who owns a chutney factory. Munoo is again left to fend for himself, homeless and hungry when Prabha is defrauded by his business partner. Munoo secures a job at a large cotton mill owned by a British expatriate. The foreman of the mill treats the workers or coolies cruelly, and we hear the term coolie used as a pejorative for all unskilled workers. The author completes the cycle of horrors that Munoo faces by transporting him to the foothills of the Himalayas in the employ of Mrs. Mainwaring as her personal rickshaw puller. Having contracted tuberculosis, Munoo dies seeing familiar mountains as in his birthplace, Kangra, at the ripe young age of 15. Mulk Raj Anand hastens Munoo's death while he is still an adolescent but that does not mean that Munoo gathers fewer experiences than a grown man. He, after all, lives the life of a coolie – a man who must work hard unquestioningly, to die penniless. Anand's empathy for the lives of the underclass in colonial times is quite remarkable. In the novel we finally get an insight into the life and identity of a coolie. Munoo is not nameless and hapless but he is human and given that precarious vulnerability, doesn't survive the onslaught of colonial capitalism. He died of TB at 15.

³¹ Kumar Jha, *Coolie Lines*.

Dewsbury (1936), a critic of Anand's novels, and a contemporary, writes enigmatically, 'it is obvious that present evils must be corrected – evils of exploitation and graft'.³² As a colonial critic and writer, Dewsbury too is not able to name the ever present 'evil,' the problem of poverty, colonial depravity and the custom of coolie labour and one feels that it's almost an act of courage that Anand does. Anand observes, indeed presages, a new society of Indians who are fast emerging as elite and are proxy of colonial officers who create their own arbitrary rules for governing people and gathering labour for menial and other domestic tasks. A society of dual class categories of rich and poor exist, where the rich depend on the poor for essential labour. The poor are hopeless outcasts with lives they have no control over.

In this vein, there is a well circulated oral rendition of a pall bearer who carried a Lady of high social standing to a City Ball in Shimla, and waited in the Himalayan snow to transport her back to her abode. The Lady of high status stayed longer than planned and the coolie froze to his death, waiting for the evening festivities to end, outside the ballroom on a cold winter night (retold to me by a longtime resident in Shimla, July, 2015). This tale is narrated by more than one old timer in Shimla reminiscing on the gaping wide chasm in the socio-economic stature between the coloniser and the local serviceperson. Some documents show that load and pall bearers were from Sirmaur, a rugged mountainous district of the state of Himachal Pradesh. The Sirmauri coolie was deemed to be tougher, stronger, than the men from the lower lying regions in the state. These qualitative evaluations of coolie labour changed with availability however.

10. The *Coolie* and Shimla: Intertwined past and present

Coolies in this day and age might seem an anachronism³³ but I grew up in the presence of this institution as a young person, in the 1980s and 1990s as indispensable load bearers and porters abounded in postcolonial Shimla, my parents' hometown. During our summer break from school the family travelled to Shimla from Delhi, the capital of modern India. My maternal grandfather, Ram Nath Malhotra, practiced

³² Dewsbury, 'A Review of The Coolie', p. 22.

³³ During the British Raj, the figure of the *Coolie* was ubiquitous as the load bearer, the indentured labourer who could not refuse service to the colonial Master. Today they are replaced by migrants who are not recognised as a diaspora, a displaced people from a state, Kashmir, that has seen violent border crossings and military action severely disrupting civilian life in the Valley since 1989. The Kashmiri Khans contribute to the need of transporting goods within mountainous locales, more particularly within this postcolonial *hill station* city of Shimla. With the passage of Article 370 Kashmir, a contested state for which India has locked horns with Pakistan since the Partition of 1947 their migration and participation in the hill economy is important to document.

law in the British High Court in Shimla, pre-independence and post-independence, where he³⁴, on occasion, employed coolie labour to transport law books from the High Court to his office study at home, back and forth several times a day. At the age of 44, he moved the family, wife and seven children, to Shimla, from Lahore (now in Pakistan), after the Punjab was rent in two during India's partition and freedom from British Rule in 1947, a bitter-sweet triumph for all warring sides. Even before India was partitioned violently and without citizen consent, in August, 1947, my grandfather had frequented the Shimla High Court, traveling there from Lahore, the capital of undivided Punjab. Although a swift, energetic walker, he sometimes hired hand-pulled rickshaws if he ventured further and higher than his usual ambit, on the sharp Himalayan inclines until that painstaking service slowly died out in the late 1970s. Childhood recollections return me to Shimla's past, accompanying a feeling of disconnect that determines how its urban status as a modern city does not inhere.

The foundation of Shimla derives from a sense of colonial British wonder at the picturesque Himalayan³⁵ landscape, its likeness to British topography and a chance to escape the scourge of the heat wave in the plains, a certain desperation to find solace and regain their health. Pradhan (1997) calls the clever foundation of hill stations in different parts of India, a 'liminal zone' as the colonials negotiated extreme differences, colonial seclusion, and the centre with the marginal.³⁶ Observing the flora namely, holly, ferns, mint, analogous to the Northern Hemisphere made it seem like Europe, not Asia. Localities on the hills were named in the image of known environs, Snowdon, Shrubbery, Wenlock, and Annandale'.³⁷

The likeness of Shimla to the European landscape did not automatically render it a desirable or strategic locale as an extension of the Empire. Kennedy has written, 'The picturesque was an interpretive mechanism that allowed the British to infuse an unfamiliar geography with meaning'.³⁸ Physical interventions by the British were needed before the Himalayan landscape could be moulded and shaped as a

³⁴ All commercial and business interests employ coolie labour. Housewives shopping for household goods will employ them too, on a casual basis. In the neoliberal economy, as during colonial times, Shimla's reliance on coolie labour is normalised.

³⁵ While the British were indeed wonderstruck by the majesty of the Himalayas and how akin to the European landscape it was, the British also marked their presence by honouring key buildings with the names of the colonisers, the Governor-Generals – the iconic post office in Shimla retained the name of Lord Combermere, the Bentick Castle, Shimla, retains Lord William Bentick's name, Trevor Tank in Mount Abu and Wenlock Downs in Ootacamund are 'some of the leading imperial representatives who governed these places and played important roles in spreading the imperial hegemony' (Pradhan, 2017, pp. 6–7).

³⁶ Pradhan, *Empire in the Hills*, p. 2.

³⁷ Pradhan, *Empire in the Hills*, p. 6.

³⁸ Kennedy, *Magic Mountains*, p. 40.

picturesque English town for liveability. Studies show that Shimla's status gradually elevated in three stages; first, as a sanatorium for the British expatriate as 'high refuge,' then as hill station, and as summer capital of the British Empire in 1964.³⁹ 'Though these towns [Shimla and other hill stations] were located at elevations of six to eight thousand feet, the appellation 'hill station' indicates 'an etymological effort to minimize the disturbing implications of the sublime.... To speak of hill stations rather than mountain stations rhetorically scaled back the overwhelming force of the landscape.'⁴⁰ In this way, Shimla never reached its potential of 'sublime' during its otherwise strategic position as summer capital for the British Raj.

Shimla, initially popular for the temple of Goddess Deity Shyamala Devi, was founded by the British in 1819 after the Gorkha war, 1814–1816. Scottish civil servant Charles Pratt Kennedy constructed the first summer home in 1822 (Govt. of HP, 2023). Once Shimla became the summer capital in 1864 the need for moving goods from the plains to the mountains and from the mountains to the plains and back to England became regular and acute. Labouring Himachalis deemed *strong*, such as from the mountainous regions of Sirmaur district, were recruited in adherence to baegar laws, by the local Raja to work for free when the need arose. This recruitment pattern, aided by extant baegar laws, made the mobility of labor more facile. These baegar laws that gave the small village town of Shamala Devi nestled in the Shimla Hills the status of a British governed hill station – one of multiple hill resorts that gave respite to the British from the heat of the plains. In Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, the old man introduces himself at Kim's behest. "I came by Kulu – from beyond the Kailas [mountain known as Lord Shiv's abode]...From the hills where' – he sighed – 'the air and water are fresh and cool.'⁴¹ The gaiety and revelry of the mountains is fabled in known and quotidian literature from the 19th and 20th century, in particular Rudyard Kipling's classic *Kim*. Shimla was known as the Queen of the hill stations. Balls, picnics, theatre productions and late-night parties easily found their place there so the Europeans could mingle. Shimla's many social activities served as a highlight to thrill the expatriate British who came there for respite and recreation.

³⁹ Banerjee, 'Not Altogether Unpicturesque'.

⁴⁰ Kennedy, *Magic Mountains*, pp. 46–47, in Banerjee, 'Not Altogether Unpicturesque'.

⁴¹ Kipling, *Kim*, p. 4.

11. Intrusions, welcome and unwelcomed

As Shimla grew in its urban spaces, the officers of the Raj came to rely increasingly on services that they brought from the plains, such as their retinue of ‘servants, traders, mercantile groups, artisans, clothiers, tailors...lower-level officials...’⁴² Over time, the summer capital could no longer uphold the nostalgia of a congestion-free location and ended up looking less like their hometown in Britain.⁴³ The service economy grew along with the urban spaces and domestic labour was drawn from the neighbouring hill stations and stations at lower altitude but further away from Shimla such as Dalhousie, Darjeeling, Mussourie, and more:

The seasonal influx of visitors created a heavy demand for domestic servants, including khitmatgars (butlers or head waiters), khansamahs (cooks), malis (gardeners), dhobis (washermen), bheestis (water carriers), jhampanis (coolies [sic] who carried sedan chairs and later pulled rickshaws), mehtars (sweepers), and others. While many visitors brought personal servants with them from the plains, all but a few depended on local peoples for menial tasks. According to Charles Dilke, a “small family” in Simla [sic] required the services of “*three body servants, two cooks, one butler, two grooms, two gardeners, two messengers, two nurses, two washermen, two water-carriers, thirteen jampan-men, one sweeper, one lamp-cleaner, and one boy . . . or thirty-five in all* [emphasis mine].” When the *Times* war correspondent William Howard Russell and a friend rented a house in Simla, they felt obliged to employ thirty servants [emphasis mine], including ten wood-cutters. Even transport within the station had surprisingly large labor ramifications. Mrs. Robert Moss King marveled at the sight of *two hundred dandies (hammocklike vehicles), six hundred coolies (to carry the dandies), one hundred ponies, and one hundred syces (grooms)* [emphasis mine] crammed together outside the Anglican church in Mussoorie on Sunday.⁴⁴

The above quotation shows that reliance on labour for maintenance of the hill stations was clearly perceived as a necessity but their presence and their physical residence in Shimla and other exclusive mountain towns was unwelcome. Shimla’s urbanisation provided the opportunity to exploit indigenous labour, but to also bring labour from adjoining villages, from other hill stations and the Himalayan states of Kashmir and Uttarakhand. Carrying heavy loads on their backs or portage became the most sought-after service. The labourers lived in close quarters in tiny tenements around the commercial spaces of Shimla. The administration constructed just a few labour hostels in Shimla and coolie labour had to apply

⁴² Pradhan, ‘Empire in the Hills’, p. 89.

⁴³ Pradhan, *Empire in the Hills*.

⁴⁴ Kennedy, *Magic Mountains*, p. 177.

for residence using the form titled *Annexure B, Form of Application*, attached at the end of this chapter (Fig. 3.3). Their habitations were perceived as vectors of disease, crime and revolt, presumably due to overcrowding, close-in and shared living arrangements. Kennedy (1996) has referred to Rudyard Kipling's description of the Shimla bazaar as a 'rabbit-warren' where anyone could give the police the slip which suggests 'the sense of disorder and danger they evoked.'⁴⁵

While Shimla never became a home to the British colonial administrators, the coolie labour from adjoining areas and from Kashmir made Shimla a convention of work, a 'habit' or 'tradition of migration' that was passed down from generation to generation. Raja Hari Singh, the controversial Kashmiri king at the time of partition, finally ended his reign in 1952 when his son Karan Singh was appointed the head-of-state, and later Governor, as monarchy was abolished after 1947. Karan Singh's mother, Hari Singh's wife, was from Kangra, a district in Himachal Pradesh. Between the 1930s–1950s, several agriculturalists escaped baegar laws of Hari Singh's rule. Given the many cultural links between the Himalayan states it was no surprise that Kashmiri labour found Shimla to be a home.

12. Social Capital Theory as conceptual framework for coolie migration from Kashmir

Social capital theories work in this project as migrants move to destinations that can provide networks and links for waged work. While social capital provides an overarching framework to understand coolie labour there are other reasons too that draw Kashmiris to Shimla. The aspects that contribute to making Shimla a conducive destination are: liveability of the city, the notion of 'what it takes to survive' due to second or third generation familiarity and the ability to get a job without an in-between contractor. Simply 'a habit' or family convention of leaving native homes to move to another state or country also contributes to an easy passage for migrants.

A blog on Shimla mentions how a currently practicing coolie's grandfather found it liberating to leave Kashmir at will, thereby escaping the indentured labour, baegari, owed to the reigning monarch of the state. The ability to reside without expense, and to follow one's religious practices gives a migrant great support and comfort.⁴⁶

Ten thousand Kashmiris from one district of Kashmir, Zamilgham, have made the important link between Kashmir and Shimla over two generations since the Maharaja of Kashmir practiced the baegari system. Ironically, coolie labour originates in the practices of the baegar system. They had an incentive to maintain the

⁴⁵ Kennedy, *Magic Mountains*, p. 177.

⁴⁶ Kashmir Life, Blog, 25 November 2013.

link due to the increasing militancy in the Kashmir valley that all young people wanted to avoid. Together they raised money to buy and bring back in use two mosques that had been turned into stables over the past few decades. As workers the Khans feel safe even at night, unlike in Kashmir, and they are able to vote during elections. Of late, given the disturbances in Kashmir and being Islamic, the local police have asked them to come in and register at the police station. This non-voluntary registry is unlike anything the Kashmiri migrants have seen before in Himachal Pradesh. This new Hindutva-inspired practice does not seem to perturb them overtly, for now.⁴⁷

Bruslé's (2008) research on migration from the hill districts of Nepal to the plains of India yields a certain understanding about the conditions under which the Kashmiri Khans travel to neighbouring Himachal Pradesh to perform coolie work.⁴⁸ The transnational social spaces between Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh are not new because the persistent, continual comings and goings of Kashmiri labour (porters and load-bearing) and merchants (dry-fruit, woollen shawls, embroidered artifacts and other specialty arts and crafts) has been firmly rooted for generations in the lives of Kashmiris looking for jobs in the lower stretches of the varied range of the Himalayas in Himachal Pradesh. There are many bustling cities and towns in the Himalayas, especially in the state of Uttarakhand, but my focus remains Shimla. DFID (2002) describes the sustainable livelihood approach as 'the range and combination of activities and choices that people make / undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals.'⁴⁹

Bruslé notes in his research on Nepali coolies in Uttarakhand that coolies often move from simple coping strategies as newcomers in a foreign location to more ambitious pastimes such as opening their own shops or owning agricultural land which he terms accumulating economic and social capital.⁵⁰ In line with Bruslé's research, my ethnographic interviews in Shimla demonstrate that Kashmiri migrants display ambition by going into the tourism business, or shop keeping, but never abandon the key vocation of coolie that they primarily came to Shimla for. The destination of Shimla for Kashmiri Khans, as for the Nepalis in Uttarakhand, gets entrenched as customary.

⁴⁷ Kashmir Life, Blog, 25 November 2013.

⁴⁸ Bruslé, *Choosing a Destination and Work*.

⁴⁹ DFID, cited in Bruslé, 'Choosing a Destination and Work', p. 241.

⁵⁰ Bruslé, 'Choosing a Destination and Work'.

13. The Coolie Cosmopolite, the itinerant, and the migrant: Shifting power relations

This study asserts that the coolie has always been a cosmopolitan figure, a citizen of the world given the nature of their work. The reference is to coolies' communication patterns when it came to their struggles for freedom from *baegar*, and their desire to modernise and participate in everyday commercial life, although not recognised as such. The term cosmopolitan is often associated with an educated traveller of means and not necessarily associated with a displaced minority migrant or a labourer indentured into servitude. The literature that exists today pays undue attention to the contracted and indentured coolie who was dislocated from their home turf to work on plantations, in mines, on railroads, or at sea performing the crucial labour that made the British, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and Belgian great Empires. Coolie seamen were recruited by a broker or headman of the crew and provided family allotment, or a part of their wages were paid by the ship-owners to their families. A steady stream of recruitment of coolie labour for the mid-19th century ship-owners meant lower potential for pay rises for the British seamen.

The cosmopolitan nature of coolie labour is important to consider to understand how tasks were accomplished during the Empire. Despite the British colonial understanding of waged versus unwaged work, the hill folk developed a quick understanding of money, transaction, exchange and business.⁵¹ Railway lines and highways leading out of and into the agricultural state paved the way for interaction among different statuses and hierarchies, as also for a greater sense of modern citizenship (a rise in social consciousness while colonial subjects), even entrepreneurship, laden in power dynamics related not just to menial and physical tasks but also commercial instincts. Passenger suitcases needed to be lifted, as in the case of the domestic Shimla coolie. Trees⁵² had to be felled as roads and highways were being metalled and carved out of the scraggy mountains, maritime work needed to be performed, railroad tracks were being laid, to siphon goods from coal, mineral and metal mines, or transport food such as potatoes harvested from their [agricultural] home to the nearest sea port.

Lord Sanderson's committee (Antislavery International, 1910) put together to examine the human and social cost of recruiting labour from India explains how the Raj's shortage of labour was fulfilled in the 18th and 19th centuries. The *coolies*,

⁵¹ Kennedy, *Magic Mountains*, p. 179.

⁵² Native varieties such as old growth deodars were used for lumber and coniferous English varieties were planted in their stead. This unthinking replacement of native flora has, in the long run, undermined efforts at curbing wild fires in the Himalayas and other forest conservation efforts to maintain native varieties.

simple villagers, were sent overseas to British colonies and more importantly, the coolie 'handlers' a genuinely disliked category abhorred by all parties because they often coerced or lured village folk to leave behind their spouses, most often women. The lack of family solace and the absence of a partner uncharitably earned them the title of 'coolie lunatics' in the Caribbean. Carrying ganja or marijuana from their villages and its use in times of despair was later attributed to their lunacy, as revealed by the several court cases they were indicted in, for misdemeanours and murders. The archives say that the herb could be used both as 'sedative and a stimulant'⁵³ assuaging the gross imbalance in the numbers of women and men who were indentured to the Caribbean. Not enough attention was paid to the harsh, often unjustified sentences meted out to them via the justice system accessible to *coolies*.

Migrancy and mobility of the *coolie cosmopolite* has constantly changed structural power relations, as also the power relations that defined coolie labour. For instance, the cosmopolitanism of the load bearer and the cosmopolitanism of the colonial employer differed, and are rooted in the pecking order of race, gender, nation and class. Similarly, 'migration is linked in complex ways to class, gender, generation, ethnicity and other social cleavages, which are embodied in hierarchies of power and social status, in positions in home and host communities, and in work and domestic relationships – all of which may be transformed in the course of the migratory process.'⁵⁴ I argue, then, that the figure of the coolie must be seen as cosmopolitan for their mobility and forced movement coded as migration. It is precisely the *coolie cosmopolite* as the domestic or the displaced expatriate who becomes endemic to a larger pattern of migration entailing servitude, fomented by colonial labour needs and interests.

14. Emerging arguments

There are two arguments that find salience here. One, labour from countries of the South have become inextricably linked with labour practices of the Global North⁵⁵ since colonialism, 16th century onward. The practices of labour control and labour exploitation are co-terminus with extant labour practices in the West, in terms of wages, recruitment and treatment of migrants from the Global South. Shortages of labour during colonial times solidified the practices of recruiting *coolies* from disparate countries under the Empire – usually from China or India.

⁵³ Gallagher, 'Dealing with Distance from the Archives through Digitization'.

⁵⁴ Van Hear, 'Theories of Migration and Social Change'.

⁵⁵ Balachandran, 'Making Coolies, (Un)making Workers'.

Secondly, scholars have noted that emergence of coolie labour during the Empire created a drop in wages among labour in the Global North. Southern migrant coolie labour and their meagre remuneration became the yardstick with which wages were measured in order to give raises or stagnate the wages of the working class in the countries of Empire.⁵⁶ Scholars believe that the practices of colonial labour encompassed in the figure of the *coolie* are coterminous with, or mirror, contemporary informal labour practices. Colonial capitalism enforced rural populations tethered to the land to be plucked out from their habitat and become indentured in labour that served the capital accumulation and commercial purposes of the Empire – railroads, mines, road construction and load-bearing. This same institution modified due to time, labour needs and practices has persisted in maintaining the different roles of coolie labour in neoliberal capitalism. The question at the end of this chapter remains: what is it about this form of labour that has transformed so easily between these seemingly different time periods, political ideologies and regimes of capitalism? Studying an imperial form of labour is essential to understand the new economic order and globalisation in contemporaneous times. Imperial coolie labour sheds light on the trajectory of a similar lack of labour regulation and human rights toward unskilled labour in nation-states that are experimenting with democracy, establishment of rule of law, are beleaguered with debt⁵⁷ and other regional political-economic exigencies.

Studying *coolies* and Khans tracks the fissures in modernity that create the same labour needs, and I argue similar poor conditions, as a hundred years ago. Archives show that an aerial railcar project had been envisioned to carry goods to and between mountainous regions and plain terrain in the early 1900s. This idea would relieve *coolies* of arduous labour and over time obliterate the need for this form of labour, but it never got off the ground. The costs of materialising this project were never set aside, and the political will was never there to fulfil a project that would equally benefit local and colonial subject populations. Today, the technological fixes to urban problems are not sufficient. One such central government program is the SMART⁵⁸ city movement that does not account for rural

⁵⁶ Balachandran, 'Making Coolies, (Un)making Workers'.

⁵⁷ For instance, 'in 2022, public debt in Africa reached USD 1.8 trillion. While this is a fraction of the overall outstanding debt of developing countries, Africa's debt has increased by 183% since 2010, a rate roughly four times higher than its growth rate of GDP in dollar terms' (<https://unctad.org/publication/world-of-debt/regional-stories>).

⁵⁸ The Smart cities mission was launched by the Govt. of India on June 25, 2015 and Shimla was selected for the third round to be implemented during June 28, 2017. Under this initiative Shimla is to become more modernised with easy citizen access to all urban amenities. 'The main objective of the Mission is to promote cities that provide core infrastructure, clean and sustainable environment and give a decent quality of life to their citizens through the application of 'smart solutions' [Ministry of

or urban unemployment, youth empowerment and migration patterns that link cities with other regions in the country that are in crisis due to military movement, cross-border terrorism or poverty and the lack of development.

15. Concluding thoughts

While the history of the coolie is replete with stories of the cross-continent traversing colonial coolie, it is the homegrown (Khan) migrant from the neighbouring hill states or baegari from the Shimla Hills in pre-colonial times (16th century onward) that fell prey to the designs of the British Raj's needs of labour for loadbearing and portering. The time span of this practice ranges from the 19th century right until contemporary neoliberal capitalist times where the global economy ironically still hinges upon the availability of cheap labour while relying on both free and unfree labour practice. The coolies and Khans of SMART Shimla are equally *coolie cosmopolite* as those *coolies* who were forced to cross the seven seas in the 19th century. The literature of Mulk Raj Anand and films of Manmohan Desai, and the references to coolies in current press, raise a cry for justice but also normalise the image of the coolie in our everyday consciousness. They inure us to the plight of the person who carries our bags and loads that we are not able to. Both the literary imagination⁵⁹ and research scholarship⁶⁰ has portrayed an all too sorry image of the coolie who cannot control their fate nor wages. Preliminary ethnographic interviews conducted with coolies right before and during the COVID pandemic in 2019 and 2020 yield a somewhat different picture.

Through their savings and labour, *coolies* and Khans turn their 'isolated helplessness'⁶¹ into a strategic marginality that both Miller (2012) and Burnard (2023) have theorised but in the context of the master-slave relationship. While the Khans have many who wield power over them, they are still able to work toward their goals of saving earnings for their family, educating their children, and performing seasonal agriculture in Kashmir to keep their farms fertile. My interviews in Shimla yield that the Khans, the coolies from Kashmir, save money from their wages to remit to family members, are fully aware of job opportunities outside of Himachal and still choose Shimla as their work destination. Khans are active in the mosques in Shimla and may reside there. Their children often seek

Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India]. Coolie labour or transportation of goods has not been a priority nor discussed as part of the plan.

⁵⁹ Anand, *Coolie*.

⁶⁰ Breman, 'Coolie Labour and Colonial Capitalism in Asia'.

⁶¹ Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History*, p. 31; Burnard, *Writing the History of Global Slavery*.

jobs in government posts such as the army despite the army's chequered record in dealing with the insurgency in Kashmir. Several mosques in Shimla had closed down due to lack of funding after the collapse of the Empire and the abatement of active recruitment of *coolies*, but the new-found mobility of Kashmiri migrants to Shimla has revived those mosques and made them available for worship and refuge. Kashmir is contested and embattled territory between India and Pakistan therefore the Khans' passage to Shimla and their reliance on hard work to establish their identity as trustworthy, reliable workers is essential to the business owners who buy their labour cheaply.

It is equally significant to acknowledge women's role⁶² although my work is on the male, Muslim, migrant coolie in the Shimla Hills. The Lord Sanderson committee report on indentured immigrant labour (Antislavery International, 1910) makes a note about women comprising a minimum of one-third of all indentured *coolies* being recruited for labouring jobs outside of India.⁶³ Some of the connections between the homegrown coolie and their multiple local histories have not been the centre of research for scholars who have worked on migrant labour. Moreover, interdisciplinary scholars interested in labour practices in democratic, neoliberal economies need to continue to make historical connections between current abusive, trafficked, meagre waged and forced labour practices lest the fault lines and historical slippage from the discourse of fair employment practices is not glaring. In this way, historical scholarship can enter the service of advocacy for elimination of the ills in the contemporary neoliberal labour laws and traditions of work locally and globally.

⁶² Research on women coolies has burgeoned in recent times. The work of Gaiutra Bahadur (2014, 2016) on indentured labour in Guyana is well known; Bahadur, 'How Could I Write About Women Whose Existence is Barely Acknowledged?'; Bahadur, *Coolie Woman*. Other writers are Madhavi Jha, 'Doing 'Coolie' Work in a 'Gentlemanly' Way'; Arunima Datta, 'Immorality, Nationalism and the Colonial State in British Malaya', Ashrufa Faruquee, 'Conceiving the Coolie Woman'. While the coolie woman was seen first as harnessing male coolie energies, and secondarily as a worker, they were often denigrated for their morality. Their share of coolie work is often misreported and misrepresented. Faruquee (1996) surmises that by the 1930s coolie women formed 30–40% of the workforce on colonial rubber estates in Malaya.

⁶³ Antislavery International, *Coolie Labor, the Indian Recruiting Ground*.

Annexes

COOLIE LICENSE

Any person can apply on an application form which can be taken from the office of estate branch on payment of Rs 5/. The application form should be recommended and verified by the area inspector. Two copies of recent photographs duly attested by a competent authority should be submitted along with the application form. A token and license card is issued to the applicant. Token if lost can be issued again on the payment of additional fee. The license is issued for a period of one year. It is renewed every year on the payment of requisite fee

The license fee is as under:

Coolie license fee Rs 120/

Coolie token fee Rs 100/

Coolie Card fee Rs 1/

Coolie card cover fee Rs 6/

ANNEXURE B

FORM OF APPLICATION

Cost Rs. 0-25 P.

Nº 006204

From :

.....

.....

To

The Commissioner,
M. C., Shimla.

Subject :— Application for grant of permission to stay in Labour Hostel.

Sir,

I am casual labourer working..... (Locality) and
I want to stay in Municipal Corporation Labour Hostel located at.....
from..... to..... my permanent address is

I undertake that I shall abide by all the condition of the permission an any other direc-
tion of the Municipal Corporation authorities. I shall be grateful if necessary permission is granted
to me.

I Certified that :—

1. I do not own any House within 5 k. m. from the outer boundaries of Shimla City.
2. I am not suffering from a loathsum, contagious or infections diseases.
3. I am not below the age of 12 years.
4. I have not been convicted for committing the offences of theft, gambling drinking in public place of or any other offence of moral turpitude.
5. I am not addict to drugs or other intoxicants.

Yours Faithfully

(Name & Address of the Applicant)

Village.....

P.O.....

Teh.....

Dist.....

Date

Indicate three Labour Hostel in order to preference.

1.
2.
3.
4.

Figure 3.3: Annexure B Form of Application

