CHAPTER TWO

SPATIAL AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

This chapter examines the relationship between spatial mobility and social hierarchy as projected in the postcolonial novels. The oppressed class tends to resist or escape (even get the better of/ challenge/negotiate/avoid) the dominance of the elites by changing their occupation and native place, even migrating to distant lands. It also looks at the fluidity of class determinants in Indian society as projected in these novels.

Large-scale migration of Indian labourers is a historical reality; it begins in the colonial days in the first half of the nineteenth century and continues even after India attains independence. Such migration is a consequence of an ideology of imperialism – the economic motive of imperialism, the motive for economic expansion by way of gaining access to or control of the markets to sell the products the colonies produce, exploring avenues to maximize profits, and for that, managing *cheap labour for maximum gain*. In most cases, the migrants are lured or persuaded to leave their homeland to work in the profit-making plantations in different British colonies. These migrants have no chance to know the real imperial motive which makes them leave their homeland. Some Indians from other classes also migrate with the labourers with different purposes, like trade or business or search for better living, are also included in the study to explore how far their hopes and aspirations are fulfilled.

This study includes three of Amitav Ghosh's novels: these are *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *The Glass Palace* (2000), and *The Hungry Tide* (2004), based on historical reality, focusing mainly on Indians who migrate to some erstwhile British colonies in search of a better life, beginning from the early part of the nineteenth century. Most of Ghosh's work has historical settings in the periphery of the Indian Ocean. The three novels taken for study are examined not in order of dates of publication but in the order of historical events, embedded in fictional narratives. The chapter begins with *Sea of Poppies*, and then examines *The Glass Palace*, to be followed by *The Hungry Tide*.

Set in North India in the 1830s during the colonial period, *Sea of Poppies* assembles and portrays a wide range of characters of different nationalities and social strata, including those of Indian labourers, the so-called *coolies,* and finally gets them together on the *Ibis* at the port of Calcutta on a voyage to Mauritius across the *Black Waters.* While unfolding the story of *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh mirrors, in particular, the problems and

sufferings, on land and on board the *Ibis*, and the hopes and aspirations of Indian labourers who choose to leave their homeland for work in the sugarcane plantations of Mauritius under the indenture system introduced by the British.

The setting of the second novel, *The Glass Palace*, is much wider than that of the first. Set in India, Burma, and Malaya, all erstwhile British colonies, the novel revolves partly around Indian migrants in Burma and Malaya. The story of the novel is woven with three generations spreading over a period of about one hundred years, from the fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in Mandalay in 1885, through the Second World War to modern times. The novel also narrates how the early twentieth century tide of modernity brings social as well as political changes in the three countries, India, Burma, and Malaya.

Migration of labourers, and other people, described in Amitav Ghosh's novels is only a part of a global phenomenon – the phenomenon of human migration. Numerous instances of human migration from one region to another for taking up permanent or semi permanent residence are found in the history of mankind. History records such human migrations occurring throughout the world at different times, beginning with the movements of the first human groups in East Africa to their current locations in the world. Studying the causes of such migrations, it has been found that there are several types of push and pull factors influencing people to migrate, the prominent among them being environmental (e.g. climate, natural disasters), political (e.g. war, internal unrest), economic (e.g. poverty, dearth of work) and cultural (e.g. social and religious freedom, good education) (*The Push and Pull Factors of Asylum Related Migration* 26-29)**.**

There are records of individual, family, or group migration at different times for one or more of the causes mentioned above.

Human migration gives rise to two contemporary notions – the notion of diaspora and the notion of migrant literature. Diaspora refers to movement of population from its original homeland and forming a distinct society in the land of its settlement. It refers to particularly historical mass dispersions of voluntary or involuntary nature. Migration of Indian people at different points of history for different causes has created Indian diasporas in many countries in the world. On the other hand, human migrations, and the

diasporas formed by it, generate a new kind of literature, the so-called migrant literature. Migrant literature often focuses on the social and economic contexts in the migrants' country of origin, which prompt them to leave their homeland, on the experience of migration itself, on the mixed reception they may receive in the country of arrival, on experiences of racism and hostility, and the sense of rootlessness and search of identity which can result from displacement and cultural diversity in the new land. *Sea of Poppies* and *The Glass Palace* qualify to be classed under migrant literature.

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Regular transportation of Indian labourers to other British colonies begin in the 1830s, with the introduction of the indenture system resulting in migration of large number of Indians to many places like Surinam, Trinidad, Tobago, Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, etc. Although, prior to that, from ancient times, Indian traders establish bases around the Indian and Pacific oceans, especially in East Africa, and Western and Southern Asia. However, these flows are not the basis for Indian migration until eighteen thirties.

The indenture system initiated by the British in the 1830s for recruiting labourers from India to work in other colonies in plantations or elsewhere, turns out to be an alternative to the slave system or the slave trade. The slave trade ceases to operate in 1807 after severe public criticism in Britain, and it is finally outlawed by the British in 1833, and subsequently by other colonial powers such as France, the Netherlands and Portugal. The abolition of slavery creates acute shortage of labourers in the British, and other European colonies, causing serious setback to the plantations, in particular sugar-cane plantation. The planters then urge upon the British government to take steps to combat the decline of sugar industry market by arranging transportation of labour to their plantations. At this point, the British government decides to supply Indian labourers to the sugar producing colonies, by introducing a system, the so- called Indian indenture system ("The Indian Indentured Labourers", National Archives). This is a system of *indenture*, a form of debt bondage, requiring the labourers to sign a bond or agreement or indenture (called 'girmit' in north Indian languages) with a binding to work for a prescribed period in foreign colonies under the stipulated conditions. It is the economic ideology of imperialism, as mentioned earlier, that promotes slave trade as well as the indenture system.

The system of indenture starts just after the end of slavery in 1833 and continues until 1920 when the system is abolished. During this period , a very large number of Indian indentured labourers, the 'girmitiyas' or the 'coolies' as they were commonly called, are transported to various colonies including Mauritius, Burma and Malaya, in which the novels—*Sea of Poppies* and *The Glass Palace*—examined in this chapter are set. *The Hungry Tide*, on the other hand, presents the migration of displaced people from Bangla Desh in the 1970s and their attempts to set up a settlement in the Sundarban island of Morichjhapi.

Workers for plantations in Mauritius are recruited mainly from the rural areas of present day states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh under the indenture system. They are sent to Mauritius from 1834 to work in the sugar plantations, and they are regarded as the most important early migrants of this type.

The first batch of indentured labourers "arrived in Mauritius at Aapravasi ghat on 2nd November 1834 from the port of Calcutta. It marked the point where indentured labourers ...passed through the gate of Aapravasi ghat, either to stay on in Mauritius to work in the sugar plantations or elsewhere, or to sail on to further destinations such as Guyana, Surinam and Reunion Island" (Mukherjee 1). Thus begins the mobility of Indian labourers to other British colonies, never to return again, as a result of the colonizers' selfish motive for their economic expansion.

Due to abuses in the system by the agents, the *duffadars*, who operate it, the Government of India orders a ban on further 'coolie' shipments in 1838.The system remains suspended until 1842 when the British government takes management of the system into its own hand and allows the Government of India to reopen it under government licensed agents, putting some regulations in practice for the voyage concerning space, food, water, ventilation, medicine etc. ("The Indian Indentured Labourers",National Archives).

During roughly the same period another form of labour transportation (migration) begins to take place. Tapping the labour surplus in South India, mostly in Tamil Nadu, the owners of tea, coffee, and rubber plantations in Sri Lanka, Malaya and Burma, authorize Indian headmen, known as *kangani* or *maistry*, to recruit *entire families* and ship them to

plantations. Thus, this system is commonly referred to as the kangani system for Sri Lanka and Malaya, and the maistry system for Burma. India, Malaya, and Sri Lanka play a role in this system by licensing the recruiters, and by partly subsidizing transportation cost to the plantations. In Malaya, kangani migration takes place in addition to the indentured system, and mostly replaces it from 1900 onwards. Indian workers in these three locations maintain close ties with India, partly because of the relatively short travel distance. Compared to indentured labourers the lives of kangani and maistry labourers are less regulated and they have the comfort of having moved with their families. Most of the workers to Malaya come from South India, and to Burma from Bengal. In addition to semi-skilled workers, members of India's trading communities come on their own to settle in many countries where Indian workers are brought. For example, traders from present day Kerala and Tamil Nadu provide rural credits for peasants in Burma, Sri Lanka and Malaya (Modi et al. 12 -16).

As a result of transportation of Indian labourers from 1834 to 1920 under the indenture, kangani, and maistry systems, there emerge Indian 'labour diasporas' in many of the British colonies (Cohen 61). The ports of Calcutta and Madras, and later Bombay, are used for transportation of such labourers.

A major part of Amitav Ghosh's second novel *The Glass Palace* revolves around Indian migrants who are taken to Burma and Malaya starting from the 1880s to work there in the rubber plantations or elsewhere.

Rubber plantation is started in Malaya in 1870s. First, the seedlings are brought from Amazon basin, and are planted on experimental basis. Later, when the rubber seedlings are successfully planted, attempts are made to produce it on a commercial scale. The British who colonize the region provide the market for rubber. Gradually rubber plantation spreads to other regions of the area including Burma.

There are conflicting interpretations and divergent views on the indenture system by various scholars in recent years. One group of scholars, nationalists, anti-colonial, neomarxist, maintain that migration of Indian labour abroad under indenture system is a 'new system of slavery' and the image of the migrants is that of victims of various forms of greed, deception, and colonial coercion/manipulation. It has been said that loss of

freedom is the distinguishing character of indenture, whereby the worker is unable to withdraw or discontinue his or her labour power to bargain or negotiate over the terms of contract for better wages and living conditions, and therefore the system is based on exploitation. Moreover, the scholars of 'coercion point of view' stress the ignorance of the workers and argue that they are misled and misinformed by the recruiters regarding the nature of plantation work and are even made captives and transported to foreign countries against their free will, whereas the 'modernization', 'imperialist', 'colonialist' and 'revisionist' school suggests that 'migration was economically beneficial'. The scholars either put 'subsistence-oriented' push factors or 'betterment–oriented' pull factors, for such emigrations (Adapa 3-4).

Amitav Ghosh demonstrates his superb literary craftsmanship in brilliantly taking care of all the aspects relating to Indian migrant labourers in his novels.

Sea of Poppies

The setting of the story of *Sea of Poppies* is in the Gangetic plains of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Northern Bihar, a highly fertile area nourished by the river Ganga, during the Imperial rule in the third decade of the nineteenth century. The village folk, in this part of rural India, are generally happy with no serious problems, and they lead a simple yet comfortable life with abundance of food crops they harvest in their land. But suddenly, abundance changes to scarcity and poverty when the Imperial Authority orders them to cultivate in their land only cash crops such as opium and indigo and nothing else, for the Authority's own trade interests. No alternative means of livelihood is seen to be provided to the helpless villagers by the Authority. There is reason to suspect that this may be a part of the Authority's policy to leave the villagers with no other option but to agree to go to other colonies to work there for livelihood.

The imperial enforcement changes drastically not only the landscape of the region but also threatens the very existence of the people there, bringing famine-like conditions with acute shortage of food. Famine-like conditions are brought to the villagers by the colonial rulers, not by natural calamity responsible for many a famine in the past. This is indeed an example of gross class exploitation, a consequence of imperial ideology for

economic expansion. This exploitation of the lowly villagers by the Colonial rulers is touchingly exposed by Amitav Ghosh in his narrative. The acute food shortage caused by the Imperial enforcement in the Gangetic Basin acts as a push factor for the people of this region to migrate to distant places and make them fearless enough to cross even the vast and ominous ocean, the "Black Waters". In *Sea of Poppies,* Amitav Ghosh's vivid description catches a glimpse of how this class exploitation begins to work:

> The town was thronged with hundreds of ... impoverished transients... willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside... food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at the temples or sip the starchy water from a pot in which rice had been boiled. (202)

Thus begins the process of exploitation driving the peasants of the Bhojpuri speaking areas to agree to migrate in search of food and livelihood, and a better life, if possible. The villagers begin their journey as migrants, forced on them by the imperial enforcement.

Ghosh describes with graphic precision the first glimpse of the migrants Deeti has, when she is on her way, with her daughter, to the Ghazipur Opium Factory to bring back her sick husband:

> The road was filled with people, a hundred strong or more; hemmed in by a ring of stick-bearing guards, this crowd was trudging wearily in the direction of the river. Bundles of belongings sat balanced on their heads and shoulders, and brass pots hung suspended from their elbows. It was clear that they had already marched a great distance, for their dhotis, langots and vests were stained with the dust of the road. The sight of the marchers evoked both pity and fear in the local people; some of the spectators clucked their tongues in sympathy but a few urchins and old women threw pebbles into the crowd,...Through all this, despite their exhaustion, the marchers seemed strangely unbowed, even defiant, and some threw the pebbles right back at the spectators: their bravado was no less disturbing to the spectators than their evident destitution. (70-71)

These are the indentured labourers, the *girmitiyas*, on their move to uncertainty, but with a lot of hopes and aspirations. There can be no better and finer words to describe the girmitiyas' initial journey than those of Ghosh. The money that is paid for them goes to their family members and then "they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld" (72). Such descriptions unfold another aspect of class exploitation, hitherto unexposed, so vividly.

In spite of knowing that they are going to be torn apart from their family and friends forever, the marchers show such courage and defiance that is at once puzzling and disturbing. Their urge for a better future is so strong that they are willing to face even the unknown. Indeed, they are far more ambitious and adventurous than their counterparts who decide to stay back at home. But, what these hopeful beings fail to grasp at that moment is that they are constantly circled by "stick-bearing guards" (70); that their life has already been clutched and shaped by those in power, that they are being made victims of some sort of exploitation.

The vision of these *girmitiyas* brings to Deeti's mind the apparition of a strange ship that flies like a bird with giant wings. Later Deeti realizes that it is the image of the *Ibis*, the enormous ship that carries the indentured labourers to a far off island, Mareech (Mauritius) situated in the midst of the Indian Ocean. Originally, the *Ibis "*had been built to serve as a 'blackbirder', for transporting slaves" (11). The numerous journeys on the transatlantic slave route from Africa to the New World have " her timbers... weeping...the 'tween deck, where the schooner's human cargo had been accommodated, was riddled with peepholes and air ducts, bored by generations of captive Africans"(12).After the abolition of slavery in the early 1830s, the *Ibis* is recommisioned for the project of indenture with its new owner, the missionary Capitalist Benjamin Brightwell Burnham who is of the opinion that the introduction of indenture can play an important role in uplifting the migrants socially and economically. Ironically, this is also the view shared by the migrants who leave their homes willingly. For Burnham, both slavery and indenture are justified as a form of freedom or emancipation for the Africans and Asians from indigenous tyranny:

> Isn't that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races? As I see it ... the Africa trade was the greatest exercise in freedom since God led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Consider... the situation of a so-called slave in the Carolinas-is he not more free than his brethren in Africa, groaning under the rule of some dark tyrant?...When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it- the Asiatick. (79)

Burnham is guided by the imperial ideology of *ethnocentricism*, the imperial belief of superiority over the natives. He is guided by a false consciousness that the natives are leading a life of subjugation under the reign of some dark tyrannical rulers. Nowhere in the novel is found a native tyrannical ruler. In fact, the Raja of Raskhali, Neel Ratan Halder, becomes a victim of conspiracy by the British, being convicted in a false forgery case because he refuses to hand over his Zamindary to Burnham for fear of ruining the life of the poor peasants.

However, similar ethnocentric prejudice is shared by many British officials of that time and can be found in various historical documents. For example, the Inspector of Jails in Bengal (1852), M.F. Mout writes thus:

> They leave India full of prejudices, utterly ignorant, and as low in the scale of humanity as it is possible to imagine such things to be. They acquire in their transmarine experience habits of thought and independence, knowledge of improved means of cultivation, a taste for a higher order of amusements, a greater pride of personal appearance, and an approach to manliness of character rarely if ever seen in the same class in their native villages.(Quoted in Chanderbali 40-41)

Burnham, Mout and others in their class are precursors of the school of recent 'modernization', 'imperialist', 'colonialist' and 'revisionist' views on migration, mentioned earlier. Their interpretation and opinion are guided by their interest in recruiting and transporting labourers. They seem to ignore or they fail to appreciate the other side of the story.

However, Ghosh's novel presents an entirely different picture of the life and journey of the girmitiyas. The novel very subtly depicts the connection between slavery and

indentured labour, the strongest physical manifestation of this being the *Ibis* itself, which was used earlier for the purpose of transporting slaves.

Though in the beginning of the novel Ghosh has clearly stated that it is acute shortage of food creating famine like situation that forces many of the poor north Indian villagers to accept the system of indentured labour, none of the principal characters of the novel is depicted as a victim of hunger. So there is reason to believe that poverty is not the only reason for migration of the girmitiyas.When Deeti for the first time saw the girmitiyas near the Ghazipur Opium factory, she shivered even at the very thought of having to abandon one's home and family for good. When Kalua asks Ramsaranji, the Duffadar about marching people, he is told

> They are girmitiyas, said Ramsaranji, and at the sound of that word Deeti uttered an audible gasp – for suddenly she understood. It was a few years now since the rumours had begun to circulate in the villages around Ghazipur: although she had never seen a girmitiya before, she had heard them being spoken of. They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmits' – agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld. (71-72)

Again Kalua asks where they were going and learns that "A boat will take them to Patna and then to Calcutta, said the guard. And from there they'll go to a place called Mareech (Mauritius). This time Deeti asks from the shelter of her sari's ghungta: "Where is this Mareech? Is it near Dilli"? She is informed that "It's an island in the sea – like Lanka, but farther away. (72)

Deeti asks him how the girmitiyas would reach that place and he tells her:

> A ship will be waiting for them at Calcutta…a *jahaz*, much larger than any you've ever seen: with many masts and sails; a ship large enough to hold hundreds of people.…(72)

Deeti is shocked at the idea of striking out for the unknown and wonders how people did it:

> She tried to imagine what it would be like to be in their place, to know that you were forever an outcaste; to know that you would never again enter your father's house...never feel the cleansing touch of the Ganga. And to know also that for the rest of your days you would eke out a living on some wild, demon-plagued island? (72)

While her husband is alive, Deeti does not have to worry about the migrants. But three significant events alter her life drastically: the death of her opium addicted husband, the plot of her late husband's family to kill her by burning her alive in her husband's funeral pyre as a Sati, her rescue by the cart driver Kalua, and their flight down the river to escape the fury of relatives.

Deeti is a high caste Rajput, a Kshatriya, belonging to the warrior community whereas Kalua is a Chamar, an untouchable, belonging to the leather tanning community. The social system prevalent at the time would not allow any relationship between a high caste woman and an untouchable. Ghosh presents a detailed description of a series of caste-based events, which leads to the development of a relationship between them where human emotions, like love and sympathy, play crucial roles.

The Deeti-Kalua relationship shows how two desperate people thrown together by circumstances can forge a bond irrespective of social conventions. However, the Deeti-Kalua episode is only an isolated event created by circumstances; caste remained an inseparable factor in the lives of the people of that time. When Kalua comes to know about the Ibis's proposed journey to Mauritius, he asks the duffadar, as usual, about his suitability—because of his caste—to join the other migrants. "Caste doesn't matter, said the duffadar. All kinds of men are eager to sign up—Brahmins, Ahirs, Chamars, Telis" (205). The *duffadar's* words show how professional are the transporters of the migrants – they are ready to overlook even the existing caste barriers, at least at the time of recruitment, to meet their own needs and interests. Deeti and Kalua decide to join the migrants and flee away from their place and get rid of all caste distinctions.

Although the faraway sea promises a bright future to Deeti and Kalua, the land seems to be still cruel to them, because they bring with them a kind of liaison between an upper caste woman and a lower caste man:

> Both Deeti and Kalua knew that their best chance of escape lay in travelling downriver, on the Ganga, in the hope of reaching a town or city where they would be able to disappear into a crowd: some place such as Patna perhaps, or even Calcutta. Although Patna was by far the nearer of the two cities, it was still a good ten days' journey away, and to cover the distance by road would be to risk being recognized: news of their flight was sure to have spread by this time, and in the event of capture, they knew they could expect no mercy, even from their own kin. Caution demanded that they keep to the water, continuing their journey on Kalua's makeshift raft for as long as it was able to bear their weight. (191)

During their initial river journey, when they stop and stay near the Chhapra ghat, Deeti overhears the sirdar informing the kotwal that Bhyro Singh, her late husband's uncle would pay him generously if he could catch hold of the two of them (Deeti and Kalua): "...the family's honour won't be restored till they're dead..."(224). Therefore, in order to avoid the impending disaster of their being searched and killed for their elopement by Deeti's in-laws, they unhesitatingly decide to go to Mauritius as indentured labourers. This is an example that not only poverty, but caste-class oppression is also a push factor for migration of Indian labourers.

Deeti is always optimistic and she has a zest for life; so, at that crucial moment she does not hesitate in taking the decision to leave her land for good. "Deeti would say: Suraj dikhat áwé to rástá mil jáwé- when the sun rises the path will show itself-and so strongly did she believe this that not even at the worst of times did she allow her hopes to slacken." (203) Such optimism is very typical of all the migrants; that is why they unhesitatingly proceed to an uncertain future leaving behind the past ungrudgingly.

The migrants are taken to the port of Calcutta through the Ganga in small pulwar boats each having twenty long-handled oars where the manpower needed for rowing the oars

are extracted from the migrants themselves. Their every movement is constantly monitored by watchful eyes:

> The oarsmen were rotated every hour or so and the overseers were careful to ensure that every man served his proper turn. While under weight, only the oarsmen, the crew and the overseers were allowed on deck- everyone else was expected to remain in the hold below, where the migrants were quartered. (231)

The ship was more like a cargo vessel with its cargo being the indentured labourers. There was little consideration for the inmates, nor was there any privacy. The people were expected to travel in inhuman conditions but they tried to think of the future that awaited them, a future away from their homeland without the rigid discriminations imposed by the caste system. Meanwhile their uncertainty continues on the ship taking them to an unknown destination. The ship is described almost as a cattle station:

> The hold ran the length of the vessel, had no compartments or internal divisions: it was like a floating storage shed, with a ceiling so low that a grown man could not stand upright in it for fear of hurting his head. The hold's windows, of which there were several, were usually kept shut for fear of thieves, thugs and river-dacoits; after the rains came down they were almost permanently sealed, so that very little penetrated inside, even when the clouds cleared.(231)

Such a description of the vessel carrying the migrants prompts one to query: "Does there exist any difference between the journeys of the slaves and the girmitiyas? Do the opinions of Burnham and Mout hold water"? Surprisingly, none of the migrants complains about the dark and gloomy hold. Nor are they bored by the same suffocating surroundings. They are too preoccupied with making new friends and learning new things about them. Amitav Ghosh unfolds, with deep literary sensitivity, another side of normal human behaviour.

Gradually, friendship and intimacy grow among the *girmitiyas*, they talk about the circumstances which make them girmitiyas, and get them on board the Ibis. The causes of leaving their homeland and accepting indenture are as varied as the places or villages from where they come:

> Ratna and Champa, were sisters, married to a pair of brothers whose lands were contracted to the opium factory and could no longer support them; rather than starve, they had decided to indenture themselves together... Dookhanee was another married woman, travelling with her husband: having long endured the oppressions of violently abusive mother-in-law, she considered it fortunate that her husband had joined in her escape. (241)

Munia's story is different. She is from a poor low caste family where two of her brothers have already accepted indenture. She has to set off for the pulwar boat in order to save her life from the father of her illegal child, who has already killed her parents and her little baby by setting their dwelling on fire. How Jhugroo, Culookhan, Rugoo, Gobin and others get into the Ibis is a different story:

> They (girmitiyas) learnt the story of the quarrelsome Jhugroo, whose enemies had contrived to ship him away by bundling him into the pulwar while drunk; of Cullookhan, the sepoy, who had returned to his village after completing his military service, but only to find that he could no longer bear to be at home; of Rugoo, the dhobi who had sickened of washing clothes and Gobin, the potter, who had lost the use of his thumb….At Sahibganj, where the river turned southwards, there were forty men waiting – hills-men from the plateaus of Jharkhand. They had names like Ecka and Turkuk and Nukhoo Nack, and they brought with them stories of a land in revolt against its new rulers, of villages put to flames by the white man's troops. (245-246)

This is a picture of a cross-section of the girmitiyas with glimpses of their past personal lives. It gives the impression that most of the girmitiyas are lower caste village folk, poor peasants and hills-men who have left their places due to poverty, starvation, various personal problems, and colonial oppression.

When the *Ibis* begins its journey from the port near Calcutta, some others join in, who do not actually fit into this group. Among them are the former Raja of Rashkhali, Neel Ratan Halder, who is convicted of forgery by the Colonial rulers and another, an Indo-Chinese convict Ah Fatt. They are sent to serve their punishment working as labourers in Mauritius for seven years. They are transported in the *Ibis* from the Lalbazar Jail of

Calcutta. It is a part of the British policy, the imperial ideology, not to feed the convicts free ration in the prisons, but to make them work, wherever possible without payment, to earn profit for the colonizers. Besides them, on board the Ibis, there is another interesting character Paulette, a European orphan brought up by a Bengali nanny, who disguises herself as a girmitiya to escape from the protective recluse of her new British family which has recently adopted her.

In the course of the journey, the girmitiyas form a new egalitarian community, which becomes a necessity to adapt in the new situation. The conditions on board the ship make it difficult for them to sustain many of the taboos associated with food, religious ritual life, caste, marriage etc. Hence, the barriers of caste and religion which so sharply divide and demarcate their lives on land become hazy and insignificant once they begin their voyage across the sea.

This new inclusive unity among the girmitiyas is strikingly articulated by Ghosh through the character of Paulette:

> From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship siblings-jahaz bhais and jahaz bahens-to each other. There will be no difference between us. (356)

They are all children of the ship with similar hopes and aspirations. All are situated in a precarious position striving to balance their life between struggle for survival and hope for a better life.

On board the *Ibis,* the migrants are allotted certain duties to perform. While some men are made to work as bhandaris, helping in the kitchen, women are instructed to do some other petty jobs such as sewing buttons, repairing torn seams and washing clothes of the officers, guards and overseers. However, after the day's work all they can find to rest is the furnace like dabusa:

> Sitting in the full glare of the sun, without a breeze to cool her, the schooner's hull trapped the heat so that down below, in the dabusa, it was as if the migrants flesh were melting on their bones. (401)

In such condition, when some rules for rationing of drinking water are implemented, the migrants who are unaccustomed to such situation are seen fighting amongst themselves

for a tumbler of water. In order to terrorize and silence the unruly and defiant migrants, Captain Chillingworth warns them thus:

> The greatest and most important difference between land and sea is not visible to eye. It is this – and note it well... The difference is that the laws of the land have no hold on the water. At sea, there is another law, and you should know that on this vessel, I am its sole maker. While you are on the *Ibis*, and while she is at sea, I am your fate, your providence, your lawgiver. This chabuk you see in my hands is just one of the keepers of my law. But, it is not the only one- there is another... But remember, always, there is no better keeper of the law than submission and obedience. In that respect, this ship is no different from your homes and religions. While you are on it, you must obey Subedar Bhyro Singh... as he obeys me... while we are at sea, he will be your *mái- báp*, just as I am his. (404)

Such is the attitude of Captain Chillingworth, the law keeper in the sea, and such is the law the migrants on board the *Ibis* have to obey. Captain Chillingworth's utterances reflect the imperial ideology of ethnocentricism, the belief in inherent superiority of the colonizers over the natives in all respects. However, it is not that the Captain's words do not 'chill' anyone in the *Ibis:*

> Despite the heat of the sun, the Captain's words had chilled Paulette to the marrow... she could see that many of the girmitiyas were in a trance of fear: it was as if they had just woken to the realization they were not leaving home and braving the Black Water- they were entering a state of existence in which their waking hours would be ruled by the noose and the whip. (405)

But Paulette and her *Ibis* companions are helpless, not capable of expressing their protest against the Captain's behaviour.

The effect of the Captain's words is such that as many as three of the migrants, unable to bear the "trance of fear", "vaulted over the deck rail" (405) in a bid to escape from the terrorizing situation. Their bodies are not to be seen anywhere.

As the *Ibis* proceeds through the sea, the migrants' conditions rapidly worsen. Seasickness, general weakness, and mental depression reduce most of them to a state of

infantile helplessness. Parallel to this, smell of vomit and urine creates such noxious odours in the enclosed space that deaths of some migrants simply go unnoticed by fellow emigrants. However, as days roll by many migrants recover; but a few succumb to the conditions. Their dead bodies are unceremoniously toppled into the sea by the silahdars. When the third victim, a Muslim julaha dies and the silahdars are about to tip his body over board, Deeti objects to this:

> He may be dead, but he's still one of us: you can't just throw him away like the skin of a peeled onion... Just a little izzat, some respect...it's not right to treat us like this. (414)

Fuelled by her heroic protest, other girmitiyas stand by her side, and ultimately the silahdars are compelled to get some religious rites performed before the body is disposed. They feel victorious for a moment, but the happiness of being victorious is temporary as a sudden flick of light in the dark permanence of a long night - the ship which is carrying them has gruesome memories as it is a ship which was used for carrying slaves.

Ironically, the *Ibis* which is carrying so many Indian migrant labourers, along with other dark skinned lascars and silahdars is controlled by only a handful of white men. They succeed because they are shrewd enough to choose their friends. For smooth functioning and monitoring of the activities on the ship, the Captain bestows immense power upon subedar Bhyro Singh, an upper caste Hindu, a relative of Deeti's late husband. Bhyro Singh continues to ill treat the workers and prisoners to the extent that some of them think of jumping off the ship to get out of his clutches. Finally when he flogs Kalua for no offense other than marrying an upper caste widow and threatens to kill him, Kalua has no option but to kill Bhyro Singh in self defence.

Other plans are made to subvert such oppressions. Jodu informs Paulette: "...It's possible that some of us may be able to get off this ship...in one of the boats - me, the qaidis, some others too" (484). Before leaving the *Ibis* with Jodu, Kalua and Neel, Ah Fatt takes his revenge upon Mr. Crowle by killing him with a spike. While the four leave in search of their lost freedom, not to speak of a better life, Deeti stays back with a child in her womb.

Amitav Ghosh has nothing more to add to the tumultuous journey of the girmitiyas, nothing to say about fulfilment of the girmitiyas' dream for a better life. But Ghosh has chosen to end his novel with a protest, a very strong protest indeed, of the oppressed against the oppressors. The search for a better life remains an uncertainty despite the distance from caste oppressed villages of India.

The Glass Palace:

The story of *The Glass Palace* is told across three generations spread over three interlinked parts of the British Empire: Burma, Malaya and India, covering a period of one hundred years beginning from 1885.

A major part of this narrative revolves around Rajkumar, originally a coolie from Chittagong, who succeeds in establishing a business empire in Burma with the money he earns as a supplier of Indian labourers to the Teak and Oil companies of Burma. Ghosh describes in detail the skill and coercion involved in the recruitment process of the labourers, and the oppression suffered by the labourers in their new destination at the hands of their employers.

In the narrative, Ghosh has neatly sketched the link between the fate of the indentured labourers and the fortune of Rajkumar. Initially, Rajkumar works as a raft man ferrying logs of teak from the upcountry forests of Burma to Rangoon through the river Irrawaddy. In one of such journeys, Rajkumar meets Baburao, a man from Guntur, India. He is a maistry, a labour contractor, who has been supplying indentured labourers from eastern and southern India to the oil companies in Yenangyaung, Burma. India is then emerging as a growing site of labour market:

> Many foreign companies were busy digging for oil and they were desperate for labour. They needed workers and were willing to pay handsomely. It was hard to find workers in Burma: few Burmese were so poor as to put up with conditions like those of Yenangyaung. But back at home in India,... there were uncountable

> thousands of people who were so desperate to leave that they would sign over many years' earnings.(*The Glass Palace* 124)

The main causes of migration of these labourers are almost similar to those of the girmitiyas who are transported to Mauritius in the eighteen thirties - extreme poverty and acute famine like situation, and dream of a better future. However, coercion also plays a significant role to make them accept indenture. When Baburao and Rajkumar come to India to recruit labourers from the Madras Presidency of South India, they select as their target the poorest villages, where the impoverished agricultural labourers use to reside. A good example of coercion depicted in the novel is that Baburao, 'welcomed' the poor villagers to the 'land of gold, Burma'(126) by talking slowly and softly like a reciter of the epic Ramayana and demonstrating a superb piece of acting:

> He took a handful of silver coins out of a velvet bag and let them fall back again, tinkling. 'Are there any here who have debts? Are there any who owe money to their landlords?... As soon as your sons and brothers make their marks on these contracts, this money will be yours. In a matter of a few years they will earn back enough to free themselves of debt. Then they will be at liberty to return or stay in Burma as they choose. (126)

Such incidents of coercion or persuasion narrated by Ghosh in his novel depict a reality, which is indeed a facet of exploitation of the downtrodden, under a veil. Rajkumar and Baburao belong to a class of professionals who are well conversant and enthusiastic in their job, striving hard to raise their class status in the society by making quick money. On the other hand, the naive migrants who begin their journey with high hopes and aspirations fall into their trap:

> Carrying tin boxes and cloth bundles, the recruits followed Baburao's ox–cart back to town. The lathiyals brought up the rear to make sure they kept in step. They stopped once every few hours, to eat parched rice and salt. (126)

Once the labourers are recruited, they are kept under strict vigil of the lathiyals. Like the 'stick bearing guards' guiding the girmitiyas in their initial journey in *Sea of Poppies*, here the 'lathiyals' are guarding the labourers in the beginning of their journey in search of a better life. There is little difference between these two scenes, although they are separated by more than fifty years, and this shows that the attitude of the recruiters

changes little during these long years. On the other hand, the migrants have the same dreams, and then the same problems.

The migrant labourers' traumatic passage across the sea is vividly described in the novel. In the initial sea voyage to Calcutta from South Indian coast, which is to lead them later on to Burma, one of the migrants jumps overboard, overwhelmed by the frightening waves of the sea. Baburao immediately 'jumped in after him and pulled him back into the boat'. (126). Baburao is a skilled and shrewd labour recruiter – he never loses his temper or shows his anger. After rescuing the migrant who jumps into the sea to get rid of the trauma of the passage, Baburao remains cool and calm:

.

> 'Where did you think you were going?' Baburao crooned, almost tenderly, as though he were singing to a lover. 'And what about all the money I gave your father so that he could pay off his debts? What use would your corpse be, to him or to me?'(127).

Thus, on board the ship a significant change in the attitude of the transporters is seen compared to that of the transporters of the *girmitiyas.* As a labour recruiter, Baburao uses words of coercion, instead of force, to persuade the migrants to continue their journey to their new destination, whereas the girmitiyas are controlled throughout their voyage by the lash of the colonial masters. However, the conditions on board the British steamers used to ferry the migrants to Burma, bears a striking resemblance to the *Ibis:*

> The thirty eight men they had brought with them were sent below, to a holding space at the rear of the ship.
>
> Some two thousand other would-be immigrants were there already. Most were men, but there were also some hundred and fifty women. At the back, jutting out over the ship's wake, there was a narrow wooden platform with four holes to serve as toilets. The passage was rough and the floor of the holding area was soon covered with vomit and urine. This foul-smelling layer of slime welled back and forth with the rolling of the ship rising inches high against the walls. The recruits sat huddled on their tin boxes and cloth bundles. (127)

The conditions are again inhuman and it points to colonial subjugation of the common people. They are made to put up with such stench and discomfort that their spirits are

crushed if they manage to survive the voyage. No resistance can be expected from these people who would be paid low wages for hard physical labour.

Some others who found the conditions unbearable preferred to dice with danger and uncertainty and jumped off the ship as soon as they sighted land:

> At the first sight of land, off the Arakan coast, several men leapt off the ship. By the third day of the voyage the number of people in the hold had dwindled by a few dozen. The corpses of those who had died on board were carried to the stern and dropped into the ship's churning wake. (127)

The journey of the migrants is described with intense sensory images. The holding space to which the labourers are sent is no other than that used for cargo on board. Indeed, the labourers are treated as human cargo with no space for privacy, which is evident from the description of the makeshift toilets. The detailed illustration of the cesspool of the very space reveals the actual conditions the labourers travel under, which colonial accounts of history seldom narrate in detail. As Ghosh puts it, "the difference between the history historians write and the history fiction writers write is that fiction writers write about human history. It's about finding the human predicament, it's about finding what happens to individuals, characters... exploring both dimensions". (quoted in Bose 238). It is the human predicament, which is sharply focused by Ghosh in his novel. Moreover, he brings out the dilemma in the minds of the migrants for their own decision to leave their homeland in search of a better life and take a journey to a new and unknown distant land in such horrible conditions. It is this dilemma that provokes many of them to escape the stronghold of the ship in search of their lost freedom. With such description of the voyage, Ghosh wants to show how the hopes and aspirations of the migrants start dwindling even before they reach their destination.

In another plane, Ghosh shows how a coolie like Rajkumar builds his own destiny by changing the destinies of these labourers. The trip to India transforms him into a master in transportation of migrant labourers, and after eight subsequent trips, he succeeds in accumulating enough savings to enter into the teak business. Rajkumar proves that unlike the caste of a person, class of a person can be changed or improved.

The teak industry trade leads him to another more lucrative venture, that of rubber, the 'money tree' and with that, into procuring more labourers from South India to a rubber plantation in Malaya through a partnership with his Malayan friend Saya John and his son, Matthew.

According to Gordon ("Dynamics of Labour Transformation: Natural Rubber In South East Asia") from 1921 onwards, "rubber reigned supreme in the agricultural economy of Malaya. By1921 plantation agriculture in Malaya was organised on the lines of western capitalist enterprise". The industry is built on indentured labour. The harshness of the indentured labour system is twofold:

> First, the worker being a poor migrant, had to borrow money to cover the journey, if not from the employer, from one associate with him. He was in debt. Secondly, were the severe conditions of the work contract itself, which bound the worker to remain on the plantation until the debt was paid. (Gordon 529)

Gordon's remarks give an indication of the rise of rubber plantation in Malaya, and of the problems of the employers as well as the migrant labourers. He also points out the harshness of the work contract and the compulsions on the workers, which, in essence, indicate a kind of exploitation of the workers by the employers bringing out a strained relationship between these two classes of people.

The indentured workers transform a dense wild forest purchased by Saya John and Rajkumar, into a symmetrical maze of rubber trees. The hill side that initially looks like a spot 'racked by series of disasters', (*The Glass Palace* 200) is transformed into a garden of rubber trees. But, along the magnificence of the ordered plantation, stand the pathetic dwellings of the Tamil speaking workers' line. When Matthew's wife Elsa visits the plantation for the first time, she has a glimpse of the workers' shacks: "...tiny hovels, with roofs made of branches and leaves... She'd looked into mud walled hut where they went to be treated when they fell ill: the squalor was unimaginable, the floors covered with filth". (200) It is another facet of exploitation of the class of workers by the class of employers. It is an example of class discrimination and class exploitation.

With the passage of time the plantation turns into a vast latex producing 'machine', as Matthew would call it, earning the three partners profit beyond their imagination. But, that does not bring any change to the living condition in the workers' line. The planters extract their labour as they extract latex from the rubber trees. The life of the migrant labourers reflects how they are dominated and exploited by the Eurasian plantation manager:

> Scores of tappers were conversing in front of the plantation's tin roofed offices by the light of blazing kerosene lamps: they were all Indians, mainly Tamils; the women were dressed in saris and men in sarongs.
>
> The ceremony that followed was part military parade and part school assembly. It was presided over by the estate's manager, Mr Trimble, a portly Eurasian. The tappers fell into straight lines...For some of the tappers, he had a smile and a quick word of encouragement; with others, he made a great show of losing his temper, gesticulating and pouring out obscenities in Tamil and English... 'You dog of a coolie, keep your black face up and look at me when I am talking to you'.... (231)

It gives a picture how the employers behave with their workers, and it speaks of class discrimination again.

Ghosh's concern about the life and the working conditions of the labour community is explicit in the novel. However, he introduces some other individuals and their stories to give a view of the collective plantation community. Ilongo, a young plantation worker intrigues Uma, the widow of the Indian Collector and a friend of Rajkumar's wife Dolly, when she visits the plantation. On Uma's request, Ilongo introduces her to his mother. Through her conversation with Ilongo's mother, Ghosh peeps into the personal details of her past life. The conversation reveals that Ilongo is Rajkumar's son as his mother is sexually exploited by him during her journey to Malaya:

> They called me out of the hold and took me up to his cabin. There was nothing I could do. (236)

Her statement points to the fact that sexual exploitation of the female migrant labourers takes place along with other oppressions, in the journey.

The conversation between Ilongo's mother and Uma changes Uma's attitude towards Rajkumar. To her, Rajkumar is an exploiter worse than the Europeans, for he commoditises his own poor countrymen and exploits them physically as well as emotionally. This is how Uma expresses her anger towards Rajkumar:

> Did you ever think of the consequences when you were transporting people here? What you and your kind have done is far worse than the worst deeds of the Europeans. (247)

Rajkumar responds to her comment by asking her in turn if she has ever "given a single person a job? Improved anyone's life in any way?"(248) Rajkumar is guided by an ideology similar to that of the Colonialists and believes that as a plantation owner he has contributed significantly in improving the lives of the plantation workers. Rajkumar's argument sounds similar to that of Burnham or Mout, and therefore, he can be placed in the same class with them. However, Rajkumar's argument indicates that poverty is a push factor in the migration of the labourers. But plantation fails to make its workers free from abject poverty:

> The officers(of British Indian Army) discovered that in Malaya the only people who lived in abject, grinding poverty were plantation labourers- almost all of whom were Indian in origin. They were astonished at the difference between the plantations' ordered greenery and the squalor of their coolie lines. (346)

This again is an image of exploitation and disillusionment of the migrant labourers.

Although, technically, these indentured workers are not slaves, their working condition is in no respect better than that of slaves. When Arjun, a British Indian Army officer, asks Rajan, a plantation worker, "what was it to be a slave", (522) he prefers to answer it indirectly:

> He would begin to talk about the kind of work they'd done, on the plantation- every action constantly policed, watched, supervised; exactly so many ounces of fertiliser, pushed exactly so, in holes that were exactly so many inches wide. It wasn't that you were made into an animal, Rajan said- no, for even animals had the autonomy of their instincts. It was being made into a machine: having your

> mind taken away and replaced by a clockwork mechanism. Anything was better than that. (522)

Labourers never have a glimpse of their 'promised land', 'the land of plenty' they are lured to. Instead, they land in a place where their mind and body are commoditised, where they are forced to work as machines, forced to live in pitiable condition without human dignity. As a consequence, utter disillusionment grips them.

They then turn around to look at the land, which their ancestors left in search of a better future. The land of their forefathers seems to beacon; for them, India appears as the land of fulfilment. This mythical image of India inspires them to fight for its freedom. For them:

> India was the shining mountain beyond the horizon, a sacrament of redemption- a metaphor for freedom in the same way that slavery was metaphor for the plantation. (522)

Such an image of India makes nationalism take shape in the minds of a section of Indian migrants who are transported under indenture and other similar systems or migrate on their own to former British colonies to work there.

The Hungry Tide

The novel, *The Hungry Tide*, is set on the tide country or the Sundarbans where the extremely poor and the dispossessed or the subalterns live along with the man eaters-the Bengal tigers, the ferocious crocodiles and venomous snakes and the terrible cyclones. The fate of the people depends entirely on Nature: "At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness of its determination to destroy or expel them" (*The Hungry Tide* 7). It is to these islands that some refugees come to settle, in an island called Morichjhapi to be precise, after the creation of Bangladesh.

The nature of migration examined in this novel is different from the other two in the chapter in the sense that the people were catapulted into a political situation from which

they had to flee for safety. But the treatment meted out to them by the Indian government was unacceptable to these people. They decide to look for their own shelter in conditions familiar to them, but not generally conducive to others. They choose to return to the Sundarbans on their own and prove their enterprise to the world. The chapter focuses on their journey from the jungles of Madhya Pradesh as they moved eastwards by train and on foot to reach Morichjhapi, and then their efforts to build a colony for themselves. While this historical event is crucial to the narrative of the novel and to this chapter, there is also the less dramatic migration and settlement of people in the Delta islands or tide country as it is known, in response to Sir Daniel Hamilton's call for setting up an ideal community. Some of these people continued to live there in the vicinity of Lusibari.

Interestingly, these people who flee from their home in the Delta region of Bangladesh, after they are burnt down during the war, are taken to refugee camps in Dandakaranya, Madhya Pradesh. For several years they struggle with the language and the hostility of the local people in these camps which are like detention centres. Apart from the people and the culture of Dandakaranya, these refugees from Bangla Desh find that they cannot relate to the land as it appears to be rather alien to them. They were kept under complete surveillance and not allowed to go anywhere. However, they manage to make plans for a habitat in the Delta region. They learn of one of the islands called Morichjhapi and make arrangements to settle there and one day manage to escape from the camp in Madhya Pradesh.

The opening of the novel offers a lyrical description of the Sundarbans:

> The islands are the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the ãchol that follows her, half wetted by the sea. They number in the thousands, these islands....These islands are the rivers' restitution, the offerings through which they return to the earth what they have taken from it, but in such a form as to assert their permanent dominion over their gift. The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable....When these channels meet, it is often in clusters of four, five or even six: at these confluences, the water stretches to the far edges of the landscape and the forest dwindles into a distant rumor of land, echoing back from the horizon. In

> the language of the place, such a confluence is spoken of as a mohona — an oddly seductive word, wrapped in many layers of beguilement. (6-7)

The description is sonorous but the conditions are absolutely hostile:

> There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as two hundred miles inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily.... When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years. A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense.... Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no mmoment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its etermination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakesand crocodiles....There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in...(7-8)

This passage is significant in view of the fact the people who had made their homes there resisted police action to protest against the Government's decision to evict them.The story is narrated by Nilima Bose, a resident of Lusibari and the main person behind an NGO running a hospital and also looking after the educational needs of the women and children in the area. Nilima is telling her nephew Kanai for whom her late husband had left a packet of papers. Her husband Nirmal is long dead but because he had been incoherent at the time of his death, the packet had not been located till recently.

Nilima informs Kanai that Nirmal had been concerned about the Morichjhapi problem and might have been there when he was taken ill.

"Oh?" said Kanai. "What was that? I don't recall it exactly."

"Some refugees had occupied one of the islands in the forest," Nilima said. "There was a confrontation with the authorities that resulted in a lot of violence. The government wanted to force the refugees to return to their resettlement camp in central India. They were being put into trucks and buses and taken away. In the meanwhile the whole district was filled with rumours**.**(26)

Kanai recalls what he had learnt from his late uncle as a ten year old about the exploits of Sir Daniel Hamilton in the area. The latter had taken a look at the uninhabited Delta region and deciding on its potential for development, had purchased ten thousand acres of the tide country from the British authorities. He invited all kinds of people to make their homes there and named the places after some of his relatives.

Sir Daniel wanted to build a new settlement where people would work together and not exploit each other.

Everyone who was willing to work was welcome, S'Daniel said, but on one condition. They could not bring all their petty little divisions and differences. Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together."(51)

Nirmal tells Kanai that despite the wild animals, people came to live there out of desperation:

This was at a time when people were so desperate for land that they were willing to sell themselves in exchange for a bigha or two. And this land here was in their own country, not far from Calcutta: they didn't need to take a boat to Burma or Malaya or Fiji or Trinidad. And what was more, it was free."

"So they came?"

"By the thousand. Everyone who was willing to work was welcome, S'Daniel said, but on one condition. They could not bring all their petty little divisions and differences. Here there would be no Brahmins or Untouchables, no Bengalis and no Oriyas. Everyone would have to live and work together. When the news of

> this spread, people came pouring in, from northern Orissa, from eastern Bengal, from the Santhal Parganas. They came in boats and dinghies and whatever else they could lay their hands on. When the waters fell the settlers hacked at the forest with their dás, and when the tides rose they waited out the flood on stilt-mounted platforms. At night they slept in hammocks that were hung so as to keep them safe from the high tide." (51-52)

> "But what was it all for? If it wasn't to make money, then why did he go to all the trouble? I don't understand."
> "It was a dream, Kanai," said Nirmal. "What he wanted was no different from what dreamers have always wanted. He wanted to build a place where no one would exploit anyone and people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences. (53)

Nirmal's account gives Kanai an idea of the settlements in the Sundarban islands as part of Sir Daniel's dream project of a community of people without caste and class distinction or discrimination. Kanai is told of the man animal conflict in the region and how the people had to kill the wild predatory animals from time to time to ward off attacks from them. This is to be noted because later under the aegis of wildlife conservationists, a greater part of the region was declared a reserved forest for the wildlife and human habitation was disallowed. This became a prime reason for the Morichjhapi conflict in the nineteen seventies between the settlers from Bangladesh and the West Bengal government.

Kanai gets to know what happened from the pages of Nirmal's hastily written diary.
As Nilima tells her nephew Kanai:

> In 1978 a great number of people suddenly appeared on Marichjhapi. In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight. Within a matter of weeks they had cleared the mangroves, built badhs and put up huts. It happened so quickly that in the beginning no one even knew who these people were. But in time it came to be learned that they were refugees, originally from Bangladesh.(98)

She further informs Kanai:

> But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhapi; it was from a government resettlement camp in central India....They called it resettlement but people say it was more like a concentration camp or a prison. The refugees were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down. (118)

Unlike the migrants in the other two novels, these people had not signed their futures away through an agreement. Their demeanour, given the charged times, was not so abject and submissive either. They were willing to work hard and not rely on the mercy of some superior authority.

Nirmal's journal throws light on their expectations, articulated by Kusum who had grown up near Lusibari, where Nilima continued to live:

> *We dreamed of storm-tossed islands, straining at their anchors, and of the rivers that bounded them in golden fetters. We thought of high tide and the mohonas mounting, of islands submerged like underwater clouds.* (136)

Kusum tells Nirmal what they told her as they met up at Dhanbad :

> *Once we lived in Bangladesh, in Khulna jila; we're tide country people, from the Sundarbans' edge. When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash; we crossed the border, there were nowhere else to go. We were met by the police and taken away; in buses they drove us to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red it seemed to be stained with blood.... But no matter have how we tried, we couldn't settle there: rivers run in our heads, the tides were in our blood. . . We sent some people ahead, and they found the right place; it's a large empty island called Morichjhapi. For months we prepared, we sold everything we owned. But the police fell on us the moment we moved. They swarmed on the trains, they put blocks on the road – but we still would not go back; we began to walk.'* (136-137)

The above passage hints at their resilience and determination to improve their lot in life. They were fighting heavy odds in the shape of government machinery which continued to suppress their efforts. They tell Nirmal of their problems:

> *"What's most important to us at this time is to mobilize public opinion, to bring pressure on the government, to get them to leave us alone. They're putting it out that we're destroying the place; they want people to think we're gangsters who've occupied this place by force. We need to let people know what we're doing and why we're here. We have to tell the world about all we've done and all we've achieved.* (172)

That the Morichjhapi settlement was demolished and numerous people lost their lives while some others were forcefully evicted remains untold as their voices were crushed and Nirmal himself died soon after the incident. Prior to being demolished, the people in the area were made to starve by the government as all supplies were cut off for some time. But one member of the community dared to slip the police cordon and swim across the dangerous waters to tell the story to the public in Calcutta. The High Court ordered the immediate restoration of the supply link to the island. This is the story he wants Kanai to tell the world: how the dreams of a Scotsman and then of a whole community of people were crushed under official machinery. This was done in the name of wildlife conservation, leaving one of the characters to exclaim:

> Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their name?...It seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (216)

The residents of Morichjhapi were killed or evicted but other people in some of the islands that had not been declared as reserved forests like Lusibari, continue their lives at the mercy of Nature.

The novels, *Sea of Poppies* and *The Glass Palace* revolve mainly around Indian labour migrants in various plantations or elsewhere in erstwhile British colonies. The movements of these migrants take place also as a consequence of imperialist ideology, as an effect of the economic policy or economic motive of the imperial power. This imperialist ideology is clearly depicted in both the novels – converting agricultural fields to profit-making poppy fields, enacting and enforcing laws to recruit cheap labour for profitable plantations in other colonies which are behind the economic motive of imperialism. Another imperialist ideology, that of ethnocentricism, finds expression in the two novels. Ethnocentricism is the belief of the imperialist rulers that they are superior ethnically to the natives in all respects, and it makes them ill-treat or misbehave the natives. But, some natives who are given some power by the colonial rulers for their own advantage, fall victim to a feeling like ethnocentricism and try to duplicate the colonial behaviour on their own fellow natives. India's age-old social evils due to caste-class discrimination and exploitation are also touchingly portrayed in the novels.

The first novel, *Sea of Poppies*, where migration takes place in the 1880s, to Mauritius, exposes the ugliest face of caste oppression and other social evils prevalent in India during the colonial rule at that time. Some of the characters, like Kalua, Deeti and the Thakurs, as portrayed in the novel, bear testimony to this social menace. It is known from the novel how poverty coupled with coercion, forces the poor villagers to leave their homes and migrate to foreign land in search of a better life, falling victim to the economic motive of imperialism. The author then describes the migrants' journey in the *Ibis* – a stormy and tumultuous journey gripped by caste and class exploitation resulting in violence, and even murder. This asserts that oppression and exploitation have a limiting or saturation point beyond which there may be violent reaction of the oppressed and the exploited. Sudden curtailing of the journey in a chaotic condition suggests that the hopes and aspirations with which the migrants leave their homes end in disillusionment, but, at the same time, the oppressed and exploited migrants have been able to express their protest in the strongest possible way against the oppressors and the exploiters.

In the second novel, *The Glass Palace*, the migration takes place, as a consequence of the economic ideology of imperialism, over a long period of time beginning in the

1880s, to Burma and Malaya in search of a better life. The novel revolves around three classes of people – the labour migrants, the transporters, and the employers of the migrants. The author brings out the frictions, along with their causes, including class exploitation, among these three classes of people. Through the key character, Rajkumar, the author shows that, unlike the caste status, class status of a person is alterable – it can be pushed higher and higher with vision and hard work. The final message of the novel is that, very often, the hopes and aspirations of the poor and the underprivileged remain unfulfilled, and end in disillusionment. But such disillusionment gives birth to nationalism in the minds of many Indian migrants in foreign lands.

In *The Hungry Tide*, migration is presented as a part of life as people look for places to populate and make habitable. But in the present day scenario that may not be possible due to issues of man-animal conflict or restrictions of government policy. It entails both social and geographical displacement, a struggle for assimilation and a recognition of difference. It is about embracing uncertainty amidst a desire for change. The plight of the girmitiyas is highlighted in two of the novels because it is a case of allowing someone else to have full control of their lives. Because most of them were uneducated, they were not even aware of what they were committing to. In contrast, modern day migration is more about conscious choice and goal oriented movement. At the same time the complexities of the political situation the world over, no longer makes migration a matter of cultural conflict, displacement and assimilation. While identity becomes a key issue in the present day migration scenario, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, migration amongst the poorer sections of society was a means of escape and desperate survival. That notwithstanding, people continue to strive for improvement of their lot, making mobility and migration as both the means and the end of their search.