

Understanding Labour Migration and Modern Slavery in British Burma: A Reading of Early Bengali Travel Writings

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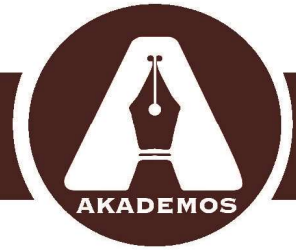
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Abstract

This paper tries to examine the system of labour recruitment and migration from mainland Bengal to Burma. Besides, it seeks to understand the state of indentured labour recruited through Maistry system which may be conceptualised as a modern slavery. The bonded labour in this system was not only to explore the mining resources or not only for the developing industrial economy in colonial Burma but also to enslaving them with debt-bondage system. They were bound to work in inhuman conditions and unable to break the contract with employers because of uncertain future and due to fear of being considered untouchable in society. Hence the said system can be understood as slavery in modern British Empire in Southeast Asia. Bengali Travel writings on Burma bear multiple testimonies to labour migration from Bengal. Primarily, this article will argue that the labour recruitment process was a well-crafted mechanism to enslave poor people and it will further look into the issues of displacement and labour migration through an analysis of selected Bengali travel writings on Burma.

Keywords: Travel Writings, Migration, Displacement, Maistry System, Slavery





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Labour migration between British colonies began to increase from the beginning of the nineteenth century. After the abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1830, the British colonies started experiencing severe labour crisis. The reluctance of former slaves to work on the basis of wages exacerbated the crisis. In this situation, they sought an alternative system to deal with the crisis. Britain introduced a new method of recruiting unorganized workers from different remote villages to deal with the crisis. The above changes brought a new class of labor, where restrictions were imposed on workers' freedom and activity and can be conceptualized as a new form of modern slavery. Richard Allen writes in this context-

“The origins of this nineteenth century labour diaspora are usually traced to British abolitionists' desire to end slavery by demonstrating the superiority of “free” over slave labour in the production of tropical commodities for imperial and global markets”(Allen 227).

Although in the beginning, the process of labour recruitment was less complicated. In the early days of immigration, labours from all regions could travel in any direction. Later a control was imposed on this system and a desirable migration pattern emerged, where migrants from the north migrated to Natal, Guyana, Fiji and Suriname. In contrast, migrants from southern India migrated mainly to Ceylon, Malaya and Burma.

The migration of Indian labourers to the British colonies took place mainly through several systems. The employment of Indian labourers under the contract system was based on an informal bond of kinship and debt. At that time, a large number of labourers were employed for various plantations of Burma with the help of the *Maistry* and *Kannagi* systems. According to N. Ganguly's 1947 survey, from 1852 to 1936, about 250,000 Indian labours migrated to Burma under the Maistry system, which was the highest among other colonies (Ganguly 237). He also referred to this system of bonded labour as indenture labour. The workers were employed in the British colony on a five-year contract with a minimum wage, a small amount of land, and in some cases promised a return after the end of their contract. In reality, this rarely happened and





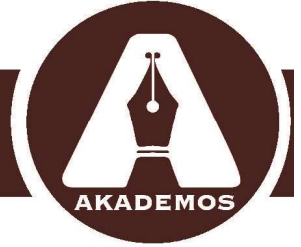
the conditions were strict and their wages were low. Renowned historian Ranjit Das Gupta writes in this context:

“The distinguishing characteristic of the system was penal sanction. Under the system a labourer was bound by a contract to serve for a specified period varying from 3 to 5 years - on the garden to which he was recruited, and if he failed to do so without reasonable cause or 'absconded', he was liable to be arrested by the planters without any warrant and criminally punished” (Gupta 1785).

It is essential to look at the reasons for this, the arrival of so many Indian migrant labours in Burma at that time. The British ruled Burma from 1844. After winning three consecutive wars with Burma the British needed many workers to run the government in Burma and to run their operations there. Burma was the center of Britain's attraction for certain products, such as fine rice, teak wood, and so on. In particular, Burma's natural resources seem to be the main reason for the British interest in Burma. Burma was also important to the British in maintaining their future dominance in Southeast Asia. But the amount of labor required to extract resources from this colony was not available in Burma. For this reason, the British government needed a lot of unorganized labor to maintain its governance structure and exploitation in Burma. Out of this demand and aspiration, the British government formulated a policy that would allow them to employ many unorganized labours. For this purpose, they created a new mechanism that solved the labor problem in Burma as in other British colonies. Renu Modi in her essay writes-

“The indentured labourers were popularly known as ‘girmityas’ (a colloquial expression for ‘those who signed the agreement’). The essential feature of the indenture labour scheme was that it was contractual in nature. Under this scheme, workers could be contracted for a period of five years. This modality ensured a steady flow of labourers to the plantations in the British colonies” (Renu 3).

Probable reasons for this increase in labour migration in Burma, as scholars have pointed out, are the persistent famine and the imposition of various new laws and regulations on agriculture that have diverted peasants from farming. In search of alternative livelihood, many people from marginal villages of Bengal and Madras Presidency joined the work as labourers in different colonies. Due to the high illiteracy rate, workers were often unable to understand the terms of their employment. Initially, labours were recruited from the countryside to work in cities like Kolkata. But they were later deceived and persuaded to leave their homeland and settle abroad. According to Ritesh Kumar Jaiswal, most of the migration from Bengal and Madras Presidency was to South East Asia. Many labours from the Andhra region of the Madras Presidency took jobs in British-owned plantations. He writes in his article-



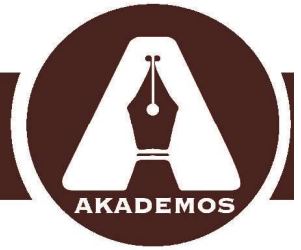
“So we notice that Indians of different classes and professions, coming predominantly from districts of Southern India formed the bulk of migrants to Burma during the British period. However, majority of the emigrants were Telugu unskilled labourers coming from Ganjam and belonging to 'untouchable' castes and Mower caste' sudras. The bulk of them settled down for employment at Rangoon” (Jaiswal 913).

Indian migration to Burma increased after the British victory in the Third Anglo-Burmese War. The influx of Bengalis and South Indians into Burma started from the pre-colonial period and increased significantly thereafter. Uma Sankar Singh provides an important information in his article on the migrant labours in Burma, as he writes-

“Most Indians who migrated to Lower Burma were from the Madras and Bengal Presidencies of Indian Empire. Over 60% of the Indians in Burma in the last decades of the Nineteenth century were from Madras while the number from Bengal ranged from 30 percent in 1881 to 25 percent in 1901” (Singh 825).

After the annexation of Burma to British India, the British introduced economic reforms in Burma. Part of this new economic plan was to import large numbers of workers from India to keep British plantations and mills in Burma operational. The British were concerned about increasing the extraction and export of Burma's natural resources. There was a great need for skilled labour to meet the demand for foreign exports. But the number of these skilled labours in Burma was not enough. Adverse conditions in the Bengal and Madras Presidencies were responsible for the increase in net immigration in the nineteenth century. Moreover, deep-rooted poverty, unemployment, starvation and population growth in Indian villages inspired Indians to move to Burma for employment. From 1880 onwards, the gradual increase of Bengali Population in Burma is evident. According to Burmese Gazette published from Rangoon in 1880 shows that in 1832 the total population of Akayab district was 1,09,645 while in 1876 it was 2,84,119. The report attributed the increase in population in Burma to the migration of workers from India (Burma 15). In thirty years, this population has almost doubled. According to the 1911 census, about one lakh Bengalis migrated to Akayab district. The vast majority of these immigrant Bengalis were laborers. The largest number of Bengali workers migrated from the Chittagong region of present day Bangladesh. According to Gait's report, about 73,000 workers from the region alone went to Aqaba, where the total number in the rest of Bengal was 60,000 (Gait 80). However, the Bengalis were not only employed in plantations, they were also employed in various mills and construction sites. A report published by Philip Nolan in 1888 identified financial security as the main reason for migration from Bengal to Burma. Burma opened the door to a new possibility for the Bengal presidency that was then plagued by famine,





epidemics and the oppression of the indigo planters. Philip Nolan's report noted that living standards in Burma were normal and not expensive (Nolan 12). But wages were not equal everywhere. The wages of the workers were different in different provinces. According to Philip's report, in Akayab district where the per capita wage of farmers was 15-20 rupees, in Mandalay it was 15 rupees. These workers were initially contracted by the owners of various plantations for 5-6 years. In addition to the Akayab region, the Rakhine state of Burma also witnessed a large influx of Bengalis. A study of the Account of Arakan by British Major R. E. Roberts and research of Bertie Pearn, a professor at the University of Rangoon, reveals that Bengali migration to the Rakhine region began in the early nineteenth century. However, the Labour Act of 1815 played an important role in accelerating this migration. Along with it, the Treaty Act of 1869 encouraged to introduce a new system for the employment of labour in Burma. Employers in Burma have given priority to hiring Indian labours through *Maistry* system because the system was cheap, manageable and met their needs. There was an intermediary contractor class within the system, as well as positions such as head Maistry, Gang mastery were also part of this structure. Uma Sankar Singh writes in this context-

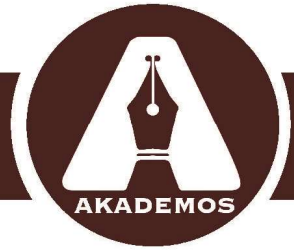
“Besides, Indian labour contractors popularly known as Maistry moved from village to village exhorting labourers to migrate to Burma for better prospects. Also, the recruitment of Indian labour for work in Burma was in the hands of shipping agents of companies plying steamships between Burma and India “(Singh 827)

At the same time, along with Maistry, another method of recruiting workers was found which is known as *Kangani* system. The main difference between the *Kangani* system and the *Maistry* system was that in the *Kangani* system workers were sent from South India to Sri Lanka, Malaysia etc. but in the *Maistry* system the workers were sent only to Burma. (Jain 162) The origin of the word Maistry is known to be primarily derived from the Tamil language and refers to the supervisor who led the system and recruited people from the remote village. However, there was disagreement among researchers about the origin of the term. According to Ritesh Kumar Jaiswal, the word Maistry is not derived from any Indian language. An analysis of the etymological meaning of the word Maistry reveals that the word comes from Portuguese and literally means "master". The term was also used loosely to sign a contract or written agreement with a company or employers to provide the required manpower to a labor contractor for a specified period of time. Further, he added that the Maistries were Indian men of higher or “advanced caste” who learned fluent Burmese language and enjoyed an influential position in their birth and workplace. (Jaiswal 98) Uma Shankar Singh, in his essay, comments in detail on the working methods of the Mastries. He writes-



“The Maistry (labour Contractor) job was to contract labourers, arrange for their transport, food, accommodation, and some small remittance to their families-all based on loans at high interest recoverable from the wages to be earned by the labourers” (Singh 827).

Employers in Burma relied on Maistries to provide labour in the plantations and they paid the labours through them. As a result, the whole wage distribution process was under the control of the Maistries, they often deducted the wages of the workers in addition to their own commission on various pretexts and oppressed them. There was a strict hierarchy and stratification in this *Maistry* system. Initially, the cost of bringing these workers to Burma was paid by the head *Maistry*, but the labours had to reimburse all the costs of food and accommodation, including interest. Hugh Tinker mentions in his book that workers were taken by ship. The time of their journey depended on the distance. The condition of these ships was similar to that of ships carrying slaves (Tinker 26) Unclean and smelly. On the way to Burma by ship, many workers died of cholera and other diseases. Working conditions were harsh with long working hours and low wages. Many labours died of poor physical condition after a long voyage. At the time of the contract, these uneducated workers were signed with incorrect and incomplete information and then detained under the ownership of a particular employer. In fact, the whole *Maistry* system had many layers. Through these appointments, *Maistry* collected commissions from various places. The Maistry received commission from that firm and plantation owners and their commission depends on the number of workers supplied. Also, they kept a commission from the money they paid to buy tickets for the ship to transport the workers. However, these ministers collected the full rent of the ship from the workers and they confiscated the surplus money. Many labours often tried to escape in order to avoid the harsh life in labour settlements. But their consequences would have been worse. If caught, they would be imprisoned. Their initial five-year contract was sometimes doubled to ten years for fugitive offenses. According to the India Immigration Act of 1922, workers had to provide information about working conditions, working hours, living costs, and wages before hiring workers in foreign lands. However, the work of recruiting workers was going on, practically ignoring this law. At the same time, the law completely avoids the protection of migrant workers. As a result, these migrant labours became regular victims by the head Maistries and shipping agents. The labourers were given false information and promises about wages, living conditions and employment in Burma. Maistry acted as a mediator between the employer and the workers. The agreement was to provide transportation, food, housing, and small remittances for workers, their families, and their perpetual enslavement. Most of the conditions were not fulfilled at all and labours were enslaved in exchange for advance wages. Ritesh Kumar Jaiswal comments in his article-



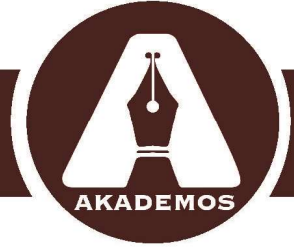
Neither the terms of service nor the actual amount of advance-debt owed by the labourers was mentioned on the promissory note/contract at the time the illiterate labourers trusting their kin-recruiter gave their thumb impression on blank stamped forms. The *maistries* used this debt-retrieval document not only to extract considerably larger sums from the labourer's wages but also to enslave him for a longer duration based on physical and moral coercion, rather than a fixed tenure based on free will. (Jaiswal 101)

In 1859, when labour migration was in full swing in Burma, a new law was enacted which was named Workmen's Breach of Contract Act. The employers tried hard to keep Indian labours in Burma by enforcing the law. Through this Act, the Maistry may seek legal assistance against workers before the full settlement of his debts as stated in the signed contract. The Maistry may order him to perform his contractual work, or punish the workers whose contract was up to 3 months' imprisonment or a fine of fine or both. The law did not identify the root cause of the problem that initially created such activities The law also played a role in ensuring that workers were allowed to return to Burma or return home for emergency work. In his article titled *Indian Labour Emigration to Burma (C. 1880-1940): Rethinking Indian Migratory Patterns*, Ritesh Jaiswal has pointed out-

Breach of Contract Act, 1859 with its vaguely defined clauses for criminal prosecution, punishments and fines was an important tool not only to strengthen the immobility and bondage of the labourers but also to enforce their return to Burma in cases when they were allowed to go home for a sojourn or some urgent work. Many a times a family member or relative worker was held back as hostage by the Maistries to ensure the return of the labourers to repay debt. (Jaiswal 917)

In this context, it can be mentioned that the information available in government documents and reports on the plight of labourers was incomplete and inadequate. But, the bright side is that even though there is insufficient information in the official documents, there is some information about the movement of these workers in the literature of that time. The literature also mentions the migration of the workers and their plight to a lesser extent. The dissenting voice of these migrant labours was never heard before in the literary sphere until the recent scholarship, which underscores their issues from the pages of travel writings. Bengali travelogues written in Burma are especially important since these writings bear the earliest testimony of indentured labour migration and their recruitment process. However, the travel writings of Bengali travellers in Burma have attracted limited scholarly attention. As mentioned earlier, Bengali migration to Burma began with the English occupation of Burma and the subsequent replacement of the previous government there by an English administration

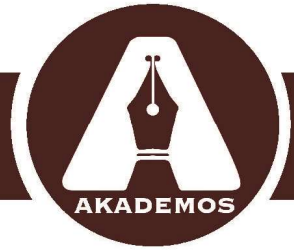




monitored from Calcutta. Europeans as well as Indians and especially Bengalis represented various administrative sites extensively. In Burma, Bengalis were employed in various public and private professions, which increased the number of Bengalis in Rangoon and other cities. Also, the number of relatives who went to visit these Bengalis living permanently in Burma was not small, who went to Burma for tourism. Many of them penned down their own experiences and published their writings in contemporary Bengali journals like *Prabas*, *Bharati*, *Bharatvarsha*, *Bangabani*, *Bichitra* etc. From these travelogues, the situation of Burma at that time and the context of the Indians living there comes to the fore. The Bengalis did not have a particularly optimistic view of Burma in the travel writings. Parthasarathi Bhaumik writes-

There was hardly any reference to pride and honour in Bengali narratives where the Bengali writers celebrated their stay in Burma. ...They wrote, chiefly, for the Bengali readers at home and there was urgency on the part of these writers to familiarize this unknown territory to the Bengalis at home. (Bhaumik 94)

Probably the main reason for introducing Burma to the Bengalis was to inform them about the livelihood opportunities in the region, which further accelerated Indian migration there. As a result, a large number of Bengali travel writings about Burma originated at a time when a lot of information about Burma contained enough information about unorganized workers, their migration, wages, etc. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, Bengalis penned numerous travel writings about Burma. Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore, Umaprasad Mukherjee, Durgadas Bandopadhyay, Swami Tyagiswarananda, Sarala Devi Chowdhurani and Indumadhab Mallick were among those who wrote about Burma in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Each of them travelled to Burma for different reasons and although they have different experiences. But in their writings, ample evidence of labour migration, their settlements can be found, which helps to conceptualize the labour movement in Burma during nineteenth century. However, the autobiography written by Durgadas Bandyopadhyay is considered to be the oldest Bengali account of Burma by the Bengalis. This autobiography gives an account of Durgadas' journey to Burma. Durgadas went to Burma as part of the British army. In 1853, the river valleys, including Prom and Rangoon, came under greater British control. Military backup was needed to maintain their dominance in the region. Durgadas was part of that military force. The first mention of the migration of Bengalis to Burma is found in the description of Durgadas. At the same time, Durgadas indicates in his travelogue the possible reasons of this migration. Burma, as the land of gold or *Subarnabhumi*, suddenly emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a great opportunity for



the struggling Bengalis to enjoy extraordinary good fortune. According to Durgadas, the salary in Burma at that time was high. On top of that the cost of livelihoods there was low. (Badopadhyay 45) It is not difficult to guess, this is why the tendency of workers to migrate to Burma increased and the masters took full advantage of their interest and recruited labours in mass scale.

The first travelogue written in Bengali about Burma is *Moulmein Bhraman* by Maharshi Debendranath Tagore. The desire to spread the Brahmo faith led Debendranath to travel to different places. He travelled to Burma in the mid-nineteenth century. Moulmein Travel recorded the experience of traveling to Burma in 1850. Moulmein is one of the oldest cities in Burma and located about 300 km from Rangoon, the capital of Burma. In addition, during his stay in Burma, there is evidence of shared cultural history between Bengal and Burma. He was startled to see Durgapujo in Burma and was very happy to find footprints of Bengali culture there. In addition to these, Debendranath's travelogue gives a brief glimpse of the city of Moulmein and a description of South Indians working in Burma, and it brings to the fore the issue of Indian migration to Southeast Asia. Devendranath narrates his meeting with a Madrasi during his visit. He writes-

Here a Madrasi resident called Mudeliar came and greeted me. He came on his own and introduced himself. He was a high level government official and a true gentleman. He took me to his house and I remained a guest there and accepted his hospitality for the few days I stayed at Moulmein. (Tagore)

Apart from Madrasi immigration, traces of Bengali movement in Burma can be found in Debendranath's travel account. One day while traveling on the streets of Moulemen, he met a Bengali and through conversation, Debendranath came to know the reason for his arrival in Burma. As Debendranath has described-

I was quite surprised to see a Bengali man there. From where did this Bengali arrive across the ocean? It seemed that there were no places where the Bengalis did not go. I asked him, "From where have you come?" "I was in trouble and so came here," he replied. (Tagore)

Therefore, Debendranath's *Moulmein Bhraman* can be considered as an extravagant display of early Indian labour movements in Burma. References to Indian immigration and especially the South Indian or Madrasi community are similarly found in the account of Rabindranath's visit to Japan. On his sojourn to Japan by sea, Rabindranath stayed in Rangoon for some time. Rabindranath describes the innumerable Madrasi, Punjabi and Gujarati crowds



filling the Roads of Rangoon. After witnessing Burmese dressed in colourful attires amidst Indian crowds, the poet felt as if they were foreigners in their own land. (Tagore 22) Rabindranath's *Japan Jatri* similarly mentions the context of immigrant Madrasis. Indumadhab Mallick's Travelogue *Chin Bhraman* also contain references to Madrasi coolies, who according to the author were very persecuted. (Mallick 25) Indumadhab stayed in Burma for some time on his way to China. There he described the situation of immigrant Indians. In addition to it, Umaprasad Mukherjee's travelogue *Burma Muluke* can be mentioned here in this context since it contains has the most information about Indian migrant workers. Umaprasad's description reveals that it is not only Bengali or Madrasi. A large number of Odia labours were employed in Burmese ports in various occupations. As soon as Umaprasad's ship reached the shores of the city of Rangoon, the writer met these labouss in the port. (Mukherjee 393)As soon as Umaprasad's ship reached the shores of the city of Rangoon, the writer met these porters in the port. Umaprasad's travel account is particularly significant for another reason, as it presents in detail the vast natural resources of Burma that the British were trying to capture. Umaprasad comments-

Rangoon, once a fishing village, is now a huge trading center. Nature has endowed Burma with various resources. On the one hand, there is an abundance of natural resources, on the other hand, there is a wealth of minerals. Burma has long been in hiding from people. (Mukhopadhyay 397)

Also, South Indians living in Burma are frequently mentioned in his travelogues. The author himself has repeatedly mentioned the Chetiyar community in particular. According to Umaprasad, there were many possible reasons for the arrival of Indian people, especially Bengalis in Burma. Along with the Madrasis, his travelogue also deals with Bengali immigrants living in Burma. He gave a long analysis of the reasons for the predominance of Bengalis in Burma and explained the penchant of Bengali migration in nineteenth-century Burma. Hinting towards the possible reasons, he writes that after the successful conquest of Burma, the British followed the same pattern as India. In Burma too, the British started ruling like India and they were assisted by a large number of people from Bengal and Madras, who were engaged in various fields of work. Since, Burmese men were not interested in these jobs. Therefore, the workers were brought from India. (Mukhopadhyay 398)Swami Tyagiswarananda's travel writing *Pagodar Deshe* can be considered as another important text in this regard as it contains several information about the labours in Burma. According to him Indian labour can be seen everywhere in Burma and they are very skilled and came from Odisha, Andhra and Bengal. He presents the

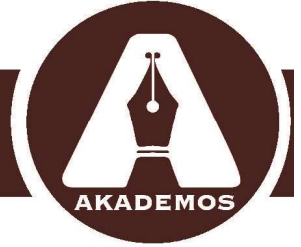




plights of labours and in his writing by presenting a vivid description of labour settlements. He writes the coolies were forced to stay in crowded rooms. Far from the outskirts of the city their settlements were dirty and filled with insufficient amenities. He describes-

I do not know the condition of the coolies of the independent country. But the condition of the coolies of the subjugated country is very miserable. They live in a cramped, airless, narrow house. There is a liquor store for them by the side of the road. Where after a hard day's work, the coolies gather and eat. (Tyagiswarananda 22)

He also mentions in his account how these coolies were robbed of their belongings by falling into debt traps. On his way to Tamoye on the outskirts of Rangoon, Swami Tyagiswarananda lamented seeing a crowd of Indian labours at a Chinese tavern. He reveals that Indian labours work and spend some of their money on various intoxicants. The coolies of the mill also spent all their earnings in the same way. (Tyagiswarananda 35) He further added, these coolies are so intoxicated that they don't want anything in the world. It's just that they were born to spend their lives like this. In addition to coolies, a large number of Indian immigrants were employed in many other professions. Tyagiswarananda mentions in this context the Chettiers who were engaged in business, commerce and other important occupations besides working as a coolie. (Tyagiswarananda 55) Even near the station in the city of Suijin, the author met Muslim workers from Noakhali, who were employed as workers in various mills. Therefore, it is evident from these selected travel writings that during the colonial rule in Burma, a large number of Indian labours migrated there and this process of labour recruitment was entirely a new form of slavery since it was a process of chaining common labours. The statistics were the mainstay of the information available in the government archives on indentured labour and their lives. There is not much information available about the employment of labourers, their lives, etc. These unorganized workers were persecuted in Burma under the terms of the agreement. Information about their lives, the reason for their arrival in Burma, was very scarce. That's where the relevance of these travel writings comes into play. Since most of the Bengali experience of Burma during the colonial period was documented in these travel writings and it presented the mechanism of enslaving labours. This model was later adopted in a variety of fields, from mills to factories and the triumph of modern slavery begins. Therefore, in the context of labour history in South Asia this study has its relevance and this study seeks to complicate the notions of freedom in colonial India and depicts a clear picture of modern day enslavement with the reference from selected travel writings.



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