

Indian Diaspora: Troubles and Turmoil Depicted in Benyamin's *Aadujeevitham*

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Abstract—Most migrants have left their homes, families and loved ones in the pursuit of a future where they will be able to achieve a higher status in society. The idea that once a person has crossed the Arabian Sea or the Indian Ocean, their life is going to change for the better is a common misconception held by the vast majority of the Indian sub-continent. Those who have reached a successful point in society have managed to do so only through sheer hard work and effort. Non-resident Indians (NRIs), or Indian diaspora, are people of Indian birth or descent who live outside India. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs there are approximately 30 million Indians residing outside India.

There are many authors of Indian origin who live in and out of India, who have written extensively about the Indian diaspora. And most of them have written about the hardships and difficulties face by these people. Authors like Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri, Benyamin, etc., have made an attempt to bring out the terrible conditions of the Indian community who are trying to make a living outside India. I propose to make a study on how the Indian diaspora is affected by factors such as language barrier, cultural shock, family and peer pressure, and how these problems have been portrayed by Daniel Benyamin in his magnum opus *Aadujeevitham* or *Goat Days*.

Keywords— *Diaspora, Identity, Migration.*

Migration is a concept that began with the birth of man. Since the arrival of Homo erectus, the human species have been wanderers. They roamed across the wide landscape, in search of food and shelter. Since settling down near riverbanks, they have moved deeper into the wilderness. Cutting down all obstacles in its path, mankind has paved the way for modernity by migrating in search of more comfortable conditions. Human migrations are a phase in the quest for the creation of a new civilization and also for progress and development.

Human movements across vast areas have created the concept of diaspora. Diaspora mainly refers to the movement of a population from its original homeland. In the Asian context, the major reason for migration is colonisation, i.e., indentured servitude and population transfer for better prospects. The reasons behind migration have always been the same. It has always been either for better livelihood or for survival.

With the advent of the oil boom, the number of people migrating to the Middle East has risen exponentially. Since the 1970's, Asians have been travelling to the gulf in search of better job prospects. The oil age was to the Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis, what the gold rush was to the Americans.

Many of these migrant workers, have left their families, slaved for extremely low wages, and have lived in extreme poverty, so that they could send some money back home. The idea behind this migration was to ensure that their families back home would not have to starve to death. The best case scenario was if one was able to make enough money, then he could either bring his family with him, or go back to the country he came from, satisfied with what he managed to make over the years.

The worst case scenario has been voiced by Benyamin in his novel *Goat Days* which has been translated from its original Malayalam version *Aadujeevitham*. In this novel, Benyamin writes about Najeeb, a sand quarry labourer from Kerala, who left his homeland and travelled to Riyadh in 1992, with the hope of making himself rich and successful. But he ended up enslaved for over three years on a goat farm in the desert of Saudi Arabia, under the cruel dominion of *Arabab*.

Tired of a life lived in absolute poverty, Najeeb leaves his loved ones and migrates to Saudi Arabia hoping to earn enough to secure the future of his mother, wife and unborn child. Unfortunately for him, his Arab employer does not turn up to receive him at the airport. Instead, his passport is seized by another man who takes him and his friend Hakeem and makes them work as shepherds in his masara /goat farm. "From that moment, like the *maniyan* fly, an unknown fear began to envelop my mind. An irrational doubt began to grip me, a feeling that this journey was not leading me to the Gulf life that I had been dreaming about and craving for. The Gulf I had learned about from so many people was not like this. A whiff of danger. Nothing clear" (Benyamin 52). Astonished and dumbstruck, Najeeb is put through extreme difficulties, as he is made to work as an indentured slave. Starved and humiliated, threatened and mercilessly whipped, he is forced to take care of hundreds of goats, sheep and camels. After being exposed to the harsh climate of the Saudi Arabian desert, Najeeb spends his most of his days and nights in the open, wearing nothing but an old and dirty robe given to him by his master and is even forbidden from washing himself.

Najeeb was a good and kind hearted man; a deeply religious man with an unshakeable faith in Allah. He makes the best of his situation and finds friendship in the company of the goats and bonds with them. He works hard to understand a foreign language. He learns to tend to and milk the goats and camels. But mainly, he learns how to survive in a harsh and remote desert. Ever under the watchful eye of his gun and binocular wielding master, Najeeb loses all hope of escaping

from his desert prison. "...I realized that my life had become inescapably bound to those goats" (73).

Benyamin has managed to effectively portray the challenges and discomfiting situations that migrant labourers have to go through in a foreign country. Dealing mainly with the themes of alienation and homesickness, Benyamin is also able to bring to the readers a deeper understanding of the psychological sufferings of a man with nothing in his life. He writes about the feelings that every migrant goes through—grief at leaving home, acclimatizing to a new language and culture, having to deal with a despotic master, etc.

All migrants have to go through a process of dislocation. Immigrants have to leave behind their family and home, and are separated from them for a long time, leading to further alienation. Their very act of attempting to empower their future renders them powerless. Najeeb was severely abused and harassed by *arabab*, and he had no support system. He even asks *arabab*, "We are two poor things, *arabab*, who do not know anything at all. Why are you angry with us like this?" (54). For the three years that he spent in slavery, he tries to adapt to the culture and customs of his master. And all of it – his jobs, the weather, the food, the language, and the social situation – was entirely alien to him. But still he managed to cope with it as best as he could.

Arabab behaved in a very aggressive and antagonistic manner to Najeeb. With his binoculars and gun, the *arabab* made all his workers meek and submissive. These objects served as agents of anxiety and kept the workers in check. Even *khubus*, the food of the desert was tasteless and dry. And there were even restrictions placed on water. He didn't even have water for sanitary purposes and had to resort to using stones for cleaning himself after defecating. "I had never faced such a predicament in my life....The harshest for me was this ban on sanitation" (78). These are events that no human should have to go through, however imperfect their socio-economic conditions. All of this was severely constraining Najeeb's life. Najeeb realises that the only way for him to survive was to have hope that he could. He knew that only if he faced these adversities head on, could he one day have his life back.

Najeeb was being stripped of his human qualities slowly. He lived in a masara/goat shed, devoid of all human company, isolated from everyone. "I lived on an alien planet inhabited by some goats, my *arabab* and me" (125). Forbidden from having any human connection, Najeeb was only left with goats to interact with. Gradually he forms a bond with the goats that he takes care of, particularly a new born goat named Nabeel. This was the name he had picked for his unborn son. He names the goats, by assigning them names of people he once knew back in his hometown. Names like Indipokkar, Ammu, Kausu, Lalitha, Ragini, etc. He considered them his only family in this foreign land and took care of them. He loved them, scolded them, and spent his waking hours with them. They were a substitute for his real family, in that forlorn desert. At one point, he even cuddles with the sheep to survive the harsh and extremely cold weather. "I spent the winter as a sheep among the sheep" (140). Once his *arabab* even locks him up in the masara, and the only way for him to survive was

by consuming the unhusked wheat that was meant as fodder for the goats. At that moment Najeeb he realizes that, "By then I had indeed become a goat" (150).

Najeeb was a very caring individual, who looked out for the animals under his charge as though they were his own family. He empathized with their situation so much so that, when the young goat Nabeel was castrated, Najeeb felt as though he too had lost his masculinity. "I haven't yet figured out that mystery of how my virility vanished with that of a goat's" (115).

The reason Najeeb left his family, and migrated was so that he could provide for his family. It was all for love. But soon after arriving, he comes to the conclusion that, he has been betrayed by his dreams. All his high hopes had been for vain. They were the reason for his servitude and despicable situation. He had not been able to achieve any of his dreams, and his life was destroyed by the horrifying treatment at the hands of the *arabab* in the desert. Even his dreams about his homeland were painful, because all they did was to remind him of what he was missing out on. And the thought of his family back home brought more grief to his already weary mind. "At such moments, I could truly comprehend the meaning of nostalgia. It is a craving. An acute craving that makes us hate our present condition. Then, that craving takes the form of a crazy urge to rush home...." (146). He feels nostalgic about home, and is hurt by the fond memories of his loved ones.

Najeeb deeply wishes to survive the hell hole he has been stuck in. He wants to survive and go back home. That is all that he desires. His suffering seems unending, and he is willing to do anything to escape his present misery. While most migrants after spending a few years in a foreign land, are unwilling to go back home because they have become used to the facilities and amenities of their new home, Najeeb becomes a contradiction. But most of the migrants do not go through even half of the misfortunes that Najeeb goes through. He plans out ways to escape from the fiery hell he has been stuck in so that he could go back home. He thinks on ways to survive the nightmare he is living in and tries to preserve what little sanity he has left.

Najeeb's loneliness and isolation along with the inhospitable surroundings made him miserable and melancholy. Loneliness and melancholy are two emotions that all migrants go through. They suffer through these feelings in the hope of a better future for their family. Though they might not want to leave their family and journey to an unknown land, they are pressured into doing so by their family. Their family and peers have fed them a story of how the Middle East is a haven for those wishing to earn obscene amounts of money overnight. After being uprooted and separated from their community and home country, the migrant stays isolated and secluded in the initial stages of his settlement into a new atmosphere.

The immigrants are seen as a necessary burden by the *arababs* and are forced to work in extreme conditions. They are made to work without break until they fall tired and are beaten again. There was no medical care for them, and if they fell sick, they could even die without proper medical



amenities. Najeeb mentions an incident when he fell sick but was cared for by no one. “Fatigue sunk in, and my running stomach made it worse. I complained to the scary figure and to the arabab, nevertheless, my work load was unaffected” (94).

Benyamin was also a migrant and emphatically asserts the authenticity of the work. The novel talks about how the ones who migrated to the Middle East were oppressed by the despotic Arabs. Through this novel, Benyamin has been able to open the eyes of millions of Indians as to how the Middle East was not the so-called paradise that they had been made to believe it was. It was not an ideal land where anyone could simply be financially secure through sheer luck. The novel serves as a life lesson for countless Indians who are ignorant

about the exploitation of the immigrants and are hoodwinked with promises of monetary benefits.

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