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Churning the *Kalapani*: Dark Water Histories, Oceanic Origins, and Marine Deities of the Indo-Caribbean Madrasi Diaspora

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Abstract

After the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834, South Asians were shipped to plantations across the Caribbean as indentured workers. The system of indentured labor produced the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. The oceans that witnessed the voyages of indentureship came to be known as the *kalapani* (dark waters). Named after their port of departure, the Madrasis are a religious minority within the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. They cohere around southern Indian *kula* (community) and *kaval* (guardian) deities and practice healing, drumming, and spirit possession rituals. Since the 1980s, Madrasis have been migrating to the United States. Despite its dark history, the *kalapani* continues to inundate the Madrasis' religious worlds. In this article, I draw on archival research on *kalapani* ship logs and ethnographic fieldwork among the Madrasis of Brooklyn to map the history, mythology, and contradictions of the *kalapani*. The Madrasis, I argue, can be understood as a *kalapani kula*—a community with opaque (*kala*) and oceanic (*pani*) origins. The community's gods have undergone a *kalapani* metamorphosis to become migrant and marine deities. Churning the *kalapani* offers us new perspectives on and from the diasporic ocean. In place of stability and transparency, the *kalapani* invites us to think with motion, opacity, and displacement.

Keywords: diaspora, Hindu goddesses, Indo-Caribbean Hinduism, indentured labor, Madrasi religion, Kalapani, ocean studies

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"The sea is History."
Derek Walcott, *The Sea Is History* (1978)

"The sea, Mahabharata!"
Khal Torabully,[1] *The Book of Métissage* (2021)

Introduction: Waters of Death, Birth, and Metamorphosis

Wading through the salt marshes of smooth cordgrass, streams of yellow-clad devotees make their way to the muddy shores of Jamaica Bay, where the waters of the Atlantic Ocean connect the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn in New York City. Clouds of camphor smoke rise to the skies as *pujaris* (priests) and *pujarins* (priestesses) set up altars on the beach. The beat of goatskin *thappu* drums drowns out the rhythm of crashing waves and the high-pitched calls of migrant ospreys. *Pujaris*, *pujarins*, and devotees plunge into the dark waters of the Atlantic. Emerging from the waves, they walk back to the soggy shores accompanied by their marine goddesses, Gangamma and Kateriamma, and a host of submerged ancestors and submarine spirits.

Marked by the arrival of migratory shorebirds and horseshoe crabs, summer is a busy time at Jamaica Bay. The bay is an estuary, a brackish body of water where the river meets the ocean. Its wetland ecosystem supports a large urban community of migrant birds, insects, arachnids, and amphibians. Every year in the month of July, the immigrant Madrasi community gathers along the bay's beaches to invoke its marine histories and deities. During this time, the intertidal zone of Jamaica Bay undergoes its annual mythological metamorphosis. Its dark waters transform into a ritual portal for the Indo-Caribbean Madrasi diaspora of Brooklyn.

The Madrasis (named after their port of departure, Madras, i.e. Chennai, but hailing from different parts of southern India) are a historically marginalized religious minority within the Indo-Caribbean diaspora formed through indentured servitude. After the abolition of slavery across the British Empire in 1834, South Asians were shipped to colonies and plantations across the Indian, Pacific, and Atlantic Oceans as indentured workers. The system of indentured labor produced a new kind of colonial subject—the portable indentured worker or "coolie." Most Indian indentured laborers were recruited from the regions of modern-day Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal. They departed from the port city of Calcutta in eastern India. A smaller group of laborers, recruited from southern India, left from the port of Madras (modern-day Chennai). Many ships set sail for sugar

1 Through his writing, Mauritian poet Khal Torabully transformed the pejorative term "coolie" and initiated the intellectual and artistic movement known as "Coolitude." Each section of this article begins with Torabully's poetry to gesture towards the *kalapani*'s significance beyond the Indo-Caribbean Madrasi diaspora (the subject of my research and this article). See Torabully 2002.

plantations in the Caribbean, particularly in British Guiana (Guyana) and Trinidad. On these voyages, indentured workers faced hunger, dehydration, and diseases like cholera. Some committed suicide, jumping off the decks of history and into the seething ocean. The waters that witnessed this odyssey and ordeal came to be called *kalapani* or "dark waters."[2]

The first two coolie ships, the SS *Hesperus* and SS *Whitby*, docked at Demerara Harbor in British Guiana on May 5, 1838. Arriving in port cities in the New World, the indentured laborers undertook fitness tests and were "bound" or "articled" to plantation owners. Indentured servitude was abolished in 1917 (though contracts continued into the 1920s), and by that time, about half a million South Asians had been brought to the (British, French, and Dutch) Caribbean and assigned to plantations in British Guiana, Trinidad, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Suriname, Martinique, French Guiana, and Grenada (Dabydeen and Samaroo 1996, 1).

The Indo-Caribbean community is a *jahaji* diaspora. The word *jahaj* means "ship" in Hindustani, and *jahaji* means "of or from the ship." The indentured workers who crossed the *kalapani* ("dark waters") became ship-siblings (*jahaji bhai*, or "ship brothers," and *jahaji behen*, or "ship sisters").[3] The term "Madrasi" itself has *jahaji* routes: the Madrasis are named after Madras, their port of departure. They cohere around various south Indian *kula* ("community/ancestral") and *kaval* ("guardian") *deivam* ("deities"), including Mariamman, Kateriamma, Gangamma, Madurai Veeran, and Sangili Karuppan, and practice drumming, spirit possession, and healing rituals associated with these deities.[4] The community describes its religious practices as the "Madrasi way," "Madrasi religion," or the "Madrasi sect [of Hinduism]." The Madrasi community has transformed its port of departure into a port (and myth) of origin.

The Madrasis of Brooklyn are a twice-removed diasporic community. While their ancestors were shipped from the port of Madras to colonies in the Caribbean between 1838 and 1920, the Madrasis themselves have been migrating from the Caribbean to North America since the 1980s. Brooklyn has emerged as the North American center of the Madrasi diaspora and religion ever since Basdeo Mangal, a Guyanese immigrant, founded the Shri Maha Kali Devi Mandir in East New York, Brooklyn in the early 1990s. Every year, the Madrasis of Brooklyn celebrate a three-day festival called

2 This article draws on and extends arguments I first made in the third chapter of my doctoral dissertation, "Bearing the Burden of History: The Indo-Caribbean Madrasi Diaspora." I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers as well as my interlocutors, Pujari Anil Mangal and Pujarin Romanee Kalicharran, for their generous and insightful engagement with this article.

3 See Lal 2000 and Mehta 2020.

4 The Madrasis refer to their goddesses by many names. For Gangamma and Kateriamma (the goddesses we encounter in this article), they use the terms "Gangamma," "Gangamman," and "Mother Ganga," and "Kateriamma," "Kateriamman," "Small Mother," and "Mother Kateri" respectively. They call Mariamman "Big Mother." Sometimes they use the names Kali and Mariamman interchangeably.

Karagam Puja. It is seen as an occasion for the Madrasis' marine goddesses and submerged ancestors to commune with and heal the present-day Madrasi community.

On the first day of Karagam Puja, *pujaris* (priests) gather along the shores of Jamaica Bay to build *karagams* (likely from *karakam*, or "water pot" in Tamil), vessels that transform into portals for their goddesses and ancestors. They fill the pots with water, turmeric, neem leaves, camphor, and *bhabut* ("sacred ash") and invite their *kula* and *kaval deivam* to travel from the ocean to the Madrasi temple in Brooklyn through the *karagams*. From the beaches, a procession of *pujaris* manifesting (or possessed by) gods, ancestors, and spirits carries the *karagams* to the temple. The *karagams* stay in the temple for two days and two nights, and during that time, *pujaris*, *pujarins*, and devotees who manifest Mariamman, Kateriamma, Gangamma, Sangili Karuppan, and Madurai Veeran perform healing rituals for the members of the community. On the third and final day, devotees carry the *karagams*, gods, and spirits back to the dark waters of Jamaica Bay (fig. 1).

Death and birth, history and myth, healing and metamorphosis—the dark waters contain many layers. How might we observe these layers of the *kalapani* and situate ourselves in relation to the dark waters? What kinds of histories, myths, and deities emerge when we churn the Indo-Caribbean *kalapani*? In this article, I map the history, mythology, and contradictions of the *kalapani*. I argue that 1) the Madrasis can be

Figure 1. Bringing the *karagams* from the ocean to the temple, 2023.
Note: The author took all the photographs that appear in this article. These photographs are part of a larger collaborative archive that the members of the Shri Maha Kali Devi Mandir and I have been working on for the past few years.

understood as a *kalapani kula*—a community with opaque (*kala*) and oceanic (*pani*) origins—and 2) the Madrasis' *kula deivam* experienced a *kalapani* metamorphosis to become migrant and marine deities. Archival, philosophical, and ethnographic views of and from the *kalapani*, I hope to show, allow us to experiment with ideas of motion and opacity, and even invert our reading of diasporic displacement to ask: how do diasporas displace our ideas of history, religion, and place?

The ocean is a historical place—an archive of the horrors of indentured labor, *kalapani* voyages, and burials at sea. Much like the *kalapani* itself, the archive of the odyssey of indenture is treacherous and opaque. On the one hand, we are confronted by logs of death that exude an air of statistical distance, while on the other, we have diaries that describe, in grotesque detail, the diseases and deaths that defined everyday life on the ships that transported indentured workers from South Asia to the Caribbean. In the first section of this article, we will encounter one such account of the *kalapani* crossing through the diary of E. Swinton, captain of the *Sail Ship Salsette*. The SS *Salsette* made a voyage across the dark waters from Calcutta to Trinidad in 1858; Captain Swinton's account exemplifies the horrors of *kalapani* history.

Despite its dark histories of death and displacement, the *kalapani* is also a place of birth and oceanic origins. The Madrasi community and religion emerge from these dark waters. In the second section of this article, I will draw on Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant's theory of "opacity" to argue that the name "Madrasi" records more than just a port of departure: it also marks the oceanic origin and birth of a "deterritorialized" community forged on and from the dark waters—a *kalapani kula* (Glissant 1997, 5). The opaque (*kala*) and oceanic (*pani*) origins of the Madrasis challenge land-based self-definitions and displace stable ideas of centers, homelands, and margins. If the community (*kula*) and its myths of origin underwent a *kalapani* transformation, the *kula deivam* too experienced metamorphosis.

Adapting to the Madrasis' oceanic origin myth, the *kula deivam* took on *kalapani avatars* (forms). They emerged from the dark waters as the marine and migrant gods of the Indo-Caribbean Madrasi diaspora. The ambivalence of the dark waters and the metamorphosis of the gods are artfully embodied in the Madrasis' annual invocation, during their Karagam Puja, of two goddesses: Kateriamma, the goddess of darkness (*kala*) and dead souls, and Gangamma, the goddess of water (*pani*) and life. Both goddesses are invoked from the waters of Jamaica Bay and are associated with transformative healing. In the third section of this article, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork among the Madrasis of Brooklyn to examine the *kalapani* metamorphosis of the Madrasis' marine and migrant deities.

In the context of the Indo-Caribbean Madrasi diaspora, the *kalapani* is a place of death, birth, and metamorphosis. It houses the Madrasis' histories, origin myths, and marine deities. What new perspectives might the *kalapani* offer scholars of South Asian diasporic religions? Toward the end of this article, I connect my analysis of the Indo-Caribbean Madrasi community's *kalpani* history and mythology with broader

questions of diasporic displacement and oceanic perspectives. The works of geographers Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg, anthropologist Jatin Dua, and religion scholar Tracy Pintchman anchor my inverted reading of diasporic displacement.

Let us begin our voyage by diving into the dark waters of history.

I The Dark Waters of History

> "In a language from *Île de France*, I therefore want to narrate my cargo hold of stars, go back to my ship in a harbour seen on a map. I already know that our song of waves, faithful as an amorous wound, can still sustain the backwash of our wanderings."
>
> Khal Torabully, *Pages from a Ship's Missing Registry* (2021, xiii)

Historical Context

Anticipating that slavery would be abolished in the British Caribbean colonies by 1834, the West India Association, a group of prominent merchants who owned plantations in the British Caribbean and invested in shipping and trading associated with sugar and slavery, appointed John Gladstone to draft a policy that would represent the interest of the planters, secure compensation for their loss of enslaved workers (as private property), and demand that emancipated workers undergo a twelve-year period of indentured labor or apprenticeship in the plantations and sugar mills (Dabydeen et al. 2010, xv).

John Gladstone, father of future British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone, had a bad reputation among Britain's abolitionists.[5] He owned several plantations in Jamaica and British Guiana. The Demerara rebellion of 1823—one of the largest and most significant uprisings of enslaved workers in British Guiana—was instigated by Jack Gladstone, an enslaved man from John Gladstone's sugar estate. Throughout the 1830s, John Gladstone defended slavery as both natural to certain groups of people and essential to the economic interests of the empire.

Ultimately, the planters received hefty compensations but the period of indentured labor for formerly enslaved workers was reduced from twelve to seven years. Desperate to fill any possible labor deficit on the plantations, John Gladstone and his associates began searching for indentured workers they could import to the Caribbean sugar colonies. Early experiments in recruiting Portuguese workers from Madeira proved unfruitful. Another member of the West India Association, Andrew Colville,

5 William Ewart Gladstone served as prime minister of the United Kingdom for twelve years (four non-consecutive terms) between 1868 and 1894 (the longest term served by a prime minister of the UK). John Gladstone served as a member of parliament between 1818 and 1827.

tried recruiting formerly enslaved workers from the United States (Kale 1998, 37). Propelled by the failures of their labor experiments and haunted by the post-emancipation futures of their Caribbean plantations, Gladstone and his associates turned to India.

On January 4, 1836, Gladstone wrote a letter to Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co., a shipping company in Calcutta that traded in cotton, tea, and indentured laborers.[6] He had heard that the company had been shipping indentured workers to Mauritius since 1834 and asked if the "coolie trade" could be expanded to the Caribbean. With an encouraging response from Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co. and the Mauritian precedent, Gladstone began making arrangements to gain official approval for his proposed policy of migration and labor (*British Guiana, 1837–1838, Indian Labourers*). Charles Grant, Secretary of State for the Colonies, issued an Order in Council on July 12, 1837, allowing planters to recruit indentured laborers from India under five-year renewable contracts, with free passage of return after ten years of uninterrupted residency (Kale 1998, 20). Gladstone and John Moss chartered the *Hesperus* and convinced Andrew Colville to charter a second ship, the *Whitby*. Both ships made the maiden voyage from Calcutta to Demerara and brought the first 396 Indian indentured laborers to the Caribbean. These workers came to be called the "Gladstone coolies." Though the system of indentured labor was abolished in 1917, contracts continued into the 1920s.

Indentured laborers shipped to the Caribbean became part of a larger network of labor circulation in the maritime empire. A *jahaji* diaspora of about 1.4 million Indian indentured migrant workers eventually populated Natal (South Africa), Kenya, Uganda, Mauritius, Fiji, Malaysia, Singapore, Réunion, and the Seychelles (Dabydeen and Samaroo 1996, 1). These *jahaji* diasporas came to be defined by the experiences and memories of their *kalapani* crossings. Let us turn our attention to one such archived crossing: the SS *Salsette*'s voyage from Calcutta to Trinidad. Here, we get a glimpse of the conditions of indentured workers crammed below and above the decks of a historical "coolie ship." Our encounter with the historical *kalapani* is opaque: we visualize the decks of the SS *Salsette* through the diary of Captain E. Swinton and the remarks of his wife, Jane Swinton (Swinton and Swinton 1859).

Death on the SS *Salsette*, 1858

Chartered in Calcutta, the SS *Salsette* sailed from the Hooghly on March 17, 1858, and arrived in Trinidad in early July. On her voyage, she faced neither turbulent cyclones nor cholera epidemics. Yet she lost 120 of the 324 indentured workers (274 adults and 50 infants) she carried across the dark waters (Swinton and Swinton 1859, 3). Before departing from Calcutta, Captain E. Swinton received the following note from his agent:

6 For those familiar with Kolkata, Gillanders House is located on the corner of Netaji Subhash Road (formerly Clive Street). It is still the headquarters of Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co., which has been part of the Kothari Group of Companies since the '60s.

> MY DEAR CAPTAIN SWINTON,
>
> Government will only pay you on so many Coolies landed alive. The *Roman Emperor* lost 86 out of 288 taken on board here, consequently lost £1000—not one man died this side of the Cape. Another ship lost a large sum; so be cautious.
>
> Yours truly,
>
> JOHN WREINHOLT. 24th February 1858. (Ibid., 4)

Captain Swinton's diary reads like a death log. He does not discuss the conduct of the crew. Neither sea shanties nor sailors' lore interrupt his stark account of daily mortality on board. Even rolling waves, sudden storms, and howling winds seem to stand still, being drowned out by cholera, diarrhea, hunger, and death. An old woman died of cholera on the first day of the voyage, and within the first week, Swinton witnessed the deaths of three more women. A six-year-old girl died of dysentery. On March 26, "a little orphan girl," four years of age, "died in a state of great emaciation." On the deck, a little boy, "a most emaciated creature," lay dying. From his cabin, Swinton heard the "sad howling of infants who were dying for want of milk." One laborer "died from fear, seeing so many die" (ibid., 5). At first, Swinton suspected that the indentured workers were "sinking for want of food" (ibid., 6). They complained "that twelve ounces of rice, without dholl" was not enough. The captain had decided the indentured laborers would get two of these twelve ounces of rice as a substitute for the dal (ibid., 8).

Death continued to plague the *Salsette*, and by the end of April, the captain ordered that the launch boat be converted into a hospital. While those dying of dysentery and spleen enlargement received hasty burials at sea, others decided to jump off the decks themselves: "A Coolie woman cut her own head going to jump overboard" (ibid., 6). Most of the women on board died from concealed cases of dysentery (ibid., 10). Captain Swinton's wife, Jane, who would become the first captain's wife to cross the *kalapani*, gave up her cabin so that the surgeon could dissect the workers' bodies before having them thrown overboard (ibid., 9). Jane would feed the indentured workers mutton and beef soup from her cabin, and Swinton worried for her health (ibid., 6, 9): "I hope she may not herself fall a prey to her disinterested kindness, but she seems to have no fear" (ibid., 10).

The two extra ounces of rice did not help. Jane's mutton and beef soups may have provided comfort to dying workers but could not put an end to the mortality on board. Ultimately, Captain Swinton turned his attention to the conditions below deck, "the smell below being so dreadful, though everything done to prevent it:"

> I regret [that sanitizing the coolie quarters with lime] was not done on leaving Calcutta, as I believe many would have been saved, the sickness arising entirely from bad smells. Each time I go below the smell makes me sick. (Ibid., 8)

By the time the *Salsette* arrived in Port of Spain, Trinidad, 120 indentured workers had been buried at sea. Captain Swinton requested an investigation. The customs-house officer and harbormaster "thought the Coolies a miserable set." They were pleased, however, "with the ventilation and accommodation" on the ship (ibid., 11). After examining Captain Swinton and the surgeon of the *Salsette*, the emigration committee concluded its investigation: "Coolies were not in a fit state to ship." Captain Swinton would not be paid for the cargo of "coolies" he failed to transport to Trinidad. He was convinced that a "great reformation" was "required in the system of Cooley emigration." Armed with his journal and investigation documents, he set sail for London. It would be his final voyage.

A storm was brewing in the Atlantic Ocean. Captain Swinton called at New York. He asked Jane to return home to England on a mail steamer and gave her his diary and documents. Swinton's final days at sea are shrouded in darkness and difficult to reconstruct. Perhaps he shouted at his crew as they reefed and furled the sails. Did they secure the hatches with tarred canvas? Did a gust of wind spin the vessel around and deliver her into the gaping mouth of the mad oceans? Perhaps Captain Swinton stood at the helm, blinded by the sea foam that submerged the deck. Or maybe he watched the dark waters rise from his porthole in the captain's cabin as he sank. This is what we know from the archival account: "In a few days after leaving, his fine ship foundered, carrying her gallant captain and a large crew to the bottom of the Atlantic" (ibid., 4).

In England, Jane wrote a commentary on Captain Swinton's diary. She hoped her "few remarks may, with the assistance of God, tend towards promoting the welfare of this unfortunate race of people" (ibid., 16). "Out of the 324 coolies on board," she reported, five, at most, "either [knew] where they [were] going, or what [was] to be their occupation" (ibid., 12). Nonetheless, upon arrival, they "made the best appearance they could when the planters came to select them (It looks very like slavery)," before they were "put into boats in sixes and sevens like cattle, and sent to their different destinations" (ibid., 15). Jane recommended a number of reforms to the transportation of indentured labor. Every ship, she argued, needed a hospital on deck, a doctor fluent in the languages of the indentured workers, and nurses to attend to the women on board (ibid., 14). "Dry biscuit with water for breakfast" was not enough food for nursing mothers. Jane suggested ships carry dried fish and fowl (ibid., 13). Music was also "very desirable" (ibid., 14). Indeed, music appears like a rare interlude in Captain Swinton's monotonous account of mortality aboard the *Salsette*:

> *21st. (June)* The Coolies very musical.
> *22nd. (June*) Coolies performing. (Ibid., 10)

While some songs remain submerged in the *kalapani*'s archives, others migrated like waves and emerged on the shores of Brooklyn. I spent the summer of 2023 buried in the *kalapani* archive. Yet every week I seemed to encounter at least two oceans. There was, of course, the historical ocean of horrors composed of ship logs and surgeon diaries

(Captain Swinton's account is one among many accounts of *kalapani* crossings). A very different body of water—an ocean of origins, life, and deities—seemed to flow into my everyday conversations with the Madrasi *pujaris*, *pujarins*, and devotees in Brooklyn. Occasionally, this migrant ocean would even leak into my WhatsApp messages in the form of aquatic puns. On a humid July afternoon in 2023, for instance, Pujari Anil, the head priest of the Shri Maha Kali Devi Mandir in Brooklyn, sent me a photograph of waves crashing onto the beach. A clever caption accompanied the photo: "Good place to be in sink with Mother Ganga [Gangamma]."

July is a busy month for the Madrasis of Brooklyn. Drummers practice day and night, *pujaris* and *pujarins* repaint the entire temple, and devotees debate and finalize the food menu for Karagam Puja. Despite the painting, preparations, and drumming, there is time for naps, jokes, and conversation. It was during one of these lulls that Pujari Anil asked me about my archival work on the ship logs. "Now I never looked at these ship logs but sometimes I go into a meditation and think about our ancestors on the ships. What and what they had to go through. The journeys they had to take," he said. I responded with details about the *kalapani* crossings I had encountered in the archive and asked Pujari Anil if and how the two versions of the dark waters—the *kalapani*, on the one hand, and the waters that contain the Madrasis' deities on the other—could be reconciled. He responded with a question: "Did you ever hear about the churning of the ocean [of milk]?" I nodded.

Pujari Anil often brings up the Puranic story of the Samudra Manthana—the mythic Hindu tale of the churning of the ocean. "So now, why were the *devas* [gods] and the *asuras* [demons] churning the ocean of milk?" he asked. "They wanted the nectar of immortality," I answered. "That's right," he said, and continued, "Now, the *devas* and the *asuras* wanted the nectar of immortality, but what was the first thing they got when they churned the ocean?" "Poison," I said. Pujari Anil snapped his fingers and said, "Right. Poison. Lord Shiva drank the poison, and then they churned the ocean again to get all kinds of gems, gods, and the nectar of immortality." He continued, "So you see what I'm trying to show you? Poison and the nectar of immortality, both came out from the same ocean. So now, it is the same thing with our ancestors. Nothing is all good or all bad. What we get is something mixed." Pujari Anil draws an analogy between the Puranic myth of the churning of the ocean and the historical experience of the Madrasis' *kalapani* voyages, highlighting the ambivalence of the ocean. Just as the Puranic ocean of milk produced both poison and the nectar of immortality, so the historical *kalapani* archives the deaths of indentured workers and the trauma of crossing, as well as the birth and oceanic origins of the Madrasi community and religion.

We have churned the historical waters of the *kalapani* and encountered the poisonous pasts that shape the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. Now let us turn our attention to the Madrasis' oceanic and opaque origins.

II Oceanic Origins, Opacity, and the Birth of a *Kalapani Kula*

> "Coolitude: because all humans have the right to a memory, all are entitled to know their first odyssey's port. Not that this port is a refuge, but because in this place, forever unnameable, they can raise those anchors that sometimes bind them to their truth."
>
> Khal Torabully, *The Book of Métissage* (2021, 18)

At first glance, the word Madrasi, meaning "of or from Madras," seems to suggest a sense of stable spatial belonging. During the colonial period, the Madras Presidency served as a political and economic stronghold of the British Empire and included most of present-day Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and parts of Kerala, Karnataka, and Telangana. The city of Madras was renamed Chennai by the Tamil Nadu state government in 1996. We can, in fact, point to Madras on a map. The Madrasis, however, are not named after Madras the city or the colonial presidency. In the maritime archive, the term Madrasi is applied to all the indentured workers who embarked upon ships from the southern Indian port of Madras (irrespective of the specific village, town, province, or region in India that they came from). The name signifies departure. Madras, the port of departure, eventually transformed into a point of origin. To understand the Madrasis—the community and their religion—we must begin with a departure from land-based self-definitions and turn, once again, to the *kalapani*.

The darkness (*kala*) of the *kalapani* often refers to the collective and individual experiences of the *kalapani* voyages and crossings. We have encountered these archived accounts of death, displacement, and disease in our reading of Captain Swinton's diary. Yet the darkness (*kala*) in *kalapani* also accounts for the limits of our archival reconstructions of these voyages. *Kala*, meaning "black" or "dark," is an optical interpretation of the dark waters. In other words, there is something obscure and opaque about the *kalapani*. We cannot peer into its depths or get to the bottom of it all. This limitation or opacity, however, is not confined to archival work. Opacities abound when it comes to mapping the oceanic origins of the Indo-Caribbean Madrasi diaspora and its religious traditions.

Neither archival work on the *kalapani* voyages nor the study of Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam will help us answer questions of territorial (and terrestrial) origins: where do the Madrasis come from? Can we trace their worship of Gangamma to communities that reside in modern-day Andhra Pradesh? Does Kateriamma come from Tamil Nadu or Karnataka? While it is important—for historical and geographical reasons—to recognize and trace ritual resonances between practices that we might find in both coastal Andhra Pradesh and Brooklyn, or in the forest groves of Tamil Nadu and the rainforests of Guyana, it is equally useful to set aside questions of transparent origins and accept and engage with the opacity of the *kalapani*.

Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant steers us in one such direction. According to Glissant, both reductive and universal claims are shaped by desires and demands for transparency:

> If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons, and perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce. (Glissant 1997, 189–90)

The poetics and politics of difference, in Glissant's view, likewise rely on transparency to legitimate themselves.[7] In place of transparency, Glissant suggests opacity:

> Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. (Ibid., 190)

The birth of the Madrasi community and the Madrasi religion can be understood in relation to two aspects of the *kalapani*: its darkness or opacity (*kala*) and its waters (*pani*). The Madrasis' opaque and oceanic origins defy terrestrial and territorial transparency and challenge assumptions about diasporic maps of belonging. Observed from the seemingly stable shores of the South Asian subcontinent, diasporas appear displaced. This idea of diasporic displacement not only centers a terra firma viewpoint but also reproduces maps of centers and margins in which diasporas, on account of their displacement, occupy only the edges or geohistorical limits of South Asia.

The *kalapani* offers a different perspective of these geographical relationships. We have called Madras a port of departure, situated ourselves in the turbulent dark waters, and observed the opaque and oceanic origins of the Madrasi community and religion. Our position at sea flattens geohistorical binaries like "homeland" and "foreign land" or center and margin. The name "Madrasi" implies not only a sense of departure, but also the process of "deterritorialization" (ibid., 5). Thus, the Madrasis are a *kalapani kula*—a community born from the historical churning of the dark waters. What might happen to the gods of such a deterritorialized diasporic community named after a port of departure?

The *kula* and *kaval* deities of the Madrasis crossed the dark waters with their devotees, and as a result of the crossing and churning of the *kalapani*, the gods underwent a double metamorphosis. Plunged into the opaque ocean, the ancestral and guardian deities emerged from the dark waters as migrant and marine gods. Thus, in Guyana and in Brooklyn, the *kula* and *kaval deivam* are invoked from the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. How do the Madrasis describe this relationship between the gods and the ocean, and how does this relationship displace ideas of centers, margins, and homelands? Let us approach this question from a secluded beach on a hot summer afternoon

7 Glissant does not imagine Caribbean history, language, or philosophy as magically lying outside of "Western thought."

in Brooklyn. Here, we witness the waters of Jamaica Bay transform into a portal for the Madrasis' migrant and marine goddesses, Kateriamma, the goddesses of darkness and departed souls, and Gangamma, the goddess of water and life.

III Waters of Metamorphosis: Migrant and Marine *Kula Deivam*

> Om
> but the sea swoons
> with delight in holy purity . . .
> . . . who will perform my ablution
> before the dirty waves?
>
> Khal Torabully, *The Book of the Journey* (2021, 49)

Pujaris, pujarins, and devotees assembled on the early morning streets of East New York, Brooklyn. They gathered ritual objects required to build beach altars for the goddesses—neem, turmeric paste, copper vessels, incense, coconuts, flags, flowers, and bamboo poles—and stacked them in the back of several pick-up trucks and vans before heading toward the bay. The morning of the second day of Karagam Puja—the Madrasis' annual three-day festival—is dedicated to invoking Gangamma and Kateriamma from the waters of the Atlantic Ocean that make their way to the shores of Brooklyn at Jamaica Bay. Karagam Puja takes place during the full moon. The tides are high, horseshoe crabs line the shores, and migratory shorebirds soar in the sky, observing the Madrasis' annual communion with the ocean.

The *thappu* drummers led the procession from the parking lot to the shore.[8] Yellow-clad devotees[9] carried trays of ritual offerings. They followed the beat of the goatskin drum and walked barefoot to the edge of the water (fig. 2). The drummers stood along the shore, and *pujaris and pujarins* flattened the sand to set up temporary altars for Gangamma and Kateriamma. They began by lining two wooden trays with banana leaves. Then, they adorned the temporary altars with coconut flowers and established copper vessels marked with neem and turmeric in the center. A *pujari* and *pujarin* were chosen to bear the altars and manifest the goddesses. They propitiated Gangamma and Kateriamma with incense and coconuts and raised a yellow flag for Gangamma and a black one for Kateriamma. The flags, attached to bamboo poles, were placed in

8 The Madrasis use three kinds of drums: the *udukkai*, the *thappu* or *parai*, and the *madalam*. The *udukkai* is hand-held hourglass-shaped goatskin drum. The *thappu* is flat-faced drum made by stretching goat skin across a circular frame made from the bark of the neem tree. The *madalam* is a cylindrical drum made from the hollowed bark of a jackfruit tree.

9 Yellow is the color worn by Madrasis during their rituals due to its association with the goddess Mariamman.

Figure 2. Walking to Jamaica Bay, Brooklyn, 2024.

the sand next to the altars. The *thappu* thundered, waves crashed onto shores, and *pujaris* sang Creole Tamil songs inviting the migrant and marine goddesses to accept the community's offerings and emerge from the dark waters (figs. 3 & 4).

The smell of the ocean mingled with the fragrance of burning camphor, and incense smoke rose from the altars to the skies. Tapping his fingers on the hourglass-shaped *udukkai* drum, Pujari Anil, the head priest of Brooklyn's Madrasi temple, addressed the gathering of devotees: "Today, as we perform this *puja* here on this beach for Mother of Ganga [Gangamma] and Mother of Kateri [Kateriamma], we join together here as a community." He turned to face the ocean and continued, "Mother Ganga is the mother who creates the body from the water. Mother Kateri is the mother who heals the body [and] takes care of all negativity. Now, she is the one they will blame when all difficult things happen. But she is the most merciful mother because she can go anywhere to help her children"[10] (fig. 5).

While Gangamma governs all water and creates life, Kateriamma takes care of all things deemed dark and negative—in life and even after death. With another tap on the *udukkai*, Pujari Anil signaled the *tappu* drummer to play "Kateri's hand," the pattern or beat used to invoke the dark goddess. As the sound of the *thappu* drowned out the din of traffic coming from Belt Parkway, *pujaris* and devotees sang to invite Kateriamma to emerge from the waters. They addressed her as *amma* ("mother") and

10 I have adapted Pujari Anil's words from Guyanese Creole into Standard American English.

Figure 3. *Thappu* drummers on the beach, Brooklyn, 2023.

Figure 4. *Pujarins* set up altars for Gangamma and Kateriamma on the beach, Brooklyn, 2023.

Figure 5. Inviting the goddesses, Brooklyn, 2023.

baigalamma ("mother of departed souls"). The *pujarin* chosen to manifest Kateriamma lifted the altar of the goddess. Devotees rushed to help the *pujarin* place the altar on her head. Another *pujari* stood next to her, ready to carry Gangamma's altar. The drummers, *pujaris*, and devotees gathered on the beach, facing the ocean.

The troupe of *thappu* drummers maintained a consistent beat as the *pujarins* and *pujaris* walked toward the water, bearing the goddesses' altars on their heads. A stream of devotees followed them into the ocean. The waves rose to their chests and the *pujaris* and *pujarins* began to sway back and forth, immersing themselves in the dark waters (fig. 6). They walked back to the beach in a back-and-forth motion and were understood to be manifesting the two marine goddesses they had invoked from the depths of the ocean. CH, a senior *pujari*, stood next to me and offered a correction: "The goddesses come from the water with their entourage of spirits." While some submarine spirits were the souls of migrant ancestors or departed community members, others were lesser-known spirit-strangers. Both groups were kept in check by Kateriamma.

The goddesses and their aquatic attendants flowed through the devotees. Various spirits circulated along the shore. The *pujarins* and *pujaris* manifesting Gangamma and Kateriamma were offered garlands of flowers and neem leaves. Guided by the beat of the drum and the rhythm of the waves crashing onto the beach, devotees rushed into the water, hoping the currents would carry away their sickness and suffering and that the presence of Gangamma and Kateriamma would transform the waters of Jamaica Bay into a portal of healing (fig.7). Pujari Anil requested that the goddesses travel from the beach to the temple in the *karagams* or copper vessels filled with water,

Figure 6. Invoking Gangamma and Kateriamma from the dark waters, 2023.

Figure 7. Waters of healing, 2024.

camphor, and neem, and the Madrasis—now drenched in ocean water—made their way back to the parking lot. The *pujari* and *pujarin* who had manifested Gangamma and Kateriamma held onto the *karagams* of the goddesses as they prepared for a bumpy ride back to the streets of Brooklyn (figs. 8 & 9).

Gangamma and Kateriamma's annual invocation from the waters of the Atlantic illustrates the ambivalence of the *kalapani*. Though the ocean bore witness to the turbulent voyages and deaths of the Madrasis' ancestors, the dark waters also serve as the opaque point of origin for the community. The goddesses of this *kalapani kula* thus not only emerge from these ambivalent waters, but also exemplify the dual and contradictory role of the ocean in the making of the Madrasis. While Kateriamma, the goddess of dead souls, embodies the darkness (*kala*) of the *kalapani* and its history, Gangamma, the goddess of life and water (*pani*), highlights the Madrasis' myth of oceanic origins.

"They say more life exists in the ocean than on land," said Pujari Anil when I asked for his perspective on the contradictions of the dark waters. "And we know that life evolved from the ocean. Gangamma represents that energy of the water," he explained. "Now, our people believe that the souls of the people who died are trapped in the ocean. So, when we invoke Mother Kateri, all the trapped souls join the feast," he added. Not only do Gangamma and Kateriamma represent the ambivalence and contradictions of the *kalapani*, but they also embody its marine rhythm. As we observed earlier, the Madrasi *pujarins* and *pujaris* who manifest Kateriamma and Gangamma move their feet in a constant back-and-forth motion. According to Pujari Anil, this "momentum" of the ocean helps *pujaris* and *pujarins* manifest and manage the "energy" of the goddesses.

Figure 8. The goddesses' flags, 2024.

Figure 9. Carrying the *karagams* back to the temple, 2024.

"[The energy of the goddesses] is like waves or tides. The movement [of the feet] is a representation of the ocean. They bring them from the ocean," he explained. To invoke and manifest the marine goddesses and then carry them to land, the Madrasi *pujaris* and *pujarins* must move in waves and tides.

Here, we can extend Pujari Anil's idea about the momentum of the ocean. The back-and-forth motion enables Madrasi *pujaris* and *pujarins* to manifest their marine goddesses, Katerimma and Gangamma, who jointly represent the back and forth of death and life. Moreover, the Madrasis themselves are shaped by the back-and-forth impulses of their *kalapani* history and oceanic origin. Finally, the Madrasi community and religion emerged from the back-and-forth churning of the *kalapani*. The oceanic origins of the Madrasis and the marine momentum of their goddesses urge us to reconsider the geography of homelands and diasporas. We have already observed that from the perspective of the *kalapani*, all land appears on the margins. Situating ourselves on the ocean and in relation to the dark waters necessitates giving up a stable sense of center and periphery. In Pujari Anil's view, the *kula deivam* can adopt this shift in perspective with ease because the Madrasis' gods are "attached to people and not to land." Let us turn, at last, to a *kalapani* view of the land.

Conclusion: A *Kalapani* View of Diasporic Displacement

> "Carry my metaphor; I touched the sea
> before the waves deceived me.
> Carry my dream; I saw it all
> without opening eyes of salt.
> Carry my soul; I met death
> but never ever died again."
>
> Khal Torabully, *The Book of Métissage* (2021, 4)

In her recent monograph on the Parashakthi Temple, a Hindu goddess temple in Pontiac, Michigan dedicated to Karumariamman, Tracy Pintchman, drawing on the work of Thomas Tweed and Anna Tsing, employs the language of crossings, flows, and friction to analyze the geographic, ritual, and epistemological boundary and border crossings that shape diasporic temples, communities, and goddesses. At the end of her monograph, Pintchman reflects on definitions of diaspora. The idea of "diaspora," she points out, often "presumes a center-periphery stand towards place, identifying a principal location toward which other locations and communities are oriented and in relation to which they occupy a marginalized position." Pintchman reminds us that such definitions "focus exclusively on the experience of human communities." Our understanding of diasporic religions "becomes more complex," she suggests, "if we take seriously such communities' discourse about the experience of their deities." The devotees of the Parashakthi Temple consider their goddess to be "as fully present, if not more present" in Pontiac "as she is in the Indian landscape." Thus, Pintchman asks, "In the case of the Parasakthti Temple, for example, how accurate is it to think of India as the Goddess's homeland?" (2024, 199). We can extend this question to the case of the Indo-Caribbean Madrasi diaspora and the Madrasi religion.

The Madrasi diaspora is a *kalapani kula*—a community whose origins are opaque (*kala*) and oceanic (*pani*). Adapting to the Madrasis' sense of departure and deterritorialization (exemplified in the community's port-based name), the *kula deivam* of the community underwent a double metamorphosis. They emerged from the historical and mythological churning of the dark waters in their *kalapani avatars* ("forms") to become migrant and marine deities. As migrant and marine deities, the Madrasi gods and goddesses are not "fixed" in place. They neither reside in some imagined "original" homeland (in South Asia) nor occupy the margins of a map drawn to the scale of diasporic displacement. The *kula deivam*, Pujari Anil reminds us, "are attached to people, not land." The Madrasis and their migrant and marine deities offer us a *kalapani* view of diasporic displacement. Situating ourselves in the *kalapani*, we can experiment with, invert, and displace ideas of centers and margins. We might begin by recognizing that it is geographically impossible to "locate" ourselves in water.

Currents, waves, and tides define not only the back-and-forth movement but also the molecular constitution of the ocean. Thinking through the problems of "thalassography" or ocean writing, Steinberg summarizes the challenges faced by

geographers: "We can never truly 'locate' ourselves within the ocean. Or, if we must locate ourselves, we require a different kind of 'map'" (Steinberg 2016, xv). Making space for oceanic thinking, Peters and Steinberg proposed the concept of "wet ontology" in 2015. Drawing on Lagrangian fluid dynamics, they describe the ocean "not as a space of discrete points between which objects move but rather as a dynamic environment of flows and continual recomposition where, because there is no static background, 'place' can be understood only in the context of mobility" (ibid., 257). While continents, even in their movement, "retain an ontological stability" afforded by the structure of solids, water remains in a permanent state of reformulation on a molecular level (ibid., 258). In addition to being fluid, the ocean is also opaque. It is the ocean's volume—that is, "its existence as a hydrodynamic arena in which waves (of water) restrict investigators' ability to observe the reflection of other waves (of light and sound)," Peters and Steinberg remind us—that poses a challenge to observation, governance, and surveillance (ibid., 254). To gain perspective on and from the opaque ocean, we have to remain in a constant state of motion. This oceanic motion is sustained by displacement.

Moving (in any direction) on the surface of the ocean (on a boat or ship) demands that we displace and become displaced by water. Reflecting on his ethnographic work on cargo ships and global shipping routes, Jatin Dua discusses how displacement is central not only to ethnographic fieldwork, but also to calculating the movements of ships at sea. Seafarers of all kinds learn to calculate displacement tonnage—the "weight of the water displaced when the vessel is in water." At any point, the "weight of the water displaced by the vessel below the keel should be equivalent to the vessel's weight." The ship moves, Dua explains, not by "occupying space," but by "constantly moving and displacing volume as a dynamic process" (Dua 2024, 43). The displacement tonnage changes throughout the voyage (because of the changing weight of the ship as cargo is loaded and unloaded, crew sign on and off, and ballast water is pumped in and out). This displacement shapes the lives and communities of the sailors on board (India, Dua tells us, is the fourth-largest provider of seafarers employed by global shipping industries).

From the *kalapani*, all land appears to be in the margins. When we think of and from the diasporic ocean, we cannot locate stable centers or margins. Moreover, we cannot expect transparency from the dark waters. In place of stability, transparency, and place, the *kalapani* gives us three different tools to think with: motion, opacity, and displacement. Like the ambivalent *kalapani* that contains death and birth, history and myth, the concept of diasporic displacement opens up two streams of inquiry and interpretation. While we can study diasporic displacement as a historical event, we may also invert the idea of "diasporic displacement" and turn it into a thinking tool to ask: how do diasporas displace (i.e., invert, play with, and/or challenge) our assumptions about geography, communities, history, and religion?

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