

ANTI-INDENTURE BHOJPURI FOLK SONGS AND POEMS FROM NORTH INDIA

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This article looks into the folksongs and poems, which became popular during the second decade of twentieth century in northern India to end the indenture system that was considered as abominable that not only diminished the 'sons' and the 'daughters' of India but also degraded the self respect of India. Influenced by nationalist discourse, these songs constructed an unique cultural identity of India. Thus it examines how the cultural construction of 'morally great India' was deployed in north Indian, especially Bhojpuri popular songs and poems.

Keywords: Folksongs, Indenture, Bhojpuri

Introduction

The indentured system of nineteenth century shipped out more than a million Indian labourers to various colonial overseas islands to work on sugar plantations. The system was hurriedly introduced to sort out the shortage of plantation workers, which arose after abolition of slavery by the British government from their empire. As soon as the system was introduced a strong opposition emerged who considered it as 'A New System of Slavery'. These were mostly anti-slavery society's members of the metropolitan England (Barret, 1859; Beaumont 1871; Jenkin 1871; Lane, 1840; Scoble, 1940). The opposition to indentured emigration declined in the decade of 1870 when the indenture system became fully institutionalised by the colonial officials in India.

Till the beginning of the 20th century indentured system was not seen as an evil by the nationalists. Some early nationalists such as Ranade and Surendranath Banerjee praised the indentured system. An article written in '*The Bengali*', on 6 February 1892, Surendranath Banerjee counted the benefits of the indentured labour migration and saw the potentialities for the economic development (Roy, 1981: 19). But from the beginning of twentieth century, the system came under the attack of Indian nationalists as well as from some professional and religious communities of India. Indian nationalists chose the platform of Indian National Congress, an association that originated to protect the interests of Indians and hence organizing Indians for their independence from British rule. But there were many other associations; groups and individuals unattached to Indian National Congress, that also came forward aggressively to stop the migration of Indian labourers to the colonies. These groups led a massive campaign against colonial policy of indenture system, which depicted in many popular folksongs and poems. The composers of

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these songs and poems constructed a unique cultural and moral identity of India, which was under threat due to the colonial policy of indentured migration. This paper explores the way in which these popular folksongs were composed and also examines how the cultural construction of 'morally great India' was deployed in these popular folksongs and poems.

Anti-Indentured Movement: Arya Samaj and Marwaris

While the nationalists associated with Indian National Congress were campaigning against the indenture system, in the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century the *Arya Samaj* and Marwari community of Calcutta got themselves involved in the anti-indenture movement.¹ The *Arya Samaji* movement against the indenture system was based in U.P and Bihar, and *Marwari Sahayak Samiti* was working in Calcutta and its adjoining areas. They formed an association named the "Indentured Cooly Protection Society or anti-Indentured emigration League" and had its office at 160, Harrison Road, (Sutta Patti) Calcutta.²

On 14th August, A. Marsden, Government Emigration Agent, Benaras wrote to the Colonial Office about the gathering movement to secure the termination of indentured labour.³ He warned that an association akin to the 'anti-slavery society' of Britain has been formed and its objective was to terminate the system of indentured labour. He informed that the Association 'consisted of a number of natives influenced by caste prejudices' and have 'political motives'. 'They don't want to hear favourable reports of indentures' and are 'opposed on principal (sic) Indians are crossing the sea and so losing their caste'.⁴ The members of the association were distributing pamphlets throughout the recruiting districts and were warning the people not to be conned by the recruiters. As proof, the Emigration Agent, Benaras attached an anti-recruitment pamphlet that was being circulated in the districts:

Save Yourself from Depot Wallas
 Be Careful !!! Be Careful !!! Be Careful !!!
 It is not service but pure deception.
 Don't get enmeshed in their meshes, you will repent.
 They take you over seas !!!
 To Jamaica, Fiji, Damra, Mauritius
 British Guiana, Trinidad and Honduras.
 They are not Colonies but jails.
 Save, be careful from depot wallas,
 They spoil your religion under the pretence of service.
 Don't hear sweet talks, they are your enemies.
 Dear brothers,
 You will find these "arkatis" at the station, at the bazaar and enquire if you are in need of service. They have not got services to offer. They will take you to Calcutta and *sell you in other people's hands* on agreement.

They got money for this, with including talks; by offering sweets they induce you. They say they will offer you service. They take you to *sahebs*.

Don't entangle yourself with their cajoling.

Don't hear what they say, don't stand near them. They have sub-depots and agencies everywhere. Wherever you go be careful of these people, don't forget. Circulate this news to all villages.

Satyadeva

Satya Granthamala, Johnstongunj, Allahabad.

Printed at Swadharma Pracharak Press, Delhi."⁵

The members of the anti-indentured organisation of U.P. were also addressing the public in market places and delivering lectures denouncing emigration. They had established their branches in Allahabad and Delhi and chose places like Muttra [Mathura], Allahabad, Benaras, and adjoining areas in U.P., from where most of emigrants belonged, for public lectures. The recruiters were also attacked. Marsden saw such activities as a 'crusade against colonial recruiting'. These protests gradually caused a slight decline in intending emigrants.⁶

In Calcutta the wealthy Marwaris ascertained the relatives of indentured coolies and brought them to Calcutta in order to claim the release of indentured coolies. They sometimes raided the bogies of trains carrying indentured labourers to Calcutta.

Bihar also witnessed anti indenture campaigns. A number of pamphlets were distributed, lectures were organised against indentured emigration and the people were warned against recruiters in the districts of Patna, Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga.⁷ Swami Satyadev⁸ was the main leader here, who published and distributed pamphlets and delivered lectures in Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga against the indenture system.⁹ Purushottam Das was another leader active in Muzaffarpur against the coolie system. He printed twenty thousand pamphlets in Hindi against indentured emigration. These were distributed widely in the district. A translation reads as follows:

ESCAPE FROM DECEIVERS.

ESCAPE FROM THE DEPOT PEOPLE

BEWARE ! BEWARE ! BEWARE !

It is not service. It is woe.

Don't fall in to their snare. They will ruin you.

You will weep your life along.

Instead of rupees, rubbish will fall (on you).

They are taking you across the sea!

To Mauritius, to Demerara, to Fiji, to Jamaica, to Trinidad, to Honduras.

They are not islands; they are hell.

Do not go by mistake. By exciting your greed for money they will destroy your caste. There you will have to break stones. On board ship people only get one *seer*¹⁰ of water in twenty-four hours. At stations, on pilgrimages, in *dharmshalas*, in the bazaar they will ask you if you want employment. They have no employment to give. They will take you to Calcutta where by contact.

They will sell you into the hands of sahibs.

These men are given money to deceive people. They delude them with sweet words and sweetmeat.

Fall not into their snare.

Do not listen to their words. These men are to be found everywhere. Proclaim this loudly in all villages.

The petitioner Purushottam Das, Vaishnav, Muzaffarpur [Let any one who wishes, ask for this notice free of charge.]

Every literate brother is prayed to read this to his illiterate brethren and sisters. It will be as meritorious as a *yajna*.

Narayan Press, Muzaffarpur, no. 68, 6-6-15, 20,000 copies printed.¹¹

Girmitiya Kunti's Cry and Nationalist Mobilisation

A column published in *Bharat Mitra* in 1913 titled "*The cry of an Indian woman from Fiji*" provided an opportunity for Indian Nationalists and anti-indentured campaigners to criticise the colonial policy and its rule. The news was about a letter of an Indian indentured woman named Kunti, daughter of Charan Chamar of Lakhuapokar, P.O. Belghat, District- Gorakhpur. In her letter Kunti alleged to be raped by the white overseer and sardar on 10th April 1913. With a great difficulty, she was able to protect her virtue and ran to plunge into a river, but was rescued by a boy who was on his boat nearby. Many English and Vernacular newspapers reproduced the letter of Kunti.¹²

Indian nationalists brought the issue into public notice and started raising issues of outrages on the plantations on the daughters of India. Nationalists, in spite of her belonging to a Chamar caste, eulogized Kunti and expected all Indian women to be like her. *Bharat Mitra* wrote on 8th May 1914:

In spite of her being of the cobbler caste, she has surpassed many well-to-do (high class) ladies by the courage shown by her in jumping into the stream to save her chastity. This will gain for her a place in the list of honourable and brave ladies. Our countrywomen should learn a lesson from the way in which she treated the immigration officer. Even on critical occasions one ought to stand by right (i.e. virtue?). A time there was when our country had many ladies of Kunti type, but unfortunately that condition does not prevail now.¹³

A poet composed a poem on the episode:

<i>Satiyon ka dharm digane ko jab,</i>	To attack the virtue of pure women (<i>satis</i>)
<i>Anyayiyon ne kamar kasi.</i>	The unjust people got ready,
<i>Jal agam me Kunti kud padi,</i>	Kunti plunged into the bottomless water.
<i>Par bahi majhdhar nahi.</i>	But did not flow in the midstream.
<i>Atyachar ki chakki me,</i>	In the mill of oppression,
<i>Pis kar dharm nahi chhoda.</i>	Did not abandon her duty.
<i>Hindupan apna kho baiithen,</i>	The brave will not relinquish their righteous
<i>Bharat ke vir ganwar nahin.</i>	Hindu way of life; They are not fools.

<i>Is patan ka to yatna karo,</i>	This degradation must be addressed.
<i>Har kunti ka jivan safal rhe.</i>	Every Kunti's life must carry on.
<i>Bina dharm dharan kiye,</i>	Without adopting a righteous way of life,
<i>Such shanty ka sanchar nahi.¹⁴</i>	Truth cannot prevail.

The stories of Kunti provided the strong base to criticise the colonial rule. The Kunti episode became a strong counter colonial discourse where an Indian woman was considered as only devoted to her husband, even at the cost of her life.¹⁵ But, what was implicit in the nationalists' construction of the lower caste working women through the Kunti case that 'despite' being lower caste, these women emulated the upper caste value of wifely devotion that was the ideal of Indian womanhood. In other words nationalists gave primacy to the high caste value even in the selection of the victimised Indian woman. These lower caste working women could acquire subjecthood only when they displayed virtues of the upper caste women. Here Kunti in a sense also defies the stereotype of the lower caste woman, by mimicking moralities of the upper caste.

Nationalist poet Maithalisharan Gupta captured the plight of indentured labourers and the loss to India of Indians in a long poem. He wrote in his poem titled "*Kisan*" on the miserable conditions of peasants that forces them into migration to Fiji, and how *Arkatis* cheated and used fraud means to recruit illiterate peasants and in plantation how they suffered a lot:

<i>Ek jan ne yo triveni-tir par mujhse kaha-</i>	A person just asked me on the bank of
<i>Taras mujhko aa raha hai dekhkar</i>	the <i>Triveni</i>
<i>tumko aha!</i>	Oh! I moved to pity to see you.
<i>Tum dukhon-se dikhte ho, kya tumhe</i>	
<i>kuchh kasht hai?</i>	You seem sad, what troubles do
<i>Kathin hai nirvah bhi, yah desh aisa</i>	you have?
<i>nasht hai!</i>	It is hard to live on, as this country is
<i>Kintu ab chinta nahin, tu par hui prabhu</i>	ruined!
<i>ki daya</i>	But there is no need to be worried
<i>Aaj lo bas, aaj se hi din fire, dukh mit</i>	now, you have the blessings of
<i>gaya.</i>	God now.
<i>Vastra-bhojan aur pandrah ka mahina,</i>	Today, and just from today your
<i>dham bhi;</i>	troubles are over, your bad days
<i>Kam bhi aisa ki jisme nam bhi aram bhi.</i>	are over.
<i>Sair sagar ki karoge drishya dekh</i>	Clothes-food and a monthly
<i>naye naye,</i>	salary of fifteen rupees,
<i>Jante ho puri ko? Dwarika bhi ho gaye?</i>	pilgrimage too;
<i>Yah bahu hai? Thik hai bas, bhagya ne</i>	Work that gives you name and fame and
<i>awasar diya,</i>	also leisure.
<i>Yad mujhko bhi karoge, tha kisi ne hit kiya!</i>	You will be sailing the seas and
<i>Mai chakit sa rah gaya, yah manuj hai</i>	wonderful sights you will see.
<i>ya devta;</i>	Do you know of <i>Puri</i> ? Have you ever
<i>Par laga pichhe mujhe us arkati ka pata!</i>	been to <i>Dwarika</i> ?
<i>Sawdhan! Swadeshwasi, han! Tumhare</i>	Is she daughter-in-law/ wife? Very well

*desh me
Ghunte hai dusht danav manvon ke
bhes men!*¹⁶

then, this is an opportunity designed by destiny.
You will remember me; some one there was who was concerned about me!
I was surprised, is he human or divine;
But later I came to know about that *arkati* (recruiter)!
Beware! Countrymen, yes in your country Many devils roams in the guise of human!

In the next part sub-titled “*FIJI*” he writes:

*Adham arkati kahta tha-Fiji swarg
hai bhu par,
Nabh ke niche rahkar bhi wah pahunch
gaya hai upar!
Mai kahta hu Fiji swarg hai to fir narak
kahan hai?
Narak kahi ho kintu narak se badhkar
dasha yaha hai.*¹⁷

The evil *Arkati* had said—Fiji is heaven on the earth,
Even though under the sky, it soars above in the heaven!
I say if Fiji is heaven, then where is hell?
Wherever hell may be but the conditions [in Fiji] are worst than hell could never be.

Gupta also praised Andrews and Pearson for their restless work for the indentured labourers and abolition of the coolie system. He wrote:

*Do sahriday sahab shighra waha par aye,
Dukh dekh hamara char netra bhar laye.
Andrews-pearson vidit nam hain unke,
Manujochit mangal manskam hai unke.*¹⁸

Two kind hearted persons came there soon.
Seeing our miseries, tears welled up in their eyes.
Their names are Andrews-Pearson
They worked for the welfare of humanity.

The latter-poet laureate Gupta also praised Lord Hardinge, the Governor General of India, for abolishing the Indenture system:

*Samjhi Bharat sarkar ant me baten.
Nij kuli pratha ke sath yaha ki ghaten.
The bade lat harding-bhala ho unka,
Sah sake na lagna nayay dand me
ghun ka!
Thi tin naron me jahan ek hi nari,
Tuti akhir wahkuli-pratha vyabhichari.*¹⁹

Finally, the government of India took cognizance of the matter
The breach of trust inherent in the voluntary coolie system.
Lord Hardinge a man of stature,
may he be blessed,
Did not tolerate weevil in justice!
Where there was one woman among three men,
That unethical kuli system finally, came to an end.

Some other writes also made this issue the subject of their writings. Mannan Dwivedi Gajpuri in his novel, Ramlal portrayed the issue:

...kya aisa bhi koi adami ilake me hai jo daroga ji se na darta ho? Aise admi agar koi hain to kuli depo ke naukar hain. Bharati wale sahab ke jor par we police se bilkul nahi darte

hain. Rahman kai dafé thane ke samne se gata chala gaya. Yah batla dena thik hoga ki bharti ka naukar akela Rahman hai . lekin Nata aur Jagropan yon chip-chhip kar kam karte hai, auraton ko fansa-fansa ke late hai.²⁰

—Badahalganj me jab gaon bhar ki auraton ko dekhte dekhte kuli depo ke adami ne dhanarajiya ko jabardasti stimar par chadha liya tha.²¹

(...Is there anyone in this region who does not fear the *darogaji*. If there are some, they are the servants of coolie depot. On the strength of recruiter *sahab*, they do not feel any fear of the police. Many a time Rahman must have passed the *thana*, singing. It may be noted here that the recruiter is Rahman alone however Nata and Jagropan work clandestinely and trap women to bring them here.

...in Badahal ganj in full view of all the village women he forced Dhanarajiya to get on board the steamer.)

A Bhojpuri poet Babu Raghuvir Narayan composed a *purbi*, a kind of bhojpuri song which depicted India as a heaven on the earth and portrayed metaphorically how indentured Indians imagined their home country from host country and eagerly wanted to visit their homeland. His song titled *Batohiya* became most popular in the beginning of the twentieth century when the anti-indentured migration campaign was on its extreme. G. A. Grierson also recorded this *purbi* in their gramophone in 1920 for Linguistic Survey of India:

Sundar subhumi bhैया Bharat ke deshwa se,	Beautiful good land brother India its country is,
Mor pran base himkhoh re Batohiya.	My life soul lives snowy cave O traveller.
Ek dwar ghere rama him kotwalwa se,	One door (gate) encircling Rama
Tin dwar sindhu dhahrawe re batohiya.	Himalaya sentinel like, Three door
Jahu jahu bhैया re batohi hind dekhi aau,	(gate) sea roars O traveller.
Jahawa kuhuki koeli bole re batohiya.	Want to go O traveller to see Hindustan,
Pawan sugandh mand agar gaganava se,	Where Cuckoo sings coos O traveller.
Kamini birah rag gawe re batohiya...	Scented air breeze slowly from the sky,
Ganga re jamunwa ke jhagmag paniya se,	Wife sings a song of separation O traveller...
Sarju jhamaki laharawe re batohiya...	Pure and transparent water of Ganga and Jamuna,
Agra Prayag Kashi Dilli Kalkatwa se,	Sarju runs ripples O traveller...
Mor pran base sarju tir re batohiya...	Agra, Prayag, Kashi, Delhi, Calcutta,
Apar Pradesh desh subhag sudhar bes,	My life (soul) lives Sarju's bank O traveller.
Mor hind jag ke nichod re batohiya.	All areas of country are fortunate with nice faces,
Sundar subhumi bhैया bharat ke bhumi jehi,	My Hindustan is essence of world O traveller.
Jan 'Raghubir' sir nave re batohiya. ²²	Beautiful good land brother India its land where, People 'Raghubir' head down O traveller.

Influenced by the nationalist campaign many folk songs were also composed tallying with the contemporary rhythm of popular folk presentations such as *Bidesiya* of Pandit Beniram of mid nineteenth century and later presentation of very popular play *Bidesiya* of Bhikhari Thakur, depicting the fraudulence in recruitment, hardship on plantations of Sugar Colonies.²³ A song can be seen which was composed on the theme of *Bidesiya*:

Firangiya ke rajuwa me chhuta mora
desuwa ho,
Gori sarkar chali chal re bidesiya...
Bholi hame dekh arkati bharmaye ho,
Kalkatta par jao panch sal re bidesiya.
Dipuwa me laye pakarao kagaduwa ho,
Anguthawa lagaye del har re bidesiya.
Pal ke jahajuwa ma roy-dhoy baithi ho,
Kiase hoi kalapani par re bidesiya...
Kali kothariya ma bite nahi ratiya ho,
Kisase batae ham pir re bidesiya.²⁴

In the regime of British, I was
compelled to leave country, White
government played a trick O migrant
...To see me innocent an arkati/recruiter
mised me,
Go beyond Calcutta for five years O
migrant.
To bring into depot make over the
[contract] paper,
Took fingerprints on it O migrant.
In the sailing ship sit with lots of cry,
How would I cross the black-water O
migrant...
In the dark room the night was not
passing,
How do I express my pain O migrant?

On the basis of writings of Kunti letters and Andrew – Pearson report, Indian nationalists aroused a great movement against indentured which ‘enlisted wider public support than any other movement in modern Indian history, more than the movement for independence’.²⁵ For them, it was colonialism that diminished the Indian superior moral and value system of ‘inner domain’ to send Indian women under the indenture system to the sugar plantations. Their claim of interference in their ‘inner domain’, which degraded the Indian womanhood in the colonies, became successful when government of India decided to abolish the system with the resolution moved by M. M. Malaviya in 1916. The system was finally brought to an end on 1st January, 1920 – the year Gandhi was pondering over the question of Non-co-operation.

Notes

1. Marwari is a Vaisya caste originally belonged to Marwar of Rajasthan and spread all over India. In Calcutta after 1897 they emerged as the wealthiest and most successful business and industrial communities widely known by a homogenous category ‘Marwari’. They ran the Mills of Calcutta and they were seeking cheap and plenty of labour for their industries. Emigration of labouring population of India under the indenture contract created problem to them in obtaining cheap and reliable labour force for their Mills. See Hardgrove, 2004; Marwaris have been a moving business and industrial community from 14th century. See Banarasi Das, 1943.

2. See, Letter No. 322, dated Darjeeling, 14th October 1915, from James Donald, secretary to the GoB Financial Department to the Secretary to GoI, C&I, Emigration.
3. IOR/P/9778, BL; Govt Emigration Agent, Benaras to Colonial Office, 23 July 1914, GoI C&I, Emigration, A Progs Nos. 43, December 1915, NAI.
4. *ibid.*
5. English translation, Emigration Agent Benaras, to Colonial Office [hereafter CO] 23 July 1914 in *Ibid.* This undated pamphlet is attached in the letter of Marsden.
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*, see letter of 7th June 1915, Ranchi, E. L. L. Hammod, Secretary GoB and Orissa , Municipal Department to Secretary GoI, C&I, Emigration.
8. Notwithstanding their opposition to the indentured system, the Arya Samaj sent their leaders to various colonies to establish branches and teach what in their view was 'proper' Hinduism.
9. *ibid.* It is important to note that Arya Samaj in India considered the migration of Indians to colonies under the indenture system as a system, which was diminishing the cultural and moral values of Indians. Hence they opposed the system as well as sent their religious leaders to the various colonies and established their braches and schools to teach them the essentials of Hinduism.
10. Old Indian weight, approximately a litre.
11. See letter dated Ranchi, 13th September 1915, from E. L. L. Hammond, Secretary, GoB and Orissa, Municipal to the Secretary GoI, C&I, Emigration; IOR/P/9778, BL.
12. Colonial Secretary Office Minute Papers [hereafter CSOMP] , 8779/13; 6609/14, National Archives of Fiji [hereafter NAF]. Government of Fiji set up an enquiry and it was found that the letter was written by Swami Manoharanand Saraswati on behalf of Kunti at the house of Totaram Sanadhya. Brij Lal discusses this episode in great detail. See Brij Lal, 'Kunti's Cry: Indenture women in Fiji plantation', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1985, pp 55-71. See also John D. Kelly, *A Politics Venture: Hinduism, Sexuality and Countercolonial Discourse in Fiji*, The University of Chicago Press, 2005.
13. CSOMP, 6609/14.
14. See Dhira Varma, Fiji ke Hindi Lok Geet: Girmitiyayon ke Maukhik Dastavej, *Gagananchal*, April- June 2000, p. 212.
15. John D. Kelly, *A Politics Venture: Hinduism, Sexuality and Countercolonial Discourse in Fiji*, The University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 45-65.
16. Maithilisharan Gupta, *Kisan*, Sahitya Sadan, Chirgaon, Jhansi, 1916, subtitle *Deshtyag*, pp. 31-32.
17. *ibid.*, p. 36.
18. *ibid.*, p. 41.
19. *ibid.*, p. 42.
20. Mannan Dwivedi Gajpuri, *Ramlal: Gramin Jiwan ka ek Samajik Upanyas*, Indian Press, Prayag, 1917, pp. 112-113.
21. *ibid.*, p. 175.
22. Raghubir Narayan Sahay, *Raghuvir patra-pushpa*, cited in Sri Durga Prasad Singh, *Bhojpuri Ke Kavi aur Kabya*, Bihar Rashtra Bhasha Parishad, Patna, 1958, second edition, 2001, pp.

- 216-7; see also Gramophone Recordings from the Linguistic Survey of India, South Asia Digital Library, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/lsi/6591AK>.
23. Pandit Beniram , a contemporary of Bhartendu Harishchandra was a great composer of *kajari*, a kind of Bhojpuri song. Beniram composed a *Kajari Bidesiya* around 1860s. See Sri Durga Prasad Singh, *ibid.*, p.142. During second decade of twentieth century Bhikhari Thakur composed a play *Bidesiya* that became very popular in northern India. The theme of play was on migration and separation of family/ newly married wife. See *Bhikhari Thakur Rachanawali*, ed., Nagendra Prasad Singh, Bihar Rashtra Bhasha Parishad, Patna, 2005.
 24. Vishwamitra Upadhyay, *Lokgitan me Krantikari Chetna*, Prakashan Vibhag, Suchana aur Prasaran Mantralay, Bharat Sarkar, 1997, p. 42-3.
 25. K. Gillion, p. 182.

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