

HISTORY, MEMORY AND CULTURE OF INDENTURED MIGRANTS: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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In the project of writing history of indentured migrants, apart from archival sources, oral traditions and cultural texts are equally vital sources of writing 'history from below'. The paper focuses on oral traditions, primarily on folksongs collected from the field in India, in order to document pain and suffering of the indentured labourers and also of their families who were left behind in 'homeland'. In spite of suffering in an alien land, the migrants have kept their cultural heritage alive in the form of rituals, folksongs and folktales. Besides, they were also engaged in a dynamic interaction with the multiethnic societies of the countries of migration resulting in much variation in the cultural heritage (intangible in this case) of these different cultural locations. The paper makes use of a comparative framework for study of similarities of Indenture experience and culture of the "sending" and "receiving" countries primarily through intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: India, Mauritius, Fiji, folksongs, oral traditions, Indenture, *girmitya*

Conventional historiography considers written and archival documents as the most reliable and authentic historical evidences; historians have long been skeptical of oral traditions as a source material of history. Oral traditions do not merely refer to verbal lore – tales, songs, proverbs etc, but the term is used in a wider sense as is done by Jan Vansina.¹ Oral traditions may include eyewitness accounts, hearsay, testimonies, reminiscences and commentaries too. Oral traditions, transmitted from one generation to another by word of mouth, and retained and relayed through individual and collective memory, embody truth of a different kind. Encompassing lived experiences of common people and "common voices", oral traditions can be equally valuable source of reconstructing and reinterpreting past.

In the wake of the rise of social history in the 1960s, history is no longer merely concerned with great personages and grand events that shape the destiny of nations, it is rather now more related to "everyday life" of people. With the shift of focus to "history from below", everyday acts and experiences of people become significant source of retrieving those "voices" that have hitherto remained unheeded in the annals of history. Writing history from below puts premium on lived experiences and culture of individuals and communities that have been excluded and marginalized in prior historical narratives, and brings in multiple perspectives on the past.

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Conventional historians of indenture, too, use documentary sources and archival materials. This history claims to be “balanced” and objective in its approach. While all these historians agree to the exploitative nature of indenture, too heavy a reliance on quantifiable data, at times, make them draw inferences which are at variance with experiences of indenture. Hugh Tinker, in his *A New System of Slavery* (1974), writes about unmitigated suffering of those men and women who were caught in the coils of indenture. Another major historian of indenture, Brij V. Lal (2000), has sought to revise his earlier quantifiable approach to history and later related it to causal questions. For instance, when he writes about condition of women under indenture and causes of suicides of indentured migrants, he succeeds in portraying a grim picture of exploitation and inhuman treatment.

Besides drawing on conventional sources, evidences like oral testimonies, eyewitness accounts, personal narratives, letters, folk songs and tales etc., should also be used as alternative sources of writing history of indenture. Luisa Passerini who is concerned with relationship of oral history and history also argues that “recognition of subjective reality enables the historians to write history from a novel dimension undiscovered by conventional historiography” (1979: 87). In conventional history of indenture, there have remained some gaps or silences. The unconventional sources, by focusing on the subjective experience of the indentured people and taking into account their memories and voices, fill these gaps in some respects. To learn about how the indentured people bore the yoke of indenture and how they themselves viewed this system is not to discount the claims of objectivity of conventional historiography but to supplement it with lived experience of the people themselves and thus add a new dimension to the understanding of the indentured past and also of how the past has shaped the present.

Experience of indenture has been viewed and interpreted by people at different locations in different ways but little attempt has been made to retrieve songs and narratives from the field. Both at the points of departure and arrival, there has been a rich repository of oral songs and narratives of indenture life-experiences; we have done some fieldwork in India and Mauritius in this regard. Each song taken up here tells a life story and illustrates, to use Paul Thompson’s words, “how every life story inextricably intertwines both subjective and objective evidences of different but of equal value.” (Thompson, 2000: 16) In folksongs found in India, we get a narration of suffering and pain. The song of Tetri devi of Harigaon is occasioned by a letter sent to his family by her husband who had become an indentured labourer. It will be relevant to point here that the woman belonged to the same village from where the ancestors of Sir Ram Goolam, the former Prime Minister of Mauritius had gone to work as indentured labourer. It is a village from where a number of migrants had gone to serve under ‘girmit’. During our field trip, Tetri Devi gave us the letter. The letter reads thus:

The letter bears testimony to suffering and disillusionment of those who went as indentured migrants. Though the letter bears no date, from what we could learn from conversation with Tetri Devi, it could be inferred that it must have been written during the first decade of the last century, at a time when the “new system of slavery” was continuing and the gullible people, being recruited in India by the British, did not know of the hardships of the indenture. They had no inkling of what fate lay in store for them when they landed on the “promised land of plenty”. One cannot deny the truth that they had agreed to migrate to other lands, crossing “black waters” due to famine, poverty and lack of means of livelihood. But when they started, they had hopes of earning plenty of money for their families. But as the indentured migrant, Raghunath, in his letter, succinctly describes his woes: hopes were belied, dreams had turned into nightmares. They had no reprieve from work; they were beaten like animals; worse treatment could not be met out even to the animals, depriving them of the basic human dignity.

When the indentured migrant, Raghunath, left his home, little did he know that he would never return? There was no way he could escape the clutches of his masters. Deprived of hope of ever returning home, life became more miserable and insufferable. The letter narrates his desperation: if he lived, he might eventually meet his family. He had not only lost hope of return or escape but also of surviving the ordeal; he might die while serving his term of indenture.

The tale of unmitigated suffering of Raghunath reached home through this letter. His wife, Tetri Devi and other family members were subjected to no lesser amount of suffering as they now knew that he was living there in a hell-like-condition. She expressed her pain in her song in which she tells the tale of her suffering and vents her anger on having become victim of manipulations and politics of the colonialists:

Like an ignorant woman without brains
 How could I know the ways of this cruel government?
 It has taken away collyrium from my eyes, vermilion from my hair parting
 It has taken away my husband from my nuptial bed
 I thought that my husband would spend his day working in his fields
 Little did I know that he would become a girmitiya
 In the courtyard weep cows and buffaloes
 At the doorsill sits and weeps the mother
 In her in-laws' house weeps the sister
 On the nuptial bed wails the lovely wife
 Let fire burn this cruel government
 Let thunderbolt strike the capital of this oppressive government
 Neither has she any mercy and compassion nor has she any shame
 Why has she become a queen and not a witch?
 Who would I depend on to row the boat of my life?
 How would I live this long life, O Bidesiya?²

The song narrates how, on one hand, she suffered as she was left alone in the absence of her husband and, on the other, her suffering and anguish multiplied on learning of the plight of her *girmitiya* husband. Her anger is directed against “the cruel government.” Though as an ordinary ignorant woman, she could not comprehend why her husband was recruited under ‘girmit’, she had enough wisdom to understand that self-interest of the colonial rulers was responsible for his as well as her miseries. She curses the queen, the colonial ruler: let destruction fall on such an unjust ruler. As a commoner, she expects the queen to be kind-hearted, more so, since she too is a woman, and she should have some mercy or shame. Here the case is just the opposite; she herself is the oppressor. The folk cultural space provides the aggrieved wife freedom to vent her anger and call the queen a “witch”. Even an ordinary woman can curse the ruler without fear of punishment.

The *girmitiyas* left behind them family members who were aggrieved in their absence. Even the pets of the family are so attached to master that they lament his absence. The man in an Indian family is not merely a bread-earner; he is a source of emotional sustenance for all the family members including his mother, sister and wife. The old mother and the sister wait for his return and the wife’s sorrow does not know any bounds. Her life becomes meaningless; she does not know how to spend days and nights. A similar kind of expression of the wife’s suffering is found in another song:

I spend my day driving off crows
 I spend my night weeping for my husband, oh Ram!
 The pot of tulsi plant has become too wet
 Even lighting diya gives no hopes, oh Ram!
 My saas and nanad taunt me
 My sister-in-law speaks sarcastically to me, oh Ram!
 The maid says that (my) husband has become a *girmitiya*
 He will bring sack (full of gold) oh Ram!
 Of what use is this money of *girmitiya* to me
 Who knows grief of my heart oh Ram!
 I feel like drowning myself in the well
 What use is the bed without *girmitiya*, oh Ram!

The wife of the *girmitiya* has long waited for the return of her husband. When she came to her in-laws’ house after her marriage, she thought that she would get her husband’s company as he would work in his own fields and stay at home but he had gone away to become a *girmitiya*. In this song, she speaks of her endless waiting. She does not even know what it means to be a *girmitiya*. She has heard people say that the *girmitiya* will return with a sack filled with gold. Such a prospect does not cheer her. She is unaware of his sufferings there as a *girmitiya*. She has no news of his whereabouts; she only cherishes hope that he will return some day. In women’s folksongs in India, we get frequent references to husband’s going to ‘*pardes*’ (another city) to earn money for his family. In such songs, the wife laments

his absence, but she has some hope. Usually, the '*pardesi*' (migrant) husband would return after a year or two. Life becomes a burden for the wife of *girmityas* because they never (except in a few cases) returned though when they left, they always intended to return home. Besides, they lived so far-off that once they had left, the family rarely received any news of them. Being superstitious, the wife here tries all means to please gods so that her husband comes back – she waters *tulsi* plant every day (the wall of *tulsi* pot has become too wet and is about to fall off), she lights *diya* (lamp) but in vain. When she gets up in the morning, she finds crows cawing on her roof top. She expects that her husband will return, as it is commonly believed that cawing of crow presages arrival of a guest. But there is no sign of return of her husband. She prays to gods; she continues with her ritualistic offerings. Days pass but there are no signs of the returning husband. Her despair is matched with the despair of the *girmitya* in his letter. The *girmitya* desperately wished to come back home. Similarly his family was equally desperate waiting for him to return. It is an unending wait. No hope alleviates their grief.

There is another song which was sung by a woman whose husband Keshav Tiwari had gone to work as a *girmitya* and was presumed to be dead. She lived a life of widowhood for twelve years before her husband managed to return to India. Thereafter she resumed the normal life of a Hindu married woman. But the period of hardship for the family had been as nerve-shattering as had been the bondage for the indentured labourer.

The song tells how the plantation owners treated them even worse than animals; they were forced to carry out each and every command of their masters and if they did not do so, they were mercilessly beaten. Physical torture was accentuated by the sense of loss of freedom. The wife tells the returnee, we will live a free life in our home:

O My dear husband! Don't go abroad and become a *girmitya*
 Don't you know the haughtiness of *firangin*
 If you stay at home, you will live a free life
 There they will make you work like a donkey
 Don't you know the haughtiness of *firangin*
 The master will give commands and whip you as well
 Of what use is such a job?
 Look out, the posse of the *sepoys* stands at the door
 If you refuse to go, they will send you to *kala pani*
 Such a cruel government is this, will it listen to us?
 It is better that we drown ourselves in the Ganga.

The feeling of helplessness and powerlessness, of being no better than a bonded slave, made their life unbearable. In fact, when we closely look at the songs, we can understand indenture as a complex phenomenon: while it is a fact that those Indians who were living a life of destitution and poverty might have been willing to go and work under a contract but no less important is the fact that they had fallen

prey to clever manipulations and machinations of British colonial masters, here referred to as *firangin*. They were lured with false promises, and they were made to sign contracts about whose terms and conditions they had no idea of as they were illiterate. Many found it hard to adjust to a life of slavery: some made efforts to run away, and while trying to escape, some of them were killed, some were caught and put into prison. Only a few succeeded in returning to their homes after serving their contract. Stories of either escape or success are few and far between. In many cases, it meant a life of disgrace, ignominy, hardship and endless wait.

Pioneering work regarding reconstruction of indenture experience and resistance through folksongs in diasporic context has been done by Ved Prakash Vatuk (1964). In this paper, we have analysed two songs of indentured migrants – one from Mauritius and another from Fiji, taken from *Tripathga*, to reconstruct their past. The song of Mauritius, too, testifies to sufferings of indentured labourers: they had to work like animals, they had to carry even excrement on head, and they were not allowed to stay back even in case of illness. If they refused, they were whipped and beaten to death:

Bound to an agreement, oh Bhaiya! Bound to an agreement
 We are paid five rupees a month
 With coarse red rice to eat
 And coconut oil and coarse rough pulse
 With gunny sack to cover and mat to sleep on
 Bound to an agreement, oh Bhaiya! Bound to an agreement
 On weekdays, we are slave of the master
 On Sundays, we are slave of the mistress
 Forced to give up our worship, we are put to work
 With a spade on the shoulder, go and mark our attendance
 Clear circle round the cane root, spread manure
 Carry bucketful of excreta on our head
 If we refuse to carry excreta, we are marked absent
 We have to bear caning by the master
 Instead of one day, are marked absent for two days
 When Dr Manilal of Mauritius came to hear
 Of the suffering of the poor labourers
 He helped us break free from the chains of slavery

In the song of Fiji, another aspect of oppression comes to the fore – women of families of the indentured labourers had to face sexual exploitation. While some tried to run away, many killed themselves. One such woman Kunti threw herself into a river but survived. She bore all tyranny but refused to yield to the lust of the white masters. Kunti, thus, became a symbol of honour of indentured women and her heroic act of resistance is celebrated in this song of a folk poet. The sacrifice of Kunti is invoked to inspire people to put up resistance to the tyranny of the colonial masters:

When the tyrants were bent upon defiling honour of the virtuous women
 Kunti jumped into deep waters, reached the other shore but did not compromise
 In spite of tyranny of the masters, she did not give up Hinduism
 Oh! Strive to overcome this decline
 (So that) every Kunti's life is happy and secure
 We cannot get any peace and happiness without bearing dharma

The song both evokes and asserts communal/religious identity and a sense of bonding. Fiji Indians refuse to give their identity up in spite of repressive designs of the colonialists. A significant aspect of indentured life has been the colonialists' notion of their cultural/religious superiority. There were attempts by the colonialists to convert the indentured labourers to Christianity and their religious practices were condemned as "heathen practices", but the indentured migrants asserted their cultural identity. This led to creation of spaces of cultural assertion and this assertion based on their common cultural background despite differences of caste, religion and sometimes of region, enabled them to resist the so called cultural superiority of the colonial masters. They set up temples and arranged *baithakas*, started celebrating their festivals and drew strength from their myths and religion to endure their suffering – the story of Rama in exile gave them hope that their exile would also come to an end; the worship of Lord Hanuman, an incarnation of *Shakti* (indomitable strength) gave them strength to strive for the impossible – liberation from the indentured life. The denigration of their religious-cultural practices made them stick to their cultural identity with greater tenacity and stubbornness. This cultural assertion took place, according to Radica Mahase, within the household, family and village groups away from the colonial gaze where they expressed themselves freely (Mahase, 2008: 467).

The indentured migrants were cut off from living cultural traditions, yet they retained their vestiges through memory. Since they had not been practiced in collectivity for a long time, part of these traditions were lost and forgotten. When practiced in collectivity, usually part of what one forgets is recalled and supplemented by the others as it happens in the case of performance of women's folksongs in which the lines missed by one woman singer are sung by other women. These cultural practices, however, became a means of solidarity, forging unity cutting across barriers of caste and religion. Our study of Mauritian indentured society reveals interesting aspects of cultural assertion and resilience of people – how they drew sustenance from religious/cultural practices to endure their sufferings and hardships; these practices became not only a means of the articulation of the latter but were also effectively turned into sites of resistance. Though uprooted from their homeland for a number of years, the indentured migrants continued with these practices. In our production of *sohar* songs with Aapravasi Ghat Trust Fund, Mauritius, we found an instance of continuity of cultural practices with some change. Similarly continuity with change has been found in *haldi* ceremony

which we recorded in Mauritius. There are many such instances of cultural continuity and change. This amply shows how the indentured migrants closely preserved their cultural identity.

During our field trip in Mauritius, I could meet women while they were reciting the sacred text of the *Ramcharitmanas*. Part of the transcribed recital is given here:

Aum [3] aum bhur bhuvah swaha tat savitour vareiniam
 Bhargo devasia dheeh mahi
 Bhio, yo naha pracho dhaya
 Guru bhramha, guru vishnu, guru deva maheswara
 Guru saksaat parambrama, tasmai sri guru dyo namaha
 HANUMAN CHALISA
 SWAGATAM SRI GANESH
 Swagatam sri ganes, saranagatam sri ganes [2]
 Swagatam, swagatam, sawagatam sri ganes [2]
 Chanting of Ramcharitmanas
 Maiya more angan mein ayi ho [2]
 Maata bhawani mein unke peiya lagu [2]
 Mangal bhavana amangal hari
 Dravahu sudashratha ajar bihari³

It is an amalgamation of recital of Vedic mantra, couplets from the *Ramcharitmanas*, invocation of goddess Durga and Lord Ganesh. At first sight, it is difficult to comprehend this phenomenon. Is this a collage? What does it mean? Is it because they have lost much in transmission? This new amalgamation of cultural practices is in fact an index of new reconstructions and reconfigurations that are taking place in such a multi-racial society. Just as caste has largely been obliterated, exclusionist religious practices also do not really matter much. What matters more for indentured migrants and their descendents is the shared history of pain and suffering and of moments of final triumph. Similarly in these recital sessions, vedic/classical, vernacular/textual and oral traditions are all being merged to form a new mode of cultural practice which is unique in its own way where purity, exclusion, division and barrier have been replaced by cohesion, solidarity and new social, religious and cultural configurations. This society is not static or fossilized; it has its own dynamism. Contact with other cultures and new environment has brought about changes as are reflected in singing of songs of celebration at the birth of a girl child in the Mauritian society.

The system of indenture caused unmitigated suffering to innocent and gullible people who signed a 'girit' without being aware of its implications for their future. Folksongs embodying lived experiences of indentured labourers and their family articulate their suffering more poignantly than archival sources. Folksongs collected from the field in India document unrecorded grief of the indentured migrant's wife who has remained invisible. Folksongs from Mauritius and Fiji too bring out

suffering of indentured migrants. The pain of indentured migrant and his family recorded in folksongs foreground the inhuman aspect of indenture.

Indentured migrants bore hardships of indenture in an alien land drawing succour from cultural traditions carried from the homeland. The caste based hierarchy and religious purity could not be maintained in the circumstances in which, as suffering lot, they were thrown together at Calcutta depots, on board the ship and at the plantation. The cultural practices of past (homeland) were reconstructed in the context of the indentured present. The “diluted” cultural traditions still continue in practice among their descendants. As inheritors of this heritage, we need to retrieve it through oral traditions before it becomes extinct.

Notes

1. See Jan Vansina (1985). *Oral Tradition as History*, especially Chapter One pp. 3-12. Vansina examines oral tradition as a process which includes generation of messages in the form of eyewitnesses, hearsay and internal experiences such as visions, dreams and hallucinations. He also includes interpretation of experience such as reminiscences, commentary and verbal art. It is in this extended sense that we have used this term oral tradition in this paper.
2. The original Bhojpuri/Hindi version of the songs cited in the text is given in the appendix.
3. It is a verbatim transcription of the recital as recorded during our field work. The original version is as follows:

ôm bhûr bhuvah svâh
 Tat savitur varenyam
 Bhargo devasya dhîmahî
 Dhiyo yo nah̄ pracodayât
 Guru brahma, guru viṣṇu, guru devo mahesvara
 Guru sâkṣât parabrahma, tasmai ūrî guru devo namaḥ

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Appendix

1

Nari anari naahi eko re akliya tha
Nahi jani kaisen sarkar julimiya
nayna kaajar chine, maang ke semurva ho
Chini lele sej ke purus ee julimiya
Din bhari janani ki khet kharihan hoehey
Pata ka ki bhailey uho jaayi girmitiya
Duara pe rowe mor gaiya se bhaisiya ho
Ki chaukat rove, baiet budh mahtariya
Apna sasurva tha roveli bahiniya tha
Sej par kalpeli patri tiriya
Aagi lagaibo ekara julmi hukumiya ke
Bajar paro vipati ke raaj rajadhaniya
Nahi dil daya batue, nahi kavno haya baduwe
Rani kahe bhaiye, nahi bhaiye churiliya
Kekre aasarva po khevbi hum jinigiya tha
Kaise kaati jingai pahad re bidesiya

Song of **Tetri Devi**

Village—Tulsi Harigaon, Bhojpur

2

Dinva katath mora kauua uchravath
Ratiya katela rodaniya ae Ram
Tulsi chaurva pa pani bhihilaile
Diyana se kavno na aas nu ae Ram
Saas mor huduki, nanad mor phuduki
Gotin birahiya ke bol nu ae Ram
Cheriyi kehele piya bhaile girmitiya
Le ai toda bhari nu re ram
Aagi lagaibo aisan toda girmitiya ke
Ke jane humro kales nu ae Ram
Aapn javan rahe, tavan sau se saupani
Ke uho gaile firangiya ke des nu ho Ram
Penhi hum, daakhin rang ki penhi khasriya
Ke kekra po karih singar nu ho Ram
As man kare eka kuniyan dubi maari jaai
Bina girmitiya ke kaisan sej ae Ram

Song of **Radhika Devi**

Village—Panditpur

3

Piya mati bani jaake girmitiya
 Firangin ke saan jaanihe
 Nij grih rehb azad hoke jiyab
 Oohi ja toke ou gadha banayi
 Firangi k saan janih
 Hukum hakim chalaabe, upar koda barisabe
 Kavan kaam badi aisan nogariya
 Firangiya ke saan jaanihe
 Dekh dua po khaad bhaile sipahiyan ke baadna
 Tha jaaib ee lagai kala paniya
 Firangiyan ke saan jaanih
 Aisan julmi sarkar kavan kari hamaar kaam
 Chal dubi marija ganga ji ke paniya
 Firangiyan ke saan janih

Song of **Basanti Devi**
 Village—Bhadaur Barrari

4

Angaje rahal bhaiya, angaje rahal bhaiya!
 Ek mahinva me panchgo rupaiya ho!
 Khaaye ke motka chaur, rahal khube laal!
 Koko ke tel aauar khesari ke daal!
 Oodhe ke goni avaru sute ke chatiya ho!
 Angaje rahal bhaiya, angaje rahal bhaiya!
 Semenva bhar raheli saahabva ke gulaam ho!
 Dimaas ke dinva madmava ke gulam ho!
 Puja paathi chodi ke tu kaarve de de bhaiya ho!
 Kandha par kudari leke lapel tuhun jaaib ho!
 Dariya debide karike fimiya bichaib ho!
 Kapar par baalti leke langre dhoaike bhaiya ho!
 Angaje rahal bhaiya , angaje rahal bhaiya!
 Langre nahi dhoaike tha, u mar tuhun kahaib ho!
 Ek din ke badle dui din maaru hohib ho!
 Angaje rahal bhaiya, angaje rahal bhaiya!
 Mazdur ke dukhva ke jab sunlan haal ho!
 Mauritius me aisan dokter laal ho!
 Aour gulami ke janjir turke gailan ho!
 Angaje rahal bhaiya, angaje rahal bhaiya!

Tripathaga pp. 224-5.

5

Satiyon ka dharma digane ko jab anayaiyon ne kamar kasi!
Jal-agam mei kunti kud padi, paar bahi majhdhaar nahin!
Atyaachaar ki chakki me piskar dharma nahi choda,
Hindupan apna kho beithe bharat ke veer ganwar nahin!
Ise patan ka kuch toh yatan karo,
Har kunti ka jeevan safal karo!
Har kunti ka jeevan safal rahe,
Bina dhram dharan kiye such-shaanti ka sanchar nahin!

Tripathaga p. 235