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Exploring the Role of *Testimonio* Method in Shaping Collective Memory of Indenture History: From Empathy to Empowerment

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Abstract

The present paper, 'Exploring the Role of *Testimonio* Method in Shaping Collective Memory of Indenture History: from Empathy to Empowerment,' attempts to study how the *Testimonio* method of study, which is a powerful literary genre rooted in oral history, can be used to study indenture history from the Bhojpuri speaking areas of North India and bridge the gaps and silences of this history using folksongs, folktales, oral accounts, poems, diary, autobiographies, etc. It also highlights the role of Bhojpuri as a *lingua franca* of the community and its impact on cultural preservation and literary expression, also focussing on the role of *Khelauni* (baby-sitter) and *Ajie* (grandmother) culture in the formation of a distinct community in the erstwhile sugar colonies like Fiji, Mauritius, etc., through folk stories and songs narrated to young children. This paper seeks to elucidate the *Testimonio* method's effectiveness in unravelling the untold stories of indentured people, and by analyzing a range of testimonial narratives and literary works, it highlights the multifaceted dimensions of indenture history, gender dynamics, and the preservation of cultural identity. It also underlines that the *Testimonio* method's unique approach, centred on personal narratives and collective memory, allows for a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of the *Girmitiyas*' struggles and triumphs.

Keywords: Indenture history, oral traditions, cultural identity, agency, diaspora literature

[**Sustainable Development Goals: No Poverty, Reduced Inequalities, Decent Work and Economic Growth**]

1. The great experiment

Indian indentured emigration was started in the 19th century to meet the shortage of labour supply caused by the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. After 1st May 1807, writes Tinker- No British ship was permitted to clear port with a cargo of slaves, and from 1st March 1808, no slave could be brought in a British colony from any ship. What had been a 'legitimate branch of commerce was now clandestine smuggling, a breach of law.' (Tinker, 1974,p.1) Colonial governments in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Pacific turned to India after other sources of cheap labour supply had failed or were insufficient. Mauritius in 1834 was the first colony to import Indian indentured labour, followed by British Guiana in 1838, Trinidad and Jamaica in 1845, small West Indian colonies such as St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Grenada in the 1850s, Natal in 1860, Surinam in 1873 and Fiji in 1879. During the eighty-two years of indentured emigration, over one million Indians were introduced into these colonies. (Lal, 2012, 42).

Mahmud (2012, 16) notes that colonial planters perceived their success as resting upon 'a critical ratio between abundant land and cheap labour – a ratio which slavery had served well and which after abolition needed to be replaced'. Looking for alternative sources of labour, the colonial government imported Indians under the designation of indentured labour. Scholars have characterized indentured labour as 'a new form of slavery' (Tinker, 1974, xiv) or as 'a bridge between slavery and modern forms of contract labour' (Mahmud, 2012, 15).

While there were variations, the indentured labour system was primarily a contractual arrangement with penal sanctions to work in a foreign country under specified terms (Goss & Lindquist, 2000). The Netherlands and France, which replicated the British system, also relied on Indian workers. The emigration of indentured labour to places in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean continued up to the early twentieth century, with approximately 1.5 million Indians leaving India under indentured contracts.

According to Mangru (1999, 1), the 'plantation system was designed primarily to humiliate and subjugate workers to the will of the planters and to create a sense of helplessness and dependence similar to slavery'. Under the indenture, human beings were reduced to a commodity, 'a unit of labour on a plantation'. (Singh, 2014, 15).

According to Brown (2007, 14): 'India was at the heart of this deepening global interconnection and became increasingly significant for Britain as a source of raw materials, as [a] market for manufactured goods, a destination for capital investment, and a source of labour for other parts of the Empire.'

The *Girmitiya* system was the brainchild of William Gladstone, as the end of slavery in the 1830s meant the necessity of cheap labour for the sugar plantations, thus bringing India and China into the scene, both of which had a huge population and thus came to be regarded as the best option for the system to function. (Carter 1996)

Hugh Tinker called it a 'new system of slavery', as slavery changes its form but never ends. Indentured labourers were vital to the economy of the colonies because they could be exploited with long working hours and low wages, which were further reduced through massive penalties for petty offences. He (1974) identified the following common characteristics of slavery and indenture:

i) The plantation was cordoned off and intended to isolate the labourers from contact with the outside world;

ii) The establishment of an authoritative, repressive chain of command within the plantations in all the sugar colonies; and

iii) The incentive to work was based on punishment rather than reward.

There were different names for labourers on different islands – they were known as *Sami* in South Africa, *Girmitiya* in Fiji and Mauritius, and *Gladstone coolies* in Trinidad. All Indians, irrespective of the nature of their occupation, were called *coolies* and *Sami*. Mahatma Gandhi recalled in his autobiography that even though he was a barrister then, he was addressed as *Sami* in South Africa.

The agreement form mentioned the kind of work to be done, hours of work and salary, and the availability of several other facilities such as accommodation, hospital, and rations. Another technically attractive provision of the agreement was an optional return passage at the emigrants' own expense after the end of the first five years or a free return passage to India at

the termination of a further five years of 'industrial residence' in the colonies (ten years of Girmit). All such contracts with the abovementioned provisions can be easily found in archives with people's thumb impressions (rarely signatures). The extent to which migrants comprehended, or planters were actually inclined to uphold the agreement's provisions was the subject of much debate at that time and later. (Kumar, 2017, 2).

1.1 Origin of the *Girmitiyas*.

Most of the migrants came from the North of India, embarking for the colonies at Calcutta, even though Bengal itself provided a minuscule of migrants due to the presence of jute industries and tea gardens in Darjeeling and Assam. Of these up-country men, *Dhangars* (tribals from the Chotanagpur region) were the first to emigrate. The recruiters preferred them as they were very hardworking and could live with a bare minimum of necessities. However, their high mortality rate while on the ships made the recruiters look towards United Province and Bihar for enrollment. Most Indian indentured migrants to Fiji and the Caribbean, and to a lesser extent, Natal and Mauritius, came from the Indo-Gangetic plains of North India, initially from the districts of Bihar and then from the depressed eastern regions of Uttar Pradesh (UP). From the 1880s to the end of indentured emigration in 1916, Uttar Pradesh provided eighty per cent of the migrants and Bihar and Bengal thirteen per cent, the rest coming from Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, and elsewhere. The emigrants were taken to three destinations - The Indian Ocean, The Pacific Ocean, and The Caribbean Sea, as per the Encyclopaedia of commonwealth literature. Outbreaks of cholera, typhoid, dysentery, and measles led to high mortality rates on most journeys.

The migrants came from a world caught in turmoil. The effects of British revenue settlements, as well as the destruction of indigenous handicraft industries, the subdivision of land holdings due to population growth and family disputes, hardships caused by droughts, floods, and famines, and the resultant poverty and increasing indebtedness among peasants- all took their toll on the rural population. (Lal, 2012,15). The dire situation that prevailed in India at that time due to colonial rule, famine, and natural calamities had destroyed cottage industries, wiped out the rural economies, and forced workers to seek employment under the indenture system. At the same time, the West, riding the wave of industrial development, deemed Indians to be a hardworking and malleable workforce. As a result, the British, French, Dutch, and Portuguese sought Indian skilled labour to develop plantations and the agricultural economies of their territories. (Hegde, 2017,4).

The recruitment of *Girmitiya* labourers was carried out by Indian agents who were hired by colonial authorities called *Arkati* or *Arkatiya* in local use. These agents travelled to rural areas of India and persuaded villagers to sign contracts that bound them to work on plantations in the colonies for a period of five to ten years. The contracts were often written in Hindi or other local languages and were not always fully understood by the labourers. Once the contracts were signed, the labourers were transported to the colonies on ships that were known as 'coolie ships. The ships were often overcrowded and unsanitary, and many labourers died on the journey due to disease and malnourishment. The journey from India to the colonies could take several months, and labourers were often subjected to harsh treatment by the ship's crew, like whipping, flogging, and other forms of physical abuse. Women were often subjected to sexual violence. According to Brij V. Lal, 'The voyage was a nightmare of disease, death, and despair, with a high mortality rate and much misery and suffering.'

The working conditions on plantations were often severe and exploitative. Labourers were required to work extensive hours in the fields and were frequently subjected to physical punishment and the infamous 'double cuts' if they failed to meet their quotas. A whip was used to discipline the workers, and their living conditions were pitiable and dismal. They had to live in shabby, congested, and dingy barracks with barely enough space for them to turn around without climbing over one another. There were four seasons on the plantations, too, just like the whole world, but the seasons were different in nature; they were planting, growing, harvesting, and milling seasons, and in every such season, they had to do arduous work. Many suffered from diseases, malnutrition, and physical and mental abuse. (Gubili, 2018). If they ever came back from the *Kala Pani* (black waters) back to India, they were boycotted from society, their family ties were lost, their caste was snatched away, and nothing remained the same for them on returning. (Jha,2009).

The *Girmitiya* system profoundly impacted the social, economic, and cultural landscape of the colonies where it was practised. It led to the creation of multi-ethnic communities and contributed to the development of new forms of cultural expression, such as music, dance, and literature. *Girmitiya* labourers engaged in various forms of resistance and rebellion, contributing to developing new forms of cultural expression and political movements. While the system was marked by exploitation and hardship, the labourers also demonstrated resilience, resistance, and agency. The legacy of the *Girmitiya* system continues to shape the social, economic, and cultural landscape of the former colonies where it was practised. David Dabydeen states, 'Indian labourers were not passive victims, but active agents in the history of the colonial plantation system.'

Shukla (2021) asserts that the Diaspora reproduces itself through 'intensified investments in Indianness.' With the imagination embedded in the practice of life (Appadurai, 1996), Indians in the Diaspora actively and constantly reinvent the idea of belonging in transnational terms. Several Indias are replicated, normalized, and mobilized by the diaspora members in the countries that they live in. These images of India are said to bring people together through cultural traditions while also imposing hegemonic views and norms. Transnational diasporic circuits have historically permitted the transit and reproduction of national ideologies due to evolving forms of communication and technology. (Anderson, 1983).

2. The *Testimonio* Method in Indenture History: Intersectional Approaches and Emerging Voices

'As an unstable genre located between ethnography, autobiography, and narrative fiction and as a small subaltern voice marginalized by history, a *Testimonio* can function in multiple ways. There is, for instance, a directness about the genre which parts company from objectivity and enters the politics of solidarity with the other, the multitude'. (Beverley,2004). It does not follow that this ideological bias means that a *Testimonio* is pure myth; a fantastic reconstruction aimed towards effect rather than felt history. As the small but urgent voice of 'subaltern' history, *Testimonio*s have played an important part in drawing our attention to the uneven nature of the grand narrative of history.

*Testimonio*s also provide a means of exploring the broader social, economic, and cultural contexts in which indentured labour occurred. By collecting and analyzing *Testimonio*s from a range of individuals, one may gain insight into the diverse experiences and perspectives of

Girmitiyas and their descendants and the ways in which their lives were shaped by colonialism, capitalism, and racism.

In *Testimonio*, it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount. The situation of narration in *Testimonio* involves an emergency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, and struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself. The position of the reader of *Testimonio* is similar to that of a jury member in a courtroom. Unlike the novel, *Testimonio* promises, by definition, to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness. (Rege,2006,14). Since, in many cases, the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer, the production of a *Testimonio* generally involves the tape-recording and then the transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is an intellectual- often a journalist or a writer.

In Spanish, the word *Testimonio* connotes an act of truth-telling in a religious or legal context-*Testimonio* means to testify, to bear truthful witness. The ethical and epistemological authority of *Testimonio* stems from the assumption that its narrator has lived the events and experiences that they narrate, either directly or indirectly, through the experiences of friends, family, neighbours, or significant others. We are expected to believe that the speaker and the situations and events described are true. The implicit 'legal' connotation in its convention implies a pledge of honesty on the part of the narrator, which the listener/reader is bound to respect. Each *Testimonio* evokes a void of other voices, lives, and experiences. In contrast, the narrator in *Testimonio* speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group and is primarily democratic and egalitarian in the sense that any life so narrated can have some kind of representational value.

Thus, a common formal variation on the classic first-person singular *Testimonio* is the polyphonic *Testimonio*, which consists of accounts from various participants in the same event. The voice that speaks to the reader in the form of an 'I' that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention, is the *Testimonio*'s dominant formal aspect. This presence of the voice, which we are supposed to perceive as the voice of a real person rather than a fictional person, is a sign of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, a desire to impose oneself on a power structure from a position of exclusion or marginalization. *Testimonio*, on the other hand, has the effect of making subalterns feel superior.' (xii)As one can see in the literature produced by girmitiya descendants like Krishna Gubili, Peggy Mohan, Janet Naidu, or the *Girmitiyas* themselves like Totaram Sanadhya's or Munshi Rahman Khan's autobiography or Kunti's letter. (Many academics have recognized it as the immediate factor that drew the attention of nationalists, the government of India, and the colonial office to indentureship in order to bring an end to this system).

In a related way, *Testimonio* implies a challenge to the loss of the authority of orality in the context of processes of cultural modernization that privilege literacy and literature as norms of expression. It allows the entry into the literature of persons who would normally, in those societies where literature is a form of class privilege, be excluded from direct literary expression, persons who have had to be 'represented' by professional writers. (p.35) Just as *Testimonio* implies a new kind of relationship between narrator and reader, the contradictions of sex, class, race, and age that frame the narrative's production can also reproduce themselves in the relation of the narrator to this direct interlocutor. What is at stake in *Testimonio* is not so much truth from or 'about the other as the truth of the other.' It is the recognition of not only that

the other exists as something outside ourselves, not subject to our will or desires, but also of the other's sense of what is true and what is false. (p.7)

If *Testimonio* is an art of memory, it is an art directed not only towards the memorialization of the past but also to the constitution of more heterogeneous, diverse, egalitarian, and democratic nation-states, as well as forms of community, solidarity, and affinity that extend beyond or between nation-states. To construct such forms of community, however, it is necessary to recognize an authority that is not our own, an authority that resides in the voice of others. In this sense, *Testimonio* continues to be a part of a necessary pedagogy despite its ambiguities and contradictions. Sandra Henderson writes that *Testimonio* is regarded by many scholars as the truest voice of the oppressed and the most authentic representation of subaltern lives -war, oppression, and revolution are some of the situations narrated by witnesses- it is an authentic narrative, she asserts. (2001,1)

According to Beverley, 'By *Testimonio*, I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in a book or pamphlet form, told in the first-person narrator who is also the real protagonist or a witness of events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience.' *Testimonio* may include but is not subsumed under any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novella-*Testimonio*, non-fiction novel, or 'fractographic' literature. (Beverley, 2004, 30-31). It is nonfictional in nature and is a popular democratic form of epic narrative. The witness portrays his own experiences as an agent of a collective memory or identity to condemn exploitation and oppression or to correct official history. It concerns itself with the other in terms of those who exist outside of hegemony; it is a witness account that implies factual and first-hand experience. It allows previously unheard voices to speak via an interlocutor like a scribe or editor, and such voices were unheard because they belonged to people who were lacking in skill and physical means to take their story to an audience, which, in my paper, are the *Girmitiyas* -away from their motherland unable to read, write or bargain expressing themselves only through oral narratives and folksongs. In Beverly's words, these Subaltern people can be 'the child, the native, the woman, the insane, the criminal and the proletarian excluded from authorized representation when it was a question of speaking and writing for themselves.'

Most of the written and oral sources for the study of indentureship are in Bhojpuri- even though people from many regions came to the colonies, but a kind of Bhojpuri- quite different from what is spoken in the Bhojpur region of Bihar became the Lingua Franca of the community. The Bhojpuri of the colonies is a unique mixture of *KhadiBoli, Awadhi, Braj Bhasha, Bundelkhandi,* etc. To familiarise us with narratives of the lived experience of day-to-day indenture life, the kind of experience that required immediate cultural expression, we have to go to oral narratives and songs that present more immediate memories of the lives of people of indenture in terms of a real here-and-now even as they created a collective memory of the homeland. An essential mode of recall in the songs took the form of longing and departure. (Hegde, 2017,39). For those who never returned, folk songs were another form of *Testimonio* that gives us an insight into the trauma of indenture. (Hegde, 2017,44). Cast adrift by the black waters, damned as a consequence of loss of caste, the hope of return denied by distance, people of the plantation diaspora turned to memory to make sense of their lives. Songs were their first entry points, and, given their peasant origins, folk songs of the seasons, of birth, and of weddings were the most common. (Hegde, 2017,45).

Indian plantation diaspora scholars have only now begun to look at these *Testimonio*s, many no more than fragmentary narratives, others, like the letters of the Guyanese indentured labourer Bechu, reconstructed through rigorous scholarship (Seecharan, 1999), Totaram Sanadhya and Munshi Rahman Khan's autobiography, *Bidesiya,* and *Beeraha* songs sung on the plantation and also back in India by the left-behind wives of the labourers. Not very different from these sources are grandparents' stories, songs, memory, hearsay, folk tales, children's stories, poems, and couplets, all become sources of indentured history. (Seecharan, 1990). It also refers to a narration marked by the urgency to make public a situation of oppression or injustice and the resistance against that. *Testimonio*- like texts have existed for a long time at the margins of literature, but *Testimonio* coalesced as a new narrative genre in the 1960s, and as the voice of a singular subject, *Testimonio* was a *petit recit*, or 'the small voice of history' (xii). It also refers to a narration marked by the urgency to make public a situation of oppression or injustice and the resistance against that same condition (Forcinito, 2016), thus helping to reduce the gaps and silences of indentured history.

2.1 *Testimonio* and the Indenture Experience: Amplifying the Voices of Female Writers

The indenture system, a form of bonded labour prevalent during the colonial era, left an indelible mark on history, particularly in regions such as the Caribbean and Mauritius. While scholarly research has shed light on the broader historical context of indenture, the voices and experiences of indentured women remain largely untold.

For Indo-Caribbean women, the experience of 'diasporic dislocation' created a 'double displacement' (Mehta, 2004, p. 3), and it would be too simplistic to club their experience with the overall Indian diasporic experience at large. By 'double displacement,' it means that the women who were transported to these lands were mostly widows and low-caste women. They belonged to the periphery of society. Secondly, their movement to far-off lands had not only uprooted them from their native lands but the very fact that crossing the '*Kala-pani,*' a taboo within Hindu belief, had distanced them further from their cultural belongingness. The women's experience of the Diaspora had been a dynamic process instead of static. (Kalyani, 2020).

It is important to read into the lives of the women migrating to the colonies as the initial theoretical and empirical models omitted their experiences under homogenized perceptions. The centrality of these arguments still revolved around the victimhood of super-exploited or passive agents- due to which their roles as mothers and *Khelaunis* in propagating their language (mainly Bhojpuri) and folk religion among the next generation of the *Girmitiyas* remain unmapped.

However, in recent decades, a notable trend has emerged in the historiography of indenture towards looking at women's experiences. There are two broad approaches: one portrays women under the indenture system as a 'sorry sisterhood' subject to sexual exploitation; a second newly developed approach highlights the possibilities created by indenture for women to escape socio-cultural oppression within Indian society. Praveen Jha (2008) argues that *'palayan nari mukti ka dwar hai'* (migration is the road towards the emancipation of women) as all obligatory things like the *ghoonghat pratha*, same caste weddings got wiped away with indentureship and remarriage of widows was accepted by the community on the plantation. *Testimonio*s from indentured women also reveal the harsh conditions, social hierarchies, and

resistance strategies they encountered during their journey and settlement. These *Testimonio*s provide insights into indentured women's resilience, strength, and agency, challenging the prevailing narratives of victimhood and passivity.

When these women moved outside the role of daughters, mothers, and wives, they competed with men in the same space earlier occupied by men alone. It was, therefore, a much tricky journey for them. Young girls and women referred to each other as *Jahaji Bahin*, a feminized form of the more popular *Jahaji-Bhai*; Mohan uses the term *Jahajin* and not *Jahaji* suggesting that in the heart of the story, there is a woman-it may be Deeda, Sunnariya, herself (as a descendant of Jahaji culture)and also Saranga who travels to far off places to find her love as a diaspora writer Mohan talks about race, identity, gender, language, caste, and the problem of cultural hybridity, loss of cultural belongingness, and the role of women in keeping their culture alive.

 The symbolic shift in emphasis from the *Jahaji-Bhai*(ship-brother) to the matrilineal chain of the *Jahaji-behen* (ship-sister), a female-centred principle of affiliation, suggests that Indo-Caribbean women writers strategically begin their stories in a gender-inclusive restructuring of the imaginative and discursive framework that has come to define the shared migration history and collective ethos of the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora. (Pirbhai, 2009,38- 39) Women writers like Peggy Mohan and Brinda Mehta present both the theme of identity crisis and the experiences and role of Indo -Caribbean women in the domestic, social, and political spheres of Caribbean society, which are the central concerns in the literature they produced.

Women diaspora writers have been creating their unique space in the world of literature. Moreover, post-colonialism leads many writers and scholars to explore post-colonialism with a new perspective, including race, identity, Diaspora, and other concepts. Most of such writers have experience of Diaspora, such as cultural hybridity, loss of cultural belongingness, confusion of national identity, etc. Even though the term *Coolie* was used as a racial slur by the British, today, authors and poets like Gauitra Bahadur, Rajkumari Singh, Peggy Mohan, and Janet Naidu have reclaimed the belittling word by overturning it into a badge of honour. This Coolie identity reflected in the relations of Jahaji-Bhai and Behen (ship brothers and sisters) was of great importance to them as it provided them with a base to build the structure of a casteless society. As the epigraphs by poet Janet Naidu and novelist Peggy Mohan illustrate-the bonds of solidarity developed during both the ship journey and indentureship and the struggle to be free of the plantation estate all have profound significance for Indo-Caribbean women writers. From their history as *jahaji-behen* and indentured labourers to their current realities in the post-colonial Caribbean, the unique roles and experiences of Indo-Caribbean women in the domestic, social, and political spheres of the Caribbean society are central issues in literature produced by them. Some of the reflections about historical narratives within which the term '*Jahaji-behen*' finds its reference has been reflected in literary works of poets and novelist like Janet Naidu, Peggy Mohan, Mahadai Das, Lakshmi Persaud, etc. Scholarly writing about women's history tends to look at the history of these women beyond statistical inquiry. This methodological shift has enriched the understanding of gender dynamics by engaging with both public and private memory of women who had experienced these historical shifts due to colonial history and indentureship. Such writings have been involved with women regarding their life stories and experiences related to indentureship, servitude, and colonialism. (Kalyani, 2016, 1)

The novels written by Indo-Caribbean female writers are frequently composed under the governing structural principles of fictional autobiography, where plots are loosely conceived around episodic narratives, anecdotes, and flashbacks. (Pirbhai, 2009, 44). Espinet (2013) accurately points out that male writers have tended to treat female characters 'as an extension of the dominant male figure,' idealizing them as daughters, mothers, and wives or parodying them in a host of unflattering stereotypes. Indo-Caribbean women novelists arguably work in tandem with historians in memorializing and excavating women's narratives, for they not only strive to fill in historical gaps but also to mobilize these stories as models of cultural and feminist agency for present generations. The historiographic impulse in the women's narrative thus begins with the *ajie* or grandmother figure, the first generation of women who made the epic voyage across the *Kala-Pani* and who are hence, seen as heroic archetypes for having survived the hardships of indenture. The grandmother figure is a precious living commodity to successive generations of women striving to fill in the voids in their familial, ancestral, and cultural memory. In her perceptive discussion of the '*ajie culture*' of grandmothers, Brinda Mehta (2004, 142) suggests that these women's active participation in the 'history of labour production' makes them emblems of the female industry as it is centred around collective action and 'group effort,' where the preservation of self is inextricably linked to the preservation of community.

These figures, like that of Deeda (Mohan, 2008), reveal the extent to which women's histories replace the textual primacy of the male-centred metanarrative (be it sacred or secular, historical or imaginative) with new ways of imagining history. In Mohan's *Jahajin* (a variant of *jahaji-behen*), indenture history is the prime mover of plot and character development. When a protagonist-narrator looks to a female elder, Deeda, as the ancestral bridge between India and the Caribbean, Deeda's increasing fragility reflects the Diaspora's tentative hold on a past that it is incumbent on them to record in the absence or distortion of official colonial documentation. In recording Deeda's *Testimonio*, the narrator considerably brings the *Jahajin*'s history into the domain of official public records in Trinidad and India. When the protagonist-narrator looks to a female elder, Deeda, as the ancestral bridge between India and the Caribbean, Deeda's increasing frailty echoes the Diaspora's uncertain hold on a past that they must preserve in the absence or distortion of official colonial documentation. The narrator significantly brings the Jahajin's history into the arena of formal public records in Trinidad and India both by documenting Deeda's Testimonio. Filled with enticing memories of 110-year-old woman Deeda and heavily drawing upon the author's own experience as a linguist, this book relates to the history of the community and even the experiences of the narrator's own family. A musical rendition of *Saranga* and *Sadabirij* in Bhojpuri runs parallel to the plot in Deeda's voice-the tale of two monkeys in love, reborn as humans, and the hurdles they had to face to reunite at the end. Deeda's narrative is full of songs, idioms, and magical tales and uses folklore to bring out the essence of village life in North India. In keeping with her historical significance, the *Ajie* character is frequently portrayed as a female cane-cutter whose activities, though not recorded in the public record, are privately treasured for altering the course of plantation history. (Pirbhai, 2010, 48).

The Indo-Caribbean woman writer frequently writes from the viewpoint of a social and political advocate, determined to bring to light what her society continues to bury in acts of social and historical forgetfulness in which themes such as incest, rape, domestic abuse, and alcoholism reoccur. The critical engagement of the new generation of writers (Mohan, Espinet, etc.) with previously taboo subjects such as incest and domestic violence, as well as the privileging of

women's voices, speaks to the limitations of indenture historiography in the absence of a gender-inclusive manifestation of the diasporic and national imaginary. (Pirbhai, 2010, 49).

2.2 *Bhojpuri* as a Lingua Franca of the community on the plantation

The name Bhojpuri, usually applied to this dialect, is derived from the ancient town of Bhojpur, situated a few miles south of the Ganges about sixty miles west of Patna. The vocabulary is similar to Hindi, but there are many words that are not to be found in ordinary dictionaries, which one can never hear beyond the Bhojpuri language. (Beames, 1868,483-508) Bhojpuri is now spoken in not only Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand but also Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Nepal. It has also travelled to numerous other regions of India with migration, especially Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi, and Punjab. 19th-century indentured labour migration from Colonial India to Caribbean countries and other plantation colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, Mauritius, etc., has permanently established Bhojpuri in these destinations, often with official status. However, the Indian State considers Bhojpuri (like 47 other languages) a dialect of Hindi which is primarily oral and rural. It is spoken with slight variations in different regions, but through all its fluctuations, it preserves the same general features, such as the use of the substantive verb *bhá* or *bá*, the perfect in *il*, and other points of difference from the classical or literary type of Hindi. In India, as per the 2001 Census Report (Office for National Statistics, 2005), more than three crore people marked Bhojpuri as their 'mother tongue,' a number comparable to that of Malayalee speakers in India. Presently Bhojpuri speakers are aspiring to get it enlisted in the eighth schedule of the constitution. The relationship of the language with the nation is continuously evaluated to understand, dismiss or justify the aspirations of its speech community.

Every linguistic interaction, even the most intimate variety, reflects, constitutes, and reproduces social power structures (gender, caste, class, etc.). For example, Bourdieu (1991,2) argues, Everyday linguistic exchanges are based on encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies so that every linguistic interaction, no matter how personal and insignificant it appears, bears the imprints of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce.

In the *Girmit* epoch, on the plantation, there were people from Uttar-Pradesh and Bihar who spoke many different languages like- different variants of *Bhojpuri, Khadi Boli, Braj bhasha, and Bundelkhandi*. However, Bhojpuri emerged as the dominant language in the sugar estates. Peggy Mohan, while taking the example of Trinidad, insists that Bhojpuri is entirely distinct from Hindi and grammatically closer to Bengali, and since the Hindi belt has ruled over the Bhojpuri areas for a very long time, it shares many words with Hindi. However, it is not a dialect of Hindi and certainly not' broken Hindi.' The language is less fragmented in Trinidad than in India as it is 'more of a Lingua Franca for the community.' (Mohan, 2008,58). She travelled to Bihar to study Bhojpuri after receiving a research grant. There, she comes to know that back in India, Bhojpuri has changed. The modern dialect might not be 'a good point of departure for speculating about the past, as living languages react to changes in the political environment.'

She argues that the dialect in Trinidad today is closer to the Bhojpuri spoken in Basti a century ago, which, in turn, coincides with many women and young children migrating from that area to Trinidad during the same time and also shows the role of the *Khelaunis* (baby sitter) who

must have been the carrier of the language for the new generation as children below the age of six establish their first language. (Mohan, 2008,59).

While in Patna, she discovered that the Bhojpuri of all the researchers she talked with was different, and there was no single 'urban variety' that was correct and valid or that was standard that everyone spoke-there was a micro dialect for every district/village. They spoke to each other in Hindi, educated people were bilingual, and Bhojpuri was to be used at home or with *Bhojpuri as* who did not know Hindi. Bhojpuri now no longer served the purpose of uniting the community, as it could never get out from under the thumb of Hindi. In Patna, good education meant speaking Hindi and not Bhojpuri by young schoolchildren too. (Mohan, 2008,259). Bhojpuri served as a linguistic bridge among indentured communities, facilitating communication, cultural expression, and solidarity. Bhojpuri preserved cultural practices, rituals, and storytelling traditions, fostering a sense of community and collective memory among the Diaspora.

The analysis of literary works in Bhojpuri showcases its evolution as a dynamic language, adapting to new contexts while retaining its cultural and linguistic roots. The national and international spread of the Bhojpuri culture is connected to the large-scale migration from this region; the descendants of these Bhojpuria migrants have now integrated into the societies of the destination country of their forefathers and, to date, use this language in their homes. These people, thus, claim a shared cultural heritage based on the historical reality of the migration from the Bhojpuri area (de Haan, 2002, 1). Travel writings by Bhojpuri speakers of India define stories of pain and separation, and they can give us a glimpse of the political, social, economic, and cultural spheres of their lives in another country.

 The *Girmitiya* migration informed Bhojpuri cultural production, such as *nautanki* and songs dealing with the *Pardesi*- echoes of these themes can be found in contemporary Bhojpuri media. This history makes themes of movement, loss, and forced migration due to economic necessity socially available as part of a Bhojpuri cultural inheritance- which can be seen as authentic by both its consumers and producers. Realities of movement have constituted the space of the Bhojpuri imaginary- be it by choice or force- to far-flung colonies or interstate movements to Delhi, Kolkata, etc.

Kathryn C Hardy (2014) traces the movement of capital, people, and films along the Bhojpuri cultural circuit, illuminating how rural and urban identities, technologies, and audiences constitute one another. While the motifs of the milk pail, dairy animals, and dirt floors- celebrating village life of the Purvanchal region- grew scarcer in Bollywood films, Bhojpuri has a cinematic scope that exceeds and challenges the rural category into which it is placed- Bhojpuri cinema's audience comprises not just Bhojpuri speakers of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar but also migrants from these areas to metropolis and erstwhile sugar colonies- These migrants repeatedly explain their desire to hear the sound of the language that they speak at home (Hardy, 2014, p. *235*)- this phenomenon has created a large urban market for industry's success- through the Bhojpuri film- the language and culture are actively produced and contested in a public space. While the Bhojpuri migrants/ speaker uses Bhojpuri as an informal language for use in intimate, familial, or private situations and using Hindi in public, the movies show it as the language used in private public, for talking to the superiors and used in villages and the city both. 'This may be the real Bhojpuri aspirational film trope- that the language shedding its rural stigma might become a language of everyday, proud, and public use (Hardy, 2014, *pp.* 238- 241)

2.3 Folksongs

The *Gimitiyas*, to ward off loneliness and as a method of keeping some form of connection with their roots, played the harmonium, *dholak*(Indian drum), *tabla*(pair of drums), *bansuri* (flute), sitar, *majeera* and other such Indian musical elements to sing songs (*Geet Gawai*) on weddings, the birth of a child, *baraat*(bridegroom procession), *Phagwa* (holi festival), and Diwali. Such performances were known as *baithak gaana* in Suriname, Indian classical singing in the Caribbean, and tan singing in Guyana. A new type of Indo-Caribbean music has become very popular, known as chutney, a remix or fusion of Indian and Caribbean music composed in *Hinglish*, i.e., a mixture of Hindi and English. (Gounder et al., 2022)

Folksongs are used as the 'raw material' to give details about the society, its social composition, festivals, stereotypes, underlying gender and caste relations, agricultural practices, etc. Every linguistic exchange, even of the most intimate variety, indicates, constitutes, and reproduces social hierarchies of power (gender, caste, class, etc.) Bhojpuri folksongs soul-scripted in the context of migration have produced two oft-repeated creative subjects – the left-behind wife and the migrant husband. Such women have produced linguistic resources which communicate anger, jealousy, revenge, progress, sexuality, etc., through their orality. (Singh, 2018,2).

If the epic and Puranic narratives provide one class of songs, another comes from the changing seasons, notably the rainy season, which in Trinidad is the months of June, July, and August. Of special note are the songs relating to the Indian monsoon month of *Sawan* (July–August). These are the *kajari* songs, nostalgic as well as romantic love-longing songs of the rainy season. The gathering clouds are connected with the sentiments of *viraha (*separation), the feelings of a wife longing for her husband's return. In the plantation diaspora, there was a painfully honest side to these songs of love-longing as many women were lured into becoming bound coolies because their husbands had deserted them in India. The importance of folksongs and orality in erecting an identity and consciousness for the Bhojpuri region has been underlined by several scholars, especially in the absence of a widely–used, written script. Manager Pandey, a socio-linguist from the Bhojpuri region, argues that folksongs are fundamental to reconstructing the history and culture of these people. (Pandey & Upadhyay, 2000)

Conclusion

Individuals' spoken memories, recollections, viewpoints, and narrative accounts of events and experiences are examples of Testimonios. Migrant memories must be viewed as more than just personal accounts of the past. Instead, they could be seen as a group attempt to recreate history from a different perspective. They are especially valuable because they provide insight into migrants' impressions of narratives generally absent from the "standard" records of a region's history. Any form of migration, be it under *Girmit* or otherwise, has generated various forms of oral histories and local narratives reflecting upon their lived experiences. This method can allow one to explore the intersections of caste, gender and colonialism within the indenture system, unveiling the challenges faced and overcome by the migrants and contributing to a more accurate portrayal of events.

*Testimonio*s, songs, and memory are crucial because they capture the sensory nuances of trauma and loss. Their evanescent presence continues to define the felt lives of the people of the old Indian plantation diaspora. (Hegde, 2017,48). To effectively use *Testimonio*s in the study

of the *Girmitiya* system, it is necessary to consider the ethical and methodological issues involved in their production and analysis. *Testimonio*s are generated in situations of power asymmetry, in which the narrator is vulnerable or marginalized compared to the researcher or writer. As a result, it is critical to ensure that the *Testimonio* production process is collaborative and respectful and that the narrator's voice and perspective are central to the analysis, only then can such a method can be further applied to other labour mobilities and similar historical contexts by focusing on the voices and experiences of those who have lived it.

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