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ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ANC	African National Congress
ASSOCHAM	Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBN	Bombay Broadcasting Network
BIT	Bilateral Investment Treaty
BJP	Bharatriya Janata Party
CBSO	City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra
CCC	Canadian Commerce Chamber
CEPA	Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement
CII	Confederation of Indian Industries
CIOP	Comparative Immigrant Organization Project
DIPP	Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion
FATCA	Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FIA	Federation of Indian Associations
FIAV	Federation of Indian Associations of Victoria
FICCI	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry
FPI	Foreign Portfolio Investment
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOI	Government of India
GOPIO	Global Organization for People of Indian Origin
GTA	Greater Toronto Area
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IIFA	International Indian Film Academy
IMA	India Mahila Association
IPUMS	Integrated Public Use Microdata Series
IT	Information Technology
IWA	Indian Workers' Association

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RACE, ETHNICITY AND CONFLICT IN THE INDIAN DIASPORA

Brij Maharaj

Introduction

The Indian diaspora can be regarded as an international phenomenon, with a presence in more than 100 countries globally. The different histories of this very diverse Indian diaspora "have much to tell about international migration processes, social and cultural change, political development and ethnicity" (Clarke *et al.*, 1990, 1). Migration from India can be categorised against specific historical periods. The first phase (which is the focus of this chapter) can be traced to the colonial domination by the British, and the exploitation of cheap indentured labour from the Asian sub-continent in different parts of the colonial empire. This group is sometimes referred to as PIOs (People of Indian Origin). The term 'PIO' is misleading since their links with India have sometimes totally disappeared. The next phase involving NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) started early in the twentieth century and gained momentum in the post-1945 period, when skilled and professional Indians migrated to western countries largely in response to a scarcity in these economic sectors (Clarke *et al.*, 1990). The term 'NRI' is "a remarkably aggressive expression that reclaims them wholly for India and reduces their diasporic existence to a matter of mere residence" (Parekh, 1993, 8). More recently the High Level Committee on Indian Diaspora defined NRI as a separate category: those living outside India for 180 days or more without acquiring citizenship.

As they attempted to adjust in an alien and hostile environment, indentured labourers encountered conflict initially with the colonial rulers and subsequently with the indigenous majority. There was a significant degree of coalescence between race, class and ethnicity as the colonial authorities had defined and maintained ethnic categories, and structured inter-ethnic relations through discriminatory regulations and institutional practices. In the colonial and post-colonial eras, the Indian diaspora has raised questions of belonging: "Were they partial citizen, or pariah citizens, permanent minorities, or resident aliens? Or were they simply excluded by race/culture from the possibilities of citizenship altogether? What political rights did their economic contribution confer?" (Koshy, 2008, 4).

These questions influence the themes of this chapter, with a focus on race and ethnic conflicts, and tensions between Indians and indigenous communities in the diaspora. This chapter is divided into six sections. The first section briefly reflects on the links between slavery and indenture, followed by an analysis of challenges facing indentured labourers and 'passenger' Indians.

Ethnic conflict and violence are discussed in the third section, followed by an analysis about whether this was linked to socio-cultural isolation or racism. The fifth section discusses contemporary challenges, and then there is some reflection on connections with India.

Slavery to indenture

The indentured or contract labour system was introduced by the British as a substitute for "forced labour and slavery. The indentured 'coolies' were half slaves, bound over body and soul by a hundred and one inhuman regulations" (Joshi, 1942, 44).

Indentured labour is "often portrayed as a bridge between slavery and modern forms of contract labour" (Mahmud, 2013, 228). Even though the situations of the workers varied a lot, the indenture system has been described as "a new system of slavery" (Tinker, 1974), or rather a "mixture of oppression and opportunity" (Freund, 1995, 10). 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 indenture human beings were reduced to a commodity, "a unit of labour on a plantation" (Singh, 2014, 15).

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.

Tinker (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.

The key components of servitude included labour exploitation which favoured plantation owners; fear, force and punishment were the main strategies to ensure a docile, compliant labour force; restrictions on labour mobility; for the duration of the contract the time and labour of the worker belonged to the estate owner (Mishra, 2009). Indentured labourers were freed from bondage once they had completed their contract period. Under certain conditions they qualified for a free return passage to India or could remain as free labourers in the colony.

However, as Desai and Vahed (2007, 13) reveal, "the indentured were not simply prisoners of 'the system' but often imaginative, creative human beings who found all manner of means to resist, survive or escape the strictures of indenture" (26), "who resisted and contested the attempts of employers and the state to control their lives". Indeed, the history of the indentured was "punctuated by accommodation and resistance in the form of strikes, riots, beating of subordinate managerial staff, and such inwardly directed aggression as suicide, maiming and deliberately creating ulcers to remain in hospital" (Mangru, 1999, 1; see also Lal, 1986). The indentured labourers were followed by traders from Gujarat.

Indentured labourers and 'passenger' traders

In South Africa a consistent policy of all governments between 1860 and 1961 was the view that Indians should ultimately be repatriated to India. In 1914 Gandhi had argued that "compulsory repatriation was a physical and political impossibility" (Dvorin, 1952, 162). The main mechanisms

to try to force repatriation were denial of political rights, limited trading and employment opportunities, and restrictions on their ownership and occupation of land through legislation which would reduce many to harlotry, strategies which were evident across the colonies. For example, being restricted to less than 20 per cent of the land has been a critical axis of conflict in Fiji for Indians (Alley, 2001). This was linked to the "strong class alliance . . . between European commercial, professional and administrative interests and the indigenous chiefly Fijian class in control of land" during the colonial era (Voigt-Graf, 2009, 102–103).

In South Africa, the late 1870s saw the arrival of a new class of Indians – the so-called 'passenger' Indians (because they paid for their own passage), who were mainly traders. They differed in terms of caste, occupation and linguistic groups from the indentured Indians. This group was relatively homogeneous, comprising mainly Gujarati Muslims who had similar economic interests (Swan, 1984; Padayachee & Morrell, 1991). Gujarati traders followed the indentured labourers across the diaspora. They made every effort to distinguish themselves politically, socially and economically from the indentured labourers, and regarded themselves as part of a commercial bourgeoisie rather than the working class or peasantry (Ginwala, 1974).

Initially, the passenger Indians in South Africa were primarily engaged in supplying the consumer needs of the Indian community. Gradually they began to diversify, and also served white and black customers in Natal, Transvaal and Orange Free State. Their success was phenomenal and can be attributed largely to their determination to work hard and succeed; business acumen; ability to identify markets, which ranged from urban to rural trading outposts; maximum exploitation of their connections with India; and utilisation of family labour. These factors, cumulatively, contributed significantly to the ability of Indians to compete successfully against white traders, and led to increasing conflict between the two groups.

The general economic success and prosperity of the immigrant group, and their ability to overcome almost impossible odds, generated a great deal of envy, bitterness and anti-Indian sentiments amongst whites. The whites in Natal were more concerned about the 'Asiatic menace' than the 'Native problem'. Natives were perceived as a passive threat, but Indians were regarded as a "sophisticated and active menace to their own position in colonial society, competing for space, place, trade, and political influence with the imperial authority" (Swanson, 1983, 404).

Basically there was a conflict between white and Indian capital, and this was being expressed in racial and ethnic terms.

Ethnic conflict and violence

Indians enjoyed a relatively privileged position compared with that of the indigenous majorities in the different colonies primarily because of community survival strategies. In South Africa, for example, in addition to dominating the trading sector, they also competed with Africans in the urban labour market. However, there had been competition and tensions between indentured labourers and locals since their arrival in the colonies.

Colonial planters preferred indentured labourers because the local labour force could organise, mobilise and bargain for higher wage and better working conditions (Tinker, 1977; Ramsaran, 2008). In Natal, for example, it has been conventionally argued that the abundant indigenous Zulu labour was inadequate and unsuitable for sugar plantations. However, on the contrary, the local Zulus comprised a capable labour force and were willing to work on the plantations but on their own terms and conditions. There is adequate evidence which reveals that while Natal was arranging for the introduction of indentured labour, the Zulus were working diligently in both the skilled and unskilled sectors of the economy (Dhupelia, 1982; Meer, 1985). So the difficulty facing the planters was not a shortage of labour, but rather a lack

of a plentiful supply of cheap labour. The cost of Indian labour was high, especially in terms of costs of recruiting and travel to Natal. This had the effect of lowering the wages paid to Africans, which was one of the reasons for introducing indentured labourers, and hence the growing tensions between these two groups (Ginwala, 1974).

The incipient conflict between these two groups burst into the open with the 1949 Cato Manor Riots, and has resurfaced periodically. The riots reflected a complex interaction between race, ethnic, political, economic and social forces. There were different interpretations of the cause of the 1949 riots (Kuper, 1965; Meer, 1969; Ladlau, 1975). The state viewed the violence as a racial conflict between Indians and Africans (Union Government, 1949). However, while there was Indian–African tension, the riot was a "complex phenomenon, fed by white prejudice and Government policy as well as by the aspirations of an embryonic African bourgeoisie" (Ladlau, 1975, 19). The riots were also attributed to the poor socio-economic and housing circumstances of Africans in Cato Manor (Edwards, 1983). Indo-African tensions burst into the open again in 1985 with the Inanda riots. The prevailing circumstances and causes of the riots were somewhat similar to those of the 1949 riots (Hughes, 1987).

While the riots appeared to be unplanned, structurally they were predetermined by the nature of the South African social formation, where Indians were perceived to be occupying a 'middleman' buffer position between whites and Africans (Moodley, 1980). In the colonial, post-colonial and contemporary eras, Indians have primarily played the role of middleman minorities, often being portrayed as scapegoats and villains in times of economic and political crisis, across the indentured diaspora.

The nature of social formation in the colonies which resulted in the differential incorporation of the various ethnic groups, enjoying different levels of rewards, set the stage for seeking a scapegoat and revenge for long-suffered misery. Indians were perceived by the majority indigenous groups as most obviously benefiting from this situation, precisely because they occupied a 'middleman' role. These stereotypes provided a focal point for quick mobilisation of locals against Indians (Desai & Maharaj, 1996).

The distinguishing feature of middleman minorities is the economic role they play. Unlike most ethnic minorities, they occupy an intermediate rather than a low-status position. They are generally found in certain occupations, mainly trade and commerce, but also as labour contractor, rent collector, money lender and broker. They play the role of middleman between producer and consumer, employer and employee, owner and tenant, elite and masses (Blalock, 1967). Socio-cultural isolation increased the potential for conflict.

Socio-cultural isolation or racism?

There are certain common themes evident in the indentured experience in South Africa, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam, Fiji and Malaysia. Although generally perceived as a homogeneous ethnic group, the indentured labour community was stratified on the basis of class, religion and language. In spite of the distance and (dis)connection from India, the descendants of indentured labourers have maintained their cultural identity, and for this they have been criticised for being 'separatist' and 'exclusivist'.

There were four characteristics that were specific to Hindu indentured labourers: the re-establishment of the family; their religious faith, especially the acceptance of the Ramayana as the basic Hindu scripture; the demise of caste; and indentured Hindus migrated as isolated individuals, not in family units, hence family life was disrupted. During indenture attempts to re-establish the family were difficult because of the uneven ratio between women and men – up to four women for ten men, but in Natal it was one to three (Parekh, 1994).

It is an extraordinary accomplishment that under such circumstances the family was gradually recreated in the indentured diaspora, although with a dominating patriarchal structure, which imposed some moral values on the rising generation. Common features of the Hindu diaspora include the extended or joint family, as well as "sharply defined family roles and status based on patri" (Jain, 1993, 45).

Until recently, Hinduism was transmitted in the diaspora largely through the oral tradition, and there were many distortions over time as memories faded. The appeal of the Ramayana was related to the thematic connection between scripture and indenture – banishment to strange territories, struggles to survive and the anticipation of return (Parekh, 1994).

Caste segmentation has almost disappeared in all the indentured zones because migrants were drawn from a large geographic area: since caste hierarchies are only regional and not pan-Indian, they could not be maintained in a population from various origins. There was also a very material reason for caste prejudices to be reduced: all the migrants were packed into the same boat eating the same food. Furthermore, during the journey migrants became *jehaji-bhai* (ship mates), which created a new 'kinship' based on the memory of travel on the same ship, without any attention to caste or religion. The erosion of direct links with India also influenced the demise of caste.

In countries where there has been conflict between Indians and locals, Tinker (1977, 138–139) has questioned whether:

> [t]he Asians create their own difficulties by their own way of life, and by remaining separate from the host society; or do their troubles arise mainly from excess chauvinism or racism in the country of their adoption? Do they offend because they are, visibly, both pariahs and exploiters in alien societies? Or are they scapegoats, singled out for victimization because their adopted country (or its government) needs an alibi for poor performance in the national sphere?

The nature of colonial social organisation was based on strict racial lines. This inevitably generated practices and outlooks which were antagonistic and opposed to any form of interracial interaction. The Indians were especially isolated from other races' groups (Ghai & Ghai, 1965). The colonial authorities did little to support racial co-operation and integration. As a result of residential segregation, the different groups were ignorant of each others' social and cultural values, and racial prejudices and stereotypes were entrenched. Consequently, the "legacy of British imperialism was thus one of racial suspicion and misunderstandings, of antagonism rather than co-operation" (Ghai & Ghai, 1971, 8). Socially, the colonial segregated system suited the Indians who were very conservative, and preferred to be left alone to follow and maintain their own religion and culture (Ghai & Ghai, 1965).

Indian ethnic identities were influenced by segregation, economic competition and the need to maintain culture in a hostile environment:

> A collective sense of ethnic identity has been cultivated by, and imposed on, communities of . . . Asians in their various colonial and post-colonial contexts. Competition for control over resources, geographical segregation, political organisation, and efforts to maintain cultural traditions in alien milieux are some of the important elements contributing to the migrant communities' development.
>
> *(Clarke* et al., *1990, 15)*

While the colonial authorities fostered a collective Indian identity from above, this was reinforced by impulses emanating from within indentured communities. Caught between an antagonistic

colonial government and fear of the indigenous masses, Indians confirmed their cultural identity: "Religion, music, customs, traditions and distinctive food tastes formed part of a womblike structure to act as a bulwark against a hostile environment" (Moodley, 1980, 234). To the colonial rulers this has been construed as "proof of their 'unassimilability'", and locals viewed them as "being racist and discriminatory against the indigenous population" (Moodley, 1975, 256).

Negative perceptions of the Indians emanated largely out of the context of colonial society (Desai, 1989). For example, writing about the east African experience Ghai and Ghai (1965, 47) noted that "most Asian–African relationships have been at the shopkeeper–customer or master–servant level", which were unlikely to support interracial relations. Also, many Asian cultural and social organisations were exclusive. As a result of a fear of losing their cultural identity, Indians "tend to be over religious, rigid, conservative, orthodox, close and restrictive" (Motwani & Motwani, 1989, 3). Africans could not join, and while they knew a great deal about, and were often drawn to, European culture, they were ignorant of the Asian way of life (Ghai & Ghai, 1965).

The negative perception of Indians in the colonies was influenced by three considerations:

> i) There is sufficient evidence of European manipulation of attitudes against the Asians.
> ii) The Asians themselves were being manipulated to serve the imperial interests by acting as middlemen, and inevitably took the blame for an exploitive colonial system.
> iii) A factor generating certain African attitudes toward the Asians were the Asians themselves in a more direct way. Of particular relevance here are certain of their social customs and way of life.
>
> *(Desai, 1989, 42)*

While hostility towards Indians emerged from economic grievances, this was often expressed by exhibiting contempt for the social and cultural practices of Asians. The major European complaints against Asians included: their unsanitary habits; their undesirable religious rituals and practices; they reduced the value of their dwellings and neighbourhood; they engaged in unfair trading practices and were therefore able to undersell European traders and reduce their employment opportunities; and they sent their capital out of the country (Power, 1993).

However, the cultural pride of Indians and a "sense of racial superiority vis-à-vis the Africans were at times as bad as [those] of the Europeans" (Tandon & Raphael, 1973, 15). This cultural detachment from the mainstream has "indirectly invited or contributed to racial discrimination by the natives against Indians, which has later turned into racial atrocity in several countries after their independence" (Motwani & Motwani, 1989, 3).

As political independence became imminent, "the Asians faced critical choices [and were] ill-prepared to meet them" (Desai, 1989, 41). By the time East Africa attained independence, Indians were a dominant force in the economy but were insulated as a community and marginalised politically. It has been argued that the expulsion of the Asians from East Africa was unavoidable because they had no power. The only concern was the way in which this mass exodus of Asians would take place. The African elite and the masses were keen to see their rapid departure. The only constraint was the international repercussions as well as the economic implications (Tandon & Raphael, 1973, 15). Tensions in the indentured diaspora have continued into the twenty-first century.

Contemporary dynamics

With the exception of Mauritius (where they are in the majority), Indians have constituted a vulnerable ethnic minority in their country of adoption, and have been 'sandwiched' between

the dominant colonial ruling class and the indigenous majority, and subsequent generations were often regarded as aliens in the land of their birth.

The historical conflicts and prejudices of the colonial phase have persisted in the post-colonial era. In countries where "Indians have been numerically significant, their ethnic orientation has been tied to struggle for political power" which has often been accompanied by threats, violence and suppression (Jayaram, 2004, 29). In 1972, Fijian politician Sakesai Butadroka introduced the following motion in Parliament:

> That this House agrees that the time has arrived when Indians or people of Indian origin in this country be repatriated back to India and that their traveling expenses back home and compensation for their properties in this country be met by the British.
>
> *(Lal, 2015, 51)*

In the 1987 and 2000 elections in Fiji, Indian majority governments were ousted by coups. The coups "witnessed the use and abuse of ethnic identity appeals to maintain privilege and political power" (Alley, 2001, 230). Indo-Fijians have been politically marginalised:

> Racism has been institutionalised under the banner of affirmative action for indigenous Fijians. As a consequence, Indo-Fijians are disadvantaged in most areas of public life including allocation of civil service positions and scholarships for tertiary studies.
>
> *(Voigt-Graf, 2009, 103)*

Consequently, those with skills and resources started a secondary migration, largely to New Zealand and Australia.

In South Africa, following the euphoric democratic elections in 1994, there have been several public attacks against the Indian community (which played a major role in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid) from persons aligned to the ruling African National Congress (ANC), and a common theme is that this group (third and fourth-generation South Africans) must return to India.

In early 2002, internationally renowned playwright and composer Mbongeni Ngema released an inflammatory anti-Indian song in the Zulu language, *AmaiNiya*, in which he called for "strong and brave men to confront Indians . . . Whites were far better than Indians . . . we are poor because all things have been taken by Indians. They are oppressing us" (Singh, 2002, 2). The song was condemned by the South African Human Rights Commission and was subsequently banned from the airwaves.

Since 2009 Indians opposed to the destruction of the century-old Warwick market in Durban, which had an umbilical connection with the descendants of indentured labourers, were taunted with calls of '*Hamba khaya! Hamba uye eBombay*' (Go home! Go home to Mumbai!) from the rent-a-mob groups aligned to the ruling party, chanting in front of senior ANC leaders with impunity. According to a Wikileaks report:

> The anti-Indian sentiments expressed by local ANC-appointed leaders and supporters . . . stand in contrast to the multi-racial ideals of the ANC . . . at its core, the (Warwick mall project) is about the displacement of South Africans of Indian descent by black South Africans. The (Warwick mall) plan is backed by the ANC, and it is simply a matter of time before the EMM [Early Morning Market] is changed forever. Indians are increasingly becoming marginalised in Durban and their political influence has diminished over the years.[1]

Largely as a result of a lack of astute leadership, Indians face the possibility of being politically marginalised in the post-apartheid era. The various deprecatory comments and racial slurs made since the 2000s may well be an appropriate warning to the South African Indian community to awake and arise from their apathetic slumber. The final section reflects on connections with India.

Fractured links with India

How does India reconnect with the indentured diaspora – a reminder of its less sophisticated past? The majority of descendants of indentured labourers have no direct links with India, except as an abstract, spiritual motherland, which many pilgrims find disappointing as the faith has been commodified and where religion betrays the poor and disadvantaged. While diasporic indentured Indians have not severed ties with their ancestral homeland, they have a highly variant relationship with India:

> Those dragooned into the plantations of East and South Africa, the West and East Indies, were after all lower caste and class peasants and labourers "unworthy" of the attention of our rulers and elite . . . Little surprise that in a status conscious people, they rarely figured in the mental landscape.[2]

However, the indentured diaspora did have some influence on the liberation of India from the shackles of colonialism. According to Prashad (2004, 2), "it was the Indian diaspora that made Gandhi Indian as well as taught him the arts of mass resistance".

After independence in 1947, the indentured diaspora was hardly considered as part of the Indian nation. In South Africa, like in the rest of the developing world, the indentured Indians were supposed to merge with the local populations and to fight the remnants of colonialism in order to create new independent nations (Gangopadhyay, 2005).

In the early 1990s, the Indian government explored connections with the Indian diaspora in order to attract investments. In September 2000, the Indian government established a High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora to investigate and report on "problems and difficulties. the hopes and expectations" of NRIs and PIOs in their interaction with India. The High Level Committee chaired by Dr Singhvi (2001) emphasised the importance of the diaspora for India:

> The Diaspora is very special to India. Residing in distant lands, its members have succeeded spectacularly in their chosen professions by dint of their single-minded dedication and their hard work. What is more, they have retained their emotional, cultural and spiritual links with their country of origin. This strikes a reciprocal chord in the hearts of people of India.

The High Level Committee recommended that NRIs and PIOs needed to be recognised, and it recommended the celebration of Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Non-Resident Indian Day) which has been observed annually since 2003 on 9 January. This date is symbolically important as Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa on 9 January 1915. When the Indian government introduced the PIO card (subsequently replaced by the Overseas Citizen of India card – largely to facilitate visa-free travel), the intention was to attract those with dollars, pounds and euros to invest in India. There was initially little interest in the descendants of indentured labourers in countries like Malaysia, Fiji, Trinidad, Surinam and South Africa.

An interesting issue from which the motherland could benefit was an acknowledgement from the High Level Committee that in the indentured diaspora "a form of Hindusim . . . was being practised by people who had rid themselves of traditions and customs like *jaati* and *sati*, *gotra* and *sutra* . . . and dowry" (Singhvi, 2001, 85).

Conclusion

This chapter provided a broad overview of labour and trader migrant experiences in different eras, and in the indentured diasporas. Indentured labour contributed significantly to the economic development of the different colonies, but Indians were only acceptable in a servile status in the colonial and post-colonial eras. In an attempt to restrict their socio-economic mobility, policies were introduced to limit their access to land and housing, as well as trading opportunities. Trade was the main economic activity of local whites, and was also a symbol of social status. Indian merchants challenged white economic hegemony and status.

Indians enjoyed a relatively privileged position compared with that of the indigenous majority primarily because of community survival strategies and their rich cultural and religious heritage. The nascent conflict between these two groups has resurfaced periodically, with the minority group appearing to be vulnerable. As they attempted to adjust in an alien and hostile environment, they encountered conflict initially with the colonial rulers and subsequently with the indigenous majority.

Indians in the indentured diaspora have always been vulnerable in the colonial and post-colonial eras, and connections with India remain nebulous. There are significant continuities between both phases, and these include problems linked to race, ethnicity, citizenship and identity encountered by indentured labourers and their descendants for the greater part of a century. The divide and rule strategy of the British persisted into the post-colonial era, where race and ethnic polarisation have in fact become more entrenched in most of the former colonies, and the descendants of indentured labourers appear to be as vulnerable as their ancestors.

Notes

1 www.wikileaks.org/cable/2009/08/09DURBAN94.html#par14.
2 The diaspora, a symposium on Indian-Americans and the motherland (n.d.), p. 3. Available from: http://www.india-seminar.com/2004/538.htm.

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3

WRITING INDENTURE HISTORY THROUGH *TESTIMONIOS* AND ORAL NARRATIVES

Vijay Mishra

Taking a leaf out of Beverley's (2004) valuable study, a *testimonio* may be defined as a *pétit recit*, a small subaltern voice marginalized by history and sincere to its emotional rather than historical content. A *testimonio* is thus both an 'authentic subaltern voice' as well as a 'staged performance' where the speaker (often with the aid of a transcriber) speaks for the other and lays the foundation for any future subaltern struggle for equality (Beverley, 2004, xvi). The Indian plantation diaspora has few surviving written *testimonios* that give contemporary accounts of the subaltern life-worlds of indentured labourers. In the case of Fiji, our case reference for the Indian plantation diaspora, there are two *testimonios* by Totaram Sanadhya, an indentured labourer who just happened to be literate and who returned to India after some twenty-one years in Fiji. These *testimonios* are a remarkable source of Fiji Indian plantation history and culture as they show the effects of crossing the black waters, the role of recruiters and the creation of a collective memory of the homeland. The *testimonios* by Sanadhya tell us one side of plantation history because they are written, retrospective and edited accounts of felt experience and in a sense this is a limitation. To provide us with narratives of lived experience of quotidian indenture life, the kind of experience that required immediate cultural expression, one has 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. A key mode of recall in the songs took the form of longing and departure. Through these songs – often cast as songs of the rainy season – the people of the Fiji Indian plantation diaspora, like the men and women on the *Ibis* in Amitav Ghosh's memorable *Sea of Poppies*, lamented their lost homeland. This chapter examines the emotional power of these songs by re-working them back into the real, material conditions of indenture so graphically outlined in Sanadhya's *testimonios*. In doing so the writer also uses memory as an affective source with which to qualify the uneven nature of plantation indenture history.

What were the origins of those songs and why recall them when they simply trigger a history of pain? To understand this we need to turn, as a primary analytical act, to an examination of the history of indenture with reference to my own homeland, Fiji, and read it, furthermore, mediated through *testimonios* and oral recitations.[1]