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Tracing the Tunes That Travelled: *Geet Gawai* and A Study of Bhojpuri Folk Music in Mauritius

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14109582

Article History: Submitted-20/09/2024, Revised-15/10/2024, Accepted-25/10/2024, Published-31/10/2024.

Abstract:

After the abolishment of slavery throughout the British Empire, under the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, a system of indentured labour was instituted in 1834 by the British Empire to combat the sudden labour shortage in enslaved colonies, ultimately resulting in forced migration. A significant majority of the Indians brought to foreign colonies (referred to as *girmitiya* /*coolie*/*jahajis* and *jahajins*) were Bhojpuri speakers from the states of Eastern Uttar Pradesh (then the United Provinces) and Bihar – two of the poorest provinces under colonial rule. With no means to return to their homeland, the *Girmitiya* (indentured labourer) settled in countries such as Mauritius, Trinidad, Fiji, et cetera. Though they had to leave behind their families, assets, and livelihoods, the *girmitiya* took a rich heritage of Bhojpuri folk songs, known as *Geet Gawai* (in Mauritius).

Recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016, *Geet Gawai* is a musical ensemble encapsulating the 'intangible cultural heritage' brought to Mauritius by Indian (primarily 'female') indentured immigrants. It is a combination of rituals, prayers, songs, music, and dance, which mirrors the oral traditions prevalent in the Bhojpuri-speaking regions of India. Also, it serves as a means of livelihood for the *Geetharines* (the performers of *Geet Gawai*). The songs in *Geet Gawai* are sung mainly during weddings and address the history and hardships of Indians (descendants of indentures living in Mauritius), separation from loved ones (in *purbi* and *birha* folk songs), the change of seasons (in *bara-masa* folk songs), ceremonial tunes (*sanskar geet*), et cetera. Instruments like *dholak* and *jhaal* and vibrant dancing are involved.

This paper will, hence, explore the phenomenon of *Geet Gawai* as an extraordinary saga of cultural perseverance despite continuous threats of identity and language erasure. Various folk

songs of different categories will be studied to delineate the musical expression of themes including, indentureship, marriage, womanhood, and the survival of Bhojpuri language and diasporic culture of a distant home, i.e., India, in the folksongs of the *girmitiya*.

Keywords: Indentured labour, Immigration, *Geet Gawai*, Bhojpuri folk songs.

After the abolishment of slavery throughout the British Empire, under the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, the British were searching for alternative labour sources to sustain the economic viability of plantations and other industries. With the end of chattel slavery, the British Empire faced a critical shortage of labourers for its colonies, leading to the emergence of indentured labour as a viable solution. To work under challenging conditions on plantations, this strategy entailed hiring labourers under deceptive fixed-term contracts, frequently from places like India, China, and African nations. Millions of Indians were brought to other British colonies during 1836-1920, mainly plantation colonies, under the system of indentureship which was justifiably labelled as "a new form of slavery" by Hugh Tinker in his book, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (14).

Most Indian indentured labourers were recruited from Calcutta (Calcutta was a significant economic, administrative, and educational centre during the colonial period, offering numerous job opportunities to Indians), who worked as migrant workers, and majorly belonged to the "basins of the Bhojpuri-speaking belt along the Ganges plains" (Boodhoo 31). These regions included Shahabad, Ara, Balia, Gorakhpur, Jaunpur, and Chhapra.

The transition from slavery to indentured labour reflected both the Empire's ongoing demand for cheap labour and the broader economic and social transformations of the 19th century, profoundly impacting the lives of millions of workers and shaping the demographic and economic landscapes of the colonies. Under what the British termed the 'First Great Experiment,' prospective labourers were recruited and required to sign a five-year contract or 'agreement.' According to the terms of this agreement, the workers were to migrate to distant plantation colonies with the promise of returning to their home country after five years. However, the reality of the situation starkly diverged from these stated conditions. Therefore, over time, the rural, non-English, mostly Bhojpuri-speaking workers *Bhojpuri-zed* the word 'agreement' to 'girmit', and those bonded under the 'girmit' came to be known as the 'girmitiya', or 'Engagé' in Mauritian Creole[i].

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Having crossed the *kala-paani*, the workers who travelled to Trinidad, Fiji, Mauritius, Tobago, et cetera had to leave their families, culture, assets, and country behind[ii]. Hence, as a word, girmitiya symbolizes the erasure of many identities and serves as a painful reminder of the deceptive 'girmit' that led to the displacement of millions of Indians. Furthermore, these indentured workers faced terrible working conditions and extreme poverty and had minimal rights to safeguard themselves against exploitation. The hope of returning home was also non-existent.

Moreover, the journey to these colonies on overcrowded and ill-maintained ships, was arduous, causing both physical and emotional suffering, along with a deep, psychological trauma of loss. For Indo-Mauritian women, indenture meant a "double displacement" (Mehta 3), making their experience more challenging. Many of these women were widows or belonged to lower castes, marginalized by society even before they left India. After migrating, they not only lost their cultural roots and sense of belonging, due to the belief associated with the *kala-paani* crossing, but they also forfeited the limited autonomy they had over their lives in their homeland.

The large-scale migration of girmitiyas was driven by several factors, such as British revenue policies, the collapse of local handicraft industries, and natural disasters like floods, droughts, and famines. These events led to increasing debt and widespread poverty among poor peasants, worsening living conditions in rural areas. Many were, hence, forced to seek jobs under the indenture system, attracted by the wages and the misleading promise that they could return home after the five-year contract period. In response to this exploitation, Indian social leaders and activists launched awareness campaigns, using slogans and songs to warn vulnerable communities about these deceptive practices. Purushottan Das, a social and political leader active in Muzaffarpur during the 19th century, wrote the popular tune, *Escape from Deceivers*, against the coolie system. An excerpt is as follows –

"ESCAPE FROM DECEIVERS.
It is not service. It is woe.
[...]
Instead of rupees, rubbish will fall (on you).
They are taking you across the sea!
To Mauritius, to Demerara, to Fiji, to Jamaica, to Trinidad, to Honduras.
They are not islands; they are hell." (Kumar 511)

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Here, the lyrics critique the fraudulent reality of the recruitment process, underlining how the promised rewards (symbolized by "rupees") are illusory, while the actual outcome is one of exploitation and hardship ("rubbish will fall on you"). The song describes the plantation colonies as "hell", hence emphasizing the severe survival conditions faced by the girmitiyas upon their arrival.

Moreover, many protest folk songs were written and performed in Bhojpuri, as most indentured labourers came from Bhojpuri-speaking regions of North India. The remaining workers were drawn from other parts of India, such as Bombay, Madras, and the North-Western Provinces. The extensive use of Bhojpuri in these songs mirrored the demographic makeup of the girmitiya.

On the 'slave' ships, however, the Indian coolies (girmitiya, or jahaji/jahajin[iii]) were allowed to bring some personal belongings, and "it was through these symbolic scriptures, utensils, idols, clothing, et cetera, that they managed to hold on to their ancestral beliefs and propagate them in the community" (Ravi 12). According to the archives of the Department of Immigration in Mauritius, many of the immigrants carried religious books, including the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Gita Puran (Hazareesingh). The girmitiya also brought items such as "cooking utensils, clothing, jewellery, and musical instruments, [and] also immaterial possessions such as stories, melodies, and singing, dance, cultural and religious traditions" (Elahi 168) to settle into their daily lives in the foreign land.

According to the Immigration Register, which recorded the personal details of labourers during their recruitment, the girmitiyas came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They spoke various languages, including Bhojpuri, Hindi, Maithili, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, et cetera. However, Bhojpuri was the most commonly spoken. Being rich in folk culture, Bhojpuri-speaking workers performed folk songs and folk dances on these ships to voice their concerns and organize resistance. These performances eventually became essential tools for raising awareness and uniting labourers across different groups.

The large-scale migration from Bhojpuri-speaking regions of India facilitated the integration of Bhojpuri language and culture into the sociocultural fabric of Mauritius. The analysis of literary works in Bhojpuri (written by the immigrants or their descendants) demonstrates its evolution as a dynamic language, adapting to foreign contexts and retaining its cultural and linguistic roots. Moreover, the girmitiya migration notably enriched Indian Bhojpuri cultural production, particularly in folk theatre forms such as *Nautanki* and *Bidesiya*. These

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

theatrical traditions frequently centre on the theme of the *Bidesi* or *Pardesi* (the immigrant), a motif prominently featured in the works of renowned Bhojpuri playwright Bhikhari Thakur. Similarly, the distinguished poet Babu Raghuvir Narayan addressed the experiences of migrants and immigrant labourers in his celebrated song, *Batohiya*. In the song, the *Batohiya* (a traveller who travels within the country and sings songs based on his observations of different people and places) is the narrator. He sings about a male migrant, and his lonely wife, who eagerly waits for his return. An excerpt reads as follows –

> Want to go O traveler to see Hindustan,
> Where Cuckoo sings coos O traveler.
> Scented air breeze slowly from the sky,
> Wife sings a song of separation O traveler… (Kumar 515)

In Mauritius, one of the plantation colonies during British rule, these Bhojpuri folk songs gradually evolved into the *Geet Gawai* tradition, commonly performed during weddings, festivals, and cultural events. The origins of *Geet Gawai* trace back to the first female migrations in the 1860s. Many of these women, who were widowed, childless, assaulted, or abandoned during the voyages to British colonies, spent their time singing folk songs such as *Jhoomar*, *Purbi*, and *Sorthi*. Since these sea journeys often spanned several months, Indian immigrants, particularly those from the Bhojpuri region, engaged in folk music, dance, and drama as popular forms of entertainment. Many were followers of Kabir and brought musical instruments such as the *khajdi*, *tumda*, *dholak*, and *dandtaal* with them.

Over time, *Geet Gawai* became a profession for some, a passion for others, and a form of resistance for many. Despite ongoing threats of cultural erasure, the *Geetharines* (*Geet Gawai* performers) have succeeded in preserving Bhojpuri folk songs, particularly *Sanskaar Geet*. As a result of their efforts, *Geet Gawai* has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The *Geet Gawai* performance generally begins with the song *Kalkatta Se Chuttal Jahaj* (The Ship Has Left Calcutta). This song reflects the historical experiences and emotional struggles of Indian indentured labourers who departed from the port of Calcutta to work on sugar plantations in Mauritius. The song encapsulates the complex and diverse nature of the indenture system, as

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the recruitment process lacked standardized criteria. Consequently, individuals from various religious backgrounds, castes, and tribes migrated, a fact poignantly conveyed in the following song's lyrics –

> "Our *Ramayana* has come on that sailing ship
> Our *Gita* has come on that sailing ship
> Our *Quran* has come on that sailing ship
> Our *Purana* has come on that sailing ship." (Boodho 29)

Following this, the *Geetharines* usually sing five *Sandhya geet*[iv], five *Debi-debta geet* (songs dedicated to Goddesses and Gods), and five *Mahadeo Geet* (songs dedicated to *Mahadev* or Lord *Shiva*). These songs serve to invoke the deities, goddesses, and holy spirits. The repertoire then varies according to the specific occasion being celebrated. For instance, during ceremonies marking the birth of a child; *Jhoomer*[v] songs, *Mundan sanskar* (songs to celebrate a child's head tonsuring), and *Sohar*[vi] songs are performed. In marriage ceremonies, the sequence of *Geet Gawai* songs begins with the *Lagan ke Geet*[vii], also known as *Lagan Kholna*, followed by *Neota geet, Sumiran geet*, *Suhag geet*, and *Sukar geet*[viii].

Historically, marriage ceremonies have been instrumental in preserving and propagating the traditional customs, beliefs, and rituals of Bhojpuri culture in Mauritius. During the early period of indenture, 'free' immigrants, i.e., those whose contracts had ended, would often organize weddings on the outskirts of the sugar estates, either their own or those of family members or friends. As noted in the book, *Geet Gawai: Bhojpuri Folk Songs in Mauritius*, "women who knew or remembered the ceremonial songs or *sanskar geet*" (Boodhoo 51) were invited to perform at these events. Gradually, small groups of female performers formed, and *Geet Gawai* gradually became a formalized cultural tradition.

In her discussion of the lives of Indian, predominantly Hindu indentured labourers, Dr. Sarita Boodhoo observes that "they would sing on their poor estate camps in their small thatched huts [...], to make an arak to the *Sooraj Devta*[ix], or to the Mahabir Sami Veer Hanuman[x]" (Boodhoo 50). These devotional songs, often directed toward deities and gods, gave the girmitiyas spiritual strength to endure life and work in a foreign land, thousands of kilometres away from their homeland, without secure income or stable housing. These songs fostered a collective memory of

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their homeland, with a "central theme of longing and departure serving as an essential mode of recall" (Katyayani 39). Thus, the songs not only functioned as a means of emotional escape from their desolate circumstances but also served as a source of hope for a better future.

As the girmitiyas began to settle in Mauritius, the tradition of *Geet Gawai* evolved. These songs were, and continue to be, performed with instruments such as the harmonium, *dholak*, flute, and sitar, during celebrations of weddings, childbirth, and festivals. In contemporary performances, *Geetharines* utilize "a copper pitcher, i.e. the *lota*, which they hit rhythmically with two spoons, one in each hand, on the rim of the lota and accompanied by a *dholak*, [while dancing to] the *jhoomer*" (Boodhoo 53).

Discussing the language of the songs in *Geet Gawai*, a blend of various Indian languages and dialects is reflected, predominantly Bhojpuri, along with loanwords from Maithili, Tamil, Bengali, and French. As a result, it "is closer to [the one] spoken in Bihar than the Bhojpuri spoken in either Fiji, Guyana, or Trinidad" (Eriksen 166). This is representative of the fusion of different traditions, rituals, cultures, and places, uniting people who have been collectively uprooted from their native lands.

In addition to the regional Bhojpuri folk songs, Bollywood songs can also be a part of *Geet Gawai* performances. Songs from the 1948 film *Nadiya ke Paar* are still performed by *Geetharines* as a tribute to their ancestral homeland. Various forms of Bhojpuri folk music, such as *Dadra*, *Chaiti*, *Kajri*, *Thumri*, *Sohar*, and *Birha*, have their roots in Hindustani classical music, particularly in the gharanas (schools) of musicians from Banaras and other regions of Bihar.

The themes addressed in these songs vary. In wedding songs (*Lagan geet*), issues such as migration, the loss of one's home, the financial struggles of the girmitiya couple, and the effect of auspicious or inauspicious omens are commonly discussed. Other songs address long working hours, the lack of resources, and an unflinching faith in divinity. For example, the song *Nimiya ke Daar* (A Branch of Neem) is a dialogue between the Goddess *Shitala* and the *Malahoriya* (gardener's wife), where the latter pleads for the Goddess to take a humble offering and bless her family. An excerpt is as follows –

O Mother, I pour water for you
From my right hand
And offer you flowers of dawna (sweet scented)

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[…]
O Gardener's wife
Your daughter will be happy
And blessed at her in-law's place
[...]
And she will light the lamp in honour of sanjha (dusk)" (Boodho 213)

Other than songs rooted in Bhojpuri culture and rituals, *Geet Gawai* can also feature protest songs, commonly called 'Chansons engagées' in Mauritian Creole. A well-known example is a song that narrates the burning of the sugar factory owned by Mr. Manes, a French estate proprietor. This song captures "the jubilation of the women singers as they dance to the rhythmic *jhoomer* and jeer at Mr. Manes" (Boodhoo 230), while also highlighting the severe hardships endured by the factory workers due to harsh treatment and deplorable working conditions. An excerpt from the song is as follows –

"Mousse Manes ke mulwa
Jari gaile ho
[The sugarcane factory of Mousee Manes
Is burning]
[...]
Damkal na pani
[No sign of a fire extinguisher or water]" (Boodho 231)

Geet Gawai also incorporates cultural elements from various Indian religions and tribal groups, reflecting the large-scale migration that began in 1894. Two notable invocations made by *Geetharines* are to *Di* and *Sayer*. *Di* is revered as the village spirit in many villages of the Bhojpuri-speaking regions, and *Sayer* represents "an inclusion from the many tribes who migrated to Mauritius in the early phases of immigration, such as the Dhangar, Oraon, Santhal, Ho, and others" (Boodhoo 141).

Some songs in *Geet Gawai* also refer to caste, though "nothing pejorative is expressed" (Boodhoo 115). The loss of places of worship, prayer books, and elders who could transmit

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religious and cultural knowledge to the girmitiyas contributed to a blending of beliefs in different gods and deities in Mauritius. It is particularly evident in the *Digbandhana*[xi] songs of *Geet Gawai*, where Goddess *Mariya* is worshipped. Mariya is a Bhojpuri adaptation of *Mariamen*, the Tamil avatar of Goddess *Kali*. Over time, the worship of *Mariamen* has become associated with protection against plague (*mahamari*).

Geet Gawai, therefore, has predominantly remained a feminine tradition. Historically, female indentured workers, many of whom were widowed or marginalized due to social injustices in India, worked both on sugar estates and in domestic roles (as wives, mothers, or maids). These women, living within a strictly feminine sphere, sang and performed songs while working together. This sisterhood influenced the re-emergence of Bhojpuri folk culture in Mauritius. Before the settlement of the girmitiyas, Mauritius had a relatively diminished cultural history due to extensive colonization and invasions by the Dutch, French, and British. The absence of a dominant cultural hegemony and the marginalization of feminine spaces by a predominantly male perspective allowed these women and their folk songs to endure and persevere.

The responsibility of preserving the tradition of *Geet Gawai* by the *Geetharines*, however, has confronted significant challenges, including social ostracism, inadequate living conditions, patriarchal injustice, and cultural suppression. Nevertheless, the folk songs that travelled with the first girmitiyas across the *Kala-paani*, and have been successfully transmitted through generations, continue to remain a source of pride for these performers and descendants of the girmitiyas. The perseverance of *Geet Gawai* in Mauritius has to be credited to the richness of Bhojpuri folk culture, which includes music, dance, and drama, therefore, displaying the deep connection of Bhojpuri-speaking individuals with their language, and the ability of these folk songs to seamlessly merge elements from other cultures as well.

As mentioned above, the foundation of this tradition was laid by the initial immigrants aboard the ships that transported them to distant British colonies such as Mauritius and Trinidad. Reflecting on the experiences of the girmitiyas during their voyage, Boodhoo notes that "*Kissas*, *kahanis*, jokes, *pahelis*, anecdotes would be exchanged and shared on board. [...] The *birhas* would be remembered. These songs echoed from the bosom of the travelling immigrants as they faced nothing but searing waves and the vast ocean for days on end" (Boodhoo 40). Those unfamiliar with these songs or stories, due to differences in religion or culture, would be "nudged with '*Gaw ge', 'gawa sa ge*' (Sing! Do sing you all!)" (Boodhoo 51).

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To counteract the oppressive conditions of indenture, the girmitiyas on the plantations adhered to the traditions of their homeland to maintain their cultural and racial dignity. Recruiting entire villages for indenture further reinforced a strong sense of collective identity among the immigrants. Consequently, the descendants of girmitiyas often understand and retell their history not solely through the lens of economic and political exploitation, but also as a testament to the successful preservation of religious traditions and ethno-religious group identities by their ancestors. As Eisenlohr notes, this perspective reflects "not just in terms of economic exploitation and political repression, but as displaying the successful 'preservation' of religious traditions and ethno-religious group identity" (82).

These folk songs, along with other cultural traditions, travelled with the first immigrants as they moved to unfamiliar lands, uncertain of their future. The earnest homesickness experienced by the girmitiyas helped them stay resolute, keep their memories alive, and gradually rebuild a new home that somehow resembled the one they had to leave behind. As the tradition of Bhojpuri folk songs evolved into *Geet Gawai*, they emerged as symbols of resilience and Indian identity within the diaspora, serving as a counterpoint to the colonial legacy. The preservation of this folk culture is so meticulous that the effects of cultural hybridity, loss of cultural belonging, or confusion about national identity are not readily apparent; and a *Geet Gawai* performance closely mirrors rural Indian Bhojpuri marriage ceremonies.

Furthermore, the folk tradition of *Geet Gawai* demonstrates a distinctive diffusion of Indian culture within the diaspora, illustrating how the peripheries of the Indian diaspora can contribute significantly to the global dissemination of Indian culture. The influence of Indian immigrants on their 'host' societies is thus far from negligible. As Eriksen observes, "the cultural adaptation of diaspora Indians is better understood as the ongoing interaction between Indian and non-Indian social and cultural systems, where values, norms, and forms of organization are continuously negotiated" (159).

In the 21st century, the widespread use of digital repositories has enabled effective measures to preserve the songs performed by the *Geetharines*. These songs are now archived in public libraries and on social networking platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. As of 2023, nearly 50 Bhojpuri Speaking Union *Geet Gawai* Schools have been established across Mauritius. Significant contributions from scholars, including Dr. Sarita Boodhoo, Professor Helen Meyers, and Professor Catherine Servan Schreiber, have helped in the development and academic

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preservation of Bhojpuri folk music in Mauritius, as well as other nations with girmitiya populations, such as Trinidad, Tobago, and Fiji.

This documentation is necessary because the preservation of *Geet Gawai* symbolizes an essential portion of a profoundly enriched historical narrative of human suffering and cultural resilience. In conclusion, it represents the incredible ability of humans to remember folk cultures, such as folk music, dance, and drama, and pass them down to the next generations with remarkable accuracy, particularly during times as culturally, politically, and personally challenging as the indenture period.

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[i] Mauritian Creole is primarily based on French, but it also incorporates elements from English, Indian languages (Bhojpuri, Hindi, Tamil), African languages (like Malagasy and Bantu), and some Portuguese and Chinese influences. This blend reflects Mauritius' colonial and migration history. It serves as a unifying language on the island.

[ii] Historically, crossing the "Kala Pani" (the black waters or ocean) was linked to the belief that one could lose their caste, culture, or religion. This idea arose from the notion that long-distance sea travel exposed individuals to unfamiliar customs, people, and influences, potentially leading to ritual impurity and a loss of cultural identity.

[iii] Translates to ship passengers.

[iv] Songs sung to pay respect to Gods. They are usually accompanied by an aarti (a Hindu ritual involving the offering of light from wicks soaked in ghee or oil to one or more deities, often accompanied by hymns or devotional songs).

[v] *Jhoomar* is sung mostly by women. The female protagonists in the *jhoomar* songs articulate their husband's/son's migration. *Jhoomar* is sung especially during marriage ceremonies.

[vi] *Sohar* is sung to celebrate the birth of a child and related occasions.

[vii] Translates to 'wedding songs'

[viii] These are various kinds of folk songs sung during Hindu ceremonies.

[ix] The Hindu Sun god, commonly worshipped in Bihari cultures.

[x] The Hindu God, *Hanuman*.

[xi] According to the Kannada-English dictionary, *digbandhana* is qualified as a binding of mystical power, that protects humans, and animals from evil.

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