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be defined as a *pétit recit*, a small subaltern voice marginalized by history and sincere to its emotional rather than historical content.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
The black waters

In the popular imaginary, the indenture system is recalled with reference to four key terms: *girmit*, *girmitiya*, *arkati* and *Kala-Pani*. First, *girmit*: it is really a demotic form of the ‘agreement’ that indentured labourers signed before embarking on ships to the plantation colonies. Related to *girmit*, the abstract noun, is the agential noun *girmitiya*, a word which designated those who actually signed (thumb-marked more likely) the agreement.\(^2\) The Mahatma himself had used the word *girmit* (“the indentured labourers who went to Natal . . . came to be known there as *girmitiyas* from *girmit*” (Gandhi, 1927/1959, 77) and in his Hindi hagiographical novel *Pahla girmitiya*, Giriraj Kishor refers to the Mahatma as the first *girmitiya*\(^3\) in the title of the novel (Kishor, 1999). The third word is *arkati* which, like *girmit*, is the demotic form of ‘recruiter’ but is given a decidedly derogatory and indeed ominous meaning.\(^4\) The word is in fact a ‘memorial construction’ with all its attendant flaws, especially in respect of memory’s tendency towards selective evidence. It does, however, appear in the *Oxford Hindi–English Dictionary* (54) and is defined as “a recruiting agent for workers for Mauritius, &c. on indenture”. The *girmit* imaginary transforms the *arkati*/recruiter into the compliant, money-hungry, totally unscrupulous agent of a “new system of slavery” as Tinker (1974), a little dramatically, termed the system of indenture. The fourth is *Kala-Pani*, a word which has an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1991, II, 252) as the fourth meaning of ‘black water’.

*Kala-Pani* or the ‘black waters’ is a loaded word which has heavy, even metaphysical, connotations. For the peasants from the Indo-Gangetic Plain (and even for the later indentured labourers from Southern India), it carried the sense of a break from an orderly social world. Although the word has a decidedly Hindu meaning, it had similar semantic associations for recently converted nineteenth-century Muslim peasants. *Kala-Pani* was in fact the ocean which few had seen, far away from the Indo-Gangetic Plain. The ocean as *Kala-Pani*, in a literal sense, also carries the sense of death, since *kālā* (‘black’) invokes *kāla* or death itself. Even more disturbingly, though, in a carefully regulated world of castes, *Kala-Pani* was also the limit situation, a kind of threshold that one never crossed or entered into. For to do either meant, at least for the ‘twice-born’,\(^5\) loss of caste and nothing could affect the social order more than relinquishing one’s place in that order. Although caste categories were brought to the plantation, the fact of *Kala-Pani* always haunted those who left home for the new land, and it is perhaps for this reason that caste itself became a lot more malleable in the plantation colonies.\(^6\) Regardless, though, what the crossing symbolized was a seismic, irrevocable break. In Ghosh’s (2009, 2011, 2015) compelling fictional work about indentured labourers to Mauritius, the first major plantation colony, *Kala-Pani* is the space of transgression which polluted the self and carried one to lands from which return was impossible. One of the key protagonists in this trilogy, Deeti, is certainly aware of this, as she very quickly connects her vision of the tall-masted *Ibis* to crossing the *Kala-Pani*. The other terms mentioned so far make their way into Ghosh’s sensational novels as well. The black waters, thus, may be turned into a larger metaphor, one which metonymically stands for indenture itself.

**Indenture history through testimonio**

*Girmit* or indenture in Fiji began with the arrival of 463 coolies on the *Leonidas* in 1879 and came to an end in 1916 with a final shipload of 887 labourers on *Sutlej V* (Gillion, 1962, 212–214). In the intervening forty-year period a little over 60,000 indentured labourers were transported to Fiji. Scholarly accounts of indenture exist, but there is little which takes us to the lived experience of indenture. Although in the works of Lal (2000) and Mishra (2002) we find creative reconstructions of the life-worlds of the *girmitiyas* drawn from documentary evidence, the field
Indenture, testimonios, oral narratives

remains open to further creative readings. In the absence of a comprehensive archive of narratives (oral and written) by the coolies themselves, I want to examine one of two testimonios by the aforementioned girmitiya Totaram Sanadhya (1876–1947).

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, 2). It does not follow that this ideological bias means that a testimonio is pure myth, fantastic reconstructions aimed towards effect rather than felt history. As the small but urgent voice of ‘subaltern’ history, testimonios have played an important part in drawing our attention to the uneven nature of the grand narrative of history. Indian plantation diaspora scholars have only now begun to look at these testimonios, many no more than fragmentary narratives, others, like the letters of the Guyanese indentured labourer Bechu, reconstructed through rigorous scholarship (Seecharan, 1999).

Totaram Sanadhya arrived in Fiji on the ship Jumna II in 1893, some 14 years after the arrival of the first indenture ship Leonidas in 1879, and stayed on after completing his five-year indenture for a further 16 years, that is a total of twenty-one years (Sanadhya, 1922/1994, 26). A Brahmin who registered himself under another caste in Calcutta (a not uncommon procedure for Brahmin indentured labourers), upon arrival in Fiji, even as he worked as a labourer, his Brahmanism remained marked. He settled in Wainibokasi, an area some ten kilometres away from the Nausori sugar mill where he worked as an indentured labourer. He married the daughter of an Indian farmer, became a leading priest and social leader for the Fiji Indians, polished his rudimentary Hindi and may have even mastered a little English which he later used in his debates with the Methodist missionary John Wear Burton (1875–1970).

Burton lived in Sanadhya’s and my home-town Nausori for eight years (1902–1910) and was one of the founders of the Methodist diocese of Dilkusha where in the forties, my father took up a teaching post and brought up his three children. In Burton’s (1910) book Fiji To-day, which remains an insightful, if proselytizing, account of native Fijians and indentured labourers, he refers to one “clever and well-educated Brahman” (322–323) which, most assuredly, is a reference to Sanadhya. Sanadhya did well financially in Fiji, had many orthodox Hindu followers and was a member of a group of young, educated Fiji-born Indians who discussed not only the evils of indenture but also political rights for Indians. It was Totaram Sanadhya who wrote a letter to the Mahatma urging him to send an Indian-educated lawyer to Fiji to fight for the rights of Indians. As a result, Manilal Maganlal Doctor, a Gujarati lawyer in Mauritius, arrived in Fiji in September 1912 and was eagerly received at the Suva wharf by hundreds of Indians. He stayed in Fiji for just eight years and was deported for his part in instigating, as the colonial administrators argued, the 1920 Sugar Cane Workers’ Strike. Totaram Sanadhya stayed in Fiji for just two more years after Manilal’s arrival and left for India with his wife in 1914.

In India, he narrated his testimonio to Banarsidas Chaturvedi over a period of fifteen days at his home in Firozabad. By then Banarsidas Chaturvedi had started his new career as a writer and journalist (Chaturvedi, 1973, 18). Chaturvedi writes:

Upon returning from the Bookshop [in Firozabad] I took Panditji to my house. After a few moments of wayward talk we agreed that for the next fifteen days the Pandit will come to my house to narrate his experiences and I will write them down. In this way my job was that of a clerk. Yes, I did collate facts and figures and embellished Panditji’s tale of woe. But even though the book was a co-production, Panditji’s moral authority informs the text in every way. (Chaturvedi, 1973, 18–19)
The first part of the ‘composite’ testimonio – *Fiji dvı̱p mē mere ikkis varsha* – appeared, it seems, within months of Sanadhya’s return to India. It had considerable impact on the agitation to end the indenture system which Sanadhya had called a “new system of slavery” (Sanadhya, 1919/1973, 82). It was translated four times into Gujarati, twice into Bengali and once each into Marathi and Urdu. The poet Maithilisharan Gupta and the dramatist Lakshman Singh Chauhan have both written about Sanadhya’s testimonio in their creative work. The youthful Jayprakash Narayan, later to become a fiery political activist, said in 1963 that Sanadhya’s work made a profound impression on him, and Bal Gangadhar (Lokmanya) Tilak, the nationalist leader, was similarly impressed (Chaturvedi, 1973, 19–20). In his introduction, Chaturvedi remarks that Sanadhya’s work gave voice to the silent subaltern, an act that, he suggested, was part of our ethical responsibility (Chaturvedi, 1973, 20).

Sanadhya’s first testimonio, *Fiji dvı̱p mē mere ikkis varsha*, deals with his departure from Firozabad at the age of seventeen in search of work. Promised work by an arkati (Hindi demotic, as already noted, for a coolie ‘recruiter’), he is taken to a shed where he saw 100 men and 80 women. A few days later these men and women, including Sanadhya, are taken to a white magistrate to declare that they are willing to go to Fiji to work. The registration of names done, they are quickly taken by train to Calcutta, placed in a depot there, made to mingle with people of all castes, given medical checkups and within days some 500 are put on a ship which leaves port at four in the afternoon for Fiji. *Jumna II* would take 3 months and 12 days to reach Fiji on 23 May 1893 with 309 (not 500 as Sanadhya recalls, although admittedly a few may have died on board the ship) indentured labourers.

The journey as described by Sanadhya was dehumanizing in every way: cramped sleeping spaces, a meal of dog-biscuits, sugar, rice and dried fish, the dead thrown overboard without, one suspects, any proper ritual, and, given caste sensitivities, the unease many high caste coolies felt about toilet cleaning. Upon arrival, the workers were sent to various estates under strict supervision. The living quarters on the estates were all identical – long lines of houses divided into small rooms with three single men or three single women or a couple in each room. Plantation work was hard, physically exhausting, the wages and food rations meagre at best, and penalties for missing work and sickness severe. Racism was rife, racial segregation (of white overseers and workers) was the norm, and sexual exploitation of women by planters and overseers was not at all uncommon. In the absence of witnesses (who dared not speak) there was no recourse to courts for justice. The subaltern was indeed mute throughout the period of indenture.

**Nodes of memory**

There is much in Sanadhya’s testimonio that provides us with valuable archival information about indenture life. Two representative stories from this testimonio may be cited: the story of Laliya (Sanadhya, 1919/1973, 68–72) and Guljari’s story (Sanadhya, 1919/1973, 32–34). The first deals with the role of recruiters; the second with the predicament of return. Taken together they dramatically sum up the practice of indenture and its effects on human lives. They also show features of a testimonio which are so different from John Wear Burton’s account of similarly distressed indentured labourers such as Din Muhammad, the woman with the sick child, the Madrasi accountant, the Christian convert Jaganandan Singh and the lawyer’s clerk who is given the pseudonym ‘John Wilson Banerji’ (sharing Burton’s own initials). In all these instances Burton, the missionary, remains the detached observer, but not free from compulsive ironic interventions.

The figure of the arkati is part of girmit lore and almost all personal narratives of indentured labourers refer to this intermediary who, for a commission, effectively ‘sold’ people into indenture. Whether the majority of people were cheated in this fashion or whether the few who
were began to typify the condition of the whole is an arguable point. In Sanadhya, though, the arkati emerges as the villain of the drama as his own indenture is attributed directly to the role of the arkati. Regardless, one of the most painful narratives in this testimonio deals with a couple who were inducted into indenture by unscrupulous arkatis. This is the story of Laliya who made the long journey to Fiji with her young daughter in search of her husband Ismail. Sanadhya catches up with her in Fiji and promises to locate her husband.

I left for Suva in search of Ismail. I contacted the Agent General who flatly refused to help me locate Ismail. I then discovered through another contact that Ismail was working on another estate. I then got on a steamer and arrived at this estate. There I found Ismail who told me the name of his wife and was extremely distressed upon discovering that his wife Laliya too had been in Fiji these past three years and yet they had not met. I told him that his wife worked on an estate some 500 [50?] miles away. I then composed for Ismail a letter of request for a fifteen-day leave and then went to Laliya on whose behalf I wrote a similar request. I took both these letters, thumb-signed by Ismail and Laliya respectively, to the Agent General. The Agent General refused to give any help yet again and asked me to go to the Estate Manager. I took Laliya to the manager who too refused to give her leave.

I returned to find other means of bringing their plight to the attention of authorities. In the meantime Ismail fell ill and was sent to the hospital. The doctor said there was nothing wrong with him and he was sent back to work. He fell ill again and this time the doctor declared that he had leprosy, he was very weak and could no longer do labouring. He recommended that as he was of no use as a worker he should be sent home as an “incapable”. Upon hearing this I immediately contacted Ismail at the hospital and found him at wits’ end. I left him to find a barrister whom I gave two guineas in fees. The barrister did a little investigation and told me that there was little else he could do as Ismail’s departure was final and his ship was about to leave for India. I made my way to the wharf and found Ismail on board. He sounded so helpless and I too felt the same because I was not able to honour the promise I made to Laliya. All I could do was inform a lascar on board to look after Ismail . . . When the ship returned to Fiji the same lascar informed me that upon reaching Calcutta Ismail died . . . I asked myself how could I relay this information to Laliya . . . With a strong heart I went to see Laliya and very gently the day after I informed her about the departure and death of her husband. She had some four months of indenture left and she too would be sent back to India. Her emotional state notwithstanding, she wasn’t given any leave as she continued to work on the plantation. What a cruel life and how cruel a system which has no compassion.

(Sanadhya, 1919/1973, 68–72 [redacted])

Sanadhya does not tell us what happened to Laliya. Was she sent back to India? Did someone marry her so that she could stay in Fiji? The story of this subaltern is incomplete, but the account given once again shows that indenture experience was perceived as ‘hell’: “[they] call it narak (hell)” (Burton, 1910, 271).

The perils of return

Diaspora theory is predicated on some statement about the ‘homing’ principle: the wish to return which remains unfilled (Mishra, 2007, 5–6). In the plantation diaspora, the right to return home was built into the agreement with the qualification that a free passage would be available only if one
had completed two five-year indentures. But crossing the *Kala-Pani* meant that an unproblematic return into a world left behind was not easy. Sanadhya makes this clear with reference to Guljari whose journey back home is discussed under the subheading: “The issue of caste upon return”.

The people of India reject their fellow Indian brothers who upon crossing the *kala-pani* return home . . . To my fellow Indian readers I wish to give you an example. Guljari, a Kanyakubja Brahmin originally from Kanauj, lived near my house in Fiji. Through hard work and through donations (to a Brahmin by fellow Indians in Fiji) he managed to amass the sum of 300 Rupees [£30]. One day he received a letter from his brother who demanded that he return home immediately or else he will carry the sin of killing a hundred cows. Bound by the *dharma* of a Brahmin he returned to India forthwith. Upon his return he found that he was not allowed to stay in his former home and had to stay next door. He gave all his money to his brother. A few days later the priest was called who along with the elders of the village discussed the consequences of crossing the black waters. Guljari explained eating routines on the ship and in Fiji. He was told that he had to sit through the recitation of a sacred text to which people of five or six villages should be invited and fed. To be able to do this, Guljari asked his brother to return the money he had given him. His brother flatly refused. Guljari was declared an outcaste and was rejected by his family. People treated him like dirt and said nasty things about him. Finally he wrote to his friends in Fiji who collected money for his passage back. In April 1914 Guljari returned to Fiji. Like Guljari many others came back to Fiji and in many instances turned their back on Hinduism and became Christian or Muslim.

*(Sanadhya, 1919/1973, 32–34)*

Sanadhya questions the ethics of rejection simply because someone out of necessity had crossed the black waters and by “crossing the *kala-pani*” had broken caste (Burton, 1910, 318). Why can’t they be re-incorporated into their original caste? What was their fault if through the false promises of the *arkatis* or because of the tyrannical nature of our social system they had to seek employment elsewhere? The *testimonio* turns its gaze back on the homeland without, of course, suggesting that the caste system itself should be radically overhauled.

**Songs of love-longing, departure and the absent homeland**

For those who never returned, folk songs were another form of *testimonio* which give us an insight into the trauma of indenture. After Sanadhya’s *testimonio* I turn to memorially reconstructed songs as another way of looking at subaltern memory and narrative. In Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, a last look at the homeland triggers memory of songs of departure and love-longing as Deeti sadly reminisces on those moments no longer available to her, and in particular that specially poignant moment when mothers sang their lament “when the palanquin came to carry their daughters away” (Ghosh, 2009, 414). These were memories from which they “would be forever excluded” (Ghosh, 2009, 414). She sings a song of lament:

The pond is dry
The lotus withered
The swan weeps
For its absent love.

*(Ghosh, 2009, 415)*
The song is taken up by other women on the ship, since women alone sang these songs of departure, capturing the “pain of the child who is exiled from home”. The men on the ship can only listen and through their silence acknowledge that it is women who capture feelings which as men they cannot utter:

How will it pass
This night of parting?

(Ghosh, 2009, 415)

At this point the narrator’s voice surfaces and we get one of literature’s great observations about the strange circumstances by which speakers of this language were carried beyond the darkling plain, across the dark waters to unknown “tapus”.

How had it happened that when choosing the men and women who were to be torn from this subjugated plain, the hand of destiny had strayed so far inland, away from the busy coastlines, to alight on the people who were, of all, the most stubbornly rooted in the silt of the Ganga, in a soil that had to be sown with suffering to yield its crop of story and song? It was as if fate had thrust its fist through the living flesh of the land in order to tear away a piece of its stricken heart.

(Ghosh, 2009, 416)

I want to suggest that the foundational semantics of the songs of these indentured labourers was so stubbornly rooted in the ‘silt of the Ganga’ and was always marked by a ‘stricken heart’.

Connective memory

Prosser (2011) has written about a particular “kind of music that is a return” in the sense that it takes us back to the past, to “where we came from, to what we’ve lost”. In other words, music functions as a bridge “between past and present” (2011, 137). These points, explains Prosser, were made in extensio by Daniel Barenboim’s discussion in his BBC Reith lectures in 2006 (lecture 2) about the incredible memory of the ear because it “helps us tremendously to remember and to recollect” (quoted by Prosser, 2011, 138). Barenboim, in turn, quotes Antonio Damasio’s observation that “sound goes very deep because of its closeness to emotion” (quoted by Prosser, 2011, 141). Hence contemplating the indentured diaspora, we ask alongside Prosser, “What is the power of music to bring back memory . . . [to enable us to] remember the country left behind?” (Prosser, 2011, 141).

Cast adrift by the black waters, damned as a consequence by loss of caste, the hope of return denied by distance, people of the plantation diaspora turned to memory as a way of making sense of their lives. Songs were their first points of entry, and, given their peasant origins, folk songs of the seasons, of birth, of weddings were the most common.

Regrettably there is no serious study of the transmission and recall of folk songs of the kind mentioned in Ghosh’s novel in Fiji. We have to turn to scholarship on the subject for a related plantation diaspora – Trinidad – to further our understanding of the role of folk songs and their recall in the old Indian diaspora.

Myers’ (1998) ethnomusicological account of the music of Hindu Trinidad notes significant continuities (and discontinuities) between songs in Felicity’s ancestral Bhojpuri-speaking villagers and their forgotten brethren in Trinidad. This exhaustive research points to the resilience of memory and an inner push to capture through songs a world no longer available to Indian
migrants in Trinidad. Invoking the work of Alan Merriam, Myers affirms the power of music, claiming that “music is culture” and “what musicians do is society” (Myers, 1998, xx).

Myers’ ethnography, quite correctly, begins with her erudite informant Umesh who is asked, “But what of kālāpānī (‘black waters’)? . . . All the books about indentureship mention kālāpānī.” Umesh’s reply comes as no surprise to us: “Kalāpānī is sending a person across a sea. It is a lifetime prison” (Myers, 1998, 6). The core of Myers’ research is a pressing one: “Cut off by time and distance from their mother culture . . . exploited and abused by English plantation owners . . . what songs would these people choose to sing?” (Myers, 1998, 31). Very quickly she discovers that their musical repertory is marked by songs about departure of the bride (byāh ke gīt), wedding and birth songs, and devotional songs often based on verses from the Tulsidas Rāmāyana (Tulsidas c.1574/1947). Importantly, these songs also capture a very Indian reading of time which is not Hegelian (in the sense that it moves towards a better world). Rather it is ‘cosmic’ in the sense that we are locked into a dark, degenerate fourth age (kāliyug) from which we can only nostalgically recall a distant golden age encapsulated in the kingdom of Rama, the god-hero of the great epic.13 In an act of reverse millenarianism, the predominantly Hindu labouring class made Rama’s return home after destroying the demonic Ravana the symbol of a glorious past they had forever lost against a golden future promised by the arkatis.

If the epic and Puranic narratives provide one class of songs, another comes from the changing seasons, and 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 Sāwan (July–August). These are the kajarı songs, nostalgic as well as romantic love-longing songs of the rainy season. The gathering clouds are connected with the sentiments of viraha, the feelings of a wife longing for the return of her husband. In the plantation diaspora, there was a painfully real side to these songs of love-longing as many women were lured into becoming bound coo-lies because they had been deserted by their husbands in India. And widows too would have found the Sāwan monsoonal songs especially poignant given their own standing as child-brides married to much older men, often dead long before them:

Blow eastern breeze, pain comes up!
Oh! pain comes up, oh! pain comes up!
Blow eastern breeze, pain comes up, oh!
What city at search my husband?

(Myers, 1998, 86)

The Sāwan songs are part of the “songs of the twelve months” (bārahmāsā) cycle, one of which, collected in Grierson’s 1880s path-breaking collection, tells us that each month is evocative of a particular emotion (Vaudeville, 1986). In the case of Sāwan, “The month of Sāwan is a fire of exceeding sorrow, which cannot even be born” (Myers, 1998, 266). Separation, reunion, love sickness, viraha, a husband working in a foreign land (bidesiya) are themes carried by the east wind. The life of Rama too is narrated in this bārahmāsā cycle where, in one version, for the month of Sāwan we read, “In Sāwan all the tanks and rivers are filled, Sītā and Raghūbīr [Rama] will be wet” (Myers, 1998, 275).

Oral viral memorials

There is a corrective to the absence of critical ethnomusicological work on Fiji Indian folk songs already mentioned. Due to the critical archival work conducted by Sudesh Mishra of the University of the South Pacific,14 I have before me three songs (referred to as bidesiyas, ‘songs
from afar’) sung by Kamla Wati which not only replicate exactly the songs my mother sang but also provide an additional archive with which to extend memories of indentured life.

Episodes from Rama’s life make their way into the songs of absence and none more so than those dealing with the life of Sita. Although relatively silent throughout the Hindi (Avadhi) vernacular version of the epic by Tulsidas (the plantation diaspora’s foundational religious text), Sita plays a crucial role in the plot of the epic.

Blessed is King Janak’s household
Listen O Kahariya the departure of Sita.
Beautiful and blessed is the city
Where Sita took her avatar.
Following behind a procession of girls
Sita enters the palanquin, O Kahariya.
Friends and relations gather around the door
And seeing Sita’s departure they cry, O Kahariya.
Lift the palanquin and carry her for
In your hands is the keeper of Avadh, O Kahariya.
As the palanquin is lifted, she cries
O Kahariya, listen to my prayers.
My life I’ll spend with my in-laws
Forever alienated from my parents.
Indoors my mother weeps incessantly
Sisters-in-law cry standing in the yard.
Friends cry wiping their tears
City folks cry as well O Kahariya.
And father too cries broken-hearted
As brothers follow the palanquin O Kahariya.
And when Sita reaches the city of Avadh
Such happiness will come to the place, O Kahariya.

Such is the affective value of the departure of the bride song that it is used in Indian cinema to capture moments of intense emotion. The emotion or rasa which infuses the song is that of kamma or pity which adds to the song’s impact as seen in the departure song-scenes of films such as Mother India (1957) (“Today the bride leaves for her husband’s house”) and Bambai Ka Babu (1960) (“You are going now, what thoughts bother you?”). Departure songs and songs of absence generally acquire additional emotional register when linked to Sāwan, the rainy season (Myers, 1998). Kalidasa’s memorable play was called Meghaduta (‘The Cloud Messenger’) and it is not uncommon to find songs in which clouds are addressed. Tropical clouds became symbols of the heavy, dark clouds heralding the coming monsoon back home and, in a sense, signalled precognitive and bodily connections between the drudgery of near slave conditions in the diaspora and the lost pastoral freedom of Indian fields. In another of Kamla Wati’s songs this much too is evident:

After the downpour do not go away O you clouds
Carry a message from me as well.
Offended by me why are you climbing away?
Come down for a moment O you clouds.
To you I will tell my lover’s secret mark
And his nature too O you clouds.
Dark of complexion with blazing eyes
But his name I cannot utter O you clouds.
His red eyes are filled with desire
And seductive ever so is his moustache O you clouds.
The city in which resides my lover
Make your rounds in that region O you clouds.
Some day for sure I will meet my lover
And I will find release from my pains O you clouds.
And some day you too may do a good deed
And take away the pain in a wife’s body O you clouds.

My mother was a product of the world of Sanadhya’s testimonios and of the world of folk songs. She remembered, often in their variant forms, many of the songs mentioned by Myers in her book and certainly those cited in this chapter. But the form that came to her most powerfully was that of songs of love-longing in the month of Sāwan, such as this early Fiji Indian bidesiya viraha sung by Kamla Wati:

Which village do you hail from, dear wanderer?  
To my village how have you come?  
I’ve brought news of your husband  
O beautiful one, I have come from the isle of Fiji.  
What message do you bring from my husband,  
Pray tell quickly and explain,  
And tell me in some detail too, O wanderer?  
The white men took your husband  
And dropped him off in Fiji isle.  
Indentured for five years he is  
To hoe in cane fields, dear one.  
Please take me to the isle of Fiji  
So that I can be with my husband.  
But Fiji is seven seas away  
How can I take you there, my dear?  
But when these five years are over  
Your husband will return to you for sure.

We may, for the moment, shift scenes here. Imagine that the woman is Totaram Sanadhya’s Laliya who has no idea where her husband Ismail is. In the original Fiji Hindi version, the third and fourth lines may be read as the wanderer within the country who has received news of her husband from possible returnees in Calcutta. In this reading the wanderer becomes a substitute lover figure, the pardesi, the foreigner, who comes with a message that soothes the wife yearning for her absent husband. The seductive power of the bidesiya (the roving minstrel’s song) resides in this double coding, a messenger who works on a wife’s desire and places himself as the substitute lover.

What drew people of the plantation diaspora towards the songs of departure and love-longing? In Sanadhya’s testimonio, return led to further pain since the black waters carried the stigma of ostracism. In the bidesiya folk songs of Kamla Wati, the language of absence and loss was symptomatic of a social disjunction and displacement which left permanent scars. Perhaps it is for this reason that for the people of indenture generally the Kala-Pani, the black waters, are so central to
a definition of an indenture and post-indenture selfhood as part of their lived experience and not necessarily historically defensible. To write a history of the plantation Indian diaspora, testimonios, songs and memory are important 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.

Acknowledgement

Unless otherwise shown in parenthesis all translations are my own. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in Interventions: Journal of Postcolonial Studies, 17(4) (July 2015): 548–567. Once again, this chapter is dedicated to my mother Lila W. Mishra whom I failed as a son.

Notes

1 Professor Brij Lal, the world authority on Fiji Indians, has drawn my attention to the letters and papers of Baba Ram Chandra who went to Fiji in 1905. His account of indenture, it seems, took the form of letters of complaint to officialdom. They do not constitute a testimonio as defined in this chapter and have to be left to others to assess within a different order of comparative historiography.

2 Girmit/girmitiya then carries a sense of both subaltern temporality (the time of girmit) as well as a sense of personhood (the act of being a girmit person).

3 In the Fiji Hindi sociolect girmit and girmitiya are used in a number of phrases and define a quite specific experience from which later migrants (the Indian comprador class for instance) are excluded. Thus one speaks of girmit kātmā (having completed girmit), dīsā girmit (another girmit), girmit log (people of girmit), girmit divas (Girmit Day), and so on.

4 The historical evidence suggests that arkatīs were, quite possibly, not single-minded and evil emissaries, and Kala-Pani too may not have had the same meaning for the lower castes. To examine the experience of indenture with these qualifications in mind would lead to the writing of a very different kind of chapter, which this is not.

5 Principally the two foremost castes, Brahmins and Kshatriyas.

6 Cross-caste relationship is captured in the phrase ‘jahājī-bhāi’ (‘ship brotherhood’) which created relationships of near-kinship during the passage. These kinship relationships were akin to family ties and often in the plantation were treated as such.

7 The economy was under the tight control of the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company (the CSR) which meant that even upon release from bondage (the period of indenture was five years, but this could have been extended, upon mutual consent, for another five years) Indian primary producers were paid a lot less for their products. It is in this context that as a free man Sanadhya was instrumental in bringing the lawyer Manilal to Fiji.

8 In a personal email (12 January 2012) Professor Brij Lal wrote, “The book was written by BC [Banarsidas Chaturvedi] to whom TS [Totaram Sanadhya] told his tale. That portion which related to the evils of the indenture system which could be used in the anti-indenture struggle was published as 21 Years. But material which concerned the inner tensions of the Indian community, reflecting badly on it, remained unpublished [in book form]. BC gave the ms to KLG [Ken L Gillion] who gave it to me."

9 ‘A New System of Slavery’ became the standard description of indenture after Tinker (1974) had given his work this title, which he borrowed from Lord John Russell’s description of the transportation of Indian labourers to Guyana. There is no evidence in Tinker’s book that he was familiar with Sanadhya’s testimonios. Sanadhya himself is unaware of Lord Russell’s description.

10 “To give voice to the subaltern is our godly duty.”

11 See Naipaul (1961, 185–186) for a novelistic version of plantation barracks and Burton (1910, 271–272) for a contemporary account.

12 I wish to thank Professor Makarand Paranjape for drawing my attention to these pages in Amitav Ghosh’s novel.

13 Helen Myers notes that in the village of Felicity “the monsoon month of Sāwan arouses in the village women images of fulfillment” (Myers, 1998, 264), which they also connected with the state of viraha that Krishna left the gopīs in.
I wish to thank Professor Sudesh Mishra of the University of the South Pacific for providing me with a recording of Kamla Wati’s *bidesiyas*. Ms Kamla Wati’s rendition is also acknowledged with gratitude. For an examination of the reception of Sāwan-related songs of Bollywood cinema in the plantation diaspora, see Mishra (2011, 89–108).

References