

Narrating Pain, Preserving Memory: Trauma and Testimony in Indentured Labour Narratives

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Abstract:

The history of indentured labour is marked by profound experiences of displacement, exploitation, and cultural dislocation. This paper, titled “Narrating Pain, Preserving Memory: Trauma and Testimony in Indentured Labour Narratives,” examines how survivors and their descendants construct, articulate, and transmit traumatic memories through written and oral testimonies. Drawing upon interdisciplinary frameworks from trauma studies, postcolonial theory, memory studies, and subaltern historiography, the study explores the narrative strategies through which pain is voiced and silences are negotiated. Indentured labour narratives—ranging from archival records, memoirs, and letters to contemporary fictional reconstructions—serve as crucial sites for reclaiming agency and resisting the erasure of subaltern histories. By foregrounding lived experiences of violence, familial rupture, and cultural resilience, the paper situates testimony not only as a form of bearing witness but also as a means of cultural preservation and intergenerational healing. Ultimately, the study underscores the role of narrative in transforming traumatic memory into collective history, thereby challenging dominant colonial discourses and restoring dignity to marginalized voices.

Keywords: Indentured labour, trauma studies, testimony, memory, subaltern studies, postcolonial narrative, displacement, cultural resilience, narrative strategies, collective history.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian indenture system, instituted in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery in 1833, represents one of the most significant yet under-documented labour migrations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1834 and 1917, more than 1.2 million Indians were transported across the seas to work on sugar, tea, and rubber plantations in European colonies such as Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Fiji, and South Africa (Tinker 32). This system, often described as “a new form of slavery,” was characterized by deceptive recruitment practices, brutal working conditions, and a profound rupture from homeland and familial networks (Lal 15). The journey across the “Kala Pani,” widely feared for its symbolic association with loss of caste and cultural identity, intensified the trauma of displacement for indentured migrants whose lives were reshaped by forced labour and colonial control (Look Lai 87). The global dispersal of indentured labourers created new diasporic communities whose cultural, linguistic, and emotional landscapes were permanently transformed by their plantation experiences. While these communities eventually forged hybrid cultural identities, the memory of indenture remained embedded in songs, oral testimonies, archival fragments, and later literary reconstructions that sought to preserve the voices of those rendered silent in colonial archives. Scholars argue that these scattered narratives form a “counter-archive” that contests official records dominated by plantation interests and colonial administrators (Gosine 54). Over generations, descendants of indentured labourers in the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius, and South Africa have continued to reclaim these histories through literature, museums, commemorative rituals, and community storytelling, thereby asserting the centrality of memory in shaping diasporic identity (Mishra 102).

The significance of narrative, memory, and testimony in recovering indentured histories lies in their capacity to humanize structural violence and illuminate experiences that colonial documentation obscured or erased. Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub emphasize that traumatic histories often survive not through formal archives but through fragmented testimonies that resist linear narration (Caruth 4; Laub 72). Indentured labour narratives similarly reveal how pain is transmitted across generations through affective memory, silence, and cultural practices. By foregrounding individual and collective testimony, these

narratives provide insight into the emotional, psychological, and cultural devastation wrought by indenture while simultaneously illuminating the resilience of oppressed communities. In this sense, the act of storytelling becomes both an ethical and political intervention—an attempt to restore dignity to those whose lives were long reduced to labour records, ship logs, and plantation reports (Sheller 139).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: LIFE UNDER INDENTURE

The lived realities of indentured labourers cannot be understood without examining the historical structures that shaped their recruitment, migration, and daily existence on plantations. Recruitment practices in North India and parts of South India relied heavily on *arkatis*, or local agents, who used persuasion, false promises, or outright deception to enlist impoverished labourers (Tinker 41). Many recruits—often fleeing famine, social stigma, debt, or caste oppression—found themselves trapped in contracts they did not fully comprehend. Once enlisted, migrants were transported to depots in Calcutta or Madras, where they awaited the long sea voyage across the “Kala Pani,” a crossing that carried profound social and cultural consequences. As scholars note, the voyage marked both a literal and symbolic rupture: it represented an irreversible break from homeland and caste networks, producing feelings of fear, contamination, and alienation that continued to haunt migrants throughout their indenture (Lal 28; Mishra 57).

The journey itself was marked by overcrowded ships, inadequate medical care, and the constant threat of disease. Mortality rates—although later regulated—remained high in the early decades of indenture, with cholera, dysentery, and respiratory infections claiming numerous lives (Look Lai 103). Upon arrival in colonies such as Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, or Suriname, labourers entered a regimented plantation system designed to extract maximum physical labour. Plantation life revolved around grueling work routines, harsh overseer supervision, and the constant threat of punishment for perceived insubordination or poor performance. Archival documents and later testimonies reveal frequent use of flogging, confinement, wage deductions, and extension of contracts as disciplinary measures (Gaiutra Bahadur 145). Women, in particular, faced a gendered dimension of vulnerability: they encountered sexual coercion by overseers, exploitation within domestic relationships, and a demographic imbalance that intensified their marginalization (Carter 92). Family structures were often fragile or forcibly disrupted, as plantation regulations and labour demands impeded marriage, stable partnerships, and child-rearing.

The economic and psychological impacts of this oppressive system were significant. While indenture promised wages and opportunities for upward mobility, most labourers found themselves trapped in cycles of debt, dependency, and economic precarity. Living conditions in plantation lines—crowded, unsanitary barracks—further undermined their physical and emotional wellbeing. Psychologically, migrants endured feelings of displacement, longing, and cultural dislocation, intensified by the loss of language, rituals, and community ties. Scholars argue that the trauma of indenture was not confined to physical suffering but extended to deep emotional wounds associated with isolation, cultural rupture, and the impossibility of return (Singh 168). These conditions created what Brinsley Samaroo describes as a “collective trauma of uprootedness,” affecting not only those who lived through indenture but also their descendants (Samaroo 204). Despite the oppressive structures of plantation life, indentured labourers developed diverse survival strategies that reveal their resilience and agency. Community networks formed within the barracks provided emotional support, cultural continuity, and shared resistance. Migrants revived familiar traditions—songs, Bhojpuri folk narratives, religious rituals, and festivals such as Holi and Muharram—to recreate a sense of belonging and maintain cultural identity (Jayawardena 76). Informal marriages, adopted kinship structures, and collective child-rearing practices enabled migrants to rebuild familial bonds absent from their earlier lives. Labourers also engaged in subtle and overt forms of resistance: work slowdowns, desertions, complaints to colonial officials, and occasional uprisings challenged the authority of overseers and plantation managers (Lal 112). Moreover, some labourers negotiated for land, accumulated savings, or used the post-indenture period to establish small farms or businesses, thereby transforming indenture from a site of exploitation into an opportunity for limited economic mobility. Taken together, the recruitment processes, the traumatic “Kala Pani” crossing, the brutality of plantation regimes, and the complex strategies of endurance reveal the multifaceted realities of life under indenture. Understanding this historical context is essential for appreciating the emotional and narrative dimensions through which indentured labourers and their descendants continue to articulate their experiences.

PAINFUL MEMORIES: REPRESENTATIONS OF TRAUMA

The narratives emerging from the indenture system reveal a layered constellation of traumatic experiences that shaped the lives of labourers across plantations. These traumas—physical, psychological, emotional, and gendered—are preserved in oral histories, archival records, and literary reconstructions that collectively illuminate the painful realities of indenture. As scholars of trauma studies note, the body often becomes the first site where oppression is inscribed, and in the case of indentured labourers, physical suffering formed the core of plantation life (Caruth 3). The memories of brutality and deprivation documented in these narratives underscore the structural violence inherent in the system and demonstrate that the trauma of indenture was both bodily and deeply affective. Physical trauma in indentured labour narratives is routinely associated with the brutal working conditions imposed by plantation economies. Labourers were required to work long hours in hostile environments—cutting cane under the tropical sun, clearing forest lands, or loading coal—work that demanded relentless physical exertion (Tinker 67). Overseers maintained discipline through corporal punishment, including flogging, confinement, the use of stocks, and withholding of wages. These practices were justified in official colonial records as necessary for productivity but are remembered in testimonies as acts of terror meant to break the spirit of the labour force (Lal 55). Many labourers bore scars from whippings or injuries inflicted during forced labour, and these marks became lifelong reminders of their subjugation. Illness, malnutrition, and death were omnipresent aspects of plantation existence. The barracks, often overcrowded and unsanitary, were breeding grounds for diseases such as malaria, dysentery, and respiratory infections (Look Lai 114). Nutrition was inadequate, consisting primarily of low-quality rations that rarely met the caloric demands of strenuous labour. Infant mortality remained high, and the early decades of indenture witnessed death rates that rivalled those of the Middle Passage, contributing to what historians describe as a “silent genocide” of plantation workers (Carter 123). The physical degradation endured by labourers is thus a central element in the memoryscape of indenture, shaping both personal and collective recollections.

The psychological trauma experienced by indentured migrants was shaped initially by their forcible separation from homeland, family, and culture. Recruitment often involved deception, and many migrants left without the opportunity to bid farewell to loved ones, resulting in profound emotional rupture (Mishra 61). The “Kala Pani” crossing symbolized more than geographical displacement; it represented a cultural death, as crossing the seas meant loss of caste and severing of ritual ties essential to social identity in India. Testimonies reveal that this loss produced enduring feelings of exile, disorientation, and cultural homelessness (Jayawardena 83). Once on plantations, migrants confronted an ongoing identity crisis. They struggled to reconcile memories of home with the alien environment of the colony, often existing between worlds in what Avtar Brah terms “diasporic space,” where displacement is both a lived experience and a psychological condition (Brah 193). This feeling of in-betweenness intensified the emotional strain of plantation life. The trauma of isolation was compounded by the inability to return to India, a dream cherished by many but realized by very few (Lal 121). As a result, emotional pain became interwoven with daily survival, and memory itself emerged as both a burden and a source of resilience.

Generational trauma is also a significant theme in indentured labour narratives. Descendants of migrants often inherit stories of suffering, loss, and endurance that shape collective identity within diaspora communities. Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory is particularly relevant: the trauma of indenture persists not because later generations experienced it directly, but because they grow up with the emotional residue of their ancestors’ suffering (Hirsch 5). Songs, folktales, silence, and even fragmented family histories transmit the wounds of indenture across generations, influencing how communities understand themselves and their past. Women’s experiences under indenture reveal a distinct dimension of trauma shaped by vulnerabilities linked to gender and power. The demographic imbalance—where women were far fewer than men—created an environment in which women were subjected to sexual coercion by overseers, plantation managers, and male labourers alike (Carter 97). Colonial authorities often failed to intervene, treating women’s bodies as extensions of plantation labour rather than sites of autonomy or dignity. Domestic relationships were similarly fraught; women commonly endured violence, abandonment, and exploitation within the barracks, conditions exacerbated by the stresses of indenture.

Motherhood under indenture was shaped by both emotional and physical hardship. Women faced reproductive exploitation, including pressure to produce children who would eventually enter the labour force, as well as limited access to healthcare, leading to high maternal and infant mortality rates (Bahadur 158). The trauma of

losing children—whether to illness, malnutrition, or overwork—features prominently in oral histories. Such losses compounded the emotional burden of displacement, reinforcing the perception that indenture threatened not only women’s bodies but also the very continuity of familial and cultural life. Women’s double burden of plantation labour and domestic responsibilities further illustrates the gendered dimensions of trauma. They were expected to maintain households, raise children, and contribute to plantation work—an unrelenting cycle that left little space for rest or emotional recovery. Yet despite these conditions, women also preserved cultural practices, maintained social bonds, and passed down stories, songs, and rituals that became essential to collective memory (Jayawardena 89). Their resilience underscores the multifaceted ways in which trauma was resisted, absorbed, and transformed within the community.

TESTIMONY AS RESISTANCE

The narratives emerging from the indenture system function not only as records of suffering but also as powerful forms of resistance that challenge colonial silencing. Testimony—whether oral, written, or literary—enables subaltern subjects to reclaim agency in contexts where their voices were historically suppressed. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub note, testifying becomes a political act because it “addresses the listener as a participant in the reliving of trauma” and thereby resists structures that attempted to erase or distort lived experiences (Felman and Laub 57). Within indentured labour histories, testimony operates as a counter-discourse, unsettling official archives that often portrayed labourers as contract-bound workers whose complaints were exaggerated or unfounded. Oral histories, folklore, personal writings, and fictional reconstructions thus emerge as crucial modes through which indentured communities articulated their pain, asserted their humanity, and preserved a memory that colonial authorities sought to control.

Oral histories form the backbone of indentured labour memory, functioning as collective repositories of trauma, resilience, and cultural preservation. Bhojpuri songs—birha, sohar, kajri, and nirgun traditions—carry emotional narratives of separation, hardship, and longing. Scholars such as Rajendra Prasad argue that these songs constitute “emotional archives” that document the inner lives of migrants far more vividly than official records (Prasad 102). Through metaphor, repetition, and lamentation, these songs narrate the pain of crossing the *Kala Pani*, the brutality of overseers, and the loneliness of life in the barracks. Even in diasporic communities generations later, these songs remain potent articulations of ancestral memory, preserving trauma in aesthetic form. Folktales and community narratives also serve as vehicles of testimony. Many stories recount supernatural encounters, moral allegories, or symbolic confrontations with authority—narratives that critics interpret as coded expressions of plantation oppression (Jayawardena 91). Community rituals, such as Holi, Tazia processions, and girmit commemoration ceremonies, further preserve and transmit trauma narratives. These gatherings enable descendants to collectively acknowledge ancestral suffering and negotiate intergenerational memory. As Ashwin Desai notes in the context of South Africa, such rituals act as “performative testimonies” that reclaim cultural identity while resisting historical erasure (Desai 144).

Written testimonies offer another crucial dimension to the narrative landscape of indenture. Letters written by indentured labourers—some preserved in colonial archives—provide firsthand accounts of deception, poor working conditions, and emotional distress. These letters, often addressed to recruiters or family members in India, reveal the stark contrast between the promised opportunities and the harsh realities of plantation life. Marina Carter observes that many of these letters were intercepted or censored by colonial authorities, demonstrating how the colonial state actively suppressed dissenting voices (Carter 119). Those that survived serve as rare, unfiltered testimonies of suffering and resistance. Autobiographical and semi-autobiographical accounts deepen this testimonial archive. Memoirs such as *Ibaadatnama*, essays by returnees, and later autobiographical writings by descendants try to reconstruct family histories from fragments, silences, and remembered suffering. Although few indentured migrants were literate, those who recorded their experiences provided invaluable narratives that countered plantation authorities’ representations of indenture as a benevolent labour system. Their writings establish what Gayatri Spivak calls “subaltern speech,” challenging the assumption that marginalized populations cannot articulate their own histories (Spivak 29).

Fictional reconstructions represent a vital component of testimony, serving as alternative archives that imaginatively recover histories often absent from formal documents. Novels, poems, films, and plays by authors such as Khal Torabully, Gaiutra Bahadur, Amitav Ghosh, Brinsley Samaroo, Subramani, and Rajendra Prasad recreate the emotional and psychological landscapes of indenture. These works weave together oral histories, archival fragments, and cultural memory, offering composite narratives that illuminate individual

and collective trauma. Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, for instance, reconstructs the recruitment process, the sea voyage, and early plantation encounters through characters whose experiences resonate with historical testimonies. Ghosh's blending of Bhojpuri, Hindustani, English, and pidgin forms what critics describe as a "linguistic archive of indenture," capturing the hybrid identities forged under colonial pressure (Ghosh 213). Poetry and drama also play crucial roles in transforming collective memory into literature. Torabully's concept of "Coolitude," for example, positions the indentured labourer as a figure of global displacement and cultural creativity, reclaiming dignity through poetic reimagining (Torabully 67). Through figurative language, symbolism, and narrative layering, fictional works articulate experiences that exceed the capacities of linear historical writing. They not only humanize archival gaps but also foreground the emotional truths of indenture—the fear, longing, humiliation, hope, and resistance that shaped migrant lives. In doing so, these literary works function as a form of testimony that counters colonial narratives and ensures the survival of diasporic memory.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN INDENTURED LABOUR NARRATIVES

Indentured labour narratives deploy a wide range of formal and aesthetic strategies to represent trauma, displacement, and cultural survival. Because traumatic experience often resists direct articulation, these narratives rely on fragmented structures, multilingual expression, symbolic landscapes, and nonlinear storytelling to convey the emotional complexity of indenture. Scholars in trauma studies argue that trauma "demands a language that breaks conventional narrative sequence," since the traumatic event often returns in shards rather than as a coherent memory (Caruth 6). Within the corpus of indenture writings—oral, archival, and literary—this fragmented narrative form becomes an important mode of witnessing, reflecting both the psychological rupture experienced by migrants and the historical discontinuities that shape diasporic memory. One of the most prominent narrative strategies is fragmentation, which mirrors the disrupted lives of indentured migrants. Many testimonies survive only in partial form—scattered letters, recollected songs, incomplete memoirs, or stories retold across generations. These fragments reflect what Stef Craps describes as "the broken archive of colonial trauma," where narrative gaps and silences are intrinsic to the history being told (Craps 44). Silence, too, functions as a powerful narrative tool: silences around sexual violence, lost children, or failed attempts at return often speak more loudly than explicit description. In many oral histories, for example, long pauses or abrupt shifts in topic highlight the emotional difficulty of revisiting traumatic memories. Repetition also plays a crucial role, particularly in Bhojpuri songs and folktales, where refrains echo the persistence of suffering and the cyclical nature of plantation labour. Repetition thus functions both as a mnemonic device and as a stylistic representation of trauma's intrusive recurrence (Laub 83).

Another key narrative strategy is nonlinear structure, especially in contemporary literary reconstructions. Novels and poems dealing with indenture often refuse chronological narration, instead weaving past and present into layered temporalities that reflect the intergenerational transmission of trauma. This nonlinear approach aligns with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, where descendants inherit memories not through direct experience but through imaginative reconstruction (Hirsch 7). By collapsing temporal boundaries, indenture narratives demonstrate how trauma permeates diasporic identity long after the original event has passed. Multilingual expression is central to the narrative world of indenture. Migrants carried Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Magahi, Tamil, Telugu, and other languages across the seas, and these languages evolved into new forms such as Trinidad Bhojpuri, Mauritian Creole, and Fiji Hindi. Literary works frequently incorporate these multilingual elements—songs, prayers, insults, plantation jargon—as markers of cultural resilience. The mixture of Bhojpuri and English in Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy*, for example, recreates the linguistic hybridity of the colonial encounter, allowing the text to function as a "linguistic archive" of indenture (Ghosh 223). Similarly, oral narratives and community performances employ code-switching as a cultural strategy that preserves ancestral languages even under conditions of erasure. Multilingualism thus operates not only as a stylistic device but also as a political assertion of identity within a history marked by forced homogenization.

Memory itself becomes an essential narrative technique in indentured labour narratives. Because experiences of indenture were inadequately documented by colonial authorities, the burden of historical preservation falls on community memory—songs sung at funerals, stories transmitted across generations, commemorative rituals, and reconstructed life histories. Such memory work challenges official narratives and emphasizes the emotional truth of indenture, which often diverges from archival facts. As Diana Taylor argues, embodied

memory stored in performance and ritual constitutes an important “repertoire” that complements and contests the written archive (Taylor 21). In indenture narratives, memory therefore becomes a space of resistance, enabling descendants to reclaim histories that were dismissed or ignored by colonial record-keeping. Finally, the representation of landscapes, ships, and plantations as trauma spaces forms an important symbolic dimension in these narratives. The recruitment depots of Calcutta and Madras, the ships that crossed the *Kala Pani*, the barracks known as “coolie lines,” and the plantation fields all appear as deeply inscribed geographies of suffering. Ships, in particular, emerge as liminal spaces where identity is stripped and recast; the voyage becomes a traumatic rite of passage marked by illness, death, and violence (Lal 59). Plantations are frequently depicted as carceral environments that regulate mobility, sexuality, and labour through surveillance and punishment. At the same time, landscapes can also function as spaces of cultural reconstruction—temples built on plantation grounds, communal gardens, and shared riverbanks become sites where migrants recreate aspects of home. These spatial representations thus capture the emotional geography of indenture, showing how trauma attaches itself to physical environments and reshapes diasporic relationships to place. Together, these narrative strategies—fragmentation, silence, nonlinear structure, multilingualism, memory-work, and spatial symbolism—form a sophisticated repertoire through which indentured labourers and their descendants articulate histories of pain and resilience. They underscore the fact that indenture cannot be represented through conventional narrative forms alone; rather, it demands expressive techniques capable of capturing the ruptured temporality, cultural hybridity, and emotional intensity of diasporic trauma.

TRAUMA, HEALING, AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE

The history of indentured labour is marked not only by dislocation, violence, and cultural rupture but also by extraordinary practices of survival and healing that emerged within dispersed communities. Trauma, although deeply ingrained in the collective memory of indentured descendants, evolves into a source of cultural resilience when transmitted through ritual, storytelling, and communal gatherings. The everyday life of the indentured labourer—its burden of forced labour, separation from homeland, and psychological wounds—produced a need for community cohesion as a form of emotional refuge. As scholars like Brinda Mehta note, diasporic communities “transform traumatic residue into cultural creativity” that enables both survival and continuity across generations (Mehta 42). Festivals, rituals, and shared cultural expressions thus became spaces where individuals could negotiate pain collectively and assert a sense of belonging in unfamiliar landscapes.

One of the most important sites of healing is the continuation of cultural practices such as Girmit commemorations, temple festivals, oral recitations, and communal gatherings. These practices allow descendants to ritualize the memory of their ancestors’ suffering while simultaneously celebrating their endurance. Mauritian scholar Marina Carter argues that cultural rituals in indentured diasporas act as “mnemonic anchors” that stabilize community identity in the face of historical rupture (Carter 118). For example, Girmit Day in Fiji is not merely a memorial of hardship but a performative reclaiming of history that counters the erasure of indentured voices in colonial archives. Through song, dance, food, and storytelling, communities symbolically reconnect with ancestral pain while reframing it as a source of strength and cohesion. Such collective remembrance practices transform public memory into a restorative act that bridges past injustices with present continuity. Memory itself functions as a key mechanism for healing and identity reconstruction. Cathy Caruth, in her influential work on trauma, emphasizes that traumatic memory often returns in fragmented, repetitive forms that seek narrative resolution (Caruth 4). Within indentured communities, these narratives—whether spoken, sung, or ritualized—provide the structure through which the unspeakable becomes representable. Oral histories, family stories, and even silences passed through generations form a living archive of affect and identity. The act of remembering, therefore, becomes a deliberate process of reasserting selfhood and reclaiming cultural agency in contexts where colonial powers attempted to erase or diminish their humanity. As Gaiutra Bahadur shows in *Coolie Woman*, the stories remembered and retold by descendants serve as counter-histories that illuminate what official documents obscure (Bahadur 15). Thus, memory becomes both testimony and resistance, a means of transcending the trauma that once defined the community’s existence.

Intergenerational remembrance plays a crucial role in sustaining cultural resilience. Trauma does not end with the individuals who experienced it; instead, it manifests in the narratives, behaviours, and emotional

landscapes of subsequent generations. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post-memory" is particularly relevant, describing how descendants inherit the emotional and imaginative weight of their ancestors' traumatic experiences (Hirsch 22). Among indentured communities, grandchildren and great-grandchildren often engage with stories of the "coolie past" through festivals, archival projects, family lore, and literary reconstructions, allowing them to reinterpret trauma through contemporary lenses. This intergenerational engagement fosters a collective identity rooted not in victimhood but in survival and cultural vibrancy. It also creates a dynamic space where the younger generation participates in preserving history while reshaping its significance for the future. Ultimately, trauma in indentured labour narratives is not solely a record of suffering but a foundation upon which healing and cultural renewal are built. Through community bonding, ritual celebrations, shared memory practices, and intergenerational storytelling, descendants of indentured labourers transform inherited pain into a resilient cultural identity. This process of remembrance not only preserves the historical truth of indenture but also reconfigures trauma as a source of solidarity, continuity, and self-definition. By reclaiming the past in these ways, indentured communities actively challenge the colonial silencing of their history and assert the dignity of their collective experience.

CONCLUSION

The narratives of indentured labourers—whether preserved through oral histories, letters, memoirs, or literary reconstructions—offer a crucial lens through which to understand the lived experiences of displacement, suffering, and resilience that defined the global indenture system. This study has shown that trauma in indentured labour narratives is multidimensional, encompassing physical violence, psychological rupture, cultural loss, and intergenerational wounds. At the same time, the endurance, creativity, and community cohesion reflected in these narratives demonstrate the remarkable capacity of indentured populations to transform pain into cultural continuity and collective identity. By examining testimonies as forms of resistance and healing, the research highlights how these stories function as counter-narratives that disrupt the sanitized portrayals found in colonial archives. They reveal hidden histories of exploitation, gendered suffering, and everyday survival strategies that official records either distorted or ignored, thus reshaping our understanding of the indenture experience.

An essential finding of this study is the profound relevance of testimony in *decolonizing history*. Testimonies function as sites of truth-telling that challenge the epistemic violence embedded in colonial documentation. Where colonial archives reduced labourers to statistical entries or "coolie" bodies, testimonies restore voice, emotion, and individuality. They allow descendants and scholars to reclaim historical agency, exposing the ideological function of colonial knowledge production and enabling new historiographic frameworks rooted in subaltern perspectives. Through oral traditions, community rituals, and literary expressions, indentured communities construct alternative archives that privilege lived experience over administrative authority. Such practices, as the research suggests, are central to decolonizing the methodologies through which indenture is studied and remembered.

Equally important is the role of narrative in *restoring dignity and reclaiming identity*. Storytelling—whether transmitted across generations or articulated in contemporary literature—serves as a medium through which descendants reinterpret ancestral trauma and affirm their cultural heritage. Memory, in this context, becomes a tool of healing, enabling communities to convert historical wounds into sources of strength and cultural resilience. Narrative practices such as Girit celebrations, Bhojpuri song traditions, and diasporic literary works reinforce a sense of belonging that counters historical erasure. They not only preserve the truth of the indenture experience but also assert the humanity, agency, and creativity of those who endured it. In reclaiming their stories, descendants reclaim their dignity, rewriting themselves not as the "subaltern subjects" of colonial discourse but as active creators of cultural identity.

This study opens several avenues for further research. Comparative analyses across indentured diasporas—such as the Caribbean, Mauritius, Fiji, and South Africa—could deepen understanding of regional variations in trauma, memory, and cultural resilience. More work is also needed on gendered testimony, especially considering the specific experiences of indentured women whose narratives remain underrepresented. Further interdisciplinary research that draws upon trauma theory, subaltern studies, memory studies, and postcolonial historiography can also expand the theoretical frameworks through which indenture is understood. Digitizing community archives and integrating oral testimonies into global academic discourse may offer new methods

for preserving and disseminating these histories. Ultimately, continued research must remain committed to ethical engagement, ensuring that the voices of indentured labourers and their descendants remain central to the ongoing task of rewriting and decolonizing the history of indenture.

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