



**Travelling Through Time and Space in Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin*: An Archive
of Displaced People Reengaging with Language, Gender, Religious and Caste
Identities**

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Abstract

This paper primarily analyses Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* and through a close reading of the text begins with an appraisal of how linguistic and socio cultural modes with respect to the "Jahajiya" have been affected due to displacement, and related issues. Thereafter it shows how Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* attacks prevalent attitudes towards gender roles, both in its own society and those beyond analysing how the preliminary assertions of gender have now come to include

concerns which go far beyond that of the first immigrants and have ensured the continued sustenance of the progressive gender discourse in the displaced community. The paper also looks at how caste roles and religious structures which came from India continued to impact and provide for a cohesion in the new world, and finally the paper moves towards its thesis query – whether forced hybridity due to displacement in a society and its accompanying loss of the original can be justified through multicultural imaginings today.

Key-words: time, displacement, Jahajiya, immigrants, caste and religion.

The “Jahajiya” experience has been the subject of much literary and academic intervention over the past few years. Notable authors like Webber, Dabydeen, Espinet and Peggy Mohan have all written on the diasporic experience. While all of them cover topics ranging from the central issue of the Indian indenture experience, alienation, displacement and dehoming, Indian-Caribbean racial anxieties especially in relation to African-Caribbeans, the last two, Espinet and Mohan in some ways have placed women and gender in the centre of their narratives. For the purposes of this paper I shall primarily take up Mohan’s *Jahajin* and through a close reading of the text, look at how the sudden displacement of the system of indentured labourers affected the labourers in their attitudes towards gender, language and caste and

religion. In this respect, Mohan's text is suitable as it is the only one which covers all four aspects in an attentive manner through the actual archival collection of oral narratives.

What *Jahajin* does as a text is to amalgamate the existing concerns of the "Jahajiya" experience, while giving it a definite direction. As Mohan is a trained linguist and an academician, her observations cannot be swept away simplistically, especially those which are related to the continued sustainability of Bhojpuri as common language amongst the "Jahajiya" community. Intertwined into this basic framework is a constant reminder for the need to question long unchallenged notions of gender, especially those relegating women to a speechless, spectatorial and spectral presence. The book constantly asserts the active and interventionist role of women in initiating, sustaining and successfully transposing the community to its new location in 'Chini'(Trini)dad. What is perhaps most disturbing is the acceptance of these women of the death of their roots, most explicitly stated by the central character, Deeda when she refuses to fret over the younger generation speaking Creole instead of Bhojpuri. The acceptance, even welcoming of change, and the fading away of the past, sets out a different world view from those who would seek to preserve and forcibly sustain a dying culture. Finally, the book asserts both the continued play of caste in the new world and its gradual demise, as well as the movement away from Hindu religion towards Christianity. Combined together, the four points converge to present a challenge to the continued existence of the "Jahajiya" identity itself. At the same time, the willingness to archive, to tell their stories, to chronicle their journey and hardship shows a willingness to engage and assert themselves. It is neither the passive acceptance of, nor the raging against of death but the willingness to create new dynamic meaning that sets apart this narrative of a displaced people from others.

My paper will proceed through an organised structure, firstly beginning with an assessment of how linguistic and socio cultural modes have been affected due to displacement, and how this changed society has now moved on to become something dynamic and interstitial. Secondly, it will take up and show how the text attacks prevalent attitudes towards gender roles, both in its own society and those beyond. It will show how the preliminary assertions of gender have now come to include concerns which go far beyond that of the first immigrants and have ensured the continued sustenance of the progressive gender discourse in the displaced community. Next it will look at how caste roles and religious structures which came from India continued to impact and provide for a cohesion in the new world, how they eventually proved to be more of an encumbrance than an asset and were eventually discarded. Finally the paper will move towards its thesis query – whether forced hybridity due to displacement in a society and its accompanying loss of the original can be justified through multicultural imaginings today.

1. Death of a Language

One of the things that Mohan passionately investigates from her professional training is the trajectory of Bhojpuri in the Caribbean islands. Within the geographical space occupied by the Indian Jahajiya communities, we find how various languages of the colonizers including English, French, Spanish and Dutch had influenced the Creole which had developed in these different islands. Mohan's own doctoral research area was Trinidad Bhojpuri, which at the time of her research was fast fading from the spoken world even of the Trinidad Indians. As she says in her novel:

...the language is Bhojpuri, not Hindi...Bhojpuri is a totally different language from Hindi and is grammatically closer to Eastern languages like Bengali...Bhojpuri shares a lot of word stock with Hindi, because Hindi is its neighbour directly to the West in India and because the Hindi belt has ruled over the Bhojpuri region for centuries. But Bhojpuri is not a dialect of Hindi, and it certainly isn't "broken" Hindi.

There were some important differences between Trinidad Bhojpuri and Bhojpuri in India. The language was less fragmented in Trinidad than in India, more of a unified lingua franca for the community...the language seemed to have come together in the migration to Trinidad.

So in that sense it really is a Caribbean language. (Mohan 46)

Mohan firstly establishes Bhojpuri as a language and not a dialect of another language. Secondly, she establishes it as a purer language than the various Creoles which are a part of Caribbean culture. Thirdly, she establishes it as a language distinct from the Bhojpuri in India today, no matter whether it is considered a dialect or a language. Indeed, she notes how "in Trinidad we think of Bhojpuri as one language, in India they think of it as a chain of dialects" (Mohan 47). She further notes how Trinidad Bhojpuri is somewhat akin to the sort of Bhojpuri that was spoken around Basti in India. She notes that the peak migration times from Basti to the Caribbean had included a large number of women. She uses this to make the further point that Bhojpuri did not hybridise to Creole forms unlike the African parent languages did because of the high percentage of women migrants from India who would have naturally taught the children

to speak in Bhojpuri. Her fifth point is that Trinidad Bhojpuri is not changing or getting hybridized or Creolized. Rather, she posits that Indian Bhojpuri has changed due to the assimilatory practices of the Indian government and the superimposition of Hindi. However, the narrative also notes how the Caribbean Bhojpuri language is now dying out, with hardly any of the newer generations using it in everyday life. This conundrum of an erstwhile robust language assertion now giving way rapidly to English, Spanish and other languages, becomes the portal of entry into Trinidad Indian society.

The situation of Bhojpuri within the Indian indentured population in Trinidad, and their descendants, is summed up by Jayaram-

Their economic exploitation was matched by cultural subjection, and there was continuous pressure on them to Creolise. That the Indians did not allow the total obliteration of their 'Indianness' under these conditions is indeed surprising. Though with some loss (including their language), the Indians still retain more of their own cultural identity than their African counterparts. Although through a process of koineisation the Indians evolved Trinidad Bhojpuri or Plantation Hindustani as a lingua franca, 'few recognise it as a language distinct from rather than derivative of Standard Hindi'. The lexical similarity (notwithstanding the morphological and grammatical differences) between the two languages resulted in this language being viewed as a 'corrupted' variety of Standard Hindi. The speakers of Trinidad Bhojpuri themselves referred to it as 'broken Hindi' or 'bad-Hindi'. Some even refer to it disparagingly as 'chamar Hindi' (low-caste Hindi) or 'gao bolee (village speech)'. The Trinidad Bhojpuri speakers used Standard Hindi as their index of comparison. Standard Hindi was viewed as 'Good Hindi'

or 'Proper Hindi'. They heard this Hindi spoken in Hindi films, which have a wide audience in Trinidad, and by the few expatriate residents (i.e., Indian nationals) there. In other words, the native speakers of Trinidad Bhojpuri themselves had feelings of inferiority about that language. This, is 'partly responsible for the failure of its speakers to transmit this language to younger generations of Trinidad Indians'. (Jayaram 52)

Mohan agrees with this pessimistic vision for the future of Trinidad Bhojpuri. The language has slowly become like a foreign language even to the native speakers and their children. Trinidad Bhojpuri is gradually facing 'language death'. This leads her to question whether something should be done about it.

However, Mohan has a deeper realization:

One day in front of (Deeda's) house I had seen a rusted half drum on a stand, with a handle to turn and husk rice. So I asked her, nostalgically, if she didn't think that food had tasted better long ago, with masala freshly ground on a seel-lorha at home instead of the curry powder we now got in the supermarket.

She gave me a sceptical look and told me that she didn't care at all. All that good food I was talking about, for her it was just a lot of hard work, and she was tired of that. Any amount of curry powder was better than always being poor, and tired. No, she said, things were plenty better now.

Something had exploded inside my head when she said that, and the mist cleared. At being such an idiot! All my middle-class angst and nostalgia suddenly

seemed like an affectation, and insensitive to boot. Would this also be true of the language? All the people who spoke it were poor, and they hadn't been to school. Could that have something to do with why it was getting lost? (Mohan 50)

Mohan seems to have realized that Bhojpuri as a language was looked upon as a symbol of the days of poverty and slavery amongst the Indian community and as such no one wanted their children to continue speaking in the language of indenture. It was almost as if having worked hard to move towards a new modernity and escape their shackles, the community had decided to jettison the language of the past and encourage their children to study French, Spanish, English and Latin, and forget about Bhojpuri. Throughout the story, Mohan herself has to employ the services of 'experts' in Bhojpuri, who maybe from her family like her mother or Rosa (an academic colleague). The Indian community does not use Bhojpuri in everyday speech, especially amongst the youngest generation to which Mohan herself belongs. Rather, it seems to be the domain of the oldest generation represented by the likes of Deeda who are dying out but are not bothered by the possible loss of their own language and culture amongst the coming generations. Indeed, there seems to be an active attempt to embrace hybridity and further avenues for growth. Mohan herself in her ancestry has Canadian blood and she is constantly encouraged to move beyond Trinidad for her own education and life – all except for going back to India. Mohan's decision to go to India is a break from the usual trajectory of the migrants who are trying to move away from India and the binds that it imposes. As such, Trinidad Bhojpuri becomes a passing link in the story of the migrant families. While on the one hand, it provides a strange unity to all the Jahajiya communities during the time of their indenture, it also becomes something that becomes a constant reminder of that indenture-ship. The only escape is to move

beyond and into the new. Trinidad Bhojpuri, having no other kindred languages to assimilate with, retains the quaint subtleties of the Basti dialect in a way that the Bhojpuri in India itself cannot because of constant interactions with other Indian languages. Trinidad Bhojpuri, therefore, has become mummified without interested native speakers generating current literary discourse.

During her later visit to India she notes how Bhojpuri in India in the name of greater diversity (which possibly would imply a greater dynamism) has broken up into many different 'micro-dialects'. As she notes, "Bhojpuri in Trinidad was dying fast, giving way to Creole English and standard English. In India it was fragmenting into smaller and smaller living universes, each too small to wield any real power without having had a golden age when the dialects had come together and unified the community. Bhojpuri had become 'pretty', rather than important. In India, Bhojpuri had never got out from under the thumb of Hindi" (Mohan 248). Mohan realizes that most of the Indians who professed to speak Bhojpuri actually used Hindi for all their official communications and reserved Bhojpuri for a little show of identity within certain communities. The younger children whom she meets in schools speak in Hindi to each other and only append certain Bhojpuri word endings in order to affect an air of conversance with the language. What is certain in both spaces, at least from Mohan's perspective, is the slow dying out of an established language.

2. Assertion of a Gender

Mohan's *Jahajin*, as the title itself suggests, refocuses attention on the narrative of the women of the Jahajiya community. Her acknowledgement begins by thanking two women Jahajins and the entire narrative is framed around the act of archiving the narrative of Deeda and her experiences on her journey from a remote village in India to Trinidad. The first chapter closes by invoking Parvati, whom Mohan describes as "the most independent of all goddesses" (Mohan 10) and the second chapter is titled "A Cargo of Women". She makes a pressing case for recognizing the uniquely gendered nature of the indentured population: "Roughly thirty per cent of the migrants on every ship were female. Some of these were women coming with their husbands, of course, and children. But most of the men were not travelling with wives. According to the records, most of these women were adults travelling alone" (Mohan 12). She recognizes how this data would be a great blow to the ideal of the Indian family and goes on to describe how the ships were compartmentalized to have separate sections for single men, married couples as well as single women. This means that there were a sizeable number of widows and children as well as women who in the words of Mohan, "were leaving their husbands and escaping...it may just be the easiest way to make a clean break from a bad marriage" (Mohan 14). This would seem to be out of place for many who would assign a secondary, passive position to women in 19th century rural India, but recent scholarship has also supported Mohan's narrative-archival findings-

One of the long-held myths about Indian women immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago is that they migrated with their families under the power, authority and control of their male relatives and were docile and tractable. These views ignore the historical documentation on the 'Indian Women Problem' which confronted the colonial office as far back as 1845 when Indian indentureship to

Trinidad began. Contemporary research in women's history has revealed that a large proportion of Indian women did make a conscious decision to seek a new life elsewhere.

They came as workers and not as dependents. (Reddock 41)

The reality of women escaping marriage by signing up for indentured labour is further backed by the author through archival tapes of oral narratives of Indian immigrants primary amongst whom is the character of Deeda. The centrality of women is invoked to explain how Bhojpuri had successfully existed as a lingua franca for the Indian indentured immigrants as on the plantation and sugar estates, community child bearing was practiced. Indian women, being very few in number, while enjoying pay and financial independence found it easier to assert themselves against traditional patriarchal binds which had fettered them in India. With the loss of traditional caste roles through forced interdining and forced sharing of common spaces during the voyage and barrack living on plantations, the shortage of women, as well as relatively fluid caste identities meant a general trend towards exogamy. Today, studies show that women generally have the freedom to marry outside their community, as long as they are marrying within Indians. The fluidity of caste in Trinidad is in stark contrast with the rigid marriage rules prevalent in India today-

Not only do endogamous patterns fail to exist, but marital trends appear to be quite the opposite. As revealed by our data, endogamous marriages take place in only 45 per cent of the cases in regard to caste and in 47 per cent of the cases in relation to varna. In contrast, ethnic group endogamy occurs in 99 per cent of the marriages reported, and religious group endogamy is found in 76 per cent of the marriages. (Schwartz 56)

In the narrative of Deeda we see how women become important not only in cooking, feeding and generally taking care of the man but also how they take over functions of medical care, oversee nursing of other women and also share the work of the men on the fields in cutting cane etc. Mohan's narrator traces her family back not through a patrilineal descent but rather through the women, all the way back to Sunnariya, explaining how all the woman characters played crucial roles in establishing the Jahajiya community in Trinidad through their interventions in business and their entrepreneurial vision. The relative independence of Indian women in Trinidad, especially in comparison to back home in India, has been captured by various commentators-

...five factors governing Hindu marriage-endogamy, exogamy, prohibited kin, virgin marriage and hypergamy- were broken down virtually irreparably. Moreover, as sociological research has now shown, the Hindu joint family among East Indians in Trinidad has almost completely vanished. First, there is no legal recognition of the system, even in a residual sense. Second, even when elderly dependents are part of an extended family (itself of a drastically reduced frequency) they are neither necessarily the patrilineal relatives nor those with decisive voice in family affairs. Marriage by choice rather than arranged marriage is the rule. And, the initiative and enterprise shown by Indian women in all kinds of businesses-from vegetable-selling to store-keeping- is there for any observer to see. Although, research is needed on the subject, there are definite indications that employed East Indian women in middle class homes maintain their separate bank-

accounts. Dowry has been almost entirely replaced by an equal exchange of gifts from the bride's and the bridegroom's side. (Jain 316)

Deeda herself becomes the narrator of her story in some ways. Although Mohan's narrator persona is narrating, Deeda weaves her own narrative into songs using the rudimentary frameworks of existing folk narratives and tunes in order to produce an original narrative of her own experiences. The narrative voice is definitely feminine and is not afraid of asserting itself and its role in an otherwise patriarchal world. However, the narrative voice is also assertive and active and forces the male character to merely toe the line in some ways. Saranga always is the one to take the initiative to throw herself into the stream, and be born anew. It is Sada Birij who is always left behind waiting. This is the story of the Jahajin, the women who threw themselves into action, headlong into adventure leaving their men behind.

In this fashion, the entire narrative does not become merely that of suppressed gender. Indeed there seems to be a gradual development in the level of assertion of the feminine voice as the narrative proceeds from the time of the first immigrants to present days and also in the spatial difference between India and Trinidad. The author, when she travels back to India in the novel, realizes how much of the notions of rigid gender roles, which had disappeared from her own society, remained amongst those in India. When she is accosted by a group of professors of linguistics in Patna as to her caste, she realizes that the rigid structures of Indian society had broken down to a large extent through "the female energy released in the migration" (Mohan 254). No wonder, she did not meet any female linguists working on Bhojpuri in India although in her experience, in Guyana, Mauritius and Suriname, all the linguists were women.

3. Issues of Caste and Religion

What is hinted at initially in the subtext and finally in the open is also the subtle undercurrent of a dying caste system. The caste system in India which in some distant past was linked to the profession of the person, but also turned into a tool of systematic oppression finds mention at the very beginning of Deeda's initiative where she introduces her father as belonging to the rauniyar kahaar caste and her mother to the dhodiya kahaar caste. However, Mohan's understanding of caste becomes more of a yard stick of shared brotherhood and a symbol of profession rather than a tool of oppression. Deeda introduces all the people she meets in her travels through their castes which include a medley of other kahaars, pundits, ahirs and kurmis. Amidst this potpourri there are also Muslims, handicaps and other odds and ends of a lower class society impoverished by famine and the apathy of the government. Despite differences in caste, ranging from the very bottom as well as the top, there are no experiences of social exclusion, humiliation or oppression. The entire attitude towards caste even before they reach open seas that is before they lose their religion and caste seems to be more of sharing information rather than establishing hierarchies. For example, Janki the Sonarin is not favoured as the keeper of children because of her caste but rather because of the loss of her own child during the passage and her own traditional role which did not include work beyond her house.

Even when other people are introduced through caste names, the intention is to indicate profession. For example, the term 'laskar' is used for both Hindus and Muslims who work in the boiler room of the ship. Some of the hardships confined living in close proximity forced people to give up many of the more rigorous caste practices including separate dining etc. However, the assertion of Mukoon Singh also had the possible background of his landowning zamindari past playing as a factor in which everyone agreed to accept him as the defacto head of the

community. Although this is not asserted in clear terms, his turban as a sign of his position is a strong reminder of caste symbols prevalent throughout the narrative. Having lost their caste, the Jahajiya community seems to have created a new imagination regarding caste.

The reasons behind the gradual dissolution of caste are summed up by Nevadomsky-

In spite of partial successes in reconstituting some traditional family and marriage patterns, East Indian community life could only be an approximation of pre-indenture patterns. The systemic linkages between national and local institutions took a different form in Trinidad where relations of social class and race rather than caste dominated social organization. Moreover, although traditional culture represented the general ideological framework for social action, conformity to it was often a matter of personal inclination for no official penalties could attach to non-compliance in a society which regarded Indian culture as alien and barbaric. As far as settlement patterns were concerned, the establishment of villages was most often determined by government land policy and the interests of the planters rather than by the residual caste and jati considerations of post-indenture laborers. The majority of villagers were in any case laborers and fanners so that caste had to be relegated to the background, as an aside in marriage negotiations or as an idiosyncrasy of interpersonal relationships. Panchayats seem to have come into being for a short time but whether or not these were anything more elaborate than vigilante groups remains unclear. Local social control was probably based on a combination of vigilante intimidation, the “charisma” of influential villagers, and the plantation management. (Nevadomsky 112)

For the narrator, “the caste system was something else. It was the little workshop behind our shop where the gold was smelted, milled, soldered, chiseled and electroplated gold on gold and the jewellery made. Where things they didn’t even teach in chemistry at school happened every day, things we discussed in the house using both the old Bhojpuri words as well as the modern scientific terms in English...every boy in our family...had had to learn the basic trade...we were still doing the caste trade we had done in India...so what was our problem with the caste system?” (Mohan 143).

But the issue of caste is also linked to the issue of religion and conversion. Mukoon Singh converted to Christianity despite being a thakur as he probably sought some benefits from the new religious elite. However, the author’s family had decided to convert as a way of moving up or at least escaping the social hierarchies of India. Conversion was also impacted by the Canadian Missionaries, who find brief mention in the book, along with their “Susamachar” or Good News Church. Set up through the efforts of the Mortons, a Canadian Presbyterian missionary couple, the church itself had a linguistic intervention which gave them substantial edge over other churches in encouraging conversion. Prorok provides a detailed and substantive review of the rise of the church amongst indentured Indians and notes the role of Hindi in promoting conversion-

Since John Morton’s goal was to evangelize among the East Indians and they were resisting his invitations to visit the church, he established a school on the church’s doorstep within three months of arriving in Trinidad. The lessons were especially designed for the Indians and given in what was still broken Hindi (Bhojpuri). Morton’s Hindi would improve, the number of schools would

increase, and they would become the trademarks of the mission. His success with the school encouraged him, and by October of 1868 Morton explained the need for a purely Indian service:

“With respect to the village I thought it better not to attempt gathering the Indians into the Church, where they would feel less at ease and where the discourse being more formal I might fail to gain their interest through want of acquaintance with the language. I therefore meet them in companies in their own houses, or sometimes by the road side.”

During visits to East Indians in their homes and shops, and in estatebarracks, Morton employed a number of techniques. These included learning Hindi, observing Indian religious life in order to converse freely with Indians, providing simple medical and legal assistance, denying caste, making a Hindi hymnal, and going anywhere to help East Indians, a practice that earned him both trust and respect. Sarah Morton gained the confidence of women and opened an orphanage for girls...

Eventually, the Mortons applied to the Foreign Mission Board in Canada for another missionary. With his help, and also the assistance of recent converts, Morton established the first formal “Indian Church” in San Fernando in 1871. He called it Susamachar, or House of Glad Tidings. (Prorok 382)

The conversions were also expedited by this particularly Indic language tilt as it helped differentiate the community from other Afro-Caribbean immigrants. There seems to be an undercurrent of difference which the Indian community sought to extend in regards to the blacks

which signifies a certain degree of racism. Strangely, the role of the church in helping consolidate the Indian community probably created a strong positive impression regarding the role of the missionaries, which helped keep this separate Indian identity intact through separate churches. Of course, this was also reinforced by their intervention in health and education. The newer professions of the 20th century like law, medicine, technical sciences and others required a knowledge of English, which would be taught in the mission schools, providing a new avenue for Indians to break free of restrictive traditional structures-

Given their marginalized position as illiterate Hindi speakers in Trinidad's colonial society, most families who sent their children to the Presbyterian school primarily considered the church a vehicle for raising their social and economic status and did not see themselves as traitors to Hinduism or Islam. Providing an education specifically for Indians had another effect; it allowed Indians to maintain their cultural isolation from African-Trinidadians for a longer period of time, thereby inhibiting their integration into Trinidadian society. Hence, the need to have free and open access to schools tailored specifically to the East Indian community, in order to attract them in the first place, actually provided a means for the community to acquire formal education without giving up its traditional ethnic and religious identity. In this sense, East Indians could resist integration while simultaneously engaging in a relationship with a religious and social institution whose very nature was designed to promote assimilation in colonial Trinidad. (Prorok 386)

Despite all this, the urgent desire to escape caste and its hierarchy occupies a central space even in Mohan's own narrative. As Nana, the narrator's grandfather says on being asked "I asked Nana, then, why his father had become Christian. I was not too comfortable about the dissonance it created with other things Indian about us. We weren't white, after all, we were Indian. Why had we chosen to be different in this way? Nana was imperturbable, and his reply always came pat: the caste system" (Mohan 143). Later on Mohan admits "Nana's dream was to take his children into the middle-class and to take the next generation into the professions. Then later he had a bigger dream. The next generation would meet Brahmins as equals on the Brahmin's turf. I had become a linguist" (Mohan 144). Mohan is to fulfill this dream only when she travels back to India where she is confronted as to her caste by an old man who is a professor visiting at the institute in Patna. Up to the point when she does not reveal her caste, she is referred to using the Bhojpuri word 'rauwaan' which has the same meaning as the Hindi 'aap'. Her foreign looks, affiliation to the University of Michigan as well as her knowledge of Sanskrit did not merit the informal Bhojpuri 'te' which would be equivalent to the Hindi 'tu'. As Mohan describes:

While we were having lunch, the old man, who was sitting next to me, casually asked me my caste. My surname was merely my great great grandfather's first name, and not a caste label as was common among the higher castes in North India. So my caste was not obvious to him.

I decided to give the expanded version this time. I was a mixture of sonar, ahir, kurmi and thakur, I said. The first three castes on the list I learned later were known as Other Backward Castes. Two of them were actually peasant castes.

The old man's smile froze and in his next question to me, all the honorifics were gone. The conversation continued like this for a few minutes, with the other professors uncomfortably trying to address me as 'te', the Bihari equivalent of 'tu' which had a real sting in the tail...

Then the old man took a decision.

'You are a linguist,' he said in English, 'and for us a linguist is like a Brahmin.' Then the honorifics were back and everyone else relaxed.

I inclined my head politely, and smiled. But my thoughts were far away, far across the salty ocean with Nana, who had distanced us all from the Bhojpur of the sugar estates and bided his time till the end of his life. Waiting for the day when Brahmins from the Bhojpuri heartland would have to recognize his descendents as their equal in learning. I had brought one long meandering journey to an end. (Mohan 249-250)

However, Mohan mentions another sort of bond amidst the Trinidad migrants. This was the bond that existed between families that had come on the same boat from India. She describes this as "like being from the same caste, or better yet from the same gotra, clan. It cut across caste lines, and was a relationship you could take for granted" (Mohan 135). It maybe strange to invoke terms indicating caste differences like gotra in order to define a relationship which cuts across caste divisions but this usage demonstrates how Trinidadians have a very different attitude towards the concept of caste than is prevalent today in India. The reforms within Trinidad Hinduism, as can be expected, essentially ensure a movement away from caste based hierarchies.

In a sample study in the town of Boodrum in Trinidad, Schwatz notes the active movement away from caste norms, whether it be in terms of untouchability, access to public spaces, inter-dining or inter-marriage. The suggestion is that even if they may exist in some pockets, they are looked upon as 'individual', exceptional or strange. Moreover, there is no social or religious sanction that is attached to such practice whatsoever, a huge difference from the situation prevailing in India today. Moreover, Hinduism has moved from being a religion aimed at transcendental truths, towards a religion being concerned with immediate material concerns. Hinduism has borrowed heavily from Caribbean-Creole practices like witchcraft and shamanism, and has become divorced from traditional Hindu metaphysics and philosophy, at least in day to day living. All in all, it has moved away from rigid constrictive structures in a manner not imaginable in India today. In some ways, Hinduism has become Creolized. This has been captured by Schwartz-

The reinterpretation of Hinduism in Boodram appears to be directed by one central concept: immediate reward. It is pervaded by the use of supernatural techniques to achieve success or rectify crises in secular aspects of life. There is little concern with theological or metaphysical doctrine. Hence, formal aspects of Hinduism are manifest to a lesser degree than those of popular Hinduism. The concern with immediate rewards and the use of supernatural agents in the life of the villagers of Boodram suggest two major points. First, there is a great concern and interest in these secular aspects of life and less with the sacred aspects except insofar as the latter are adaptive mechanisms or are directly correlated with crises situations. There is more emphasis on magical practices and rituals than there is with theological doctrine. Secondly, there are almost no validatory or

justificatory aspects provided by Hinduism in Boodram. These factors reflect a transitional society moving in the direction of increased economic and political opportunities. Certainly they are not conducive to a rigidly stratified society. (Schwartz 12)

4. Conclusion

Trinidad Bhojpuri, along with the Indian identity that had been carried over is dying a slow and certain death. The institutions of society including gender and caste roles, religion as well as language have all been radically changed through the years and have morphed into forms which have little in common with similar institutions in India today. There seems to be an attempt on the part of the society in general to move from its indentured past and assert an independent tomorrow. The language is being lost not because of any reason other than that it is not being propagated by the speakers of the language on to the next generation. It is only fragmentary and sentimental use that is frequent with the younger generations who no longer find any use for it in a more assimilatory and accepting social setup.

We can tell that a language is dying when its ethnic community begins to use it for less and less of its in-group communication, as more 'serious' work is left for a 'more modern' language; and when the community itself ceases to use it as a native language. It is only after this point that the language, now dead, begins to 'decay'. This 'decay' is not because the words and grammar are inconvenient, or 'difficult'. This 'decay', if the 'body' is kept around to rot, is only the result of the shift to a new native language: the language is now being clumsily used by

people who have become foreigners, despite their best efforts to maintain the old identity.

.... When one of the languages is too strong, and the advantages of joining that group too great, and the stronger group too welcoming, the weaker group will probably opt for change—rapid change. And keeping up the old language for sentimental reasons will become a drain and a struggle. Old software, lying on a shelf, with no computer that needs it. (Mohan, “Two” 133)

Mohan sums up the situation regarding the loss of language in her recollection of a conference she had attended in Fiji-

One thing was certain: we no longer lived our everyday lives in Bhojpuri. Not even us, the linguists at the conference, who had done our PhD dissertations on Bhojpuri as it was spoken in each of our diaspora lands. Perhaps because we all had worked so hard to know Bhojpuri, because our knowledge of the language was not in doubt, we could go beyond the great pretense of having managed to freeze time, and admit that the language we all spoke now was something else, not Bhojpuri. That we had moved on! (Mohan, “Indians” 3-4)

To end it would seem that now there is a wider acceptance of the idea of creolization as a lived beneficial reality amongst the indentured population in the Caribbean. Whereas the early Indian settlers actively resisted creolization, the current generation seems to be welcoming it. The movement away from roots and towards a future of possibilities seems to be ingrained in their society. The loss of a language, a social hierarchy, of traditional gendered roles, of religion

etc. are all seen as necessary for the revitalization of the community. They are not losses to be countered through structured planning, nor are they to be preserved and mummified. They are merely a part of a time which is over. The inherent liberal attitude towards society, culture and community which has been the product of this churning over space and time has produced a living, vibrant culture- a culture which is mature and forward looking, and today forms an integral part of the colourful Creole of the Caribbean. What is of more interest to us Indians would be the parallels which our own society is showing in its own development. Are we not also facing erosion of traditional languages? Are we not also upturning traditional stratifications of society? Are not women in our society also slowly moving towards greater liberation? Is not religion slowly losing its immediate and vice like grip on all aspects of life? Are not we also globalizing, hybridizing and creolizing? Perhaps, instead of trying to see how Indian Caribbean Indians are, we need to see them as being in some ways ahead of us in time. In some ways, what has happened to the Indian indentured community in Caribbean then would become an indication of what is happening to our society now, and perhaps we can turn the mirror around to see how we will soon be here in India. As Mohan puts it-

Why do we all look alike, but so different from the Indians we see in Delhi? Because the Indians, who would look like us, in the Bhojpuri heartland we came from in India, are still poor, and don't dress like us, don't live as we do. But they will, some day. They want to. The link between us isn't gone: it just hasn't yet come of age. Because we are Mother India's advance party, as it were, sent out to test the global waters. We are Mother India's pilot project. We are a glimpse not of the past, but of India's best future!

...Indian women, often with stylish short hair, who take English for granted, mixing in a bit of Hindi, as they speak, the way we would mix in Creole! Mothers bring in their little girls, on weekends, dressed in pretty colourful shorts-and-tops, the same ones I wore as a child.

...India is not going to turn into the U.S. But it looks like it is turning into the Trinidad I knew as a child...The people we have become, in Trinidad, are curious about this new modern India...Not defensively... But as though these things of modern India are ours to claim, as much as Western culture is.

... Don't you think it has all turned out very well? (Mohan, "Indians" 11)

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