Her Middle Passage
A journey to unravel the truth of one woman’s courageous crossing reveals a social and family history of indentured labour migration from India to the Caribbean

By GAIUTRA BAHADUR | 1 September 2011
OUR JOURNEY TOOK US past endless fields of flowering yellow along the northern bank of the Ganges. When we pulled into towns, we asked for directions, from children balancing loads three times their size on their heads, from crouching women tending baskets of cauliflower and brinjal by the roadside, from men in the stores that stared open-faced onto the street, framing a tailor at his sewing machine or a man pumping air into bicycle tyres. We sought the guidance of random people on the route, turning to them as to a
collective human compass. And they obliged. They pointed us along bumpy roads bracketed by tiny pastel altars made to worship the sun, until one man finally indicated a rocky path. “That way,” he said.

We had travelled five hours over shell-pocked roads and narrow dirt lanes to arrive here, at the threshold of a place I wasn’t even sure still existed. It did a century ago. That’s what a document that I had discovered two years earlier, in Guyana’s National Archives, indicated. It was the emigration pass issued to my great-grandmother on 29 July 1903, the day she sailed from Calcutta to the Caribbean.

Catalogued on this brittle artifact, yellow and crumbling with age, was everything about Immigrant #96153 that the imperial bureaucracy had considered worth recording: “Name: Sheojari.” “Age: 27.” “Height: five-feet, four-and-a-half inches.” “Caste: Brahman.” Here was colonial officialdom’s cold summary of an indentured labourer’s life. Yet, it included strokes of unsettling intimacy. The emigration pass told me that my great-grandmother had a scar on her left foot, a burn mark. Someone had scribbled “Pregnant 4 mos” in pencil at the document’s edge. On the line for husband’s name, there was only a dash.

Though my great-grandmother claimed no husband, she did list coordinates for home. The pass pointed to it precisely, almost like a map to some mythic location with hidden riches. X marks the spot: the state of Bihar, the district of Chhapra, the administrative block of Majhi and the village of Bhurahupur. There rested the past, buried. And here we were, just a few kilometres away, more than a century later, hoping to excavate lost history.

Bihar isn’t a place where people typically go in search of buried treasure. Although it was once the seat of a vast and ancient empire stretching to Iran, few people see it now as anything but the bowels of India’s Cow Belt. Its per capita income is among the lowest and its illiteracy rate among the highest nationwide. One historian has branded the state, the country’s second most populous, “the stinking skeleton in the cupboard of Indian democracy”.

It was November 2005, four days before state elections—a bad time to be travelling in Bihar. Ballot boxes had been stolen at gunpoint in the past. And Maoist rebels had just broken out of a jail south of the capital, Patna, when we set out. The police had been ordered to keep civilian vehicles off the roads until the votes had been cast. One of my guides decided we would pose as journalists to get past the roadblocks. He taped a phon[y PRESS sign on the windshield of our white Ambassador. Surprisingly, our Scotch-taped ruse worked. Armed policemen in khaki fatigues stopped us, but they didn’t ask for credentials. They took us at our word.

Now, as we idled at the threshold in the bulky Ambassador, my guide Abhijit eyed the impossibly small lane separating us from my great-grandmother’s village. He chuckled. “That’s a great scene, just like Veer-Zaara,” he said, with a sudden, sarcastic edge. “Preity Zinta is searching for her forefathers.” He
was referring to the Bollywood movie that had cast its dimpled starlet along village back roads in search of a lost love—not lost forefathers. But the imprecise analogy seemed somehow appropriate to the journey I was on. Ancestral memory had told my family the story of who we are: brown-skinned people with many gods and peculiar, stubborn habits. It had told us imperfectly. Memory, after all, fails us. That, we expect, especially over generations and across oceans. Details get smudged, and dialogue garbled. The will to remember the past is undermined by an equally formidable will to forget. Given how facts had fared with the passage of time, how could I do anything but fumble my way inaccurately through India? I had to rely on Abhijit to name things like the yellow fields, and the comedy was unavoidable. “Is it saffron?” I asked. Yes, he said—though saffron does not grow anywhere near this corner of the subcontinent. Those stalks were mustard.

Upon our arrival, women, some of them crying, surrounded me. Abhijit and I were offered throne-like wooden chairs in the courtyard. We sat, awkwardly, and drank tea. I was made to recite the story of my great-grandmother, to the extent that I knew it: Her name was Sujaria, and this was her village. The British took her away in 1903 to work their sugar plantations in a place now known as Guyana. She sailed on a ship called The Clyde. My grandfather was born on that ship. Abhijit interpreted some of this—how much, I was never really sure—and there were more tears by the women. It seemed to come as a revelation. None of them had known anything about her.

I feel like I barely do either. I have little to go by to unravel her story, except for the minimal clues on the emigration pass and one elevating act of transatlantic naming. She called her child Lal Bahadur. Lal is an endearment that means something like “beloved son”. And Bahadur used to be a title like “sir”, often earned by men who had proven their mettle in the military, but is now more commonly used to mean “brave” in Hindi and Sanskrit. The last Mughal emperor, for instance, won the title: Bahadur Shah Zafar rallied the first rebels against the British in 1857. Bahadur was the nom de guerre of a popular 1980s comic book hero, a battler of dacoits in the subcontinent. In my own family, the name seems to have come into being, along with my grandfather, on The Clyde. As far as I can tell, Sujaria made it up. It wasn’t her name. It wasn’t the name of the man she ultimately married in Guyana. And, if the archives are to be believed, she had no husband on leaving India. She conferred a high title on the child of her middle passage, apparently born out of wedlock.

It’s pleasing to think the bahadur—the hero of this story—was Sujaria herself. She did, after all, leave a village in the most conservative corner of India. She was 27 at the time, middle-aged by the standards of the day. Sujaria had much to lose by crossing the Indian Ocean. This was a forbidden passage, especially for a woman, especially for a Brahmin and most especially for a Brahmin woman travelling without a male relative. I like to think she claimed the decidedly masculine title of Bahadur for women, too.
Sujaria was a passenger on *The Clyde* and also part of its cargo. The iron sailing ship, owned by the Welshman James Nourse, ran a regular route between the West Indies and India, exchanging salt and railway iron for “coolies”, the term the British used to describe the indentured servants who succeeded slaves as labourers on their plantations across the globe. From 1838 to 1917, half a million Indians travelled to the Caribbean to grow and cut sugarcane. That migration had put thousands of kilometres and an even greater psychological distance between me and the village women whose tears at the time seemed to implicate me—to twist me into the hem of their saris and their suffering, to knit me into their family tree and their fate. It was not an offering I could comfortably accept, much like the brass cup of water that they extended and that I had no choice but to take. Who were they to me? Strangers. Or kin. Possibly both.

**I COULD NOT FIND ANSWERS** in India, and so my search shifted from the potholed roads and mustard fields of Bihar to the reading rooms at the National Archives in the UK. What I found there was a revelation. I had thought that my great-grandmother must have been an exception. As it turns out, mystery darkened the lives of many women who left India as coolies. The hint of scandal was shared.

Some historians have called indenture “a new form of slavery”. In many ways, it was—but the story is more nuanced than that, especially for women. They possessed a subtle power based on their ability to leave what—or who—they had for another. From the beginning, men well outnumbered women in all of the colonies that turned to indenture to rescue their plantations from ruin after slavery was abolished. This was the case in Fiji, in Mauritius and in the Anglophone Caribbean. And it gave the women sexual leverage. They took new partners, often. Theirs was a tale of leaving their country and leaving their men—which some had done even before leaving the country.

Sujaria was 260 kilometres from her village, in the city of Faizabad, when an agent for the British Empire registered her for its sugar colonies. Faizabad sits on the edge of the holy city of Ayodhya; in the late 19th century, the area was known as a magnet for wanderers. Temples and holy sites, then as now, were natural places for runaways to seek refuge and alms. Labour recruiters looking for people desperate enough to cross *kala pani* or the “dark waters” of the Indian Ocean, thus losing caste according to Hindu orthodoxy, found them in exactly such places. A British colonial administrator, writing in 1882, noted that Ayodhya “furnishes many recruits (for indenture) from among its pilgrims”. It may have been where my great-grandmother met her recruiter. The fact that she was registered there raises questions: Why was she so far from home? Had she run away? Was she thrown out?

Eleven days later, Sujaria was on *The Clyde* as it sailed up the river Hooghly from Calcutta at the outset of its epic course westward, around the Cape of Good Hope at Africa’s southern tip, past the tiny island of Saint Helena in the Atlantic, to a place known as Demerara, which the coolies called “Damra”. I can only read between the lines of the threadbare statistics that have survived to imagine the textures of
her journey. Aboard ship were 171 women and 389 men. That was just above the quota of four women for every 10 men required for indenture ships to set sail. My grandfather was not the only child born during the journey. Twelve babies, six boys and six girls, entered the world during that crossing, and four of them left it soon after. Five men also died at sea. Cerebrospinal fever, an inflammation of the brain, killed one. It was a common affliction on the ships—a clear sign that the quarters below deck where the immigrants ate, slept and lived were cramped and badly ventilated. Sujaria spent three months and a week in that iron belly. The experience may have been what induced premature labour: my grandfather arrived two months early. And he was born legs first, a dangerous debut even under normal conditions.

Demerara, where The Clyde landed, was the shorthand the British used for Guiana, their only South American possession. It was where Sir Walter Raleigh had gone in search of El Dorado, the mythic city of gold. In the end, it wasn’t gold that enriched the colonisers. It was sugar. In 1903, the plantations studding Guiana’s marshy coast supplied the world with Demerara sugar. To produce that brown gold, in the generations after slavery and the slave trade had been abolished, they needed the human cargo aboard The Clyde.

The vessel pulled in beside a floating lighthouse in the sludgy waters off the Demerara coast on 4 November. It must have come in late that Wednesday, because the colony’s Daily Chronicle didn’t note its entry into port until its Friday edition. When The Clyde did finally appear in the newspaper’s pages over the next few weeks, it was in fine print. The details presented were bare and mercantile: The ship had brought 300 bales of gunny sacks from India and a box of cigars. When it left four days later, it took 15,958 bags of linseed to the English port of Falmouth. Of the immigrants aboard, all that survives is a census, a mean tally of births and deaths and a ship’s manifest of everyone who had made it to that new world.

Slightly more had been made of the arrival of the first immigrant ship of the season, The Erne, two weeks earlier. The Daily Chronicle reported on its “exceptionally healthy-looking lot” of indentured labourers, including the striking presence of “a giant among the coolies: a great, big, stalwart fellow standing six feet three on his natural heels”. But their correspondent dedicated most of his copy to the fairer sex. “The women, moreover, were pretty and youthful,” he wrote. “Coolie women are in demand here, as … a large number of vacancies for coolie wives exist; but the difficulty about the shipment is that all the ladies seem to be very much engaged already to their fellow passengers of the male ‘persuasion’. There were very many more men than women on board.”

British Guiana was struggling to deal with a shortage of women on its plantations. There were just 41 women to every 100 men among the indentured workers who had replaced freed slaves. The effects of this skewed ratio could be fatal. Just days before Sujaria landed, a coolie was executed for hacking his wife to pieces with the same machete he used to cut sugarcane in the fields. She had been unfaithful to
him. That season, four other women were killed in the same way, for the same reason. In order to separate a cheating woman or her lover from a jealous husband, plantation managers transferred workers from one sugar estate to another 47 times that year.

It's impossible to know whether my great-grandmother, carrying her three-week old baby, had any inkling of these tragedies when she arrived. Nor can I describe her first impressions of the colony. The moon was full that first morning she spent in British Guiana. And that afternoon, the Demerara Agricultural Show, which displayed the fruits, vegetables and varieties of sugar grown in the colony, opened at the Promenade Gardens with a concert by the British Guiana Militia Band. Electric lights, refreshments and alfresco suppers, all for the price of one shilling, were advertised.

That genteel world wasn’t the one to which Sujaria would belong. Hers was to be Enmore, a plantation on the east coast of Demerara recently acquired by Booker Bros, McConnell & Co. She joined 419 indentured servants in its fields and in its “nigger yard”, where the Indian workers lived in the same barracks once occupied by the slaves before them. Here there were just 44 women for every 100 men among the coolies—and it wasn't getting any better with the arrival of new recruits. The next ship to Guiana, The Moy, arrived with a note from the emigration agent in Calcutta. “The collection of emigrants for this vessel,” he wrote, “has been attended with exceptional difficulty, owing to the phenomenal scarcity of women.”

It had been a bad year for recruiting women in India. The British government was so hard up, it even tried its hand at matchmaking. Two months before Sujaria's arrival at Enmore, the manager of the plantation had received a memo from the immigration agent-general, AH Alexander. It was a plea to plantation managers to spread the word among their coolies that the government would help if they wanted to import brides from their villages. But only six labourers applied, and three were rejected because they already had wives.

**THE VERY SUMMER** my great-grandmother crossed the Atlantic, a debate was raging over a law intended to keep married women from deserting their homes for the colonies. No woman could emigrate without her husband's permission. If she claimed to be single, and officials thought she was lying, she could be detained for up to 10 days as rural constables checked out her story.

Robert Mitchell, the man in Calcutta in charge of securing immigrants for British Guiana, complained the law was being applied too rigidly. He blamed overzealous magistrates in rural areas, which furnished most recruits, for his trouble collecting women for the colonies. In a 1903 letter to Guianese officials, he accused the magistrates of holding single women for at least 10 days, not up to 10 days, before registering them. The recruiters needed to gather several dozen women to make the train trip together from the countryside to Calcutta. Before enough women could be cleared of suspicion, a month would often pass—pause enough for second thoughts and desertions.
Mitchell was livid. He couldn't muster enough women to sail. His ships were grounded while white men protected the interests of Indian men. Since his own frustrated interests seemed to coincide with those of indentured women, Mitchell expressed his outrage on their behalf: “The Magistrate ... has advanced as his reason for these detentions that the female emigrants are so immoral that they would desert their husbands for a ‘sari’ ... worth a shilling,” he wrote. “The fact probably is that the unfortunate women of the peasant class in this country are hardly removed in some districts from ordinary beasts of burden.”

Writing from his office on the river Hooghly, Mitchell pleaded his case to various officials in London, Georgetown and India’s hinterlands. It had rained that season in the province embracing Faizabad, a boon to wheat growers. The resulting fall in the price of grain had made the job of recruiters that much harder. It was so difficult to get enough women to dispatch The Erne that when it finally sailed, it was with some women collected almost a year earlier. The second ship of the season, meanwhile, was supposed to leave on 18 July 1903, but would likely be late. Mitchell fretted that it would go with far fewer than the 649 adults it could hold. That ship, as it turned out, was The Clyde, and it went with 560 adults. My great-grandmother was among its last-minute recruits.

The law that exacerbated the shortage of women, the 1883 Indian Emigration Act, was meant to stop wives from passing as widowed or unmarried to escape their husbands. But, Mitchell argued, it was being abused. Genuinely single women were being detained, too. He felt the need to remind a deputy commissioner in Raipur that the law as written “contemplates special cases only and not ordinary”. Instead, he scolded, it seemed to be applied in almost every case.

THE LAW THAT SO INCENSED Mitchell resulted from the travels of two English civil servants in the backwaters of northern India in the early 1880s. They were sent to investigate claims of all kinds of chicanery in the recruitment of coolies for the West Indies, Fiji and Mauritius. The reports they filed and the diaries they kept provide fleeting glimpses of the women targeted to go. At times, it almost feels like these women are peeking through the pages, from behind a curtain separating the women’s quarters from the rest of the house of official history.

That’s exactly the way Major DG Pitcher encountered a handful of women at a depot for recruits. It was a house “full of small rooms, dirty and generally unfit”. Competing recruiters had denounced it as “a disgrace to emigration”. Allegedly, there was no licensed recruiter in sight, and women were falsely “kept there under promise of marriage”. Pitcher, a minor judge in Lucknow, had been assigned to scrutinise recruitment in the northwestern provinces. When he visited the discredited depot, he found only three recruits—two men and a woman. There were also several men “of rakish aspect” hanging around. As soon as Pitcher left, however, recruiters from other depots pounced on him with claims that the house was actually bursting with women, who had been concealed from him. Pitcher returned immediately to check it out.
“I took the people by surprise,” he wrote, “and found about half a dozen more women who rushed into an inner room, and were said to be in purdah. Of course, I could not on this insist on their coming out.” Confronted with a tradition that had kept women from the prying eyes of outsiders for centuries, Pitcher had no choice. He had to interview them from outside a closed door. The women told him, through an interpreter, that they were not coolies bound for the sugar colonies. They were concubines, they said, in relationships with various men living in the house. (The men were later convicted of illegal recruiting.)

Was it just the spectre of a white man representing the British government that so scared the women? Were they really in purdah? Or were they lying? If they had signed up for indenture under false names, they might have feared being found out. Or perhaps they were also recruiting for the colonies. Women were not officially allowed to recruit, but many of them did anyway. They were delegated by their men to convince other women to board the ships bound for British sugar plantations abroad.

Mainpuri, the district where Pitcher encountered the women hiding behind the door, had a reputation as a good place to find women for the colonies. The number of its recruits was so high that Pitcher wondered in his diary if it had “anything to do with the existence of canals, and the (as frequently asserted) impotence of men in canal districts?” Women seemed to outnumber men drastically in the streets. Mainpuri was on the road to Vrindavan, the site of a major temple to Krishna, born, according to lore, in a forest nearby. Pitcher later discovered that many of the women in Mainpuri had begged their way there en route to the holy site. It’s probably safe to say that the women who found themselves in the town’s emigrant depots, suddenly on their way to sugarcane fields at the other end of the globe, were not refugees from malfunctioning penises. They had probably been siphoned off from the outcasts and pilgrims on their way to Vrindavan in search of food, shelter and possibly God.

They and Sujaria and all the women like them peek through the pages of the records in the British Library in London—elusive, hidden or hiding from view. There’s Manharni, who left a Ganges village close to my great-grandmother’s in 1872. Sir George Abraham Grierson, the civil servant and Orientalist mandated to do in Bihar what Pitcher was doing in the northwest, tried vainly to track down her relatives. He could “gain no intelligence”, he admitted. “Nor did anyone in the place know even the name of either herself or her father.” And there’s Rojha, an 1873 emigrant from the same area, whose father “denied having any such relative, and probably she had gone wrong and been disowned by him”.

An emigration register examined by Pitcher contained revealing handwritten notes next to the names of some of the women:

*The enquiry now ended, resulting in the fact that she has been forsaken by her husband on account of her unchastity, now allowed to go.*
A married woman forsaken by her husband on account of her bad conduct.
A widow under enquiry.

There are flashes of wilfulness. One woman, “turned out of home by her husband, who had taken up with another woman”, then signed up as a coolie. Her father offered her food and shelter, but she refused to give up on the idea of leaving India. Further east, in the village of Jagdispur, in what is now Bihar, a starving and almost naked woman succumbed to the offerings of a recruiter named Ram Phal. He fed her for a month and gave her his mother’s clothes. When he took her to a magistrate to be registered for the colonies, she refused to go and walked off with the clothes. Not far from there, police raided the house of a recruiter for Mauritius in search of a woman, at her husband’s insistence. She had just been released from jail, but didn’t go home to him. No one was ever able to find her, and she seems to have eluded both her husband and the authorities.

The recruiters targeted the most desperate women. Many entered the depots in “a garment of filthy rags, which can hardly be said to clothe them”. Advocates for women serving as recruiters argued that it would attract a better class of coolie woman. “The necessity of employing women (as recruiters) stands to reason, as it is only women at their last resource who would bargain with strange men,” one wrote. Pitcher, meanwhile, was “smilingly assured that it is out of the question to expect respectable men, however ready themselves to venture on the unknown, to expose their wives to they know not what set of risks”.

Grierson concluded that the female emigrants consisted of four groups: prostitutes, the wives of men who had already been to the colonies and had come back to fetch them, destitute widows with no one to take pity on them and “married women who have made a slip, and who have either absconded from their husband’s house with or without a lover, or who have been turned out of doors by their husbands”. The widows were blameless. The colonies would gladly take them. Grierson objected only that they were “seldom comely”. The wives of re-migrants were few. And while there could, of course, be no official sanction for prostitutes going, it was the last group that he considered the best hope for the colonies. “They are generally comely, and comparatively pure,” Grierson wrote. “I do not think that anyone can say that the recruiting of these poor creatures is anything but good, both for themselves and the country. Once they leave their home, whether they abscond or are turned out, their husbands will never receive them back again, and if they do not emigrate, they will have only two alternatives: suicide or prostitution.”

Anxiety over how to handle this group of women had, partly, prompted the expeditions by the two Brits in the first place. The confusion had started in December 1878 in what is now Uttar Pradesh, when a man banished his wife. She wandered to another district seeking help from relatives. When rebuffed there, she signed up for Guiana. Three months after she sailed, her husband found out and filed a complaint against the emigration authorities. As a result, the British government in India issued
instructions for registering officers to find out, in the cases of married women, whether their husbands minded if they left. Grierson and Pitcher both thought the directive absurd. “A man who has turned his wife out of doors, if asked whether his wife might emigrate would probably say—no,” Pitcher wrote. In Faizabad, a magistrate sent a would-be emigrant home because her husband objected to her going, only to have him refuse to support her. She landed right back in the coolie depot after she was found starving in the streets.

Many magistrates interpreted the government’s memo to mean they had to refuse all women unaccompanied by their husbands. They put the burden on the woman to prove that she was a widow. Pitcher railed against “the ludicrous travesty of justice involved in expecting a woman who had tramped the country for months hundreds of kilometres from her home to produce ‘evidence’”. In some cases, the magistrates sent police to hunt down a husband in another district to secure his permission. The process could take so long that the women and the recruiters, who meanwhile had to feed and house them, gave up the bid. In one district, Pitcher found that even women accompanied by men were investigated, in case they were eloping. Police sometimes returned with a reply that the woman wasn’t known at the address she’d given, and she was rejected for providing false information.

Grierson, reacting to the situation, wrote: “There seems to me to be everywhere too great a tendency to treat a native woman as an ignorant child. She is not an unreasoning brute, if she may be a little dull of comprehension. … A wife will not leave her husband in this country without extreme pressure of some kind or another, and if she insists on going, … I do not think that any Government official has any right to stop her.” It’s possible that Grierson was a forward-thinking man. It’s more likely, however, that his embrace of women’s rights reflected his government’s problems with attracting women to the sugar colonies. The prejudices against emigration were deep. In the countryside, people believed recruiters were actually gathering coolies to hang them by the heels and extract oil from their heads. The oil, or mimiai ka tel, was supposedly sold to thieves who rubbed it all over their bodies to elude capture.

Grierson found that the sugar colonies had gotten “a bad name” as “a kind of Limbo” into which people disappeared, never to be heard from again. “It is stated everywhere,” he wrote, “that it is a hard thing to leave one’s motherland. This is everywhere admitted, and several persons told me that they would have emigrated long ago but for the fear they had of breaking the tie which had bound their families to the same spot for generations.”

Most of the women who went to the West Indies didn’t have providers or protectors with them. Many found some on the way, either in the emigrant depots where they waited for ships or during their journey west. Others found partners in the new world when they landed. The fact remains, however, that two-thirds of all indentured women left India unaccompanied by their husbands.

In total, 2,509 women sailed from Calcutta to the Caribbean the same year my great-grandmother did. Only 589 of them had their husbands with them. Seventy-six percent were somehow allowed to go
alone, despite all the drama over background checks and detentions in the rural recruiting grounds that year and the decades before. The debate that took place in the summer of 1903, when Sujaria climbed aboard The Clyde pregnant and alone, does not make what happened to her any clearer. If anything, it throws shafts of darkness on the circumstances leading to her departure. British administrators were so desperate for female recruits that they may have bent some rules to get them. There may have been lies told about who the women were and where they had come from, both by recruiters and the women themselves—which only makes my goal, to unearth her early life in India, more elusive.

I RETURNED TO MY GREAT-GRANDMOTHER’S village for a second visit in January 2008. I approached slowly and cautiously this time, leaving enough time for the taking of many teas with countless strangers along the way. And I had a more practised guide.

He called himself “Roots Man”. Dr Tiwary, a PhD in Philosophy, had stumbled into the business of tracking ancestors a decade earlier. He carried a letter from the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, saying he had been instrumental in reuniting the Trinidadian Prime Minister (1995-2001) Basdeo Panday with his “long-lost loved ones”. Tiwary claimed to have escorted dozens of Indo-Caribbeans through the hinterlands of their ‘foreign motherland’ in search of their origins. Given an emigration pass, he would try to locate an ancestral village and any relatives living there now. The quest usually failed if the indentured labourer had been a woman; he found the female histories harder to unravel. Still, clean-shaven and briefcase-in-hand, he had travelled all the way from Delhi to be my interpreter.

Tiwary was fluent in Bhojpuri. He had picked up the rough, idiosyncratic dialect of Bihar as a child because his father had been posted nearby as a government railway official. Bhojpuri, oddly for the patriarchal territory where it is spoken, ignores the strict rules about gender that govern standard Hindi sentences. The verbs don’t change endings based on whether the subject is masculine or feminine. Tiwary, exceptionally for an outsider, knew how to handle this eunuch of an idiom.

Tiwary informed me that there had once been a settlement of tawaifs not far from my great-grandmother’s village. Tawaifs were once courtesans who sang and danced for the nobility and the wealthy and practised the high art of pleasure, but now they are just viewed as prostitutes. In fact, not 110 km from here sits Muzaffarpur, a town with an infamous red light district that has been home to tawaifs for generations. The town has an established connection to the great sugar migration. Every single emigrant registered as a coolie there from 1877 to 1879 was a woman. George Grierson, the British civil servant sent to investigate abuses in the recruitment of indentured servants, had tried to track down relatives of those women. “I found that the names of some of them, and the fact of their having emigrated, were still remembered,” he wrote in his diary. “They were said to have all been unsuccessful prostitutes, and hence they left no relations behind, and there was no one who took any interest in, or knew anything about, their subsequent career.”
This suggestion of sin only sharpened my anxieties about meeting my own long-lost relatives again. I didn’t know how to behave in their presence. I also didn’t know how to feel about their claiming my great-grandmother, given that their ancestors might have cast her out.

About two kilometres outside Sujaria’s village, we stopped at a railroad town. A local newspaperman there had assembled more than a dozen people to meet me. There was a folk singer and a college principal, a merchant and a schoolteacher. This impromptu gathering didn’t shed much light on the history of migration, but the people were warm and welcoming. The afternoon had almost evaporated by the time we finally managed to climb into our Ambassador, headed for Bhurahupur. The car stopped at a railway crossing. The train chugged slowly past, leading to a cowardly question: Push ahead or retreat? My lips had already run dry from telling and retelling Sujaria’s story. My hair had come undone. The dupatta of my salwar-kameez had slipped immodestly from my shoulders. It had taken us more than an hour on Bihar’s potholed roads to reach the town, but I couldn’t go on. I wasn’t up to the emotions it would summon or the feats of protocol it would require.

When we finally made it to Bhurahupur the next day, the patriarch of the family that had claimed me two years earlier greeted us. Bijender Dubey peered into my face for a few seconds before breaking into a broad smile. He pointed at me and said something with hilarity. It sounded as though it might have been, “You again!” Bijender escorted us to the family’s home and seated us at a table in its courtyard. People from the village piled in. One pushed to the front of the crowd, snapped a photo of me with a cellphone and disappeared. Chai, water and sweets were presented. Bijender’s wife, Manju, her sari pulled demurely over her head, fed me grapes.

With Bijender’s help, Tiwary sketched a family tree that linked us as fourth cousins. This time, a slightly different story emerged: Sujaria’s father, Mukhlal, had taken his family to Burma, where he was a soldier for the British Army. An unknown tragedy occurred there. “Something happened to the daughters,” Tiwary told me. “What happened, they don’t know.” According to the tale, Mukhlal’s daughters both disappeared, and the ensuing shame made it impossible for him to stay in Burma. He deserted the army. The account of a disgraced exit from Burma varied considerably from what I had heard in the village in 2005: that my great-grandmother died there, which went against the evidence of a tombstone found in a Guyanese cemetery. Other details clashed, too. In this new narrative, Mukhlal died almost two decades earlier, and Sujaria had a sister rather than a brother. The discrepancies called for an explanation. Perhaps my interpreters on the first trip understood Bhojpuri poorly. Maybe Bijender was making up the story. Or it could just be that facts get compromised with time, and family lore becomes its own shifting truth, with competing and evolving details. A century is a long time to stay consistent, if the facts were ever known to begin with.

The sudden hint of scandal surprised me, because Tiwary the interpreter had also served as Tiwary the censor. As we told Sujaria’s story, he skipped the fact that she had given birth mid-ocean to my
grandfather, despite having listed no husband on her emigration pass. I understood that I couldn’t tell the family *that*. But he censored other things, too. He refused to tell them that Sujaria worked on a plantation. I thought I had already shared that two years earlier, but I was never really sure what Abhijit had conveyed. The family is Brahmin. The Dubeys are poor but caste-proud. It would have damaged their prestige to have it disclosed that Sujaria had been a common labourer. We were in the family’s private courtyard, but it was mobbed with people from the hamlet eager to see an American, and Tiwary said nothing when I asked him to translate.

“Tell them,” I insisted.

“It is not always necessary that all the things I must explain to them,” he replied, in his soft, circumventing way.

“No, *tell* them,” I ordered.

He remained silent.

I bristled against his control. I didn’t want this man or any man telling me what to say. That has always been my instinct, but it was even more acute in Bihar because of the century-old story written under it. The details of Sujaria’s exit from India had been erased by time, but the impression of her rebellion was still strong and clear. In retrospect, I realise Tiwary was probably right to censor me. I was paying him, after all, to keep me within the boundaries of custom and shame. At the moment, however, all I knew was anger and ache. I have never felt anything but pride in my great-grandmother, for her honest though menial toil and for her bravery in crossing borders.

The next day, I asked to be alone with the Dubey women. I thought I might learn more if they had a chance to speak, and they wouldn’t in the presence of their men. The women invited me into a bedroom decorated with technicolour posters of Hindu gods and goddesses. Manju and her sisters-in-law sat cross-legged on the bed, and they invited me to do the same. I gave them sweets, and they gave me bolts of blue-and-white cloth for a *salwar-kameez*. They fed me potato curry, and they complained about their men. One of them sang a Bhojpuri folk song for me. Her voice was raw and cracked, and her hymn to the goddess Durga was full of heartbreak. Then, the women confided that Sujaria’s name had not been lost to them. They didn’t grow up knowing it, because they had married into the family from surrounding villages, but they recited her name at every family wedding. According to custom, the songs that women sing on the eve of a wedding list all ancestors for five generations back, in homage. Even if Sujaria had been a source of shame to her father, she had apparently not been cut out of that tradition.
At that point, Bijender barged into the room, telling Tiwary he had something to tell me. He must have been curious to know why I wanted to be alone with the women. His wife had already shooed him out several times, and he had sent his son into the room to make a phone call just as I was giving the women money. Bijender wanted me to contribute money for a puja at the shrine of the village's founder, a Dubey. “They are considering you as one of the daughters who has come back to the village, kind of a homecoming,” Tiwary told me. “Take whatever you think and give it to the family, and they will do this puja, maybe tomorrow, maybe next day, whenever they find a suitable time.”

I gave Bijender a few thousand rupees. Somewhere in a house nearby, someone played a scratchy record loudly, and the lyrics of a Hindi film song filled the awkward silence. I returned to the subject of my great-grandmother.

“It’s nice to know that her name is spoken here,” I said. “Can you tell them, Tiwary?”

“Name will keep going,” he said, interpreting the women’s words.

I was touched by the thought of that, although I wasn’t sure about the Dubeys. My putative fourth-cousins worried I might covet their land. I did covet something, to be honest. I coveted my great-grandmother’s story. I wanted the Dubeys to unravel her mystery for me.

The Dubey matriarch sang a hymn for me in honour of Durga, the mother goddess whose name suggests protection. She has a dark aspect, however. She can become Kali. In that incarnation, she is usually portrayed dancing on the god Shiva, grinding his head underfoot like the malevolent goddess she is. Kali, with her charcoal face, necklace of skeletons and darting serpent tongue, personifies woman’s wrath. Worship of her, through unorthodox rituals of spirit possession and firewalking, was popular among Indians in the West Indies during indenture. It’s no wonder, given the dangers associated with coolie women and their sexuality on the plantations.

But the goddess who mattered to me, growing up, was the far less lusty Saraswati. Associated with knowledge and purity, she is the only major goddess unaffiliated with a god. She is no one’s consort. According to Hindu lore, Saraswati gave birth to the Vedas, its oldest sacred texts. Stories were her children. I went to India as Saraswati’s devotee, in search of buried narrative, and I had failed to find it. I had not managed to excavate my great-grandmother’s story. I wish I could have brought back the answer, but I have since decided that it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t even matter if I have, in fact, found the right family or the right village. Sujaria may have lied about her origins to cover up the tracks to a disapproving husband or father. The Dubeys may also have lied, or been mistaken, when they called me one of their own. It doesn’t matter because, along the way, I discovered the story of what happened to the many other women like my great-grandmother, from the moment they left their villages, through their middle passages, to their reinvention and struggle in a new world. And as solace against
the silence wrought by history and its asymmetries—between men and women, coloniser and colonised—I have the voices of women from a remote village near the Ganges telling me a story. Believe, don’t believe, but four generations later they say they still speak her name.


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One more person to keep us as ‘coolies’. Another writer using the coolies to keep the guyanese people below. No wonder indo guyanese hate the east indians, They never want to see us ahead. We are westernized and we retained our indian culture. We are way ahead in our growth, unfortunately our low population has limited our technological advancements, however many of us have been leaving to developed world. WE will not continue to work as your laborers. In fact, many of us have mixed with upper whites. I think you better start respecting us INDIA and stop using the blacks to keep us below.

Very interesting reading. My Aja is also from Bihar and I visited his visit in January. The family was very happy to meet me. They treated me like a Devta.

Many of us think about crossing the kal pani back to Mother India but few of us are as determined or brave a the amazing Gaiutra Bahadur. It does indeed appear that our ancestors were more better prepared to make that ghastly journey than US, THE SO-CALLED MODERN AND LIBERATED. As commenter Rampersaud wisely said above here: Grandmother Sujharia will be blessed to attain Mukti because one of her descendents has been detetmined to stand up and chronicle the life and suffering of Sujharamaiya.

You should read Amitav Ghosh’s River of Smoke which is along similar lines but from a different perspective

Dhanyavaad, Gaiutra.
You are possessed of a soul that is full of human compassion, spiritual strength, courage, wisdom and honesty. You have transalted your feelings and thoughts with admirable clarity on the subject of your travels (Yatras) and on all you have researched and written of your grandmother Sujharia. I believe her soul attained Mukti some long time ago and your travels, your work and your well-being are all under guidance and protection.
You are a credit to your Dubey heritage. More power to you.
Chiranjivi Raho! – Live and Prosper.
JAI HO!
Rampersaud Tiwari.
Nice story. I liked it. I like all ethnological stories. Interesting genetics. Thanks for sharing.