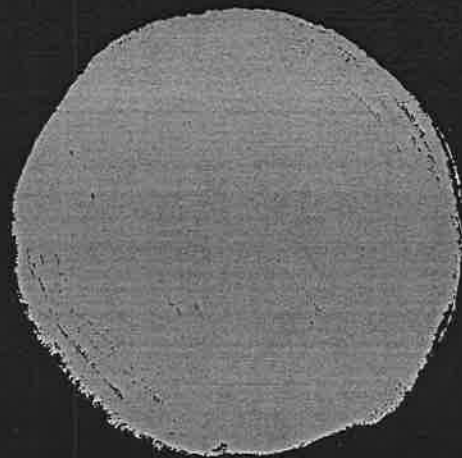


# I EVEN REGRET NIGHT

Holi Songs of Demerara



Lalbihari Sharma  
Translated by Rajiv Mohabir

Kaya Press (2019)

## Table Of Contents

Introduction	12
<i>Rajiv Mohabir, Translator</i>	
Holi Songs of Demerara	17
• Invocation	21
✓ The Tale of Demerara	27
✓ Demerara's Condition	33
• The Work of Poet Lalbihari Sharma in Chautal	53
• Bhajans	137
✓ Transliteration for Chautal Singers	166
✓ The Tale of Demerara	
Rescued From the Footnotes of History	176
Afterword • <i>Gaiutra Bahadur</i>	
✓ Translating as a Practice of Transformation:	190
✓ Translator's Note • <i>Rajiv Mohabir</i>	

The Tale Of Demerara  
निजबयान सहित डमराका बयान



भूमिजन्मका प्रान्त छपरागांव मैरीटांड है ॥

ब्रह्मदेवकर पुत्र जानो,  
लालबिहारी नाम है ॥

आइके हम बास कीन्हां,  
देश डमरालोक है ॥

रहत हम हैं शरणप्रभुके ।  
कटत दिन सब नीक है ॥ १ ॥

In the region of his birth,  
in Chhapra district in Mairitaand village,

Lord Brahma begat a son  
named Lalbihari, the Beloved of Bihar.

Having come here, I live in the country  
of Demerara. I pass my days

in the refuge that is Hari.

बृटिस गयाना देशमें, यद्यपि प्रांत अनेक ॥  
कहुं विचित्र कहूँ अतिदुखी, यहनिज मनकर टेक ॥ १ ॥

ऐस्सीकुइबो प्रांतमें, गोल्डनफ्लीस एक गांव ॥  
अति सुन्दर अस्थान यह, सब जानत यह ठांव ॥ २ ॥

पंडित परमानन्दजी, बासी जहंकर आहि ॥  
सबहीको वह बिदितहै, देश विदेशन माहिं ॥ ३ ॥

रामचरण पुनि बंदिकर, महिसुरपद मन धार ॥  
पंडितजीके चरण युग, हमरे प्राण आधार ॥ ४ ॥

There are many provinces in British Guiana:  
some queer, some miserable, depending

on your own eyes. Everyone knows  
the wondrous village of

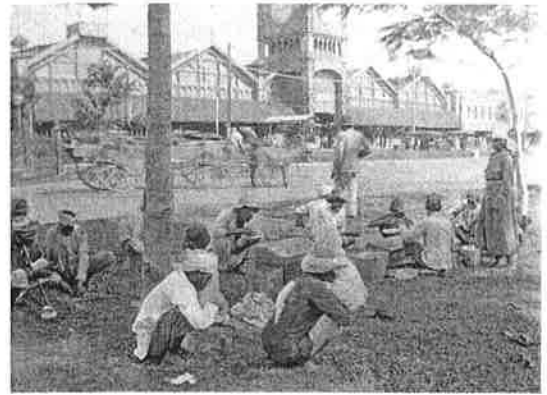
Golden Fleece in Essiquibo District.  
Where Pandit Paramanand resides

is renowned both here and abroad.  
Again I bow before Rama; also I bow

before the wise one's feet,  
the foundation of my life.



Demerara's Condition  
डमराका हाल



## चौपाई

लिखन चहों कुछ डमरारीती । सुनिहैं सज्जन करि प्रीती ॥  
यह है देश कुदेश अपारा । रहत न धर्म विवेक विचारा ॥  
देश छाँड़िकर डमरा आय । आपन नाम सो कुली लिखाय ॥  
भजन छाँड़ि छाँड़े निजधरमा । छाँड़ि वेदपथ करहिं कुकरमा ॥  
नित्यकर्म जो डमरामाहीं । सो अब लिखों कबित्तके माहीं ॥

## Chaupai

I want to write a little  
of Demerara's customs. Listen,  
this is a country of infinite ills,  
where wisdom is scarce.

I left my home and came to Demerara,  
my name penned as "Coolie."  
Forsaking bhajans, forsaking dharma,  
the Vedas I abandoned, to my disgrace.

Of the routines of this Demerara life,  
I write these kavitt, these verses.

बाजी घंटी पांचकी कि हण्डी दीनी है चढाय,  
भात लियाहै बनाय दही चीनी मेलिके ।

खायके अनन्द भये द्वारे आये सरदार,  
ठाढे करत पुकार आग्यदेँ सम्हारके ।

अब धोयके ससपान भात लेतहैं भराय,  
चीलम तयार करि धरत सम्हारके ।

जमा भये नर नारि कान्धे धरेहैंकुदारि,  
भीर भइ भारी पहुँचे डमरहु जायके ॥

As the bell tolls five, the pot heats  
on the fire: rice and yogurt boil  
with sugar. I eat my fill and  
the sardar comes to the door,  
bringing orders we must endure.

Washing the pot I keep the rice,  
I prepare my chillam pipe to deal  
with this. Men and women join together  
bearing hoes on their shoulders,  
the way clogged with those  
who have come to Demerara.



## डमराका हाल

पहिले पानीमें हेलाय लत्ताकपड़ाकी  
भिजाय आयेहैं सरदार काम देतहै बतायके ॥

## Demerara's Condition

First we ford the waterway,  
our ragged clothes soaked.

The sardar comes  
to apportion our tasks.

दोहा

ता पाछे साहेब चला, टोपी ऊंच लगाय ॥  
चाबुक लीन्हो हाथमें, सरपट पहुँचा आय ॥

Doha

Then behind us comes the sahib,  
hat high on his head.

Grasping a whip, horse  
cantering, he reaches the field.

बुक लीयोहै निकाल पहुँचा कुलियोंमें जाय,  
काम लिखत बनाय सब देख देखके ॥

जाकर है काम खोटो ताकर पैसा लीन्हो काटि,  
करत खराब मेरी काया काँपै देखिके ॥

डमरा टापु बरजोर पुलीस थाना चहुँओर,  
राम कहाँ लायेहो गरीबन भुलायके ॥

Bearing a book, the sardar reaches  
the coolies. Inspecting the cane field,  
he accounts their work. If one does not finish  
the tasks, he vexes, then garnishes pay.  
When I witness this my entire body shakes.

In Demerara there are police  
stations in every direction. O god, where  
have they taken and forgotten the poor?

## दोहा

आये सनीचर रंगला, खुसी भई नर नारि ॥  
ओढ़े पंचरँगचुनरी, चलि मंजा दरबारि ॥

## Doha

Come Saturday, men  
and women finally make merry.

Covered with orhnis,  
scarves of five hues,

they approach  
the manager's court.

कोई पहिर बाजूबन्द कोई खडीहैं दुक्न्ध,  
काजर मनोहर नयनोंसे लगायके ॥

आये सरदार करि काज सबके सम्हार,  
पयसा देत नर नारि सबन देवायके ॥

Some in armbands, some standing,  
their lovely waterlines besmeared in kohl.  
When the sardar comes, he attends to all matters,  
giving men and women their money.

## चौपाई

बीते पांच बरिस यहिभांती ॥  
चिन्ता सोक करत दिनराती ॥

टिकट पाइ मन भयउ अनन्दा ॥

जिमि चकोरसिसु निरखत चन्दा ॥  
भयउ प्रमोद धरहि नहिं धीरा ॥

कोइ साधु कोइ बने फकीरा ॥

होइ अधीर चहूँदिसि धावहिं ॥  
एको जुक्ति न मनमें लावहिं ॥

## Chaupai

In this manner five years pass  
in steady woe. With a ticket,  
the heart, like a chakor bird,  
cries out to the moon.

Such mirth! Some act as sadhus,  
some fakirs, wildly  
prancing all around, without any idea  
of what comes next.

दोहा

सौमें एक धीरज धरी, रहे गांवके माहिं ॥  
बात सुने सरदारके, खुसी रहें मनमाहिं ॥

Doha

One out of one hundred are patient  
as before in the village.

If they obey the sardar,  
their hearts remain content.



Transliteration for  
Chautal Singers  
The Tale of Demerara



chhand

bhumi janam ka prant chhapara gaany mairitand hai

brahmadev kar putra jano  
lalbihari naam hai

aayke ham baas kinhan  
desh damaralok hai

rahat ham hain sharan prabhu ke  
katat din sab nik hai

• • •

In Chhapra 'e get one village name Mairitaand  
an' Brahm-bhagwaan get one pickni

'e name Lalbihari. 'E been come yah-so.  
Me de a Demerara an' stay corner gad.



britis guyana desh mein, yadyapi praant anek  
kahun vicitra kahu(n) atidukhi, yahnij man kar tek

essequibo prant mei(n), golden fleece ek gaanv hai  
ati sundar asthan yeh, sab janat yeh thaavn

pandit paramanand ji, basi jaha(n) kar aahi  
sabhi ko voh bidit hai, desh videshan mahi(n)

ramcharan puni bandi kar, mahisur pad man dhaar  
pandit ji ke charan yug, hamre praan adhaar

• • •

Guyana get plenty place—  
good kine an' bad kine

wha' you look fa a-you go fine 'em. All bady  
does know Golden Fleece in Essiquibo

a whe' Pandit Paramanand stay.  
Dem know fum yah-so til a India.

Me bow in front Ram  
he meh praan ke adhar.

likhan chaho(n) kuchh damara riti,  
sunihai sajjan kari priti  
yeh hai desh kudes apara,  
rahat na dharam vivek vichara

desh chaa(n)ri kr damara aai,  
aapan nam so kuli likhai  
bhajan chaa(n)ri chaa(n)re nij-dharmaa,  
chaa(n)ri vedpath karhin kukarmaa

nityakaram jo damara mahi(n),  
so ab likho(n) kabitt ke mahi(n)

• • •

Me wan' write little 'bout  
how Demerara deh. Hear,  
dis country get bad kine people,  
none bady na get sense.

Me lef' India an' come Demerara side  
an' deh call me "Coolie."  
All de ting me been lef' the Bedas  
and so come me shame.

Me wan' write little 'bout how me live  
dis side, so me write dis.

baji ghanti panch ki ki handi dini hai charhai  
bhat liya hai banai dahi chini milike

kahike anand bhaye dvare aaye sardaar  
thadhe karat pukaar aagya de(n) samhaar ke

ab dhoyke saspaan bhaat let hai(n) bhara  
chilam tayaar kari dharat samhaar ke

jama bhaye nar naari kaandhe dhare hai(n) kudaari  
bhir bhai bhaari pahuncha damarhu jaaike

• • •

De bell ring a five a'clock an' de karahi pan de fiah  
rice and dahi bail wid sugah.  
Me eat belly full an' de sardar come a me door,  
fe tell abbi wha' abbi mus' do. Me wash  
de karahi an' keep de chowr, an' make de pipe  
fe smoke lil bit. All bady come one time  
wid cutlass an' ting, de road na get space  
'e choke up wid mattie.

pahile pani mein helay latta kapara ki  
bhijai aaye hai(n) sardaar kaam det hai bataai ke

• • •

Fus' abbi mus' crass de wata  
an' abbi close ovah wet.

De sardar come  
fe tell abbi wha' abbi mus' do.

doha

ta paachhe saahab chala, topi unch lagayai  
chabuk linho haath mein, sarpat phuncha aai

• • •

Den de sahib come fum behin' mattie  
an' wear one hat.

'E tek 'e whip and grabble 'e hass  
and come run cornah abbi.

buk liyohai nikaal pahuncha kuliyo(n) mein jaai  
kam likhat banaai sab dekh dekh ke

jaakar hai kaam khoto taakar paisa linho kaati  
karat kharaab meri kayua kampe dekhi ke

damara tapu barjor pulis thana chahu or  
ram kahan (n) layeho gariban bhulaike

• • •

'E bring one book come and reach abbi  
an' look abbi wuk done and write 'em doun.  
If one abbi na wuk done, 'e vex bad bad  
an' na gi' abbi abbi paisa. When me see dis  
me shake bad. Demerara get police  
all about. O gad, dey tek abbi yah-so  
and fahget abbi because abbi been poor.

aayi sanichar rangla, khushi nar naari  
ordhe panchrang chunari, chali manja drbaari

• • •

Come Sati-day, man an' ooman  
all ovah jai.

De ooman wear deh orhni  
wha' get plenty colah

an' go corner de managah.

## kavitt

koi pahir bajuband koi khadi hai dukandh  
kaajar manohar nayano(n) se lagaai ke

aaye sardaar kari kaaj sab ke samhaar  
payasa det nar naari saban devaai ke

• • •

De put an all deh bangle dem  
an' stan' wid kajar  
in deh eye. De sardar come  
fe gi' abbi paisa  
an' 'e gi' abbi all abbi money.

bite paanch baris yahi bhanti  
chinta sok karat dinaraati

tikat paai man bhayau anandaa

jimi chakorsisu nirakhat chandaa  
bhayau pramod dharahi naahi(n) dhiraa

koi sadhu bane fakira

hoi adhir chahu(m) disi dhaavhi(n)  
eko jukti na man mein laavhi(n)

• • •

Jus' so abbi dis punish  
bad five year. Wid a ticket  
me heart cry out  
like one burd.

Abbi dis ovah happy, some deh like sadhu  
an' some deh like fakir  
dance all about. Dem na sabi  
wha' go come nex'.

sau mein ek dhiraj dhari, rahe gaany ke mahi(n)  
baat sune sardaatke, khushi rahe manmaahi(n)

• • •

'E get only couple  
mattie wha' patient.

If dey mine de sardar  
deh go stay happy.

## Translating as a Practice of Transformation

Translator's Note • *Rajiv Mohabir*



I began writing poetry when I was eight, building my own ideas of metaphor and image from the sun-dried bricks of folk music I knew. I do not come from a very literate household—in fact, my own paternal grandparents and my maternal great-grandparents were not able to read or write. My family came to Guyana to work the sugar plantations of Lusignan and Skeldon, bound by their own thumbprints on English contracts. But this did not mean that they did not possess a vast knowledge of their worlds.

I did not at first recognize my own writing as poetry; I thought of it as a record of my thoughts, written in a way that would be inaccessible to prying eyes. Poetry became a serious practice for me only after I started to learn my Aji's language, which is a form of Bhojpuri—a dialect of Hindi spoken in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India. Through her language, she taught me songs. Her music dazzled me. I did what I could to learn it, recording her songs and speaking with her in Bhojpuri every chance I had, hopeful that this would help me learn a little more of what she knew.

I began the process of translating in my early twenties as an undergraduate focused on religious studies. That is when I realized that my Aji's language was a key to the culture of being Indo-Caribbean. The Bhojpuri that she had always spoken and sung was not standard Hindi but a new kind of language, one that had been created on sugar plantations and estates by indentured laborers and their children. My Aji was the last of our family who spoke Bhojpuri as a first language; due to its low social status, it had been abandoned in my parents' generation.

I think this made me love it even more. It was a language unique to our community, which had survived and persisted despite one hundred and thirty years of living in the diaspora, of being told that everything about our identities was broken, that we spoke "broken" English and "broken" Hindi. It was thus my own personal, live connection to South Asian culture. I clung to every word of it I could find.

But one thing troubled me as both a scholar and a translator. I studied in the West, where the written word is the measure by which cultures are evaluated. Yet most of the traditions I had experienced were oral. This absence of written texts meant that any attempt to render the language of my Aji visible would require a measure of creative invention.

So when Gaiutra Bahadur wrote me to ask if I would be interested in translating these verses, the only known literary record of indenture written in Awadhi/Braj Bhasha/Bhojpuri in the Anglophone Caribbean, I almost fell out of my chair. It seemed an answer to a question I had never even dared to ask myself. Here was a text written in the very language that I felt was not just ancestral but an actual ancestor. It even mentioned Demerara, one of the places my family is from in Guyana.

Gaiutra had written about these songs in her book *Coolie Woman: the Odyssey of Indenture*, and she had even undertaken a rough draft of an English-language translation, which she provided to me to look over. But more surprises were to be found once I was able to view the scanned copies of the original work for myself. When I opened to the first page, I that saw the folk songs were written not in standard Hindi, nor in the familiar lilt and rhythm of my Aji's Bhojpuri. Rather, the language of the text Gaiutra provided me mirrored the classical Braj Bhasha used by the great sixteenth-century Hindu devotional poets.<sup>1</sup> I began to understand that I held in my hands a new genre of devotional poem, one that was rooted in the Caribbean instead of India.

#### A NEW GENRE OF HINDU DEVOTIONAL POETRY

To fully appreciate the remarkableness of this work, it is important to understand the context in which it was written.

Hindu devotional poetry draws upon a tradition that is perhaps most closely associated with medieval India, when writers such as Kabir, Surdas, and Mirabai, known

as bhakti poets, revolutionized the formulaic, ritualistic practice of the Hindu religion as enacted by upper-caste (Brahmin) pandits and pujaris (priests). By sixteenth century, when Kabir, one of the most famous bhakti poets, is purported to have lived and worked as a weaver, Hindus were at a crossroads of sorts, their temples being demolished by monotheists in the North. At issue was increasing dissatisfaction with the caste system.<sup>2</sup> The Brahmin or priestly class—the only ones authorized to perform the rituals and sacrifices required for the appeasement of the Vedic gods—often demanded significant fees to perform the ceremonies and prayers necessary to a proper ordering of the world. Without the Brahmins, these ceremonies and prayers would remain incomplete. However, this system also served to keep the castes separated. Many non-Brahmins chose to convert to the newly introduced religion of Islam, which taught that it was possible to speak to god without an intermediary. Others, many of them poets, pioneered a new way of relating to god within the Hindu context, addressing god as the Self, or in the case of the legendary bhakti poet Mirabai, as a lover.

These bhakti poets, or devotional poets, opened up a new world of possibility, one in which there was no more need for pandits, Brahmins, and temple charlatans. Instead, one could speak directly to god through song and prayer. In the poetry of this movement, all caste or religious distinctions, or indeed any other label that might separate one person from another, are considered to be a result of maya, that great illusion that keeps us thinking that we are not already with god, that we live lives separate and distinct from one another.

Because I'd spent time translating bhakti poetry in Jaipur and Varanasi, I quickly realized that Sharma's work had been composed by someone educated in medieval Indian poetry. This came as something as a shock to me. In all my studies and in all my familial stories, I had never been made aware that indentured laborers might have had this kind of sophisticated education. For me, this is



important because it goes against certain popular misconceptions. Most people believe that those who ended up indentured in the Caribbean were uneducated, duped by the British into working their colonial fields. But while many of those who chose to migrate were in fact illiterate, the indisputable, published fact of Sharma's songs shows that the situation was far more complicated.

These inheritances—this complexity—have however been largely lost. Not only are most Indo-Caribbean poetics derived from languages and cultures that are neither Bhojpuri nor Awadhi, but the colonial rupture of indentured servitude, and the alienation from languages that it led to, has meant that the people of the Caribbean have had to rebuild their cultures in English, the language of social prestige. As a result, the poetry taught in schools has been that of daffodils or other flora and fauna alien to a Caribbean landscape. Meanwhile, the meanings of folksongs and the particular customs that they belong to have been viewed as a kind of occult knowledge, one not supported by mainstream religion or cultural values.

Yet Sharma's songs give us an alternate view into the world of diasporic experience. The religiosity and sophistication I saw in his writings not only amazed me, it changed the landscape of my poetic imaginary. Born in England and raised in the United States, I had been told all my life that we come from a "broken" tradition. This text showed me a mirror—it showed me my face in one solid piece.

#### POETIC FORMS USED BY LALBIHARI SHARMA

The poetic forms that Lalbihari Sharma includes in *I Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara*—chaupai, chautal, doha, kavitt, ulara, and bhajan—are derived from folksong, and each possesses its own structures and history rooted in performance and narrative tradition. They are celebratory in nature, and capacious enough to contain epic narratives as well as songs of praise. Typically sung during Phagua/Holi, they are performed by two lines

of singers that face one another and sing back and forth different varieties of Phagua songs (songs of the holiday), each with its own particular pattern of vigor and rest.

In order to make accessible to the reader some of these forms that I have migrated into English through this translation, I present herewith a brief guide.

#### Bhajan:

This is a type of devotional song that does not have a set metrical structure. Bhajans often contain lyrics that praise deities and can be used as part of religious worship ceremonies. Since they are written in the vernacular and not in Sanskrit, they are intended for use by lay people. Included in Sharma's text are two types of devotional bhajans. One is dedicated to the physical representation of god who comes to earth in bodily form. This style of bhajan is known as sagun bhakti, or devotion to the god that has form. The second is the bhajan in praise of the unseen god that pervades all things—the deity that is formless and inside us all. This is known as nirgun bhakti. Bhajans typically vary widely in rhythm and style, and can be sung to various ragas and tunes.

#### Chhand:

A poem written as a quatrain. These are usually declarative in nature and used ceremoniously in praise of a specific person. In this collection, the chhand are used to introduce the poet Lalbihari Sharma, identifying his place of origin and telling us a little about where he is from as a way of establishing his credibility.

#### Chaupai:

Literally a quatrain written in two lines with a meter of four main beats per section and sixteen syllables per line. This is the most common form used for narra-

tive poetry. Sharma's use of the chaupai structure pays homage to the great bhakti poet Tulsidas, who composed his famous *Sri Ramcharitmanasa*, a rendition of the *Ramayan* in the vernacular Awadhi, using this form. Other classical examples of the chaupai include the "Hanuman Chalisa," a prayer to the monkey god.

*Chautal:*

Literally four claps in the structure. This type of meter, which describes an entire subset of songs, is comprised of fourteen beats and is used when performing songs around Holi. Chautal songs are practiced in the Caribbean and also in villages in the Bhojpuri belt in India, namely Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.<sup>3</sup> This style of singing is well-documented by the late Indo-Caribbean drummer and musician Rudy Ramnarine and the ethnomusicologist Peter Manuel in their collection of chautal songs, *Chowtal Rang Bahar: A Treasury of Chowtal Songs From India and the Caribbean*. However, according to scholars, the practice of chautal has been diminishing in recent times, drowned out by the catchier and ubiquitous music of Bollywood.<sup>4</sup>

*Doha:*

A rhyming couplet written with a 11/13 beat and 11/13 syllabation. A notable doha writer is Kabir, whose bhakti poetic tradition is threaded throughout Sharma's work.

*Kavitt:*

A poem written in quatrains whose rhythm is meant to correspond with the movements of a kathak dancer. In the songs presented here, Sharma deviates from the strict quatrain form of the kavitt, using its syllabation patterns but without ensuring the completeness of the four lines.

*Ulara:*

A short three to four line song that follows a chautal, but is usually lighter in tone and semantic significations. This indicates the chorus-like patter of gol singing that takes place during Holi. The ularas in this collection are highly repetitive and indicate the quality of repetitive recitation that offers a lyric respite from the more complicated and demanding performance of chautal.

#### A TRANSLATOR'S CHOICES

As a translator, I deal with a palimpsest of silences. While some translators feel compelled to "foreignize" their English, as Walter Benjamin insists, others strive to preserve the integrity of a line's music, allowing all kinds of gaps in meaning. The South Asian forms that Sharma writes in depends upon the stresses of the Awadhi and Bhojpuri languages, a reservoir of cadence not available in the English language. Implicit cultural and political presumptions further vex translations that are mediated by colonial relationships—in this case, the power play that inevitably exists between colonial-era Hindustani poetry and the English language. In his book *Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular*, postcolonial scholar and translator Subramanian Shankar insists that translation must be read as a practice of "interpretation rather than rendering." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her article, "The Politics of Translation," says that translation—especially when pertaining to songs in Indic languages—is an act that must be undertaken in a way that considers the author: the newly migrated text must be comprehensible to the writer of the original, keeping the same register of language and tone.

The works presented here were originally meant as songs, as a living part of an oral culture. So by attempting this translation, I had been tasked with transforming a text meant for music into one that belongs to an entirely different world. Part of the translation process has thus

been carving these poems, originally intended to be worn in throats and ears, into forms that they could inhabit on a printed page.

I have attempted to address these issues by taking a cue from Borges, who says, "the original is unfaithful to the translation." Instead of relying on the metrical structures of the South Asian language presented by Sharma, I have attempted to translate meanings more closely to the semantic significations of the text. And in order to make these songs, originally published without any line breaks, read more like poems, I have changed their lineation to reflect their musicality. This has allowed me as translator more room in the text, making possible more twists of meaning.

I have thus chosen to format each style of poem in ways that I hope help to honor and pay homage to the type of song it references. My intention in so doing has been to transform these poems and make available their original meaning without having to adhere so fixedly to the structure of the form. For example, the dohas are translated as couplets and the chaupals are written into quatrains. This is something I learned to do from reading Agha Shahid Ali's translations of the legendary Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz in *The Rebel's Silhouette*. Instead of preserving couplets as they appear in Faiz's Urdu, Ali broke Faiz's lines into pieces that fit his own sense of what the lines wanted to accomplish. This particular way of translating the musical tradition of South Asian poetry provided me the inspiration to translate Sharma's songs with a sense that is both intuitive and reflective of my own poetic practice.

Finally, to allay any fear of over-fidelity to the original language to the detriment of its musical origins, I have allowed myself to consider my translations as one of many possible avatars or emanations of the original text.

ON THE DAMRA JOURNEY THROUGH SPIRITUALITY  
What is instantly remarkable about this collection is how, by embedding Indian poetic inheritances within

the realities of indentured diasporic experiences, Sharma manages a potent alchemy of philosophical guidance, musicality, and devotion.

As Bahadur's research tells us, Sharma was a sirdar, one of the drivers who kept other indentured laborers in line on the plantations. He thus saw firsthand, and perhaps even had a hand in, the trials and joys that his country folk suffered under the economic exploitation of the British in the period between 1838–1917. Indeed, this collection of songs begins by recalling the plantation experiences of those bonded by contract to work the earth and at the mercy of British planters.

At the same time, the use of the vernacular shows Sharma's work to be in conversation with bhakti devotional poets. Sharma is thus in effect reflecting upon the human condition according to Vedantic Hindu philosophy. Beyond creating a set of devotional songs tailored to the circumstances of Indo-Caribbean life, he is elaborating upon the soul's journey from the illusory (maya) to the Real.

If Sharma's songs start off with a consideration of the material conditions of plantation life and experiences, they soon attempt to escape those conditions through the the narration of sacred myth.

By relating stories in which the incarnated gods Krishna, Radha, Rama, and Sita play Holi and pine for one another, experiencing human emotions, Sharma is able to delve deep into the psychic realms of indentureship.

For example, in one of his "Chautal" poems, Sharma writes in the voice of Radha, Krishna's consort, as she waits at home for her lover to return:

*From abroad Piya sends  
no word. I'm listless in the month  
of Phagun without my love.  
The papiha bird cries out, piya—*

*I'm overcome by this distance between us.*

*He stole away to another country  
without telling me. The rain falls  
like arrows or serpents, stirring worry*

*in my heart.*

By reinterpreting the Krishna myth in order to emulate the pain of separation from one's beloved, Sharma reflects the influence of the sixteenth century poet Mirabai, perhaps the most famous of the sagun bhakti poets. In Mirabai's poems, the human soul is represented as a woman whose beloved, the divine, is absent, the two separated through illusion. According to the practice of sagun bhakti, the only clear path to liberation and a merging with the divine is through devotion to a specific form of god, a god with form.

But in Sharma's poem, an implicit parallel is also being made between exile and indenture, the separation between the speaker and the beloved deepened and made more complex by the circumstances of migration. The speaker's description of longing could refer as much to the distance between the indentured from their "home" as to that between the human and the divine.

Sharma ends his collection with a series of bhajans that show a spirituality that has shifted from embodying the perspectives of the women in mythology to a more devotional tone, taking the reader or listener into a personal space where the deity is not one of flesh and bone, but rather is simultaneously all-pervasive and seemingly absent. This turn to nirgun bhakti, or that form of devotion that praises a god without form, connects Sharma's work to the poetry and hymns written by or attributed to the great bhakti poet-saint Kabir (1440-1518), whose religious philosophy laments the duality of the Real and maya. Kabir asserts that in order to escape the torture of illusion, and to escape the bondage of karma that ties the soul into the cycles of human incarnation and death, one must chant the name of Rama.<sup>5</sup>

In his "Fourth Bhajan," the poet Sharma makes clear the connections between his spirituality and his poetic lineage:

*Lalbihari is of no use;  
you are alone and destitute.*

*This whole creation is a dreamlike  
illusion. Sing the only truth*

*of Rama's name.*

The name of the divine is Rama, but not in the sense of Rama the sagun deity, son of King Dasharatha and incarnation of Vishnu. Rather, Rama is invoked as a way of acknowledging the eternal life force, the god behind the gods, the master divinity that is beyond human understanding—the Real behind the maya. In these final poems, the soul is thus figured as eternal, escaping torment through devotion and by keeping righteous company. Sharma asks:

*Without singing praises to Hari,  
who will attain bliss?*

In this move from the physical to the spiritual, Sharma the poet, the singer of songs, reconciles with the divine and shows his readers a clear path to liberation from suffering, offering help and advice along the way,

*Sing these thoughts of Rama,  
give up your attachments  
and desires.*

*Lalbihari says, "Try and understand,  
the company of saints is absolute truth."*

As a poet myself who is obsessed with the music of the Indian diaspora and specifically the music of my own tradition, working on this text has been revelatory. I have always charted my own poetic lineage from the chutney music of Sundar Popo and Dropati, music that itself took inspiration from the devotional populism of bhakti poetry. But in Sharma's combination of precision, spirituality, and clarity, I have been able to find the seed of a story that shows me how I myself can be transformed.

By describing the journey from the material into the spiritual, this collection as a whole functions as a kind of a guide, showing me possible ways of re-conceptualizing and re-framing a cultural inheritance and knowledge that colonial and postcolonial pressures to assimilate have caused to be devalued and eschewed, even by my own family of origin.

Given that South Asian languages rarely appear the world of postcolonial Caribbean literature, it is my sincerest hope that people come to this text understanding what this tradition of oral language gives to the Caribbean landscape. Our particular mix of South Asian languages has been almost entirely extinguished by the cultural hegemony of English. But by digging into Sharma's archive of sound, spirituality, and image, I have been able to see exactly how themes of separation have unfolded through to my own generation. My family has always been haunted by the unfulfilled contract that promised to return us to a homeland that no longer exists. What Sharma shows is that such a return is psychic, the return of the spirit to the "home," a merging with divinity in a way, that, though rooted in bondage, can be released to the sky. I grapple regularly with large questions such as these in my own poems: Where does the soul begin and where is it going? What is poetry if not a steady searching?

By reading and translating Sharma, I've learned to constantly engage with the materiality of sound as I attempt to reclaim what is lost to my generation. I have come to

truly appreciate that in order to do so I must write in and out of all my languages: Guyanese Creole, English, and Bhojpuri. In Sharma's plantation Hindi, I hear echoes of my own ancestors singing for the spring of the soul, praying colors into play.

<sup>1</sup> The languages that scholars agree have created modern Hindi include Braj Bhasha, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi—all non-standardized languages of North India, and all closely identified with the tradition of devotional poetry and music. Though seen to be more rustic and rooted in village life, these languages are, ironically, admired for their poetic depth and traditions.

<sup>2</sup> India has four major castes that are organized into a hierarchical structure that include Brahmins (the priestly class) at the top, then Kshatriyas (the ruling class), Vaishyas (the mercantile class), and Shudras (the servant class). Dalits fall outside of the caste system entirely, and suffer oppression from this system as a result.

<sup>3</sup> The chaatal in particular is specific to Indo-Caribbean people—so much so that it became the forerunner to a new kind of Caribbean music with Indian roots: chutney music. During the 1960s, singers such as Sundar Popo and Yusef Islam sang bhakti poetry set to song and rhythm. In so doing, they brought the performance of folk music traditions to the public sphere, harkening back to the metaphors and experiences that had inspired their ancestors, but fitting them into the sonic landscape of the Caribbean. Following in the tradition of bhakti poets, these musicians found inspiration in the idea of liberation from caste and religion, but in the service of a new Caribbean cultural rebuilding.

<sup>4</sup> This could be due to Bhojpuri cinema's wild take off from obscurity to its present style of racy songs and dancing.

<sup>5</sup> Though Rama is the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, he is held to be the formless god.

#### WORKS CITED

Shankar, S. *Flesh and Fish Bone: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Politics of Translation." *The Translation Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 397-416.

Lalbihari Sharma was born in Chapra village in the United Provinces of India (now Bihar, India) and indentured by the British East India Company to work the sugarcane fields. A musician and singer, he published his chautal folksongs in 1916.

Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*, a personal history of indenture, was shortlisted for Britain's Orwell Prize, the international literary award for artful political writing. Her short fiction "The Stained Veil" appears in the 2018 Feminist Press anthology *Go Home!* Named a Nieman Fellow by Harvard for her work as a journalist, she has also been awarded literary residences at the MacDowell Colony and the Bellagio Center in Italy. She writes for *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *VQR*, and *Dissent*, among other publications.

Rajiv Mohabir is the author of *The Cowherd's Son* (Tupelo Press 2017, winner of the 2015 Kundiman Prize) and *The Taxidermist's Cut* (Four Way Books 2016, winner of the Four Way Books Intro to Poetry Prize and finalist for the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry in 2017). In 2015, PEN awarded him the PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grant Award for the completion of *I Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara*.