

Title of paper:

**Lalbihari's "Phagvā Delight from Demerara": A Reconstruction of a Broken World**

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Summary of paper:

Lalbihari (n.d.), an immigrant from former British Guyana, figures along with Munshi Rahman Khan and Totaram Sanadhya, among those few indentured labourers who wrote about their experiences in the colonies. Little is known about Lalbihari apart from some basic biodata.

Lalbihari's "Phagvā Delight from Demerara", a work in Hindi vernaculars, published in 1916 in Bombay, is interesting for Diaspora studies from various points of views. This book has two main parts and an appendix of names, the purpose of which remains unclear. The first part is short and autobiographical and thus interesting as a first-hand account from a Guyanese immigrant; especially his bold statements about the peculiar situation in Demerara during indentureship are noteworthy. The second and main part, has a religious and devotional content. Close reading of the text indicates that song by song, Lalbihari weaves a spiritual and metaphysical realm, which, as it seems, may be seen as an attempt to reconstruct a new religious reality in the alien world of many an immigrant. Lalbihari's work provides rich materials for literary and psychological studies of immigrants' reconstructions of their broken worlds in the Diaspora. In this paper I briefly discuss both parts of the book followed by a short analysis of the author's underlying thoughts for writing the book.

Keywords: religion, Hinduism, devotion, bhakti, culture, literature, Overseas Hindi, Indian diaspora, Guyana, autobiography.

## Introduction

Lalbihari (n.d.) was an Indian immigrant from former British Guyana who wrote a small book in Hindi vernaculars, a mix of Avadhi and Bhojpuri. The title of that book is *Ḍamarā Phāg Bahāra* ('Phagvā Delight from Demerara') and was published in Bombay in 1916. Courtesy to Dr. Nalini Mohabir, who during her PhD research in London, 'discovered' the book in 2013 by chance in the India Office Library. She brought it to my attention as it might interest an Indologist concerned with Indo-Caribbean diaspora, languages, culture, religion and music. Considering the value of the text, I seized the idea to translate and publish this unique material. This paper offers a short analysis of its contents, and as such may be seen as an introduction to the work; the text and translation will be published elsewhere.

Apart from the title page and notes by the librarian, this work comprises 35 pages of printed texts of 46 compositions in verse. At the end, two separate lists of names have been appended of which the purpose remains unclear.<sup>1</sup>

### Table of Contents:

Nr.	Sections	Meter	Components	Pg. nr.
	Librarian's Entry Notes			
	Title page			1
	Sūcanā / Announcement			2
1	Vandanā / Invocation		6 Caupāi + 3 dohā-s	3
2	Autobiography and Description of Demerara	Chanda	4 stanzas	4
3	Demerara's Situation	Caupāi		4
4		Kavitta		5
5	Demerara's Situation	Kavitta	+ dohā	5
6		Kavitta	+ dohā	5
7		Kavitta		6
8		Caupāi	Caupāi	6
9	Lālabihārī Cautāla's	[Cautāla]	+ Ulārā	7
10		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	7
11		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	8
12		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	9
13		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	10
14		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	11
15		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	12
16		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	12
17		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	13
18		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	14
19		Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	15

<sup>1</sup> Lalbihari obviously intended to write something like brief biographies of 34 persons of whom he prepared a list, but for unknown reason he could not finish the project.

20	Cautāla	4 stanzas	16
21	Cautāla	4 stanzas	16
22	Cautāla	4 stanzas + Ulārā	17
23	Cautāla	4 stanzas	18
24	[Cautāla]	4 stanzas + Ulārā	18
25	Cautāla	4 stanzas	19
26	Cautāla	4 stanzas	20
27	Cautāla	4 stanzas	21
28	Cautāla	4 stanzas	21
29	Cautāla	4 stanzas	22
30	Cautāla	4 stanzas	22
31	Cautāla	4 stanzas	23
32	Cautāla	4 stanzas	24
33	Cautāla	4 stanzas	24
34	Cautāla	4 stanzas	25
35	Cautāla	4 stanzas	25
36	Bhajan no. 1	6 stanzas	26
37	Bhajan no. 2	4 stanzas	27
38	Bhajan no. 3	5 stanzas	27
39	Bhajan no. 4	5 stanzas	28
40	Bhajan no. 5	5 stanzas	28
41	Bhajan no. 6	4 stanzas	29
42	Bhajan no. 7	4 stanzas	29
43	Bhajan no. 8	4 stanzas	30
44		Kavitta	30
45		Savaiyā	31
46		2 dohā-s	31
47	Name list 1		32
48	Name list 2		34

### Book on Phagvā songs

As indicated by the title, Lalbihari's work is a collection of songs on Phagvā, the colorful Hindu spring festival, celebrated at the end of winter, signifying the victory of light over darkness and good over evil. The setting is explicitly not India, but Demerara, the new world for Lalbihari.

In the Caribbean, Phagvā songs are commonly referred to as *cautāla* (commonly spelled *chowtal*). Lalbihari composed his work entirely in verse, utilizing the most popular meters from classical Hindi literature such as the *dohā*, *caupāī*, *kavitta* and *chanda*. The work comprises of about 46 compositions, most of which are *cautāla* or Phagvā songs, as indicated by the title of the book. 30 *cautāla*, 8 *bhajan*, 5 *kavitta*, 1 *chanda*, 1 *savaiyā*, 1 set of two *doha*'s at the end, followed by an appendix of two lists of names.

A standard *cautāla* composition usually comprises of four Caupāī stanzas or quatrains, each of 4 lines. After a *cautāla* generally follows an attached *ulārā*, which ideally is linked to that particular *cautāla* and corresponds in theme (Peter Manuel 2009: 29). Lalbihari's Phagvā *cautāla*'s, usually comprise four to six Caupāī quatrains.

The Caupāī is usually printed as two rhyming lines of verse, each containing sixteen *matras* or metrical instants, irrespective of the order of short and long syllables. Lalbihari, however, seems to take care for the last four syllables, which usually is a sequence of two short and two long syllables. Each block of Caupāīs is ideed closed by an *ulārā*, comparable to an envoy, i.e. a short closing stanza in a certain verse form, usually summarizing its main ideas.

### **Kavī Lālbihārī Śarmā**

In the introductory part of his work, the author refers to himself as Lalbihari, but at the beginning of the actual work, before writing his first *cautāl*, he presents himself fully as Kavī Lālbihārī Śarmā (p. 7). The appendage Śarmā to his name shows that he was a Brahmin, but more important is the academic title 'Kavī' prefixed to his name, which attests to him being a learned pundit, who was not only a Brahmin by birth, but also a versatile poet versed in Hindi and Hindu traditions. Little is known about Lalbihari apart from what he states about himself such as his name, his father's name (Brahmadeva), place of birth in India, i.e. Mairitar, a village in the province of Chapra, Bihar, and Golden Fleece, his village in Guyana, Essequibo.

Lalbihari's book towers among the few works written by East-Indian immigrants around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that respect, Lalbihari figures along with Munshi Rahman Khan (Surinam) and Totaram Sanadhya (Fiji) among those few indentured labourers who wrote about their experiences in the colonies. This means that in the Caribbean there were two prominent immigrant writers who wrote in Hindi vernaculars, i.e. Munshi Rahman Khan and Kavī Lālbihārī Śarmā. While Lalbihari's work was published already in 1916 in Bombay, Rahman Khan's monumental autobiography, though completed in the 1940s, saw its publication only in 2003 first as a Dutch translation, followed by an English rendition in 2005.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sinha-Kerkhoff *et al.* 2005: xv.

### **Lalbihari's Autobiography**

In comparison with Munshi Rahman Khan's voluminous autobiography, written in prose as well as verse, Lalbihari's relatively small work is composed entirely in verse. It should be noted that Rahman Khan devotes his entire work, titled *Jīvan Prakāśa* 'Light on (my) Life', on describing his life from his early childhood in India until his heydays in Surinam during the 1940s. Lalbihari on the other hand, dedicates only seven compositions at the beginning of his work for describing the working conditions in Guyana during indentureship. Even though the bulk of his work deals with religio-devotional matters, still 15% of his work is autobiographical. Nevertheless, his work is highly relevant as a first-hand account from a Guyanese immigrant who offers a unique insight into his personal Caribbean experience. Even though Lalbihari seems to narrate from his personal perspective, we may confidently assume that it also reflects the views of his fellow migrant workers given the general nature of the actions described.

### **Lalbihari's Broken World**

After an opening prayer and briefly stating his personalia, Lalbihari quickly moves to Guyana and mentions his village Golden Fleece that is situated in the Essequibo region. He begins with a short description of the current 'situation' of Demerara (*ḍamarā kā hāla*), which is shockingly forthright and depressing. Lalbihari's bold statements about the peculiar situation in Demerara during indentureship are particularly noteworthy.

Before narrating his personal 'story' from Demerara and presenting the actual book on Phagvā songs, Lalbihari begins with an invocation in the form of a benedictory prayer (*maṅgalācara*) to propitiate the gods. This practice is very much in line with Indian literary tradition; the author first calls to mind the gods and saints as it is believed that the enterprise one intends to undertake will be accomplished successfully only when the deities, in particular Lord Ganeśa, are pleased with auspicious and benedictory prayers and thus incline to remove all impediments.

Lalbihari first pays homage to the deities Rāma, Sītā, Śiva, Pārvatī, Go-mātā, Ganeśa, Hanumān, Sūryanārāyaṇa and his *guru*. In the concluding line of this part Lalbihari states the object and essence of the prayer, *viz.* the desire to accomplish this booklet (*gāthā*)! Though under normal circumstances such a concern would be nothing more but a formal exercise, but here, under the given circumstances in which he undertook such an undertaking, his concerns seem to be serious and genuine. One can imagine that

in the period (around 1916) that this book was published, it was not usual among immigrants or their descendants, to produce literary works, let alone getting it published in India. Assuming that like most of his companions, Lalbihari too was poor; his concern to ever complete the work and seeing it through the press, must indeed have been weighing heavily on his shoulders. In the *dohā* summary Lalbihari underscores his main concern: "... may the Lord fulfill my wishes." Another, apparently minor wish, seems to have been that of organizing regular religious meetings such as *satsaṅga* and *kathā* during which occasions local wise and learned men were invited to share their thoughts with laymen Hindus. Lalbihari then reiterates his main concern and desire, but now in terms of faith and trust in his Lord, who not only is known for fulfilling the solemn oaths of his devotees, but also for relieving them from the ensuing anxieties of such undertakings.

Lalbihari opens his description of Demerara with a vivid depiction of daily procedures at the camps of the immigrants. His personal encounter with his new environment has obviously not been so pleasant because he opens his description with the sobering statement that even though he had heard that the good people of Guyana loved one another, he had to conclude right at the outset of his work that in fact 'this country (*deśa*) is a terribly bad place (*kudeśa*) with no norm, discern or consideration (whatsoever)!' This devastating realisation seems to be of someone waking up into a nightmare, for Demerara turns out to be a horrible place! However, despite his discontent, Lalbihari does not indicate against which group his sentiments were directed to: the Creole community of former slaves or the ruling elite of white masters, or perhaps his own fellow immigrants.

In two following verses Lalbihari gives us his brief diagnostics of what we may call their collective trauma. First of all, he mentions the experience of leaving one's beloved homeland and come to Demerara, an alien and hostile country; second, the humiliating experience of registering oneself as 'Coolie'; third, the neglect of ones daily religious duties (*nityadharmā*) such as singing devotional songs (*bhajan*), etc.; and fourth, the wandering away from the 'path of the Veda's' (*vedapatha*), which he seems to have equated with the entering of the 'path of crime' (*kukarma*). All this sums up what he saw as the straying away from one's culture, religion and personal ethics. This perhaps explains why Lalbihari does not mention his morning prayers, which normally form part and parcel of the daily rituals or ceremonies for any devout Hindu, traditionally grouped under the so-called (compulsory) daily rituals.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lalbihari also skips less interesting and obvious matters such as bathing, using the latrine or kindling a fire.

Since life on the estates boils down to labour and control, Lalbihari focused on food and instruction, which are essential for the workers to survive and to do their work in an orderly way. Lalbihari describes some important matters such as getting up in time, preparing food, having breakfast, receiving orders from the supervisor, packing up some food and then joining the other workers before proceeding to the working fields. The daily dealings with the foreman and other overseers were very important. When arriving at the working site, the foreman would again issue detailed orders what each individual worker had to do that day. Lalbihari draws a caricature of the white supervisor by calling him *sahib*, mounted on a horse, with a tall hat, who would let the workers march ahead of him and when reaching the site, he would gallop and overtake the men.

Lalbihari's work stands out by its realistic compositions, which, though bitter, offer a short but vivid description of his daily dealings with the realities of indentureship.

## Food

Food was undoubtedly something of prime concern among the immigrants during indentureship. The first thing they thought of when getting up at the 'strike of five', was to prepare food for the day. The first meaningful act Lalbihari describes is that of 'putting a cooking pot on the stove and boil rice', the staple food for North-East Indians, already during indentureship.

After preparing his food and having his 'breakfast', he would receive his daily tasks from the foreman (*sardār*), pack up his lunch in a *sispān*<sup>4</sup> –lunchbox, which would be filled with rice and whatsoever available. Note that Lalbihari shies away from mentioning any spread, filling or 'side dish' such as e.g. vegetables, *dāl* (lentil soup) obviously because these could not be afforded. An interesting clue is the explicit mentioning of curd (*dahī*). Lalbihari's morning diet comprised of freshly cooked rice and curd, which he ate with some sugar. The curd was obviously much easier to make than, e.g. *dāl* and easily kept for some days. And when finishing, the curd could easily be 'lengthened' by adding more milk to the

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<sup>4</sup> In Surinam the word *sispān* is prevalent instead of *saspān*. It is a multi-layered (Tiffin) lunchbox, often cylindrical and made of aluminum. The derivation of the word is not clear, whereas English 'sauce-pan' and Dutch 'saus-pan' come quite close phonetically, but make little sense because these are deep cooking pans with a handle. Usually a *sispān* comprises of two or more stacks of containers that lock together for easier handling, and allow separating the different parts of the meal, whether they be solid, liquid, hot or cold.

remnant 'sour' base and produce fresh curd overnight, whereas the preparation of for example *dāl* requires much work, which moreover spoils very fast in hot climate.

Another important daily ritual was the preparation of a 'smoking kit' in the morning.

### **The Chillum Pipe**

After packing his 'lunchbox', the next item that attracted the immigrant's attention was the Chillum. That's a small hollow pipe traditionally made from clay designed for smoking tobacco, cannabis (*bhāng /gānjā*), marijuana (hashish or *charas*) or some mixture. In those days cigarettes or hand-rolling tobacco/shag were not popular yet, whereas smoking from a Chillum pipe was much in vogue in South Asia. Indo-Caribbeans brought it to the Diaspora countries, but most of their descendants have only heard about this practice and often have no idea how it was smoked. All that Lalbihari says is that "The Chillum was prepared and stowed away carefully." In fact, the pipe was first cleaned of the smoke resin or debris stuck to the pipe from its previous usage and refilled for its next use. Then a round or conical piece of stone was placed in the base of the pipe as a crude filter, preventing pieces of burning *caras* entering the smoker's mouth. Finally a wetted piece of cloth was wrapped around the mouthpiece as a fine filter guarding against the heat and burning pieces.

### **Reconstruction of a Broken World**

With the harsh and alien reality of Demerara around him, Lalbihari starts out with his main work, which at first sight appears to be a collection of religious and devotional songs. Lalbihari in fact pierces through the shell of his daily reality and tries to reconstruct a broken world from the patches of his scrambled memory. Obviously unable to compromise with his situation, Lalbihari projects through his songs an imaginary world of divine love and merriment between Rāma and Sītā, Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, Śiva and Pārvaṭī, and divine couples. He skillfully connects the delightful play of Hindu deities with that of mortals through the worldly festival of Phagvā.

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At the end of the work, Lalbihari produces two lists of names. To begin with the last one, this consists of two columns of totally 31 numbered names. Notably, all these names occur one or four times in the previous list of unnumbered names, also in two columns. It is not clear at all what a high or low number of occurrence on the list means. Perhaps Lalbihari tried to prepare a list of citizens living in one or his

own village. He obviously first prepared a detailed list with the repetitions (perhaps representing people with the same surname), which he ultimately narrowed down to list number two by deleting all repetitions. This would render list number two an enumerations of Hindu surnames, perhaps occurring in one particular temple or village.

## Conclusion

Given the depth of the narrative of his perspective on his migration experience, one cannot but conclude that the first part of Lalbihari's work is autobiographical by nature, how small that may be. Considering these facts, one has to disagree with Sinha-Kerkhoff *et al* that Rahman Khan's *Jīvan Prakāśa* represents the 'only written autobiography of a first generation indentured labourer in the Caribbean' (2005: xii). It may not be an independent autobiography, but the first part of Lalbihari's *ḍamarā phāg bahāra* is historically certainly the first personal account of the Indo-Caribbean migration experience.

What strikes is that Lalbihari does not describe the daily Hindu duties. A deeply pious Brahmin like Lalbihari, who fills his book with numerous religious, devotional and spiritual songs, would be expected to describe his daily religious duties such as doing his morning prayers, giving water offerings to the sun and ancestors, and so on. In the given circumstances, these were obviously considered 'optional' and could be dispensed off in times of adversity, which the period of indentureship certainly was.

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