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When no one is left to tell the story,
would there be no history?

On History:
Fact,
Fiction,
&
Factions

Dialogue

Hope and Disappointment: Nearly Impossible Task of Searching Ancestral Roots in India

Satish Rai

In the modern world human migration began some 500 years after Christopher Columbus, in August 1492 set foot on an island in the present day Bahamas. He then claimed it for Spain and thus opened up the Americas to European colonization. This was followed by most brutal forms of labour transportation and exploitation in form of African slavery and Indian indenture system which followed the abolition of the former with the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 which freed all slaves in the British Empire. Between 1525 and 1866, according to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, some 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World. 10.7 million of them had survived the passage across the Atlantic. The abolition of African slave trade was followed by another form of slave trade in the guise of Indian indenture system, now known as *Girmit*, *Jahajis of Kontrakis*.¹ Under this system of human trafficking approximately 1.3 million Indians were dubiously recruited and transported to several European colonies in the West Indies, South America, Indian Ocean, South Africa and Fiji between 1826 and 1917.

Today, some 500 years after the start of these two dreadful forms of human trafficking and nearly 100 years after the abolition of the second form, there are many people who wish to trace their roots back to Africa and India. Add to these many people from England, Ireland, Wales and Scotland and other European countries who had been permanently transported to the colonies as indentured labourers, convicted settlers or as farmers, supervisors and so on, are also searching for their ancestral roots

¹ In this I will use the term *girmit* for all the Indians who were transported from India to the European colonies under the indenture system. *Girmit* is the shortened term the *girmitiyas* used for the 'agreement' under which they were transported. *Kontrakis* were used for contracts and *Jahajis* arose from the *Jahaj* (ship) which transported them.

in countries of their origin.

During the African slavery and Indian indenture system, spanning over 400 years, those enslaved and indentured had practically no means to trace their roots in the countries from where they were recruited and transported to the European colonies. Factors that could have contributed to this would have included illiteracy, lack of freedom, lack of awareness and lack of resources. Another important factor to consider is that the majority of historical documentation of slavery and *girmit* was done by the Europeans who were mainly motivated to do so to justify capture, recruitment, transportation, exploitation and inhuman treatments of the Africans and Indians. However, there a few instance of history from the Europeans who have tried to provide a more balanced view of this period and some from those who even tried to provide a voice for the enslaved and exploited people. Hardly any documentation exists of this period by those we were enslaved and exploited by the Europeans in the colonies. The few that exist are in form of folk lore, folk songs, poems and interviews of the enslaved people towards the end of the slavery and *girmit*. By and large voices of the enslaved and *girmit* people are missing from slave and *girmit* histories.

Today, 500 years since the start of the African slave trade and 100 years since the abolition of the Indian *girmit* system, some people are trying not only to trace their ancestral roots in Africa and India, but also to understand the histories of these people; their ancestors.

Those Europeans who were transported to the colonies as convicts and indentured workers, are also trying to reconnect to their roots in Europe. Europeans were generally better in keeping records; anecdotal research suggests that they may have kept better historical records of those who transported then from Europe, than the records on those who transported people from Africa and India. Hence we can see television programs which show successful searches of ancestral homes in Europe, mainly by entertainment and political personalities of Australia and the USA.²

Books, films and television series such as the old and new *Roots* demonstrate that the descendants of the African slaves are also interested in keeping the memories and histories of their ancestral homes and people alive.

Coming closer to home Fiji, and towards the latter part of the Indian

² Websites such as www.ancestry.com and www.myheritage.com are examples which provide a lot information and support for Australians, New Zealanders and Americans of European ancestry to trace their roots back to European countries.

gimit system, significantly less interest was shown by the descendants of gimitiyas towards either their gimitiya ancestors or their ancestral homes in India. The daily quest for bread - survival - in a world of illiteracy contributed in no small measure to this lack of interest. But with changes in educational and income fortunes, interest increased.

Some academics such as Brij Lal and Shaista Shameem did their doctoral thesis on Fiji gimit and Fiji gimit women respectively. Other academics such as Vijay Naidu and (now late) Ahmed Ali conducted interviews with some surviving gimitiyas and wrote papers and books about them and gimit. Other academics and writers like Subramani, Satendra Nandan, Vijay Mishra and Sudesh Mishra have written books and poems on gimit and gimitiyas. Apart from these, and a few more that I may have left out, the general public was left with no record by gimitiyas and/or their descendants. The plights of gimit and gimitiyas remained unknown to the new generation.

From my early primary and secondary school days I recall learning about the native Fijian history, and history of England, Australia and New Zealand. At no point I was taught our gimit history. Till today Fiji has not included gimit history into its education curriculum. Since 1979, apart from small events hosted by the Indian High Commission in Fiji, Fiji as a nation has not organised any gimit event until now for general public.³ Hardly any film or television has been produced on Fiji gimit by Fijians. It is, therefore, not hard to see why there is lack of awareness of gimit in Fiji.

In 2001 I produced my first documentary film *Milaap-Discover Your Indian Roots*⁴ which shows visits of the former Fijian Senator Asha Singh to her ancestral villages in Ghaziabad and Basti districts of Uttar Pradesh, India. During this visit we also visited the ancestral village of another Fijian family in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. Ram Ugra from this village was transported to Fiji; his family lived in Natabua, Lautoka. The

³ The rare exception may have been the 1979 centenary celebrations in Fiji that I vaguely remember. I mentioned elsewhere that I had attended one of these celebrations in Suva. Despite being in my early 20s I had no clue what gimit was then. For me and for many of my friends, this celebration was about fun and entertainment, and gimit did not even register to us then. In 2004, as part of the marking the 125th year of arrival of gimitiyas in Fiji, a number of NGOs organised events throughout Fiji. Since then, smaller localised events have been held annually in May to commemorate Gimit.

⁴ You Tube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M59la3hEx3Y>

most prominent descendant of Ram Ugra is late Surendra Prasad, a lawyer, former mayor of Lautoka and a former MP of Fiji. We also visited a family in Rae Bareilly and Gorakhpur from where men were transported to Guyana and Mauritius respectively. According to my research at that time *Milaap-Discover Your Indian Roots* was the first ever documentary film produced on gimit.

In 2003 I accompanied Tourism India (Sydney) officers to participate in the India Week in Fiji. With the aid of these officers I ran 5 *days Discover Your Indian Roots information sessions* at the Civic Centre in Suva and a one day session at the Khastriya Hall in Lautoka. In total some 900 people attended these sessions over these six days. I managed to assist some 60 of these people to extract immigration (gimit) passes of gimitiyas from the National Archives in Carnarvon Street, Suva. I later took copies of all these gimit passes with me to India.⁵

The Tourism India officers were very surprised with what they witnessed during the Discover Your Indian Roots information sessions in Fiji. When I applied for support for filming my second documentary film on the *Milaap* series, they supported my application and I managed to get partial support for this project. This film project consisted filming of footage for my *Dream Indian Golf Holidays* and *Milaap-A Royal Discovery films*⁶.

After concluding filming for the first film, I started filming for the second film by searching for the ancestral roots of my friend Thakur Ranjit Singh's ancestral home in Karauli, Rajasthan. Ranjit had already tried this search a few months earlier but he could not trace the ancestral roots of his grandfather Bansi. I did not have the immigration pass of Bansi but Ranjit had provided me some information about his ancestral home. My visit was more positive. I was lucky to have made acquaintance with someone who sent a message to the manager of the Maharaja of Karauli for assistance. Upon reaching Karauli we stayed in the palace of Karauli overnight and in the morning we were informed that a local thakur, Vijay

⁵ During this visit I also screened *Milaap-Discover your Indian Roots* in Lautoka and Suva. A day or two later Radio Fiji 2 had organized a talent quest in the same hall. I was present with my camera at this event. To my surprise and dismay I witnessed some of the Radio Fiji 2 announcers making fun of gimit and my film and laughing about it. To me it clearly demonstrated the way people with some power regarded gimit and gimitiyas in Fiji. This was in stark contrast to the feelings of the ordinary descendants of gimitiyas, many of whom cried or had moist eyes when interacting with the Tourism India officers and me during the days Discover Your Indian Roots information sessions.

⁶ You Tube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPg9mqV5B4>

Singh had positive news for us. We travelled along the narrow row of the now dilapidated estate of the Maharaja of Karauli and had a chat with the amiable and helpful Vijay Singh. Vijay Singh then took us a short distance to what he believed to be relatives of Bansi. The relatives told us about young Bansi and how he went to Mathura one day and never returned. After his disappearance his descendants also slowly disappeared; only a small piece of land where Bansi's home once stood remained for one of his descendants to claim. So once where nothing was found by Thakur Ranjit Singh, something had been found during this search.

My journey continued to Lucknow where I met up with an Uttar Pradesh Tourism Discover Indian Roots Project officer and handed over the 60 girmits that I had brought with me from Fiji. She promised the Discover Indian Roots Project will try to trace the ancestral roots of those girmits in the passes. Incidentally when I returned to the office during my next visit to India, I was informed that no work was done on this because the office had lost all the passes!

From Lucknow I travelled with the team to trace roots of Gangadin, who according to the information on one of the girmits, lived in the village of Pandeyganga Purwa, Colonelganj, in the district of Gonda, Uttar Pradesh. Gonda is some 120 km northeast of Lucknow; it took us about 3 hours to reach the township of Colonel Gunge, where we asked the local police for direction to the village of Pandeyganga Purwa. A short drive through dirt roads flanked by farms, we reached a small settlement with thatched houses and cows lazily sitting around amongst thatched houses and shabbily dressed men, women and children. We spent one hour in the village, asking young and old about a person called Gangadin who may have lived in the village some one hundred years ago. A young man assisted us with our search and spoke with several elderly men about the person we were looking for. Unfortunately no one could tell us anything concrete about Gangadin. However they confirmed that was the only Pandeyganga Purwa in the village. We left the village disappointed and confused. We were in the right village but no one in the village remembered one of their ancestors who had left the village one day and never returned. If he had a family, parents, siblings or children, what had happened to them? Gangadin's descendants had come to see me in Fiji; what happened to the descendants of his family, parents, siblings or children in this village? Why no one in this poor little village remembered anything about his existence?

A two hour drive took us from Colonelganj to Balrampur, some 65 km east from there. This stop was to meet up with an Uttar Pradesh Tour-

ist officer. We were informed in Lucknow that he had arranged us to meet one of my Indian cousins who would escort us to the ancestral home of my paternal grandmother (*aaji*) in a village in Utraula, located some 25 km east of Balrampur. The search for my ancestral home began in 1994 while I was living in London. The events in my life post 1987 coups had promoted me to seek out my Indian identity, which was connected to my girmitya ancestors. A number of telephone calls to Fiji and conversations with one of my uncles had provided me information which finally helped me to locate my ancestral village in India. The first two visits to India in 1994 and 1995 did not reveal much. During the third visit I travelled to Balrampur and with help of a friend, spoke with several local media representatives in a press conference. A few months later I received an email from one of these media representatives that my aaji's village and relatives had been identified through a local doctor. The doctor had read the article about my aaji in a local newspaper. He had an 84 year old patient Dhokey Rai who on occasions had talked about his aunt who had gone away to Fiji.

My cousin did not come to our hotel to meet me. I learnt that his name was Naeem Rai and he was a Muslim. I felt my fourth visit to India would also result into nothing because of the fact that his aaji was Hindu and she could not be related to Muslims. I decided to end my search there and return to Sydney. However, the next morning I was persuaded to visit the village as it was only 50 minutes drive from the hotel. At the end of the visit to the little town of Shridutganj and village Galibpur, I was convinced that the people I met during this visit were related to my aaji Gokuldei. I met my 84 year old uncle, four cousins and their families. I also visited the village where my aaji was born. Since then my brothers, sister and nephews from Australia and New Zealand have visited this family.

Leaving Utraula to trace another family in Bhanpur some 47 kms from there I was glad that I finally visited Utraula. The long visit from Sydney could have resulted into nothing if I did not summon up sufficient courage to travel from Balrampur to Utraula. We reached Bhanpur after travelling for nearly one hour. We were looking for the ancestral home of Udit, whose descendants lived in Nausori and Suva area of Fiji Islands. I managed to extract the girmit pass of Udit from the Fiji National Archives after a brief conversation with some of his descendants in Suva. What assisted a lot in this search was that Udit was transported to Natal, South Africa for his first girmit. Upon his return to India he was subsequently transported to Fiji. From my previous searches at the Archives I knew that should I locate Udit in the Archive's register and *Returnee* was marked on his girmit pass; he would be the ancestor of these people in

Suva. A quick search revealed exactly that. On Udit's girit pass *Returnee* and Natal was hand written.

As we travelled to Bhanpur from Utraula I was apprehensive that the dual girit of Udit may pose problems for us in locating his ancestral home in UP. He belonged to one of the labouring cultivation castes; this fact may also add to our problem. I wondered if the village named in the girit pass was his ancestral home or the home he lived in when he returned to India from South Africa. We reached the town of Bhanpur after one hour and asked some people for the village listed on the girit pass. No one knew of the village but we were directed to the home of a former government employee for further help. He was joined by a retired school teacher as well. Between them they informed us that the village mentioned in the girit pass was now a part of another district area and was located some distance from the town. They did not know about Udit and promised to make inquiries and get back to our guide with any information they discovered. Till today this has not happened. As we left the two elderly people and the small town, we were left with the feeling that Udit's ancestral home will never be found unless a massive search was conducted.

We then proceeded towards the village of Kotwali in district Basti, located some 28 kms from Bhanpur. This journey was to search for the ancestral home of my paternal grandfather (aaja). On various occasions my elderly uncle had informed me that I will never find the ancestral home of my aaja. He appeared to be very clear about it, even though the name of his village was written in his girit pass. There appeared to be some sort of mystery about my aaja which my uncle did not wish to reveal to anyone. I had tried several times to persuade my 96 year old uncle to reveal to me the secret of my aaja even when he lay on his death bed in Natabua, Lautoka. His mind was still crystal clear of events going back to his childhood; but he still refused to tell me this secret. My curiosity about my aaja grew even further, who I had utmost respect for protecting my aaji at various stages of her life. When I returned to Sydney 2013, I had hoped to ask him again about my aaja in my next visit to Fiji. Sadly my uncle, who had provided me the initial information which had helped me enormously to locate his mother's ancestral home in India, died a few months later. This crucial information about my aaja is thus lost to us.

We reached Kotwali after about 40 minute drive and drove to the village listed in his girit pass. His girit pass listed his caste as Sonar (goldsmith); he same cast was listed on my aaji's pass. We know now that she was the daughter of Udit Rai, a Bhumihaar Brahmin. I was told by

some older members of my family that my aaja was a Thakur, adding to the mystery that surrounds him. The village that we visited did not appear to be that of Brahmins, Thakurs or even Sonars. The residents of the village informed that no sonar had ever lived in the village and they were not aware of a Sukhdev living there. They suggested we look in the nearby town for sonars. We asked several sonars in the town about Sukhdev but no one recalled him.

As I headed to spend the night in Faizabad some 75 kms from there, I recalled my uncle's words. The girit pass also lists my aaja's brother as his next of kin. Aaja used to write to him until his brother died. I wondered where aaja's brother had lived. What was the mystery? Will I ever get to find his home in India? What had happened in Utraula and Faizabad, where my aaji was living after her marriage to a Rai Bahadur? Did my aaja give wrong information in the girit pass? Did it have anything to do with the fact that he had dared to marry the wife of a Rai Bahadur? Did he decide to go to Fiji with my aaji and her two children to escape the wrath of Rai Bahadur? Reaching Faizabad one hour and thirty minutes later I wondered if my aaja had in fact lived in Faizabad where he had met my aaji. I also wondered if the two knew each other prior to her marriage and he came to her rescue when he found her in trouble during her marriage.

There were so many unanswered questions which may well remain unanswered for ever. One thing was certain to me. A lot of drama must have unfolded some 100 years ago between Faizabad and Utraula located less than 90 kms away. Central to this drama were my aaji, her former husband, my aaja, his brother, my aaji's two little sons and her father Uma Rai. These were real people with real lives, real homes, real villages, real expectations and dreams. Four were transported to Fiji, aaji's father and aaja's brother had died a few years later. No one knows what happened to aaji's first husband. Real people with real life stories mean little to anybody one hundred years on.

Two years later we travelled to south India to film *Milaap-the Land of the South Indian Giritiyas*.⁷ This film was motivated by an incidence that happened during the Discover Your Indian Roots information sessions that I had conducted with the Tourism India officer in Fiji in 2003. One day a group of south Indian women came to the session and one of them requested me to show her the place on the large map of India where her ancestors had come from. She told me that her ancestors were from Malabar Hill area, which presently falls in Kerala. I located Malabar Hills

⁷ You Tube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZiVB7nTwgg>

on the map and pointed that out to her. She looked at the map for a long time and a few tears rolled down from her eyes. Other women had also joined her and everyone was touched by her emotion. *Beta, hum to kabhi wahan jaye nahi payega*, she said in her south Indian accent. *Bas ee mapwa dekh ke dil ke tassali de dei*. (Son, I will never be able to visit this place, she said in her south Indian accent. I will satisfy myself by looking at this map.) She thanked me and the group left. I was profoundly moved by the woman's reaction and emotion she displayed towards her ancestral land. I had left Fiji in 1980 as a young man. Upon my return there some 23 years later, I was informed by many that no one really cared about giritmit and giritmitiyas any more; their descendants had moved on. This woman and approximately 900 others who had visited the information session in just 6 days told me a very different story. I promised my self on that day that I will do something better than showing descendants of south Indian giritmitiyas the land of their ancestors just on a map; I will make a film of their land. I had already showed the North Indians their lands in my previous two *Milaap* films.

During this filming tour I had with me a giritmit pass of a person which showed that he was from Palakkad, Kerala located some 135 km northwest of Ernakulum, near Kochi. The name on the giritmit pass stated that the giritmitiya ancestor was a Nair and on reaching Palakkad from Ernakulum by a hired car, we proceeded to the village recorded in the pass. This area was still populated by Nairs. I spoke to several elderly people in the village, explaining why I was there. Unfortunately no one knew of Fiji, let alone about the relatives of the person listed on the pass. They only remembered people from that area being taken to (Ceylon) Sri Lanka.

This was a big disappointment for us. From there we travelled to Coimbatore by car and then by bus to Chennai. In Chennai we filmed some areas from where giritmitiyas were transported to Fiji, including Chengelpett and North Arcott. Our filming for this film concluded in Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh, from where many of the Telagu giritmitiyas were transported to Fiji.

Through the limited resources of *Milaap-Discover Your Indian Roots Project* I had some successes in helping people trace their ancestral roots in India. I have come across several other cases where we were not able to trace the ancestral roots due to various reasons. There were two main reasons for the unsuccessful cases. Firstly, few people had money or inclination to travel to India to trace their roots once the giritmit passes were extracted from the National Archives. Even those who did travel to

India, did not have sufficient knowledge and skill sets to conduct the searches successfully. Secondly, little support exists in India to assist people in Fiji, Fijian diaspora and the giritmit diaspora to trace roots in India. So even when some of the people manage to obtain the giritmit passes of their ancestors in India, itself a big task, they do not actually get to trace their roots in India.

If the present state of affairs continues for a few decades, I believe there will be little chance of anyone finding their roots in India. Today the information required to find the giritmit passes is held by some of the older people in a giritmit family. Once these people pass on, this information will be lost for ever. Therefore the millions of giritmit families in the giritmit diaspora will lose their ability to reconnect with their history forever.

Author

Satish Rai, is a dedicated filmmaker and TV producer; he has made several feature films and documentaries. His two novels, *Silent Cries* and *In Exile at Home* have been published as ebooks. He taught Digital Film and TV Production at the Fiji National University. He is presently writing his third novel *Life in Exile*.