

## Fiji: Absent-Present and Vice Versa

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The lights must never go out  
The music must always play  
WH Auden, 'September 1939'

I am sorry I cannot be with you in person in Fiji for this inaugural international conference commemorating the end of indentured emigration.<sup>1</sup> You all probably know the reasons for my absence: my wife and I have been banned for life from entering Fiji, the land of our birth, for no other reason than for standing up for the rule of law and the values of democracy threatened by a succession of military coups; we have been declared a threat to peace and good order in Fiji. But I am present in spirit.

Banishment is such an obsolete and futile 19<sup>th</sup> century way of dealing with dissent in a society that prides itself as democratic and freedom loving, open and transparent, in spirit and in substance. It is obsolete because peaceful dissent is a fundamental human right in a modern democracy. And it is futile because the myriad yearnings of the human spirit for freedom cannot be constrained or contained for too long by erecting walls and creating boundaries. It was ever thus, but it is especially so now in this age of galloping globalization and incessant cyber traffic.<sup>2</sup> Whatever they say or do, I am always present-absent in Fiji. This they are powerless to stop, can do nothing about. University students in Fiji listen to my lectures, hear my voice, read my words, discuss my ideas and regularly

<sup>1</sup> Conference held at Lautoka, Fiji, 22-24 March 2017. The last Indian immigrant ship, *SS Sutlej* reached Fiji on 2 November 1916. I would like to thank Doug Munro for his help and advice and, more generally, for his forty-year gift of much cherished friendship. He has read and commented on much of what I have written over this period. The contents in this article are entirely mine which may not necessarily be shared by the conference organisers or the publisher.

<sup>2</sup> I should like to record our deepest gratitude to many friends and colleagues in Fiji who have sought to have the ban on us lifted, petitioned the government and written to the press.

communicate with me via the internet for my advice on assignments and further reading. I am a mentor to many. The populace at large hears me on regional radio stations and reads my thoughts on contemporary Fijian affairs in the print media. I am always within accessible distance, always within reach. I am the ghost at the table who will not vanish into the thin air at some capricious and vengeful autocrat's whim or magic wand. The blood on their hands will not wash away easily, and I will not be silenced. Silence, by its very nature, gives succour to (immoral) authority.

I am delighted that this conference to commemorate the end of indentured emigration is being held in Fiji. As you all know, in 1879 Fiji was the last British colony to import Indian indentured labour, some sixty-thousand of the one million who were taken to distant 'King Sugar' colonies from 1834 onwards. Fiji also played a major part in the movement to abolish the indenture system. Reports by CF Andrews and Totaram Sanadhya on the real and alleged abuse of indentured labourers on the plantations, especially of women such as Kunti and Naraini,<sup>3</sup> galvanized Indian public opinion witnessing the first stirrings of nationalism in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, occasioned, in part, by Mahatma Gandhi's return to the subcontinent from his long years in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Despite desperate pleas from the colonies, including Fiji, for the Indian immigration to continue after the necessary reforms were made in the system, the indenture system, or 'Girmit' as it was known, had to go, and it did. Shipment of indentured labourers ceased after the *Sutlej* in 1916, and the system itself was abolished on 1 January 1920. Parenthetically, I should add that the word 'Girmit,' derived from the 'Agreement' of indenture, has a uniquely Fijian provenance although it is now used widely to describe the indenture experience in many former Indian labour importing colonies. Many places used the word 'indentureds' or 'coolies' to describe the immigrants. In Surinam, the word was 'Kontrakis.' In Fiji, it was Girmit. There is a book on Mohandas Gandhi titled *Pehla Girmitiya* (First Girmitiya) (Kishore, 2011) but the title is a total misnomer. Gandhi was many things to many people, including to himself, but he most certainly was not a girmitiya. We will claim 'Girmit' as Fiji's invaluable contribution to the vocabulary of Indian indenture historiography.

My own exploration of our girmit experience began in 1977 when I went to The Australian National University to write a thesis on the social origins of our girmitiya forbears (See Lal, 1980, 1983). Much was assumed about that subject but little actually known. For far too long, it re-

<sup>3</sup> The plight of these two women is covered in Lal (2000).

<sup>4</sup> See Gillion, 1962: 164-189.

mained an area of darkness for us in Fiji, remote, unappetizing and unexplored. What was past was past. 'When our ways of thinking changed,' as VS Naipaul puts it ever so poignantly in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Stockholm (7 December 2001), 'and we wanted to know, it was too late.'

Education came late on the scene; it was for the generation before ours in Fiji a luxury beyond reach. The exigencies of starting anew in a new and strange land, without a helping hand and often in inhospitable conditions, took its own inevitable toll. And, truth to tell, there was a certain ambivalence about the past among our own people, perhaps even emotional discomfort and embarrassment. We had escaped the shadow of servitude through much sacrifice and hard work, moved on and made something of ourselves. There was no need to be reminded of our sorry beginnings and truncated ambitions.<sup>5</sup> That was what our opponents and detractors did, to put us in our place – at the bottom of the social hierarchy, without the rights and privileges of equal citizenship and the dignity human beings deserved whatever their station in life. The idea of remembrance as redemption lay some years into the future.

For a long time, the history of indentured migration was consigned to the unlovely fringes of British imperial history as an unwanted and problematic stepchild, an unwelcome reminder of a sordid and shameful past best left untouched. When the subject did receive passing attention in officially authorized texts,<sup>6</sup> it was to remind the girmitiyas and their descendants of the unequivocal benefits of the indenture system, a flawed means perhaps but to good end nonetheless. And that, for them, was what mattered in the end. Some of our own people parroted that 'thank goodness' school of thought. Attitudes changed ever so slowly through haphazard self-assessment and random reflection.<sup>7</sup>

Among scholars, anthropologists arrived on the scene first, keen to explore the processes and dynamics of cultural change in 'Overseas In-

<sup>5</sup> In 1929, prominent Fiji Indian leaders spurned the colonial government's declaration of a public holiday to mark the fiftieth anniversary of indentured emigration to Fiji and burned an effigy of 'Mr. Gimit' instead.

<sup>6</sup> Such as *The Report to the Government of India on the Conditions of Indian Immigrants in Four British Colonies and Surinam* by Mr. James McNeill, ICS, and Mr. Chimman Lal, Cmd. 7744-5, 1914.

<sup>7</sup> The opening of the University of the South Pacific in Suva provided fresh and sustained impetus for research into local history. Among the first in the field was Ahmed Ali who conducted interviews with surviving girmitiyas in the late 1970s. The fruits of that effort are in his edited volume (Ali, 1979).

dian communities.<sup>8</sup> They investigated the collapse of the caste system, changes in religious and social practices, family relationships and community networks. Cultural persistence versus cultural change was the overarching theme of their scholarship. Their rich and detailed ethnographies are still invaluable windows on our past. Unsurprisingly, historians, ever the perennial laggards, arrived late. The early efforts were rudimentary, keen not to offend the sensibilities of the sahibs, for the most part supplicatory in tone. The first scholarly account of indenture anywhere was Ken Gillion's pioneering *Fiji's Indian Migrants*. The book, published in 1962, has worn its age well.

In 1974 came Hugh Tinker's landmark book *A New System of Slavery*. It was hugely influential, and continues to be among some quarters. It became popular for many reasons. Its accessible narrative and connected history, ostensibly based on deep archival research, written not by an angry, misguided colonial but by an established scholar living in the heart of the British Empire exposing the evils of the indentured labour trade, attracted attention. Nothing like this had ever been done before. Someone with authority and prestige and enviable institutional connections was finally prepared to comment publicly on the emperor's transparently scanty clothing.

The timing of that publication was important as well. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a difficult time in the lives of many overseas Indian communities descended from indenture, whether it was on account of Eric William's Black Power Movement in Trinidad, Forbes Burnham's racist socialism in Guyana, planter power in Mauritius, apartheid in South Africa, Mahatir Mohammed's Bumiputra policy in Malaysia, or the expulsion of Indians from Burma. Fiji was not to be left behind; in 1975, Sakesi Butadroka moved a motion in parliament to have all Fiji citizens of Indian descent deported. The sentiment, Ratu David Toganivalu said, was widely shared among the indigenous Fijians at the time.<sup>9</sup> The degree of exclusion from mainstream politics and society varied from place to place and over time, but that it existed was undeniable; it was real and deeply hurtful for those who were its target and denied the right to belong, to call their place of birth 'home.' Tinker's thesis provided a powerful argument for inclusion and equality as well as balm on a bruised soul.

Slavery had a resonant ring, but the experience of indenture was too

<sup>8</sup> Among the more prominent anthropologists were Burton Benedict (Mauritius), Hilda Kuper (Natal), A.C. Mayer (Fiji), Arthur and Juanita Niehoff (Trinidad), Chandra Jayawardena (Guyana and later Fiji).

<sup>9</sup> See Lal, 1992: 235-241.

complex, too contradictory, too varied, to be expressed in a single linear narrative. In some places, such as the Caribbean, it was for many a life sentence, in others, a limited detention.<sup>10</sup> In some places, the damage was deep and permanent and the loss irretrievable, in others light and transient and the wreckage redeemable. In Fiji, after five or at most ten years, the Indian immigrants were free to set up on their own on leased land wherever they could find it. There they established families and communities from the fragments of a remembered past. The colonial policy of ethnic segregation forced the new migrants to rely on their own cultural resources. There was no free market in cultural exchange as there was in the Caribbean, for instance.

In time, social and cultural organizations emerged, schools were established, newspapers came, and link with the Indian subcontinent was revived (it was never completely severed as in some colonies). Gradually, a new society emerged, more egalitarian, more pragmatic, more resourceful, but also more alone. And more vulnerable. A fundamental social transformation was underway. The 'Indian' immigrants were slowly becoming 'Fiji Indians' with a new world view and new habits of thought. 'Indo-Fijians,' completely at home in the new environment, would come some decades later. The speed of recovery and reconstitution was remarkable - and remarkably successful.<sup>11</sup>

The concerns of the new generation of indenture historians, many themselves descendants of the indentured labourers, are different.<sup>12</sup> Previous preoccupation with grand questions about the rights and wrongs of the system, whether indenture was slavery or something else, with the formulation of high policy, the politics of imperial concerns, is of little interest to them. Rather, they are more concerned with the actual lived experience of those who worked under indenture, how they resisted or accommodated themselves to the demands of the plantation system, the role culture played as a tool of resistance and as an instrument of survival, the way in which the values and institutions of the old world were reconfigured in the new environment. What made the earlier generations tick, what helped them survive the rough hand fate had dealt them? The new scholarship paints a more finely-grained picture of a complex and con-

<sup>10</sup> The latest reiteration of this view is Tikasingh (2012).

<sup>11</sup> See Lal, 2015: 52-72.

<sup>12</sup> Among the earlier generation, the prominent scholars were Brinsley Samaroo and Kushaharak Singh (Trinidad) latterly joined by Gerad Tikasingh, Clem Seecharan (Guyana) Ahmed Ali (Fiji), Goolam Vahed (South Africa). Among the non-indentured scholars would be Marina Carter (Mauritius) and Verene Sepherd (Jamaica).

tested experience that accorded the *giritiyas* a measure of humanity and agency, gave them a recognizable human face. It acknowledged sorrow and suffering that accompanied migration and indenture but also noted the possibilities of individual empowerment and social amelioration impossible to imagine in the tradition-encrusted, change-averse villages of rural India. In this perspective, indenture was simultaneously an enslaving as well as a liberating experience, a two-way traffic. And this was not history dried, dusted and shelved; it was history up close and personal. It went to the core of how we understood ourselves as a people, our place in the world, our journeys and transformations. The singular achievement of the new scholarship was to give us a distinct and distinctive history and historiography. Thanks immeasurably to their efforts, we are no longer appendages in other peoples' narratives, footnotes in their texts.

History is now performed in a variety of ways, not necessarily only through the printed word bound in books and scholarly journals. This is to be expected as modern technology revolutionizes the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. Films and documentaries abound as do dedicated blogsites. *Fijigirmit.org* is one example from Fiji. Historical information now reaches an audience unimaginable in the past. The desire to know our story is deep and abiding, especially in the Indo-Fijian diaspora in search of its hyphenated roots. This diaspora of the 'Twice Banished' is increasing daily as people leave Fiji for freedom and opportunity elsewhere and as the search for roots flourishes among increasingly large numbers of people seeking to understand their history. Properly done with adequate care and due diligence, the result can be vivid and compelling. It has the potential to ignite the imagination and launch fresh research. But more often, a great deal of fantasy passes through unfiltered, unverified, unrefuted. In time, it acquires an air of authenticity. A new narrative is born innocent of archival research and longstanding scholarship. On numerous sites, you will read how the *giritiyas* were kidnapped or duped into emigrating by unscrupulous recruiters, how they were shipped like cattle across the seas, how the overseers, invariably nasty and brutish, brazenly brutalized those under their charge, how the system defrauded the gullible and the innocent. Specially composed, tear-inducing songs, with scant regard for factual content or context, tell of endless suffering and desperate longing for home in India. All this is true, but only upto a point. India of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was not a land flowing with milk and honey for its long suffering subaltern classes facing droughts, famines and human exaction. They were already on the move in search of employment elsewhere, and it was from this uprooted mass of humanity that the *giritiyas* came. Nearly a half of those recruited upcountry did not

make it to the boarding gates of the immigrant ships: so much for tall tales of kidnapping and fraudulence. So it goes. The dead deserve the truth, as Voltaire says, as the living deserve respect.

Girmit history is also in the danger of passing from the domain of reasoned discourse into the realm of heritage studies, as a subject for veneration and reverence. Once derided as damaged people, flotsam and jetsam of humanity, girmitiyas are now portrayed as men and women who were noble and courageous, without blemish or blame, victims of unremitting, systematic violence (some of it perpetrated by Indians themselves: sirdars, the lynchpin of the system, were Indian). To characterize them as people who participated in the making of their own history, who had agency, who had all the faults and foibles of the normal human character, is to risk being labelled heartless and condescending. The new popular narrative brooks no debate, no criticism. Minds are made up; they should not be confused with facts. This won't do. We should also resist the temptation to turn the story of girmit into a serviceable ideology of grief and grievance deployed for various political purposes. Girmitiyas are gone. We honour their memory but we must steadfastly continue the search for the fundamental truth of their experience. We owe them at least that much.

All this and more I would have discussed with colleagues attending the conference, but that is not going to be. I regret not being with you in person, but in my own small way, I will continue to speak truth to power, defend the value of free, uncensored speech, uphold the principles of true representative democracy in the land of my birth, and elsewhere. I refuse to be silenced. Yes, the lights must never go out, the music must always play. For myself, 'All I have is a voice/To undo the folded lie,' to quote Auden again. That, dare I say, has to be the moral and intellectual responsibility of all of us who are passionate about the truth and the integrity of the human experience.

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