

Good evening, warm greetings from the UniFiji, Vanakkam and Bula from Fiji. I would like to start my presentation today by thanking the organizers The India Foundation, with the support of the Overseas Indian Affairs Division of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, in organising a two-day- Conference on 'Girmitiyas 2021' *Changing identities, Shifting trends and Roles*, for their commitment and dedication to make this a great success. Special thanks to Shreya, Senior Research Fellow with India Foundation who has been in constant touch with me and to **Alok Bansal sir**, Director India Foundation, New Delhi, for inviting me to be a Guest Speaker

THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

THE BURDEN OF INTERPRETATION

The main argument in the paper is that for contemporary Indo-Fijians the burden of history that they have inherited from indenture is the burden of interpretation.

This presentation is concentrated on Burden of History in relation to Fiji and would be incomplete without some discussion on the History of the Indian Indentured Labourers in Fiji. Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833. After that date, Indians were recruited in various ways, usually foul, to work in the very plantations that the freed slaves had hastily left. The conditions of employment were stated on a form of agreement – *gimit* – in English, Hindi and Urdu in North India and in Tamil, Telugu and Malayam in the South. *Gimit* is a corrupt word for the English Word 'Agreement'. A labour emigrating under the Agreement or *Gimit* was a *gimitiya*. All *gimitiyas* were not literate and disguised under 'voluntary' recruitment, in reality they were made to sign contracts, typically by affixing a thumb impression and arrived in Fiji crossing the dark, dreaded seas, the *Kala Pani*, to the 'King Sugar' colony Fiji. They cleared the Fiji jungle, made roads and tramlines for sugar transportation.

This Indenture System, an inhumane system, or the Labour System or a New Kind of Slavery was introduced in Fiji in 1879 by Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, the first governor of the colony (1875-80) in line with his native policy to protect the Fijian way of life and with his bid to establish Fiji as a viable economy. He believed that imported labour would protect the native population from the damaging effects of industrial agriculture (Gillion, 1962: 1-18).

Gordon had experience of immigrant labour in the form of Indentured Labourers in Trinidad and Mauritius. He thought that a similar system of indenture, bringing Indian immigrants, would ensure that Fiji developed economically viable and at the same time exclude the Fijians from the changes that this would bring, giving the indigenous people the time to gradually adjust to the transformation brought by colonial administration. The first 'cargo' of 464 Indian immigrants arrived on the ship *Leonidas* in May 1879. The arrival of Indian labour together with the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company in 1880 ensured the economic slavery of the colony

without prejudice to the Fijian traditional hierarchical structures as perceived by Governor Gordon. Some 61,000 *girmityas* arrived in Fiji between 1879 and 1916.

Fiji born descendants of Indian indentured labourers have researched to record the predicaments of their ancestors in far-flung abodes. The heart-rending records of Vijay Mishra's *Rama's Banishment* (1979); *The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora* (2005); Subramani's *The Indo-Fijian Experience in Fiji* (1979); Vijay Naidu's *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (1980); Ahmed Ali's *Girmit* (1979); *Plantation to Politics* (1980) and *The Indenture Experience in Fiji* (1981); and Brij Lal's *Girmityas, the Origin of the Fiji Indians* (1983) speak volumes about the traumatic Indenture System, and its consequences. For the indentured labourers, life seemed to be one of hopeless degradation. The life of *girmityas* was full of tension, turmoil and uncertainty. The *girmityas* survived amidst all these struggles.

I wish to begin this task of interpretation, *The Burden of History*, by asserting that there are two common tools in writing history and making fiction. These are two genres of writing that the educated Indo-Fijians have engaged in significantly to make sense of their past, first the use of language; and secondly, constructing narratives. Another important fact is they have used the language of the colonizer, that is, the English language to write fiction and history, not the vernacular Hindi. This is another burden for Indo-Fijians: to master the English language as a second language to depict their complex fate and to communicate that to the wider world. Where they have used Hindi or any other language, their works would have remained relatively unknown not only to the rest of the world but also in their own community.

I shall refer to a historian and a fiction writer to examine how they have endeavored to explore their past: they are Brij Lal and Subramani. They have both written extensively about indenture or what is popularly called 'girmit'. The historian and the writer of fiction come to their subject through two different routes. The historian's quest is to be empirical and objective; the fiction writer, on the other hand, aspires to make his/her narrative as real as possible by using some of the techniques of the historian, for example the documentary mode of presentation. It is interesting to observe closely how a historian works with his material. Here is Brij Lal writing about the wreck of one of the indenture ships, the *Syria* in 1884:

"At 8.30 pm on Sunday, 11 May 1884, the Indian immigrant ship *Syria* was wrecked on the Nasalai reef. By the time the ship-wrecked passengers were brought to safety, fifty-six immigrants and three lascars (Indian seamen) had drowned..."

Brij Lal uses a lot of documentary evidence from the archives to reconstruct this very early history of indenture. He comes to a very interesting conclusion at the end of his article which was published by Subramani in his book *The Indo-Fijian Experience* (1979): "The subsequent story of the surviving *Syria* immigrants cannot be told with certainty. However, from the available records it appears that after two weeks of rest from the exhaustion suffered during the ordeal, the indentured labourers and their children were taken from the Nukulau Depot to Suva ... "So how can the subsequent story of the surviving *Syria* immigrants" be told if there is

'uncertainty". The historian turns to the poet Satendra Nandan to invoke the memory of that experience:

"O my father's fathers
What forgiveness is there for me?
O my children's children
Listen to the voices from Syria

Drowning the silence of the sea."

It is not surprising that historian has turned to writing fiction by experimenting with what is called 'faction' where fact and fiction come together.

The history of indenture was from the beginning reported as a story of suffering and oppression. The writings of the only author who emerged from the indenture system, Totaram Sanadhya, portrayed the suffering and oppression of the indentured system in Fiji. The inhumanness of Indo-Fijian indenture has attracted the most attention globally from the early years of the twentieth century. The Indian indenture system as a whole came under severe criticism from missionaries, humanitarian groups and activists in the Indian nationalists' movement. The activists C.F. Andrews and William Pearson caused uproar in India, as did the earlier invaluable eyewitness accounts by the *ex-girmitya*, Totaram Sanadhya. In his book *My Twenty-one Years in Fiji*, Sanadhya, an Indian-born political activist, pundit and social worker wrote about his appalling experiences as a *girmitya*. Their reports contributed to the abolition of the Indian Indenture System by Britain. The system was terminated in 1916, and in Fiji, the remaining contracts of indenture were cancelled on 1 January 1920. His accounts were used by nationalists in India to agitate for the abolition of the indenture system that involved Mahatama Gandhi.

This growing diaspora, many of whom comprise the largest ethnic groups in *girmit* countries, have over the years become a significant force in the development of their countries. They have left a mark in their settled lands, controlling big businesses, and are involved in both local and national level politics. Countries like Fiji, has all had Indian descendants leading them, shaping policies and affecting their communities. This tremendous growth is a reflection of the dynamism present within the community. The majority of the descendants of the indentured labourers have moved away from being cane farmers as their leased lands got reserved and are homeless or landless in a country where their ancestors toiled to make Fiji what it is today.

Vijay Mishra says, "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way" (1996: 189). Though his roots are in India for an Indian in the diaspora, he still feels an outsider or a foreigner in his homeland. Mishra (1996) further claims that the real history of diaspora is always contaminated by social processes and, in the end, by nationalist forces that govern

diasporic subjects' lives. The idea of the lost homeland is triggered by the question in whatever form it is asked and the trauma repeats; it reinforces the imaginary and darkens consciousness of a racial collective as one sharing space with others, devoid of exclusivists and dominating power (Boyarin and Boyarin, 1993: 713 cited in Mishra, 2005: 12). No doubt, The Yolk of Burden is heavy with pitiful emotions but we should remember the good things as well. The perceptive imaginative writers know the sense of freedom that many indentured Indians felt in a new country, the laughter and camaraderie they enjoyed as *jahajibhais*, and the music and the songs that sustained them through whatever difficulties they faced. The bond between these *jahajibhais*, the brotherhood of the crossing, was emotionally powerful and intimate as real blood kinship, which they cherished even after the abolition of Indenture System. More than most literary scholars Mishra understands the meaning of 'the burden of interpretation' and the responsibility that interpretation entails. Our culture was kept alive by our ancestors in those laborious years. This gives us a great depth of meaning to living.

The writers of narratives and history have illuminated and enriched the lives of the descendants of indentured labourers throughout the world and redeemed, the stigma that the indentured labourers probably felt: that they were the rejects of the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, quality of ancestry reflected strongly in subsequent generations and the descendants of the indentured labourers has a proud record of success, wherever they now live. The Indo-Fijian writers have recreated the colonial experience with a deep sense of history.

I conclude on a sad note - the indigenous Fijians very loudly ask precisely the question "What do we do with them now?" of its own Indian diaspora. The Indian diaspora was conveniently forgotten after its abolition in 1920. Their contribution to the country's economy was noted but not remembered because with it comes the remembrance of the harsh and inhumane conditions under which the Indians had toiled. Today, the Second Class citizens, the Indian descendants of these Indentured labourers are "Vulagi" (visitor) in Fiji, "weeds" to be pulled out and thrown aside, or to be put out to sea in canoes to go back to India. The Indians of Fiji had to contend with not only the loss of homeland and the brutality of plantation life, but also with the series of coups that left lingering discrimination and racism. Intense pain and sorrow emerges from the stories and histories that embody universal truths concerning colonization and the 'Girmit', the Burden of History and the Burden of Interpretation.