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Memories of indenture¹

How the log came to the mill
How the tree was defeated and
Lapped to log
Really
Does not matter now.

— Sasenarine Persaud²

November 2017 marked the 100th anniversary of the end of Indian indentured immigration to the sugar colonies of the British Empire. The occasion was marked by celebrations and conferences across the Indian indentured diaspora. Much changed in the intervening hundred years, especially in our approach to our past. Once reviled and rejected, indentured immigration is now revered as the foundational cornerstone of our history, the place where it all began. There has similarly been a reevaluation in our attitude to the girmitiyas—the humble men and women who crossed the kala pani (dark, dreaded seas) to distant places around the globe. In the following essay, I revisit the ways in which we have understood the gimit experience in Fiji and more generally.

1 Originally appeared as 'Avatars of Fiji's gimit narrative', in *Narratives and Identity Construction in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Farzana Goundar (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), pp. 177–93.

2 Sasenarine Persaud, 'Let the past go pass, my love', in *They Came in Ships: An Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry*, ed. Ian McDonald, Joel Benjamin, Lakshmi Kallicharan and Lloyd Seawar (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1998), pp. 223–28, at p. 228.

Every so often for the past two decades or so, Indo-Fijians in Fiji and in the steadily growing and vibrant Fijian diaspora across North America and Australasia organise a ‘Girmit Divas’, on 14 May, to mark the arrival of Indian indentured immigrants in Fiji. Floats and processions are organised, plays performed, specially composed songs sung, poetry recited and school essay competitions held. The occasion has a carnival atmosphere about it, joyous and celebratory, not, as one might expect, solemn and contemplative. The story of *girmit* (indenture) has gone through several ‘reincarnations’, running the whole gamut from shame in its earliest phase through embarrassment in its middle passage to celebration in the latest, but the underlying narrative is essentially the same, a sad tale stressing suffering and sacrifice on the part of the indentured workers in the most inhospitable of conditions and in the face of impossible odds. Commemoration of *girmit* is for the most part a phenomenon of the postindependence period. It was a dormant issue during the period of colonial rule (1879–1970) for obvious reasons. There was a world of difference between the official rendition of indenture and the collective memory of the indentured labourers.

Colonial officialdom and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), the largest employer of Fiji’s indentured labour force, saw *girmit* as a positive, ameliorating experience for the labourers. It had brought a people—caught up in the quagmire of misery and destitution in India, imprisoned in a pernicious social system of inequality and oppression—and given them an opportunity for improvement they could not have ever dreamed of in their homeland. The dislocation had come at a cost, to be sure, but it was worth it in the long run. The narrative of (and for) the indentured labourers emphasised the complete opposite: degradation, violence and brutality in a system with no redeeming features at all, reducing everyone to a simple unit of labour to be exploited for the benefit of others. There was in this view no redemption, only rupture. Given the vastly contrasting and deeply contested claims about the nature and meaning of the indenture experience, the subject slipped from public discourse into virtual oblivion, and there it remained for several generations. In this chapter, I discuss the changing nature of both the scholarly treatment and the public imagination of the Fiji indenture experience. But, first, some background.

Indian indentured immigrants were first brought to Fiji in 1879—five years after Fiji became a British Crown colony—as part of first Governor Sir Arthur Gordon’s policy to lay the foundations of a reluctantly acquired

plantation colony.³ Indigenous Fijians were prohibited from commercial employment and sources of labour were scarce in other Pacific Islands, embroiled in controversy or tainted with blood. So, Gordon turned to India, which was already a supplier of indentured labour to sugar colonies in various parts of the world (the Caribbean, South Africa and Mauritius). Between 1879 and 1916, over 60,000 Indian indentured men, women and children came to Fiji—the adults on a five-year contract, after which they could return to their homeland at their own expense or on a free passage after 10 years' 'industrial residence' in the colony.

The majority stayed on, encouraged by the government and the planters who were keen to have a large pool of local labour within Fiji. Since indentured emigration was state-sponsored, the Government of India was kept informed about the condition of its subjects in the colony, but in the late nineteenth century, that interest was largely passive and pro forma. From the beginning of the twentieth century, irregularities in the indenture system began to surface to public notice and their exposure brought some amelioration. But when reported sexual abuse of women reached the Indian public and threatened massive civil protest, the Government of India intervened and, ignoring pleas from Fiji, abolished the indenture system. The last indentures were cancelled on 1 January 1920.

Until then, the indentured labourers were confined to their plantation estates in a stringently supervised routine of work in and around the colony's sugar industry. They are for the most part mute and voiceless on the pages of annual reports and other memoranda in the files of the colonial secretary's office in Suva. They appear only as objects of investigation for some breach of the labour regulation or because of violence inflicted and self-inflicted. For these breaches, the indentured labourers themselves were often held responsible. In part, this was inevitable. The labourers were widely believed to be people of bad stock, from the lowest and most wretched sections of Indian society, the flotsam and jetsam of humanity, picked up from the overflowing streets of urban centres and despatched like cattle to the colonies. Nothing much could therefore be expected of people from this kind of socially corrupted and morally compromised background. They got what they deserved.

3 K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A History to the End of Indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), Chs 1 and 4.

Bad stock was, of course, part of the ideology that justified the system. The truth was more complex. The immigrants were a representative sample of late nineteenth-century rural Indian society.⁴ They emigrated in roughly the same proportion as their size in the total population. Migrants represented all the major castes and classes: higher castes, traders and artisans, agriculturalists and labourers, victims of profound changes taking place in rural India under the impact of the British revenue policy, which induced poverty, dislocation and the fragmentation of land holdings. Famines and droughts added their own share to the increasing rural misery.

The result was a resort to migration to urban centres for employment, making remittances an integral part of the rural economy in the Indo-Gangetic Plain of North India. Men were leaving as well as women. It was from this uprooted mass of humanity on the move that the indentured immigrants came, some undoubtedly victims of fraudulent recruiting practices by the *arkatis* (recruiters), but others in search of better opportunities elsewhere. Many did not envisage a permanent rupture, hoping to return one day. But time passed, memories of India faded and the day of decision never came.

The passage of time
has too long been trampled over
to bear your wistful recollections,
and you only know the name
of the ship they brought you on
because your daadi told it to you.⁵

They were ‘coolies’ in the eyes of the colonial world, beasts of burden, but some suffered more than others. Women bore the brunt of racism as well as sexism. They were held accountable for the two most obstinate problems of indenture. One was the heart-rending high infant mortality rates, especially in the 1890s, when nearly a quarter of the children could die within the first year of birth. Officials laid the blame for this at the feet of Indian mothers, who allegedly lacked the ‘motherly instinct’ due in part to their loose morals, rampant promiscuity and poor hygiene.⁶

4 Brij V. Lal, *Girmityas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983).

5 Shanan Yordan, ‘Earth is brown’, in *They Came in Ships*, ed. McDonald et al., pp. 242–50, at p. 250.

6 Brij V. Lal, ‘Kunti’s cry’, in Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jabaji: On a Journey of Indenture through Fiji* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 2000; Canberra: ANU E Press, 2012), pp. 195–214, doi.org/10.22459/CJ.12.2012; Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Infant mortality and Fiji’s Indian migrants, 1879–1919’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 23(3) (1986): 289–302, doi.org/10.1177/001946468602300303.

Few attributed the calamity to the nature of plantation work and the routine itself: the absence of child-rearing facilities on the estate lines; the compulsion on women to return to back-breaking field work soon after giving birth; the prevalence of debilitating infectious diseases such as hookworm diarrhoea, dysentery and anaemia to which many, mothers and children included, succumbed in disastrous numbers. These diseases were, by far, the biggest takers of human life on the plantations.⁷

The other major problem afflicting the Indian indentured population was suicide. Suicide was not a major killer but because of its tragic and sensational nature, violent and unnatural, it attracted public attention; and Fiji Indians at the turn of the twentieth century had the highest suicide rate among all Indian labour-importing colonies.⁸ For this tragedy, too, women bore the major blame. 'Sexual jealousy' was the catch-all phrase used to explain the cause of death. Proportionately more men than women took their own lives. There was sexual disparity in the recruited population, with a stipulated 40 women migrating to every 100 men. The ratio had been in place since the 1870s and was invariably met in Fiji's case.

But while the recruitment of some women alleviated the disparity somewhat, it did not solve it. Competition for women was an inescapable fact of life on the plantations. Officials alleged that women ruthlessly exploited their 'scarce value'. They reportedly attached themselves to one man, got their rewards in jewellery and other valuable items, moved on to another man and perhaps another, leaving the jilted men to take their lives, most commonly by hanging. No doubt some women trafficked in sex, but suicides had other causes besides sexual jealousy: the cultural prejudice of the dominant towards the minority communities;⁹ the collapse of the integrative institutions of society such as family, kinship and community; the violence; the relentless pace of work; and the sense of despair and hopelessness that followed the realisation that the break with India was permanent, and that there would be no return. And most of the suicides occurred within a relatively short time following the immigrants' arrival in the colony.

7 See Glenn Fowler, "A want of care", in Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, pp. 237–90; Nicole Duncan, 'Death on Fiji plantations', in Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, pp. 291–323; Anthony Cole, 'Accidental deaths', in Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, pp. 324–36; Jane Harvey, 'Naraini's story', in Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, pp. 337–47.

8 Brij V. Lal, 'Veil of dishonour', in Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, pp. 215–38.

9 Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (Suva: World University Service, 1980).

These were truths revealed in scholarly investigations decades later. In official discourse and imagination, the *girmitiyas* remained beasts of burden from broken backgrounds that had done well for themselves by migrating to Fiji. Instead of holding grudges against the government and the planters, the *girmitiyas* should be grateful for the opportunities that came their way, grateful to be delivered from grinding poverty and social oppression. Indenture had its faults. There were breaches of the penal code, there was violence, but these blemishes were not enough to besmirch the name of the system itself. Officials had come to accept that the ‘curtailment of liberty implicit in the system was reasonable and just’.¹⁰ The same narrative persisted after the end of indenture in 1920 when Indians in Fiji began to demand political representation on the basis of equal franchise.¹¹ The pages of the legislative council debates are replete with words and phrases from European members imputing inferiority to the Indians and demanding observance from them of their proper place in the broader scheme of things in Fiji—at the bottom. Because of their lowly, untutored background, Indians could not possibly be trusted as partners in government, which should, instead, continue to remain in European hands. That was the natural order of things, preordained.

The gaze turned from contempt to pity in the eyes of missionaries and others who began to take an interest in the life of the indentured Indians at the beginning of the twentieth century. For J.W. Burton, the generally well-disposed Methodist missionary, the only salvation for the Indians lay in converting to Christianity, to which cause he expended considerable effort but without success. Burton showed a more sympathetic understanding of the predicament of the Indians and the environment in which they worked, the pressures they endured. He wrote, ‘The coolies, however, are not all scum. Among them are to be found, here and there, well-educated men, of good caste and not without refinement.’¹² But these opinions were few and far between; for the missionaries, the best of them were Christian converts and others well versed in Western etiquette.

10 Brij V. Lal, *Crossing the Kala Pani: A Documentary History of Indian Indenture in Fiji* (Canberra: Division of Pacific and Asian History, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, and Suva: Fiji Museum, 1998), p. 215.

11 K.L. Gillion, *The Fiji Indians: Challenge to European Dominance, 1920–1946* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1977), Ch. 7.

12 J.W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1910), p. 277; Gillion, *Fiji’s Indian Migrants*, pp. 166–67.

Hannah Dudley puts it this way:

An Indian in becoming a Christian, they [Indians] believe, ceases to be an Indian; he eats meat willingly, drinks water others have been drinking, and breaks other religious laws, the doing of which is considered by them far more heinous than any violation of the moral code. They believe that Christianity is the religion for Europeans and Hinduism is for the Indians.¹³

Mrs Bailey in M.G. Vassanji's masterly novel *The Book of Secrets*, about East Indians in East Africa, expresses a view that would aptly describe the Fiji situation: 'The Indians are half savages,' she says. 'And therefore worse,' her companion agrees. 'You can do nothing with them.' Gone too far the other way for salvation, the Hindus and Muslims are 'incorrigible in their worst suspicions. They will always remain so'.¹⁴ Once again, women incurred the moral censure of the missionaries. Florence Garnham examined the social and moral conditions of the Indians on the plantations and, although sympathetic, wrote of the 'utter abandonment of morals' by young and old alike. 'The life on the plantations alters their [women's] demeanour and even their very faces. Some looked crushed and broken hearted, others sullen, others hard and evil.'¹⁵

Of all the missionaries and expatriate observers, the most influential was Mahatma Gandhi's confidante and emissary C.F. Andrews.¹⁶ He visited Fiji twice, in 1916 and 1918, and wrote a probing, if also frequently prejudiced, report (in the form of a substantial pamphlet) on his findings. He was, as expected, critical of much of what he saw: the failings of the indenture system; its many irregularities; breaches of the labour regulations; and the need for urgent reform. Perhaps his mind about the evils of the indenture system had already been made up before he left India. The indenture system had to go irrespective of any other consideration. Andrews's account, especially of the abuse of indentured women, who came in for severe treatment in his report, caught the public imagination in India, which led eventually to the abolition of the system.

13 Morven Sidal, *Hannah Dudley: Hamari Maa* (Suva: Pacific Theological College, 1997), p. 38.

14 M.G. Vassanji, *The Book of Secrets* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994), p. 44.

15 Florence E. Garnham, 'Report on the social and moral conditions of Indians in Fiji', quoted in Brij V. Lal, *Crossing the Kalapani: A Documentary History of Indian Indenture in Fiji* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1998), p. 162.

16 Hugh Tinker, *The Ordeal of Love: C.F. Andrews and India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979).

He wrote of the collapse of culture and custom among the immigrants, and the squalid living conditions in the 'lines', which, he said, had the 'morals of the poultry yard'. Andrews wrote:

The Hindu woman in this country is like a rudderless vessel with its masts broken ... being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand. She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so.¹⁷

This portrayal was as harsh as it was unfair, but truth, in the objective sense, was not a part of his purpose or brief. Andrews was engaged in a moral crusade against indenture, and if women had to be demonised to arouse the conscience of India, then that price had to be paid by the victims. That is one of the saddest legacies of the anti-indenture struggle in Fiji and elsewhere.

A similar picture of moral collapse and degradation emerges from Totaram Sanadhya's *Fiji Dwip Men Mere Ikkis Varsh* (*My twenty-one years in Fiji*).¹⁸ Totaram had come to Fiji as an indentured labourer in 1892 and returned to India in 1913 when Hindi journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi ghost wrote an account of Sanadhya's time in Fiji. But that account was a polemical text, designed to expose the horrors of the indenture system and to contribute to its abolition. In this endeavour, it was singularly successful.¹⁹ Once again, the treatment of women, especially their sexual exploitation by European overseers, and Indian *sirdars* (foremen), too, played a critical role in awakening the Indian conscience towards the atrocities committed in Fiji and other sugar colonies. Indians as victims is the dominant theme in the narrative. But only that portion of the manuscript that detailed the horrors of the indenture experience, and which could thus aid the anti-indenture crusade, was published. That portion that concerned the social and cultural life of the Indian community in Fiji remained unpublished. Chaturvedi gave that manuscript to Ken Gillion, author of the standard history of Indian indentured migrants to Fiji, who passed it on to his last doctoral student (me). An edited version was published in

17 C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth: Privately published, 1918), Appendix, p. 6.

18 Totaram Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years in Fiji, and, The Story of the Haunted Line*, ed. and trans. John Dunham Kelly and Uttra Kumari Singh (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1991).

19 Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, pp. 147, 158, 174–75.

1994 and revised and reissued in 2012.²⁰ The manuscript reveals some of the darker aspects of the inner life of the Indian community: the duplicity and deception; the nefarious goings on in the community; and the fraudulence and exploitation by Indian moneylenders and charlatans. But all this remained hidden from the public view for nearly a century.

The abolition of indenture in 1920 marked the end of the first phase of the Indo-Fijian presence in Fiji. The second began soon afterwards with twin projects at the forefront of the community's social and political agenda. The political agenda began with the demand for equal political representation on the basis of noncommunal franchise—that is, a common roll. Indian leaders raised the issue in 1929 when they were first elected to the legislative council.²¹ The motion was, unsurprisingly, defeated, whereupon the Indian elected members walked out. They returned later without their demands being met, but the common roll issue would continue as a major political platform for the community over the next half century. Interestingly, the demand for equality was based on the notion of equal citizenship as members of the British Empire irrespective of race or creed. *Girmit* featured little in this discourse or in much else at the time. The eyes of the Indo-Fijian community were firmly focused on the future, not on the past, which had no redeeming features.

On the cultural front, the Indo-Fijians began the massive task of reconstruction to give identity and purpose to a people floundering in the wilderness, unsure of which way to go. A number of voluntary organisations such as the then India Sanmarga Ikya Sangam (TISI) and the Fiji Muslim League were founded in the 1920s to provide moral guidance and leadership to their followers. The older Hindu organisations, the Sanatan Dharam and Arya Samaj, engaged in vigorous (and, in hindsight, futile) debates about the validity and legitimacy of certain rituals and cultural protocols, the proper way to worship, to celebrate life and mourn its passing, as did the Sunnis and the Shias over the correct interpretations of the Qur'an and the proper line of succession following the Prophet Mohammed's death. Temples and mosques appeared in most Indo-Fijian settlements.

20 Brij V. Lal and Yogendra Yadav (eds), *Bhut Len Ki Katha: Totaram Sanadhyha's Fiji* [in Hindi] (New Delhi: Saraswati Press, 1994); Brij V. Lal, Ashutosh Kumar and Yogendra Yadav (eds), *Bhut Len ki Katha: Girmit ke anubhav. By Totaram Sanadhyha* (The story of the haunted line: The experience of *girmit* by Totaram Sanadhyha) (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2012).

21 Gillion, *The Fiji Indians*, pp. 137–39.

A new world was beginning to emerge, forged from the remnants of a remembered past but shorn of the arcane rites and rituals of village India. Over time, religion became one of the primary markers of identity in the Indo-Fijian community, drawing boundaries that would become hard to cross or were crossed at considerable personal and social cost. *Panchayats* (village councils) were encouraged in the 1930s, based on the Indian model, to help resolve tension and conflict in the community, but these gave way to more egalitarian councils reflecting the changed realities of Fiji. Indo-Fijian settlements were a haphazard collection of widely scattered households with few settled ideas about the codes for correct conduct so well understood on the subcontinent. Fiji was not India.

Rudimentary schools sprang up, giving children a semblance of education. I have in front of me as I write a rare bound copy of the English–Hindi *Fiji School Journal* from 1929–1934—an official government publication—which contains lessons taught in Indian primary schools throughout Fiji. The content of the curriculum is revealing. Apart from lessons on such basic things as good hygiene and good husbandry, the *Journal* has comprehension lessons about the kings and queens of England, great achievements of English and Western civilisations and technology as well as stories on legendary figures of Indian mythology and more recent history: pride-inducing pieces that pupils were expected to memorise and reproduce on paper. There was near-total amnesia about Fiji’s history, and nothing on the historical experience of the Indians in Fiji; this when the majority of the pupils reading the text were Indian. It is as if that past never existed. Instead, Indian children were taught about the remote pasts of England and India. As for *girit* itself, its 50th anniversary occurred in May 1929. Prominent Indian groups burnt an effigy of ‘Mr Girit’ and observed the occasion as a day of shame.²² Indenture was the site of embarrassing, not inspirational, history.

And so it remained for the next three decades or more. Children growing up in Fiji in the 1950s and 1960s knew little about their foundational past. *Giritiyas* were on their way out, and those few remaining were often treated as oddities, clad in *dhoti* and *kurta*, with a *pagri* on their close-cropped heads, speaking a variety of dialects incomprehensible to us; they were a people from another place and another time, waiting to die, irrelevant to our needs and times. There was no serious enquiry

22 *ibid.*, pp. 120–56.

about them, no effort to listen to their stories. No one talked. By the time attitudes changed and people wanted to know, it was too late. Our cane-farming parents were eking out a meagre livelihood on the outer edges of poverty on a 10-acre (4-hectare) block of leased land.

Neither they nor we had the time, energy or curiosity to enquire about an important but rapidly fading past. It appears important to us now, but it was not then. At school, too, the past pattern of amnesia persisted. There was nothing about *girit*, or about Fiji for that matter more generally, in the school texts, which were instead full of material on the history and geography of the United Kingdom and later Australia and New Zealand. The children were being prepared for careers as teachers, administrators, managers and civil servants in an independent Fiji that did not need half-baked *babus* (Indian male clerks) conducting enquiries into the country's past and asking troublesome questions.

Two things indirectly provided an added impetus to the rejuvenation of interest in the past. One was the founding of the University of the South Pacific in 1968—an historic event that for the first time placed tertiary education within the reach of most people in Fiji, including children from poor homes. The intellectual ethos and mission of the university were firmly utilitarian: to provide trained workers for a rapidly decolonising Pacific. Nonetheless, its humanities and social science curricula introduced students to aspects of Fijian and Pacific Islands' histories and cultures. It was through these courses that I encountered texts about my own past, in books such as Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants* and Adrian Mayer's *Peasants in the Pacific*.²³ It was an enthralling experience to come across names of people and places and events with which we were intimately familiar but which we had hitherto not seen in written words. My curiosity was further aroused by short stories by authors such as Raymond Pillay, who wrote with insight, sympathy and humour about the inner lives of our people that took us further and further back into the past.²⁴ *Girit* was no longer a vague, strange word but one whose resonances could be seen and felt. It was real. We felt connected.

23 Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*; Adrian C. Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific: A Study of Fiji Indian Rural Society*, 2nd edn (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973).

24 Raymond Pillay, *The Celebration: Collection of Short Stories* (Suva: South Pacific Creative Arts Society, 1980).

The 100th anniversary of the arrival of Indians in Fiji, in 1979, was celebrated as a national holiday marked by multifaith prayers, music, dance and sports. Surviving *girmitiyas*, well into their twilight years, were sought out and feted on the national stage and their experiences recorded for posterity by radio.²⁵ They were being honoured, for the first time, for all that they had done for Fiji under the most difficult and inhumane of circumstances. The word *girmit* gained a currency it never had before. Scholars contributed their own share. Ahmed Ali, the then leading Fiji historian at the University of the South Pacific, taped interviews with *girmitiyas* in various parts of Fiji, including in Labasa, my home town.²⁶ Ali was a Suva-bred boy, Marist-educated, with practically no knowledge of Hindi, so he conducted the interviews with the assistance of others, myself included.

There were no set questions, no systematic interview pattern—the main concern was to obtain the information that could be extracted from very old people with porous memories. The tapes were transcribed, but by whom it is not known; and they have disappeared so that it is not possible to authenticate the accuracy of the transcriptions. For the most part, it contains accounts of pain and hardship, brutality and exploitation. That seemed to be the sum total of the *girmitiyas*' plantation experience. There was no probing about alternative narratives that might suggest diversity and difference in the experience of indenture.

Ahmed Ali's extended introduction made explicit his central thesis that indenture was simply slavery by another name, a 'total institution' whose brutality and violence took unimaginable toll on the *girmitiyas*, psychologically 'infantilising' them. *Girmit* was *narak*, hell, 'as pernicious towards the end as it was in the beginning; violence engulfed life in the *Girmit* lines till abolition'. 'Violence characterized the relations of the ruler and the ruled, between master and servant, and among the labourers.' Murder and mayhem were the order of the day: 'Indentured labourers found strange solace in domestic violence, men against women, and in

25 Farzana Gounder, *Indentured Identities: Resistance and Accommodation in Plantation-Era Fiji* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2011).

26 Ahmed Ali, *Girmit: The Indenture Experience in Fiji* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1979). See also Doug Munro, 'In the wake of the *Leonidas*: Reflections on Indo-Fijian indenture historiography', *The Journal of Pacific Studies* 28(1) (2005), pp. 93–117, available from: www.usp.ac.fj/fileadmin/files/Institutes/jps/DougMunro.pdf (accessed 5 April 2018).

manslaughter and murder.’ All in all, the experience was ‘dehumanising’, ‘brutalising’, ‘traumatic, destabilising and disorienting in nature’, ‘an inevitable purgatory towards earthly paradise’.

The plantation system was a microcosm of the colonial microcosm in which planters prospered. Both were hierarchical and sustained by an ideology of organised racism wherein the person with white skin was master, the dark skin destined to slave for the white master’s gain. Violence was endemic in both the colonial universe and the plantation compound.²⁷

Ali was hugely influenced by the narrative of indenture authored by Hugh Tinker in his highly influential and emotionally charged 1974 book, *A New System of Slavery*.²⁸ The title said it all. Indenture was simply slavery by another name. Men and women who came under it were improperly recruited under false promises. On the plantations, violence ruled the day. Elaborate rules on paper governing the system remained largely that, rules on paper, nothing more. The hand of justice remained distant and arbitrary, and this condition persisted throughout the life of the system. Tinker’s thesis was widely popular and its appeal persists among both the lay and the scholarly community for it has become an all-encompassing, emotionally appealing explanation of indenture needing no further enquiry or scrutiny. It settles the issue beyond dispute or debate. The slavery thesis, by emphasising suffering and sacrifice with no rewards, also found resonance in the political struggle of Indian communities for full acceptance and equality across the globe, from Guyana and Fiji to Burma, Uganda and South Africa.

Things have moved on. The *girmit* narrative is no longer concerned with the grand moral questions of indenture, with questions of right and wrong and with apportioning blame. Among a newer generation of scholars, the appeal of the Tinker thesis has dimmed. The latest dissension from the slavery thesis comes from Trinidad’s Gerard Tikasingh who rejects ‘the mythic ideas that indentured immigration was some form of disguised slavery’. Indenture, he argues, was ‘a contract for a five-year term of service, for which the worker was paid. It was a contract for a term of

27 Ahmed Ali, ‘Resisting *girmit*’, in *Girmitiya: Souvenir Magazine of the National Farmers Union* (Suva, 2004), pp. 64–69.

28 Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Abroad, 1830–1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

service, not involving the ownership of a person'.²⁹ Violence and brutality in the system are readily conceded, but the diverse experience in different places is also acknowledged. Fiji was not Guyana or South Africa. There was change over time.

Greater agency is accorded to the *girmitiyas* in the making of their own histories. The emphasis in the literature has now shifted to the actual lived experiences of indenture, the ways in which men and women from a variety of social and economic backgrounds coped with the demands made on them, raised families, formed communities and forged new identities from fragments of the new and the old. In Fiji at least, indenture was not a life sentence, as it was in some other places. But it was a limited detention of five or at most 10 years, after which the freed *girmitiyas* set up on their own in settlements of leased or privately acquired lands.

This, then, is the latest avatar of the *girmit* narrative, but it struggles to find full acceptance in popular imagination. Nuance, qualification and subtlety do not travel as well as sharp images and views simply presented in stark, easily grasped words. That, I suppose, is the fate of scholarly discourse in the public arena. But at least *girmit* is no longer an experience languishing in the shadows; a cause for shame and embarrassment. It has become a household word among Indo-Fijians and many indigenous Fijians have also heard of *girmit*. During the 2004 celebrations marking the 125th anniversary of the arrival of Indians in Fiji, it was interesting to observe two rival groups, aligned to two different Indo-Fijian political parties, the Fiji Labour Party and the National Federation Party. Each published separate glossy pamphlets full of pictures and stories about the past and potted biographies of prominent individuals. They organised rallies and ceremonies to mark the occasion. Subtly, each was accentuating the role and contribution of its own selected heroes, each claiming to be the proper inheritor of the legacy of *girmit*. Some used the occasion to differentiate the descendants of the 'pioneer' Indians who came under indenture from the free migrants who came later—to differentiate between *girmitiyas* and non-*girmitiyas*. This has long been a refrain in Indo-Fijian political discourse and the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

29 Gerard Tikasingh, *Trinidad During the 19th Century: The Indian Experience* (Trinidad: R.P.L. Limited, 2012), pp. x–xi.

The commemoration of *girit* has acquired a political edge to it in recent decades as Fijian nationalists have tried to disinherit the Indo-Fijian community of their political rights. Subtly, the *girit* experience is transformed into a serviceable ideology to demand equal rights for the descendants of the *giritiyas*, not as a matter of grace from the powers that be, but as a matter of birthright; we have earned our right to belong to this country as full citizens. This is our home, too. We are not here on the sufferance of others. Our existence here is non-negotiable.

Generations nurtured from my seeds
will clasp their hands and say
our ancestors carved those fields
which have given us meanings
meanings to stand tall
This land is ours too.³⁰

The quest for acceptance and equality is both legitimate and necessary, but it clashes head-on with another powerful claim: the claim to paramouncy by the indigenous Fijians, premised on the assumption that as the first settlers in the land, their rights, interests and concerns deserve privileged consideration. The paramouncy versus parity paradigm keeps the *girit* experience as an ideological platform at the forefront of Indo-Fijian political discourse.

Remembering *girit* is no longer confined to the Indo-Fijian community in Fiji alone. The *girit* narrative has taken a different turn in recent decades with the increasing size of the Indo-Fijian diaspora in North America and in Australia and New Zealand. There is a palpable sense of the need to know in the new generation growing up in these places. Hardly a week goes by when I do not receive a request from a complete stranger, usually a younger person, often a university student, for information about their roots in India. The need to know is deep and genuine, but the quest often remains unrealised because the information about their ancestors (their district of origin, the name of the ship on which they came, the approximate date of migration) is incomplete. Some younger investigators have made documentaries or short films about their journeys back.

30 Rooplall Monar, 'Babu', in *They Came in Ships*, ed. McDonald et al., pp. 203–05, at p. 205.

Others have written poems and short stories and songs about the *girit* experience, repeating the popular rendition of the past. But, so far, we do not have an extensive literary exploration of the indenture experience, the sole exception being Jogindar Singh Kanwal's Hindi novella *Savera* (The dawn). Fiji has not yet produced an Abhmanyu Anath (of Mauritius), the author of the great novel *Lal Pasina* (Bloody sweat), although Subramani's *Dauka Puran* (Scoundrel's tale), about the postindenture period in Fiji, is a signal achievement.³¹ And Fiji compares very poorly with the literary efflorescence of the Indo-Caribbean where novelists, writers of short fiction, poets and playwrights have long been engaged in a massive literary reconstruction of their past. Much of the best Indo-Fijian literary effort, such as it is, is focused on the contemporary period, some of it in a rather incongruous postcolonial mode.

In keeping with the times, the electronic media has entered the scene. Several websites—Fiji Girit, Giritunited.org and Fiji Global Girit Institute—provide access to raw historical data as well as published pieces about various aspects of indentured migration and settlement in Fiji. This is to be welcomed; it is the way of the future. The internet and the visual media will become the new frontiers where the future narrative of *girit* will be written and debated. The internet, it goes without saying, will reach far larger audiences than the print media can ever hope to match. But there is a negative side to this as well. The internet has sometimes become the vehicle for the propagation of private opinion which passes for scholarship. Emotion overrides thought and reasoned debate. Often it is a case of 'my mind is made up; do not confuse me with facts'. I know of some fairly desperate people being encouraged to apply for an Australian immigration visa and they demand sympathetic consideration on the grounds that their ancestors toiled for the CSR. No chance there.

Some advocate compensation from the British Government for the sufferings Indian people endured under indenture.³² This is an emotionally appealing cause but legally futile. The labourers came under a contract and jettisoned the right to return when their indentures expired and war-interrupted shipping resumed. Not everyone wanted to return either. 'Most of us regard Fiji as our permanent home,' Indians had told the Secretary of State for the Colonies in December 1927.³³ More than a century later,

31 Subramani, *Dauka Puran* (New Delhi: Star Publications, 2001).

32 Gounder, *Indentured Identities*, p. 39.

33 Gillion, *The Fiji Indians*, p. 105.

why would the British Government pay compensation; to whom and how much? But this is a microcosm of a much larger problem of the cyber age: anything goes, at the expense of discrimination and a serious quest for accuracy based on painstaking research. Instant gratification is the order of the day.

In one important respect, things have changed. The *girmitiyas* are no longer viewed as objects of contempt and pity as they had been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or as curious, irrelevant oddities, as they were for a generation or two after the end of indenture. They are now figures of reverence in the Indo-Fijian imagination, people from impoverished, improbable backgrounds who achieved great things in the face of very great odds. Their resilience and resourcefulness are celebrated in public discourse. Mythic figures now, they represent nothing less than the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. It has been a long time coming. Former Fiji Indian leader Jai Ram Reddy catches the current consensus of opinion:

The girmitiyas gave meaning to the ideals of hard work,
perseverance, commitment and endurance, and provided the
example and inspiration for subsequent generations to emulate.
That is the lasting legacy of gimit and the girmitiyas.³⁴

And it is well worth commemorating. In the words of Guyana's Sasanarine Persaud:

Let the wood go to dressing
And highly polished school
Of furniture
Let each kingly grain of sawdust
Spin jubilantly to the crown of the heap
Until the jubilant past
Overtakes everything.³⁵

34 Jai Ram Reddy, 'Message', in *Gimit's Greatest Gift: Magazine of the Fiji Gimit Council* (Suva, 2004), n.p.

35 Persaud, 'Let the past go pass, my love', p. 228.

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