Hinduism Under Indenture

The religious situation of our people is very unstable. This is because of the lack of religious teachers and other dedicated people. As a result, the Fiji Indians are like an unsteady boat caught in a whirlpool.

Totaram Sanadhya

What follows is extracts from a remarkable text by a remarkable individual, providing a rare contemporary description of and commentary on the first attempts to resuscitate religious and cultural life in Fiji's early Indian community. The site of the investigation is Fiji at the turn of this century, but the story that Totaram Sanadhya tells here will resonate in the early histories of Indian indentured communities elsewhere as well. Cast adrift from their familiar cultural moorings, trapped in indenture, illiterate and poor, they struggled against great odds to preserve fragments of their ancestral culture in alien surroundings for reassurance, comfort, security, and memory. It is a moving story of defiance and resistance.

The project of cultural rejuvenation was fraught from the start. For one,
as Totaram tells us, there were few teachers and religious books in Fiji. For another, many of the early priests were fraudulent men who preyed on the gullibility of their followers and, when caught, absconded to India or simply disappeared from sight. And then there were Christian missions which worked tirelessly but unsuccessfully to convert the Hindus and Muslims to their faith. Why these missions failed becomes clear in Totaram's encounter with the Rev. J. W. Burton, a Methodist missionary for whom Totaram had genuine affection but whose creed he refused to embrace. Nor was the chaotic social environment of indenture conducive to religious instruction. The colonial government's indifference to the cultural needs of the migrants contributed its share to the problem. But the real culprits in Totaram's account are the Hindu holy men whose habits ranged from fleecing their disciples to seducing their wives.

For the first time, we now know precisely the kinds of books which circulated in Fiji's Indian community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These range from simple instructional texts on astrology and witchcraft and manuals on how to conduct marriage ceremonies to ballads, enchanting tales of ghosts and goblins, and poems and stories of romance, heroism and adventure. Much of this escapist literature that provided a relief from the distress and despair of indenture was popular throughout North India, from where the bulk of the migrants had come. This literature circulates in the Indo-Gangetic plains even today. The books were not read individually—there were just a handful of copies available and literate people were few in number—but recited at social gatherings in the evenings, at weekends, on holidays, and at festive occasions such as marriages. Together with prayer meetings, and such festivals as Ramlila and Tazia, these readings countered the fissiparous tendencies of indenture and its aftermath, and served to forge a sense of community.

Many of the sects that Totaram describes have declined in importance or disappeared altogether. But the centres of prayer and fellowship that they established had their uses. Most importantly, many of them later provided the nucleus of the first elementary schools in the Indian community. These rudimentary structures, often nothing more than grass huts on the outskirts of the Indian settlements, played a crucial role in educating the first generation of Indian children in Fiji at a time when officialdom refused to provide educational opportunities for Indians.

The sects were interesting in terms of what they preached. Some were pragmatic and flexible in their approach, showing a readiness to adapt to new circumstances. In one encounter recorded here, a priest invokes the Bible to justify meat eating. Others sought refuge in mysticism. But all the
sects rejected the divisions and the hierarchy and the doctrines and practices of the Brahmanical socio-religious order. They rejected the caste system and preached, instead, the fundamental oneness of humanity and the principle of equality and brotherhood among all. The path to salvation, they taught, lay not in spiritual asceticism or pursuit of knowledge of the sacred scriptures but in devotion (bhakti), in complete surrender to the Lord, and in singing songs of His praise (bhajans). This approach appealed to the migrants, most of whom were simple, non-literate people from rural India, many escaping from the tyranny of the Brahminical socio-religious order. This emotional, egalitarian and non-intellectual tradition has become an integral part of the Fiji Indian moral order.

Of all the texts listed by Totaram, the most popular was Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas. To this day, it remains the standard religious text for Fiji Hindus. This is so partly because the book is written in the Avadhi dialect of Hindi, the language of the Indian migrants from the Indo-Gangetic plains. Moreover, it does not require prior knowledge of Sanskrit or the intervention of the priestly class to understand the book. Fundamental moral values—such as the importance of righteous conduct in the face of even the greatest of adversities, observance of one's duty to one's family, selfless devotion to the interests and welfare of others no matter what the cost—these values are imparted through the trials of Ram, the legendary king of Ayodhya, widely regarded as the incarnation of Vishnu. The story of Ram struck a particular chord with the Fiji Indians who themselves came from the region of Ram's kingdom. Ram was exiled for 14 years for no fault of his own, but he did return; good ultimately triumphed over evil. His story gave them hope and consolation: one day, they, too, would escape the exile of indenture.

Among those who managed to return to India was Totaram Sanadhya himself. Totaram was born in Hiraungi village near Firozabad district of Uttar Pradesh. Though by caste Brahmin, to improve his chances of recruitment, Totaram enlisted for work in Fiji as a Thakur (warrior caste). He left Calcutta aboard the Jamuna on 26 February 1893, and arrived in the colony on 28 May. He was indentured to a Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) plantation on the Rewa. After his indenture, he immersed himself in community work initially as a priest. Among other things, he was instrumental in organising a petition to Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa to get an Indian lawyer (Manilal Maganlal Doctor) to Fiji.

Totaram impressed everyone with his dignified bearing, keen intellect, knowledge of Hinduism and his debating skills and oratory. Among those whom he impressed was Burton, whose book, The Fiji of Today, published
in 1910, exposed the worst excesses of the indenture system. Burton does not mention Totaram by name, but there is little doubt that the person he describes as 'a clever and well-educated Brahmin with finely chiselled features and lofty brow so typical of his kind' is Totaram. 3 In April 1914, after 21 years of residence in Fiji, Totaram returned to India with his wife Ganga Devi. The Pacific Herald of 30 March wrote: 'Totaram is leaving for good and his departure is much felt by the Indians in Fiji, as he has been one of the leading Aryan lecturers and debaters in the Colony. It is noteworthy that Pandit Totaram is the first Indian who has received an address from his fellow countrymen in Fiji'.

In India, Totaram met the Hindi journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi, who had taken a particularly keen interest in the affairs of overseas Indian communities, and narrated his experience of indenture to him. From it came the tract, Fiji Men Mere Ikkis Varsh (My Twenty One Years in Fiji). 4 The pamphlet was enthusiastically received and widely circulated in India and translated unto several Indian languages. Totaram became a well known figure in political circles. In 1922, Totaram and his wife entered Mahatma Gandhi's ashram at Sabarmati. He died in 1947, after a long period of illness. Altogether, Totaram was a remarkable man of indomitable spirit, proud of his cultural heritage but not enslaved by it, open to new ideas and influences, and not above turning adversities into opportunities to promote himself and his cause.

Fiji Men Mere Ikkis Varsh contains a selective reproduction of the material that Totaram narrated to Benarsidas, highlighting those aspects of the indenture experience—the violence, the collapse of moral and religious values among the migrants, the ill-treatment of Indian women, the indifference of the colonial government—that helped the anti-indenture campaign. 5 Those aspects of Totaram's story which treated social, cultural and religious issues in the nascent Fiji Indian community were left unpublished. Benarsidas gave the unpublished material to the late Ken Gillion, who used portions of it in his book. 6 Towards the end of his career, Gillion gave the manuscript to Brij V. Lal, his doctoral student.

This manuscript was published in Hindi in 1994 under the title Bhut Len Ki Katha: Totaram Sanadhya Ka Fiji. 7 What follows is a translation of those sections of the book that further our understanding of the social and religious evolution of the Fiji Indian society. In translating the text, we have followed the spirit and tone of Totaram's account, bearing in mind that the story was narrated to Benarsidas who then wrote it down. Totaram is a participant in the drama he describes, and not a disinterested bystander. But he is also self-critical. His own transformation into a holy man could be
read as cynically self-serving. Reading the text will make it clear why it remained unpublished for so long, for here is a story that could hardly have furthered the anti-indenture crusade in India. But it is a part of the Fiji Indian historical experience, and for that reason alone it needs to be preserved.

The indenture system spawned a new society in Fiji, more egalitarian, more isolated, speaking a Hindi based lingua franca cobbled together from the dialects and languages which the migrants had brought with them. Totaram's account provides a valuable introduction to the evolution of a distinctive Fiji Indian society. He was present at its creation. For better or for worse, his is the only Indian indentured voice that is extant.

Totaram

When I finished my indenture and came to this place, I had nothing with me. No matter how hard one worked for the company, one always remained poor. For four days, as I lay idle my fellow compatriots looked after me. Lying in the hut, I began to think about my future. If I started farming, I would need money, labour, bullocks and equipment, none of which I had. With only grade seven education, I was not qualified for community service. Even for such work, one needs money. In the end, I decided to become a priest for a few years. But to perform certain Hindu rituals, one needs texts, which are not available here. At that time, only the following books were found in Fiji:

In the Rewa region there were six religious texts in circulation. In addition to four copies of the Ramcharitamanas, Maqdoom Buksh of Korocirciri had one copy of Sukhsagar, which he rented out for a deposit of 10 rupees and a daily rental of two and a half rupees, and Lalta Prasad had a copy of Satyanarayan ki katha.

The Navua district had 32 books. These included six copies of Ramcharitamanas, three copies of Satyanarayan ki katha, four of Surya Purana, one Devi Bhagavat, eight copies of Danlila, two of Ekadashi Mahatm, one of Indrajat two of Durga Saptshati, one Rampatal, and three of Alaha Khand. The last was popular throughout the distinct, while the Ramcharitamanas was especially popular among the girmityyas from eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar.

In Ba, there were 41 books, including nine copies of Salinga Sadabrij, four Baital Pachisi, of Indra Sabha, one Valmiki Ramayana, two Vivah Padhati, two Satyarth Prakash, four Ramcharitamanas, four Alaha Khand, and two Satyanarayan ki katha (hand written). Indra Sabha was the most popular book in this region.
Totaram Sanadhya's Emigration Pass. Although a Brahmin, he registered himself as a Thakur to improve his chance of recruitment
In Mango district, there were four books, two handwritten copies of *Satyanarayan ki katha*, and a copy each of the *Ramcharitamanas* and *Mahabharat*. Apart from these, one also saw a few copies of Christian texts in Hindi.

I gathered this information during a two month period. In Nausori, there was a trading store by the name of A. M. Brodziak. Its [European] manager, whom I knew slightly, asked me for a list of things most needed in the Indian community. I asked him what my commission would be. He said two shillings per every pound of profit. The same day, I gave him a list of books to be ordered. The books arrived from India within three months. Within a fortnight, all the books were sold. The manager made a handsome profit, but balked at giving me my agreed share. Instead, he gave me 40 rupees worth of books I had chosen myself. I brought the books to my hut, and hoping to become a priest, I began to read them with great enthusiasm. First I memorised the *Shigrabodh* and then all five chapters of *Satyanarayan ki katha*, gained some knowledge of *panchang*, and all the 16 kinds of Hindu rituals for worship. This was not a problem since I already knew how to read. Thus, I acquired enough knowledge to be a priest in Fiji.

I planted flowers all around my hut, including *tulsi*, on an elevated ground to perform my rituals. Inside the hut, I kept Vishnu's image in a corner, which I partitioned off with cloth to separate my bedroom from the place of prayer. And on a small wooden platform there, I placed all the items I needed to perform worship, such as a conch shell, *tulsi* and banana leaves and flowers. Also on the platform I placed a bowl of pure (holy) water. I used to get up at four in the morning, bathe and blow loudly on the conch shell. Woken by the sound of the shell, neighbours would get up, bathe and come to partake of the holy water.

As the people arrived, I would busy myself in the prayer room, hidden from them by the cloth partition. To impress the people with my new priestly role, I would take a long time decorating my forehead with *tilak* marks. Then I would come out taking Lord Ram’s name. The people gathered outside the hut would greet me respectfully. Putting my palms together and invoking the name of goddess Durga, I would greet them politely. The people would leave after I gave them *prasad* (food offered at a ceremony). I repeated this routine in the evening after returning from work. I would also narrate episodes from the *Ramcharitamanas* until about midnight.

This was my daily routine. Whenever I could, I would move among the people, making enquiries about the sick and the needy. In this way, I became well known and liked by the people. However, I secretly wished to
be addressed as *pandit* (priest, learned person) so that my work would flourish. I wanted to use income from this to continue my community work.

One Sunday, a carpenter named Bihari came to me and said: 'Maharaj, I have 300 people at my place waiting to listen to *Satyanarayan ki katha*. But my priest is unwell. Please come and recite the *katha*'. Inwardly pleased with the invitation, I said: 'Alright, my friend, if you think I can help, I'll come, but on one condition. The ceremonial platform should be prepared according to my instructions. If you interfere in any way, I will leave immediately'. Bihari said: 'Don't worry, Maharaj, everything will be done your way'. 'Okay, then let's go. But remember, when we arrive there, you address me as panditji, not as a priest'. Bihari agreed.

I accompanied Bihari with my prayer bag. Upon reaching the house, Bihari announced: 'Here brothers, the pandit has come'. People attain the status of pandit after years of learning, and here I was, a nobody, who had become an instant pandit in Fiji. Everybody said: 'Greetings, panditji'. 'May you live long, brothers. May the Lord shower his blessings on you', I said diffidently, being a novice in this role. I decided to perform the *katha* in a novel way so as to impress the people.

Everything was set. I asked them to prepare an elaborate platform, had banana stems planted around it and little lamps lighted to make it appear attractive. People were impressed. I then sat Bihari down to a long *puja*. Since I had already memorised all the five chapters of *Satyanarayan ki katha*, I conducted the ceremony without a hitch. Seeing the new pandit and his new ways, people were thrilled. They said: '0 brother! This is just like doing *puja* back home'. I was given plenty of alms, some of which I distributed to the Brahmans present, which made them very happy. After the feast, I returned home. My clientele increased dramatically. For two or three years, my priest business thrived and I had accumulated one and half thousand rupees. From this sum, I bought some land, abandoned my priestly work and began looking into the condition of my fellow compatriots. I also learned Fijian.

The religious situation of our people is very unstable. This is because of the lack of religious teachers and other dedicated people. As a result, the Fiji Indians are like an unsteady boat caught in a whirlpool. The different sects are pulling in different directions. To overcome this, there is an urgent need for books, teachers and education, all of which are lacking. It is necessary to write briefly what some of the sects are doing.
Akhade (Sects)

There were the following akhade in Fiji: Kabir Panth, Nath, Nanak, Satnami, Dadu Panth, Jagjivandas, Ramanandi, and Arya Samaj.

Kabir Panth. In December 1894, Baba Oridas founded this akhada in Manipatu. He initiated about 200 devoted disciples into this sect. Oridas was an employee of the police department. As he was well liked by his disciples, the number of his devotees increased to one thousand. Every fortnight, bhajans and prayer meetings were held at this place. Most of his disciples used to take alcohol. But being a shy person, Oridas hesitated in asking them to give up their habit. Eventually, he left for India, entrusting his sect to Baba Dalbhanjandas, his favourite disciple. Dalbhanjandas did his best, but he lacked Oridas’s authority and influence. Like Oridas, he could not persuade his disciples to give up drinking and eating meat. Instead, he asked them to do penance every fortnight. Because he was a simple and kind hearted man, his disciples did not take much notice of him and did as they pleased. Unable to accomplish much, he, too, left for India. After his departure, his sect existed in name only.

In March 1898, Baba Bhaggadas arrived in Fiji and settled down in Davuilevu in Rewa. He summoned Baba Oridas’s disciples and said to them that Oridas was not competent to explain the intricacies of Kabir Panth. He had misled them. ‘I am the only one who is competent to teach Kabir Panth’. Falling for this, most of Oridas’s former disciples and a few others joined him. Everyone in Davuilevu became his disciple. In this way, his akhada became very popular. His disciples collected 400 rupees and built a kuti for him. Every purnamasi [full moon], people would gather there for feast and festivity.

Pingaldas and Sitavdas were Bhaggadas’s favourite pupils. Sitavdas taught the disciples while Pingaldas looked after his guru. Once Sitavdas went to Tavua to visit Rangu Pandey, a disciple of Bhaggadas. Rangu was not at home. He stayed there for a few days. One day, Sitavdas said to Rangu’s wife: ‘You have a curse on you. To get rid of it, you must cut your hair and give it to me.’ Believing him, she shaved her head and gave him all her hair. Immediately, Sitavdas disappeared and made a wig for his bald head. When Rangu Pandey found out what had happened, he went looking for Sitavdas, found him at a festive gathering where I [Totaram] was also present, and thrashed him soundly. Soon afterwards, Sitavdas left for India, and Rangu Pandey broke all ties with the sect.

After Sitavdas left, Pingaldas took his place. Baba Bhaggadas sect became very popular. Crowds gathered regularly to receive the Baba’s blessings. Every evening, bhajan was sung at the kuti, accompanied by
cymbals, drums and other such instruments. Especially large crowds would gather at purnamasi. Large stocks of tobacco, mixed with hemp, were also kept. Baba Bhaggadas had a foot-long chillum, which he had brought with him from India. He would take huge puffs from it and exhale clouds of smoke as if a boiler had ruptured. Everyday, four packets of American-made 'Old Judge' tobacco would be smoked, costing about 90 rupees a month. On top of this, 60 rupees a month would be spent on food. What a waste of money. Each purnamasi celebration cost 200 rupees a month. Over a period of four years, 16,800 rupees were thus wasted, none of it on educational work. Well, if nothing else came of it, Baba's disciples at least learnt a few verses of Kabir and how to perform prayers.

On one occasion, some of the disciples got into a fight, which landed them and Baba in court. When the magistrate demanded that the prayer marks on his forehead be removed, Baba capitulated meekly. This act of abject submission ruined his reputation. People lost faith in him. Many went bankrupt paying the fine. Donations dried up. Except for a few families, people left Davuilevu.

Bhaggadas was exposed. He handed over the sect to Pingaldas and left for India. Pingaldas later built his own kuti in Suva. Once, a female disciple who had fallen out with her husband came there. She attached herself to Pingaldas and refused to return to her husband. A few months later, she gave birth to a son. When she went to register the birth, she refused to give the father's name. Pingaldas was assumed to be the father. He took the responsibility of bringing up the child. Pingaldas is a very capable man, a person of good birth (Kshatriya), straightforward and generous.

Nath Sect. Baba Ramnath founded this sect in Fiji. He had 300 disciples. From them he chose a few deputies and had them pierce their ears and wear a ring, saffron clothes, and wooden sandals. The deputies would greet each other in the traditional manner of the sect, calling out 'Alakh, Alakh' [To know the Invisible]. Ramnath claimed he was initiated into the sect at a place called Bowhar [most probably in Uttar Pradesh] This man was completely illiterate, but he could recite well a few things he had learnt from his gurus.

In Fiji, only Europeans are legally allowed to take alcohol, hemp and other such intoxicants. But Ramnath had obtained a liquor permit from the government. On the day of Durga worship every year, he would pray to the light from a huge, hand-made diya [as a symbol of the Invisible], sacrifice a specially reared goat and drink liquor. His main message was this: 'Shiva is the Father and Shakti is the Mother. Men are Shiva and women Shakti'. Ramnath was a real nitwit. Pot bellied, he could only roll, not walk. His
head was shaped like a pumpkin. His big eyes were always red from smoking opium. Naturally people were scared of him.

In Rewa, a man named Kharpat and his wife became Ramnath's disciples. Kharpat was a simple, trusting man. One day the guru said to him: 'My son, send your wife to my kuti where other women are coming as well. She might learn some spiritual things to make life worthwhile. Otherwise, she is doomed'. Kharpat sent his wife along. When Kharpat went to visit his wife after a month, Ramnath said: 'Thank God, Kharpat you came. I myself was about to visit you'. When Kharpat's wife appeared, Ramnath said: 'When Shiva and Shakti have merged, it is a sin to separate them. See for yourself how this girl is blooming'. Kharpat knew at once what had happened: his wife was pregnant. Dejected, he returned home while Baba Ramnath eloped with his, Kharpat's, wife to India. This incident shook the sect to its foundations. Thus ended the Nath sect in Fiji.

Nanak Sect. The founder of this sect was Chota Singh. He had about 80 disciples. Singh was a showman. He would recite a few Kabir verses he knew. When people came for communion, he would withdraw into his room. Once, one of Singh's disciples revealed some damaging details about him. Chota Singh thrashed him soundly, for which he was fined 50 rupees. Upon returning from the court, Singh eloped with the disciple's wife to Labasa. After a while, he had a son from this woman. He abandoned her at the kuti and absconded to India.

Satnami and Dadu Sects. The founder of the Satnami sect was Baijudas and Hardeodas was the founder of the Dadu sect. They did not have disciples as such. They managed to collect enough money from donations to pay their way back to India.

Jagjivandas Sect. Baba Ram Adhin founded this sect in Fiji. Because he had the habit of closing one eye while talking to people, they nicknamed him the Kana Maharaj (The one-eyed priest). He had 135 disciples. As a distinguishing mark of his sect, he tied a thread around his disciples, called the nirvani dhaga (the thread of salvation). He instructed his followers not to eat eggplant. Adhin was popular because he knew the mantras and techniques to deal with magic and evil spells and was a good bhajan singer. He used his knowledge to dupe people. After he was thrashed by one of his disciples, Adhin gave up witchcraft. Sometime later, he married a widow and when his students abandoned him, he abandoned the sect altogether.

Ramanand Sect. This sect had two founders, Baba Vasudev and Baba Raghodas. Vasudev was initiated into this sect at Ayodhya, the birth place of Ram. A married man, he provided for his family from alms. He did not believe in accumulating wealth. Vasudev had 600 disciples. He initiated
them into his sect by putting a sacred thread around their necks. He did not expect anything in return them, visiting them only when he thought it necessary. He did not expect his disciples to show him unquestioning obedience. Vasudev died in 1911 aged 76. His sons earned their livelihood as cultivators instead of relying on donations from their father's disciples.

Baba Raghodas came from the Kota region in Rajasthan. After completing his indenture, he founded a *kuti* in Lau. Baba Raghodas did cane farming, which earned him an annual income of 1,000 rupees. He had the largest number of disciples, numbering around 1,500. The disciples used to give Baba Raghodas a rupee each annually. He lived at the *kuti* and met all its expenses from donations he received, setting aside 1,000 rupees for his cremation. Later, he became asthmatic, and began taking liquor.

In the Naitisiri district, there lived a Thakur woman with a young girl and a 10 year old son. Although under indenture, she was not fit to work. She used to relate her troubles to Baba Raghodas, to whom she had gone after a European had attempted to rape her. Raghodas asked the manager to cancel her indenture, which happened after he paid £30. The woman began to live in a separate room at the hermitage. One day, the woman tried to kill Baba Raghodas by putting ground glass in his dhal. He somehow found out, and from that day, refused all food cooked by her. Then, the woman put opium in his soft drink. When Raghodas was in an intoxicated state, she stole the 1,000 rupees he had set aside for his cremation. With that money, the mother and the son left for India. The mother died in Mathura and the son returned to Fiji. Baba Raghodas took no action against them, but stopped saving money for his funeral. One disciple gave him 20 acres of freehold land. With money collected from donations, he built a *kuti* there. He passed away in 1907 at the age of 78 years. After his death, his sect dissipated and the disciples went astray. Thus ended the Ramanandi sect.

**Arya Samaj** The Arya Samaj was founded in Samabula in December 1902. Sucharam Ugo from Punjab with the help of enthusiastic people like Mangal Singh hoisted the flag of Arya Samaj in Fiji. Babu Mangal Singh donated his own house, worth around 150 rupees, to the Samaj, and moved into a small thatched hut nearby. He gave his all to the Arya Samaj. A school was opened at the Arya Samaj mandir attended by some 60 boys and girls. Sharma was the principal of the school as well as the secretary of Arya Samaj. Enjoying the trust and confidence of the people, Sharma became the moving force behind the Samaj. As such, the responsibility of raising funds fell on him. He was also a good teacher and a father figure to pupils at the school. Under his leadership, the future of the Arya Samaj
looked bright. Membership was increasing day by day. Babu Mangal Singh went back to India, but the work of the Arya Samaj continued to flourish.

Just when things looked promising, the fortunes of the Samaj came under a cloud. Mr Sharma eloped with a 14 year old pupil at his school to Suva. When people confronted him, he asked them to talk to the girl. The girl replied: 'I want to stay with Sharmaji. I have become his wife'. Sharma got what he wanted, and broke all ties with the Arya Samaj. After this episode came Swami Ram Manoharanand Saraswati from India. Soon after arriving, he married a 16 year old girl. He, too, got what he wanted. Now that he had become a householder, he passed himself off as a philosopher rather than a follower of any one particular sect.

In writing about the various sects and institutions, it has not been my aim to pass judgements on them. What I wanted to do was to make our cultural and spiritual leaders in India realise their duty to the thousands of our brethren abroad and try to do something for their spiritual uplift.

Encounter with a Baba [Priest]

At Rarawai [Ba], I met a well-to-do Baba, who was also the leading priest of this region. My conversation with him went as follows:

Me: Well, Babaji, what do you teach your disciples?

Baba: I have discouraged my disciples from reading ancient scriptures because they are so dry and prohibit us from enjoying worldly pleasures.

Me: What religion do you follow?

Baba: Stop worrying about such things as right and wrong. Focus on those that give pleasure, such as women and money. Don't worry about compassion to animals, worry about your taste buds. This is the way to salvation. Doctors say that meat is good for you. The Bible also permits you to eat animal flesh because unlike us, animals don't have soul. We eat meat because we regard it as a sacred offering to Mother Goddess. Tulsidas also tells us in his *Ramcharitamanas* that one can deceive anyone, even one's own guru, to satisfy human needs. This is the dharma of this Kaliyug (dark age).

Me: Do you believe in any other text such as *Manusmriti*?

Baba: My dear fellow, this book was appropriate for Manu's time, not now. This is *kaliyug*. The god of this age has given me a handwritten copy of the text 'Doctrine of Self Gratification'. It contains a lot of information relevant to Fiji, which I have drummed into my disciples. They are so devoted to my philosophy that they have even been to jail for drinking liquor.
Me: Not only are you the victim of bad *karma* from a previous life, you are also ruining your next life, besides leading your disciples astray.

Baba: That's what you think. Neither Europeans nor I believe in transmigration. Enjoy the present because this is the only life one has. Look how the Europeans are enjoying themselves. For them, self gratification comes first. See how well they have done for themselves. They have enticed thousands of our women folk to the colonies as indentured workers, where they serve their white masters hand and foot. Reports of their conditions on the plantations are sent to India regularly. These are read by our well-heeled graduates seated on cushy chairs while stroking their pot bellies and picking their noses. Fresh contingents of Indian women are transported to Fiji. They are kept at Nukulau depot where they are medically examined. They appear happy as their masters take them to the plantations where they slave for five years, etc. Brother, our people say there is no *narak* [*evil, shame, hell*] in India. Where was their sense of honour when our poor women were trapped into indenture and sent away? The pit of hell was full to the brim so our people lost all fear of retribution. Hence they watched as our women were sent into slavery right before their eyes. Other countries have a sense of honour, and they don't treat their women like this.

Me: You are privileged to be born a human being. You still have time to rectify your mistakes for your next life. You have done shameful deeds and yet have no sense of regret. You don't ask yourself who you are. You eat meat, drink liquor and indulge in other bad things. Really, you are no different from an animal.

Baba: Two million of my countrymen are living in terrible conditions in the colonies. Even before they were born, the European invented the indenture system in collusion with some of our countrymen, which reduced us to the level of animals. We were subjected to medical examination like animals. He tried to destroy our sense of shame and honour, he stripped us of our clothes and made us run naked. We lost all our sense of modesty. For a few pennies, the *arkatis* [recruiters] sold us as if we were animals for farm work. As soon as we arrived in Fiji, we began to be treated as if we were in fact animals. Even animals behave according to some set of rules, but here we had none. Nor was there anyone who could show the way. There is no one here to enlighten us. So we, descendants of the great sages of India, live like animals with a new identity as Mr Coolie of Fiji.

Me: You must do penance because you have accumulated so much sin. Devote yourself to doing the right thing for the coming generations.

Baba: There is no sin left in the world since Christ paid the price for all of us. If people feared sin, then we would not be mistreated like this. The whole world knows our plight. You may be troubled by sin but they [European
planters] are not. Why should they do penance? If, for the sake of argument, we believe that there is such a thing as sin, then those selfish Europeans and their flunkies should be the ones to do penance first. Please leave now. I have had enough. Jai Kali Maharaj.

Thus ended our conversation. The steamer was due to arrive soon so I took leave and came back home.

Hindu Ceremonies

**Birth Ceremony.** As soon as a child is born, a priest is summoned for the name-giving ceremony. Some [well-to-do parents] invite a lot of people and give a feast. When a child is born in a Kabir Panth family, the Baba and his disciples gather and sing *bhajans*, after which the Baba ties a small bell around the child's neck, gives his blessings and leaves.

**Thread Wearing Ceremony.** When our own people [from India] discard the thread as burdensome as soon as they arrive in Fiji, how can one expect the Fiji-born to wear it? As a result, the practice has disappeared. Even those few who go through the ceremony throw it into the river or hang it on a peg after a few days.

**Marriage Ceremony.** Now take marriage. Those who go as a married couple try to find worthy partners for their children. But such people, who were few in number, invite a priest to officiate at the ceremony. The majority of the marriages are registered at the magistrate's office for a fee of five shillings. Widows, victims of maltreatment back at home, normally have their marriages officiated by the magistrates. There is another way of getting married which I call 'indiscriminate marriages'. This is the most common pattern throughout the colony.40

**Funeral Rites.** The way the Fiji Indians bury their dead is pathetic. They dig a hole and dump the body in it. A well-to-do person might invite a few Brahmans to his place for a ceremonial feast. In some places, people read religious books and sing *bhajan* during the mourning period. Nowadays, there is no ban on cremation, but people still bury the dead because cremation is looked down upon. Suva people bury their dead—and their customs—in a casket. The most they do is erect a headstone. Once a year, they cut the grass around the grave. This is the sum total of their obligation to the dead.

Festivals and Charity

Our Fiji Indian brothers contribute enthusiastically to charity work. They listen to readings from the scriptures and fast on and celebrate such
occasions as the birth dates of Lord Ram and Lord Krishna. Holi is also celebrated as also is Ramlila, which is performed at several places. In some places, even the natives join in, as members of Ravana’s army. For some time, the interest in the festival has declined. Tazia is another festival which is celebrated enthusiastically in Fiji. Hindus contribute generously and take part in the festival. Hindu men and women make offerings, and join in the processions, beating drums and flagellating themselves. There is no religious disharmony among the people; everyone works together. But the biggest celebration among our people is Christmas. People spare no expense in celebrating it. Thousands of animals are slaughtered for the occasion, and a lot of liquor drunk, much to the delight of the hoteliers. This is the most popular occasion.

Untouchable Bhagvana’s Revenge on Brahmans and Kshatriyas

I once went to the Luvluy sector [in Lautoka]. There, Bhagvana was the sirdar (foreman) over 150 workers. He enjoyed the confidence of the white manager, who asked him to supervise the work and the workers in the sector. On Sundays, he used to lie in his hammock and get the higher castes to serve him, preparing his smoking pipe and fetching him water. If anyone complained, he would note his name down, mark him absent for a day, and have his indenture extended by a week. In this way, Bhagvana maintained his stranglehold over his workers. Such a thing [an untouchable lording over the higher castes] would be unheard of back in India. All this is the result of the indenture system. Bhagvana narrated his story thus:

I am from Faizabad district. My landlord there used to beat me every day. All day I would spend collecting his dues from his debtors. In the evening he would give me a few cheap rotis. Once my mother took me to the village temple on Lord Ram’s birthday. Since my mother couldn’t get a good glimpse of Rama’s statue from outside the boundaries of the temple, she began to cry. Unable to bear this, I took her inside for a better view. My mother was delighted, but I was severely beaten by the [higher caste] villagers. Fearing more beating the next morning by the landlord, I ran away, got registered in Faizabad, and came to Fiji. Now, for the next five years, these people under me can’t even squeak. Every dog has its day. What happened to me I still remember vividly, and won’t forget for the rest of my life.

My Encounter with the Rev. J. W. Burton

There is a [Methodist] Wesleyan Mission in Fiji to propagate Christianity among Indians. Of all the missionaries, Rev. Burton was the most
prominent. He was tolerant, kind, eloquent, well-meaning and a true Christian. He helped Indian Christians gain their freedom from indenture. His great mission was to convert as many Indians to his faith as possible. Yet despite his best efforts, Rev. Burton was disappointed with the results. Even those few he was able to baptise were quickly converted by the Kabir Panths to their sect.

One Sunday, Rev. Burton sent a message saying that he was coming to visit me. He arrived at midday and I welcomed him. He then said to me: 'Would you mind if I talked about Christianity with you?' I told him I had no objection because I believe in the truth of all religions. Rev. Burton then sang a hymn, talked a little and left. This routine went on for a year. If a week went by without him visiting me, he would send me good wishes. Rev. Burton was extremely keen to convert me to his faith, knowing that many more would follow me if I converted. All his efforts were directed to this end.

Whenever missionaries from Australia and New Zealand visited him, he would always bring them to me. Seeing me steadfast to my religion, in spite of all his efforts and inducements, he began to debate with me. One Sunday, he arrived early with a New Zealand missionary along with his Indian converts. Our conversation went like this:

Rev.: You have listened to me with great interest and tolerance, but I seem to have made no impact on you. I would like to know if you have given serious thought to the teachings of Jesus Christ. To what extent are you prepared to believe the teachings of the Bible? What do you think of Christianity?

Me: Why do you go to such lengths to convert others to your faith? Religion is something unchanging, unchangeable. True religion is about selfless social service, not about outward appearances or rituals. People may believe in different sects but that for me is not true religion. Religion cannot be divided into compartments such as Islam, Christianity or Hinduism. For me religion means righteousness. I readily accept some of Christ's teachings in the Bible, such as not inflicting pain on others, being benevolent toward others, and the like. For me these are some of Christ's main messages in the Bible. I welcome them, but I don't agree with the ritual of baptism.

Rev.: I am very disappointed to learn that you disapprove of baptism.

Me: What does baptism accomplish?

Rev.: Only after baptism is a person considered a true Christian.

Me: I am very surprised to hear this.
Rev.: Surprised!

Me: As you said, only after baptism can one become a true Christian.

Rev.: Yes, only after baptism does one become a true follower of Lord Jesus and his teachings: he shares other people's sorrow, loves his neighbours, is calm in the face of adversity. Such is Christ's glory that all these virtues come to a person as soon as a person is baptised, and he follows that path.

Me: So, all those Europeans who attend your church on Sunday and listen to the sermon and are baptised must be true Christians!

Rev.: Yes, they are true Christians. They believe in the teachings of Christ. Of course, there are some who don't go to church and don't follow His teachings.

Me: The employees of the CSR who attend church must be true Christians?

Rev.: Yes, those who do go to church are true Christians.

Me: You call them true Christians? How can that be when these people treat their workers like animals and skin them alive? Their cruelty knows no bounds. They pay them a pittance. Look at the atrocities they commit against our women. And yet in a court of law they take the oath on the Bible and deny their evil deeds. Does baptism wash away all their evil deeds?

Rev.: No, no. Those who do these things are evil people. They don't understand the meaning of Christ's teaching.

Me: So those Europeans or anyone else who are baptised but don't follow the Bible, are they Christians?

Rev.: Those who don't follow the Bible are not true Christians.

Me: So, there is no need for baptism as long as one follows the right path and serves mankind. This is true religion. All this has been preached by our sages long before Christianity.

Rev.: Whatever you say. But if you become a Christian, you will enhance your knowledge.

Me: Reverend sahib, what do you mean? There is no discourse on knowledge or metaphysics in the Bible.

Rev.: The word of Christ is the source of all knowledge.

Me: Our scriptures deal with metaphysics at length. Through ignorance, man has confused reality with illusion, just like a dog barks at its own reflection. When the dog realises that it is not another dog but its own image, that is knowledge. To know the Self is knowledge. There is nothing about this in the Bible. You Europeans are baptised as soon as you are born,
so there is no need to go into metaphysics. You exploit our people for your own luxury without the fear of God. How will Christianity improve me? I am sorry, but what has Christianity got to offer me?

Rev.: I am very glad that you have listened to me so patiently. I hope to see you again. I must leave as it is time for church.

Thus our relationship continued for 10 years. Rev. Burton did a lot for our people. They used to flock to him and tell him their tales of woe. He would plead on their behalf to their masters in the CSR company, but to no avail. Burton even had an argument with a manager of the CSR, who told him bluntly not to interfere. But Burton persisted. He would frequently take the workers’ complaints to the magistrates, the agent general of immigration, the governor, or anyone else. The door of his house was always open to our people. Burton would visit the workers in the fields and shed tears at their plight. Burton wrote *The Fiji of Today*, where he has painted a true picture of our plight, but he published it only after leaving Fiji. He was savagely attacked by the local whites and the Planters Association even petitioned the governor to prosecute Burton and confiscate the book. But they failed. Rev. Burton was the first person in Fiji to raise his voice against the indenture system.

*(With Yogendra Yadav)*

A rare sight of Indian converts to Christianity. Despite persistent efforts of Christian missionaries, very few embraced the new faith.
Endnotes

2. This sketch is based on Sri Krishna Sharma, Svargiye Pandit Totaram Sanadhya (*The Late Pandit Totaram Sanadhya*) (Rajkot, 1957). In Hindi.
8. The company here and throughout the text refers to the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), which was the main employer of Indian indentured labour in Fiji.
9. The 1890s and early 1900s.
10. This is the work of Tulsidas (1532-1623). It is the story of Lord Rama in some 10,000 lines of verse. There, according to R. S. McGregor, Tulsidas gives his version of the story an elaborate introduction, partly invocatory, partly devotional and partly puranic, and adds an interpretive conclusion. See his *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth century* (Wiesbaden 1984), 111. Written in the Awadhi dialect of eastern Uttar Pradesh, it is the most popular text among the Fiji Hindus.
11. Compiled by Malukdas (b.1574), it is a text in the Awadhi dialect interspersed with standard Hindi. It is a discourse, in prose, on the different incarnations of the Absolute.
12. A collection of five stories from the Reva chapter of the *Skanda Purana*, reputedly compiled by the sage Vyas in 1600 BC. They deal with concepts fundamental to Hinduism, such as the theory of transmigration.
13. One of the *Puranas* devoted to the glory of Lord Shiva.
15. A manual of Indian astrology.
16. Devotional verse in praise of Lord Krishna.
17. A text that deals with the importance of, and certain rituals performed on, the 11th day of the lunar calendar.
18. An instructional manual on how to perform magic and cast spells on others.
19. A devotional text in praise of Shakti.
20. A text of mantras to be chanted when carrying out ablutions (toilet, bathing, brushing teeth, washing, and the like).

21. A popular North Indian ballad about two brothers who fight heroically for the hands of women they have fallen in love with. In India it is sung mostly in the monsoon season.

22. An entertaining and widely popular love story (with a happy ending) of Salinga and Sadabrij.

23. A collection of 25 stories popular throughout North India, told by goblin Baital to Raja Tri Vikrama Sen.

24. Romantic (raunchy) folk tales which can be either read or performed on the stage. Popular throughout North India.

25. Valmiki's story of Lord Rama in Sanskrit, with long expository passages, which Tulsidas later simplified and translated into Awadhi.

26. A manual of mantras and rituals to perform when conducting a marriage ceremony.

27. The teachings of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj (Society of the Aryas).

28. A Hindu epic on the battle between the Pandavs and the Kauravs, the central part of which is the Bhagvada Gita, a religio-philosophical text, in which Lord Krishna, in conversation with Arjuna, talks about duty (dharma), knowledge, devotion and other such concepts central to Hinduism.

29. A plant of the basil family considered holy by Hindus.

30. By common consent a great poet and figure in Indian religious history, Kabir was born (1898 AD) into a low caste weaving family. His teachings, preserved in verse, are devotional and mystical in content, with a strong moral and social emphasis. Kabir rejects the brahminical socio-religious system, and stresses the essential brotherhood of man. Salvation is to be attained through devotion (bhakti). See McGregor, Hindi Literature, 46-9.

31. Founded by Gorakhnath in 854 AD. Believed in strict self-discipline through the performance of certain kinds of yoga. To that end, it sanctioned the infliction of bodily pain.

32. After Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of Sikhism. Practical and non-mystical in character, the Nanak panth 'evokes a love for God which can be expressed through meditation on God's Name and leads the devotee towards a condition of union with God' (McGregor, Hindi Literature, 54-5). The teachings are expressed in the form of parable and metaphor.

33. Dadu (1554-1603), born into the same caste as Kabir, whose influence is apparent, repudiates the caste system According to McGregor, 'If Kabir is a unique figure in force of mystical passion, Dadu might be termed a mystic with a religious vocation'. Satnami poets belong to the 16th and 17th centuries.

34. Jagjivandas (71670-1761), a member of the Satnami sect found widely throughout north India. According to McGregor, Topics dealt with by Jagjivandas include the Name, invocation (vinay) and vanity of the world and
of all observances as compared to love. Use is made of sufi, Nath and Krishna symbolism' (Hindi Literature, 144).

35. Sees Ram as the incarnation of Vishnu and stresses devotion and meditation on Ram's name as the true path to salvation.

36. Lau is probably a mistake, for there were no Indians in that island group. Is Lau a short form for Lautoka?

37. A reformist Hindu sect founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83). Advocated the discarding of rituals and ceremonies that had accrued to Hinduism, and returning to the teachings of the Vedas.


39. Laws of Manu, a manual for the conduct and organisation of Hindu society. Sanctions a brahminical socio-religious system repudiated by the various sects mentioned above.

40. By this phrase Totaram appears to mean inter-religious and even inter-caste marriages.

41. Festival celebrating the life of Ram, the centrepiece of the evening being a play depicting the life and deeds of Ram.

42. A Muslim (Shia) festival commemorating the death of Prophet Mohammed’s grandsons, Hasan and Hussein.