



## The Story of the Haunted Line

*A person who does not have stability of mind is like an unstable dinghy. In this struggle of life, I will confront all the challenges with truth and strength, and will never waver. Cowardliness is an evil which I should banish from my life.*

Totaram Sanadhya

Totaram Sanadhya served his indenture in Fiji in the 1890s. After completing his five year term, he married the daughter of a wealthy Indian settler and lived in Wainibokasi on the Rewa for another 16 years before returning to India for good in May 1914. His experience of his Fiji years was published in *Fiji Men Mere Ikkis Varsh (My twenty one years in Fiji)* in Kanpur in 1914 or 1915. This book was translated into several Indian languages and had a great impact on Indian public opinion. Totaram was an orthodox Brahmin from Firozabad in Agra, which was also the birthplace of Hindi journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi who ghost wrote his works as Totaram himself was not very well educated. In Fiji, Totaram played a very active

role in various social, cultural and political affairs of his community. He was also influential in the broader struggle to end the indenture system. His speeches and publications at political gatherings in India received a wide and sympathetic audience. Historian K. L. Gillion has written: 'Totaram was a remarkably able man. His writings in Hindi (for he knew no English) show a perception, idealism, tolerance, wit, balance, and shrewd practicality seldom matched by any of his European or Indian contemporaries, and as a debater he was supreme. As a *Sanatani* pandit he built up a following of several hundreds on the Rewa.'<sup>1</sup>

Some of these traits are evident in the story printed below. It was first published in a Benares-based Hindi journal *Maryada* around 1922. However, our translation is from a typescript of the story which Benarsidas Chaturvedi presented to Ken Gillion along with Totaram's unpublished manuscript 'The Religious and Social Condition of the Indians in Fiji'. We have tried to be as faithful as possible to the text as well as the spirit of the story, keeping editorial emendations to the minimum. Its main themes which played a crucial role in bringing about the abolition of indenture in Fiji are amply clear: the harshness of plantation life, the plight of indentured women, and the shaming of India into action.

### The Haunted Line

On May 28, 1893, I became an indentured labourer of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Fiji and arrived in the Nausori sector of the Rewa district.<sup>2</sup> There were 140 others with me. On the order of the Sector Manager, a European overseer came and began allocating everyone quarters in the coolie Lines.<sup>3</sup> All my companions were given accommodation except me. The overseer told me that as there was no room left in the lines, I would be placed in the haunted line. Here it is necessary to say a few words about the conditions in that line to give my readers an idea of the terrible conditions there. In the Nausori sector, there were 26 lines available for the accommodation of indentured labourers. A line consisted of 24 rooms, each of which was 8 feet wide and 12 feet long. A room housed three single men while couples with children were given a room to themselves. Thus were some 1500 workers accommodated in the lines.

The haunted line was situated six chains apart from the other 26 lines. It had once been used to house the Company's Fijian workers. When eight of its Fijian residents died because of some illness, the remaining workers abandoned the line and fled. Hence its name. No one would agree to live there and no one walked past it at night. New arrivals who went there

unknowingly would run away in fear as soon as they found out the truth about the place. In any event, the overseer took me to this line and allotted me a room. After I had put my belongings down, he said to me: 'This will be your accommodation for five years, and if you leave it, you will not get another one. It is an offence to leave it without permission, the penalty for which will be fine and imprisonment.' The overseer then left, and I walked around to see what the place was like.

The line had 24 rooms. It was surrounded on all sides by grass so thick and overgrown that a person standing upright in it could not be seen from outside. The grass was infested with mosquitoes and crickets. In one direction, the deafening noise of the engines of a sugar mill could be heard. There was a river three chains away. From the rooms came a foul smell and inside them were mounds of earth dug up by a huge colony of rats. The rats and I were the only inhabitants of the line. However, six or seven tired looking dogs used to lie around. I realised that I would have to spend my five years of indenture in this place.

I immediately got to work, cut down the grass in front of my room and threw out the mounds of earth. It took me about four hours to clean my room. Afterwards, I spread a blanket and sat down. No sooner had I done this than swarms of mosquitoes descended upon me. My body was covered with rashes and itched intensely. I panicked and fled the room. A little while later, I saw two rats covered with mosquitoes. They tried to escape into a hole but came out again when the mosquitoes did not give up. When rashes on my skin seemed to grow as large as a rupee coin, I lit a fire in my room and the mosquitoes disappeared.

As I was lighting the *chula* [fireplace for cooking], an order came from the Company's office for all new coolies to get their rations. I joined the others and at the once collected seven days' rations consisting of flour (3 *seer*), dhal (1 *seer*), ghee ( $\frac{1}{4}$  *seer*), salt ( $\frac{1}{8}$  *seer*), etc.<sup>4</sup>As I began to walk towards the lines, the manager said: 'This ration is to last for seven days. Don't sell, barter or share it. Anyone disobeying this order can face 1-3 weeks imprisonment. If you finish your ration early, then you will have to starve. This office will not give out rations in the middle of the week.' After listening to the order, I left for my line thinking to myself: 'What a country this is where sharing food is an offence punishable by imprisonment. Oh Lord! Who knows what else is to come.'

At the line, I had my meal and was sitting down when an old resident of the lines came over and said to me: 'What are you doing living in this haunted line? Many men have died here. I swear it's the truth.' I was amazed to hear this but what could I do? I feared the punishment which

awaited those who deserted their lines. I said: 'Brother, help me get another place. It's the overseer who allotted me this accommodation.' The poor fellow became frightened as soon as he heard the overseer's name, saying 'Brother, he is an evil man. We are completely at his mercy.' I said: 'Well, it is the will of God. What will happen will happen. We will see when the ghost comes. He is the ghost of the line and I am the Company's ghost. If I win the contest with him, I will throw him out of the line. I know a thing or two about fighting ghosts.' My friend then left and tired out, I went to bed.

I got up in the morning and went to work. This became a daily routine. After a day's work, I would return home at dusk, have my meal and read the *Gita* before going to bed. This book, which was very dear to me, had been presented to me by my elder brother Ram Lal. I carried it all the time, and so when I left home [India] I took it with me. I read it every night until ten or eleven o'clock.

A man called Baiju began to visit me and listened to the *Gita* readings with great devotion. There is one *shlok* (religious stanza) in the book which I memorized by heart because I cherished its message.<sup>5</sup> Baiju and I used to sit until eleven o'clock every night and talk generally about spiritual matters. People began to ask him where he went every night and he would tell them about me and the *Gita* readings. They were surprised to learn that I lived in the haunted line, saying: 'Why, the ghost has not been able to bring any harm to him! Before, no one could stay there. They would be driven out by the ghost within two or three days. It seems that because of the *Gita* readings, the ghosts are now running away. Baijuji, tonight we would like to go with you to visit this Brahman.' And so in time, more and more people began to visit me as my reputation spread as the exorciser of the haunted line. Most people thought I had some special powers/knowledge to deal with ghosts. Hence in their blind faith, when their children became ill, they immediately brought them to me saying: 'Maharaj, this child is sick. Please make him well.' I told them time and time again that I knew nothing about these matters but they, of course, did not believe me. Eventually I would give up and offer them a few *tulsi* leaves.<sup>6</sup> And so it went on.

On Sunday I went for a stroll in the other coolie lines. There I saw people singing ballads [*alha*] or reading from the *Ramayana*, playing the tanpura and singing devotional songs [*bhajan*], uttering obscene words, welcoming close friends, practising wrestling in the grounds, or standing mutely in the presence of a headman [*sirdar*] hurling abuses and threats at them. Some with tears in their eyes would be pleading with the headman: 'You are our

benefactor. It would be better if you end our lives. Despite working so hard, we are not able to earn enough to feed ourselves. Alas, we will not be able to survive.' Their humble pleadings would be enough to melt even a heart of stone, but the headman remained unmoved. He was the very symbol of heartlessness.

With tears streaming from my eyes as I witnessed this scene, I continued on and came upon the lines which housed Indian women. To think that they had come from India, the land which the *Bhagavad Gita* says the gods considered to be a privilege to be born in, where Lord Ram Chandra endured the hardships of exile to preserve the sanctity of culture and religion? Is this the land where Sita and Anusuiya were born, where the great Rana Pratap suffered numerous hardships to defend the motherland? Is this the place where thousands of heroic women in Rajputana immolated themselves on funeral pyres to preserve their honour? Times have changed, indeed, Bharat, you are no longer the country you once were. Today, Indian mothers and sisters, separated from their parents, husbands and sons, are found in the coolie lines of Fiji. Alas, Bharat, you are old and timid and unable to see even though you have eyes. Your knowledge and wisdom no longer count for anything. You have become heartless. You put these women in the cage of indenture, rendering them powerless, and sent them overseas to work as slaves. In every way you have deprived them of their independence. You have tossed their ship [of life] into a deep whirlpool and are yourself sitting contentedly on the side. You seem to have lost your manly strength: don't you have any concern for your self-respect? Alas, Bharat, it is astonishing to see you in this state of deep slumber. Is there any other place like you whose women are enslaved and sent overseas? No, no, no other country would be prepared to endure such an indignity. Yes, unfortunate Bharat, you are the only nation that is exporting its women as slaves. The result of your callousness is that today thousands of women are bidding farewell to their motherland and are living in the coolie lines of Fiji like caged birds with their wings clipped.

Why have they been sent? So that as women used to agricultural work, they will work in the fields of their white masters and with their blood and sweat fill their coffers with their earnings. No longer able to protect their honour and dignity, they will become degraded and face countless hardships. Who knows what else they will have to suffer. I was pondering these thoughts as I walked into a shade of a mango tree in the middle of a courtyard. This courtyard served as the common ground for the four lines surrounding it. I saw women busy at work. One is washing dishes or preparing a meal while another is crying as she remembers all the relatives

she has left behind in India. She sobs, takes a long sigh and then resumes work. She remains quiet for a while. Tears well up in her eyes as she says to another woman: 'Sister, where are our brothers?' She lowers her head and remains silent. Then another woman interrupts her work and comes over to console her. Choking with emotion, she says: now don't cry, sister. What good will thinking about the past do you? We are on our own now. Damnation to the recruiters. Oh Lord, we have become separated from all our relatives.' Another says: 'Oh Lord, I never worked so hard at home. Oh sister, how will we be able to endure five years of girmit.' Saying this, she begins to cry again. Then some women would come and console her.

Unable to bear this heart-rending scene, I turned my head away in another direction and saw a woman washing her tattered clothes on the banks of the river. As I watched, she stopped and began to cry loudly. I walked up to her and asked: 'Sister, why are you crying?' On regaining her composure, she told me her story. After seven years of marriage, her husband had died [in India], leaving behind his aged mother and a three old year son. One day she left them at home to go on a pilgrimage to Dwarika. On her way back she got separated from her companions at Mathura and ended up in Fiji. She felt very sad remembering her aged mother-in-law and son, wishing she were dead.

I was so moved by this that I wept openly. Waves of thoughts entered my mind as I arrived at my line. After sitting silently for a while, I busied myself with some work. When I regained my peace of mind, I prayed to the Lord for a way out of this whirlpool: 'Oh Lord, take pity on us, protect Indian women who have come to Fiji. Were India to see the condition of its daughters in the coolie lines, it would feel remorse for allowing this to happen and would say: 'I have fallen so low as a result of the indenture system.'

One day, Baiju came to me and began to cry. I asked him why he was crying. He told me that Mr Merv of the Korociciri Sector [Nausori], had torn up and trampled upon his *tulsi* beads which his guru [religious teacher] had given him when he had taken the vow of poverty. Further, the overseer had seized hold of his *jata* [knotted hair] and jerking it violently had said that it would be cut off at the hospital the next day. He was deeply troubled by this. I told him to leave everything in God's hands. After Baiju had left, I spent some time thinking about the matter and then fell asleep.

Next day was Saturday when we were required to do only a half day's work. On the way home from work, I picked up my week's rations from the Company's office. On Sunday, a few of my countrymen came to visit me. It turned out that two were from Agra and three from Kanpur. We

embraced and talked generally about the life in the lines. I prepared a meal for my guests which used up all my ration. As my guests sat down to eat, I was very worried that there might not be enough food to go around which would embarrass me deeply. But thanks to the Good Lord, there was enough for everyone. I left the pots on the stove after my guests had left; since there was no more food left in the house, why would I need the pots? For this reason, I completely forgot to clean them.

After the guests had left, I went to the *sirdar* to enquire about my task for the next day. He gave me the field number but said that we would be told what to do when we presented ourselves for work at 6 the next morning. The field was three miles away from the line. Returning to my room, I got the tools ready for work next day. It dawned on me that the next day was Monday, the first day of the week, and I had already used up the whole week's rations. I would get my next ration on Saturday, but what would I do in the meanwhile? If the manager found out what I had done, he would lodge a complaint against me and I would be penalised in court. For this reason, I could not borrow rations from anyone else. Unable to resolve the dilemma, I went to bed.

Early the next morning, I went to the field and worked as well as I could. So Monday passed without any food. On Tuesday we were let off because of heavy rains, and like everyone else I stayed in my room. At midday, I felt very hungry, there was a burning sensation in my stomach and my body became limp. Still, I somehow managed to get through the day. In the evening, I lit a candle and began to read the *Gita*. At around ten as I lay down, I felt sharp pangs of hunger. I immediately got up but felt giddy, broke out into a sweat and began to hallucinate. There was one scene in which I saw myself back in India surrounded by relatives on a joyous occasion in the courtyard of our house. Then I saw my mother coming out of the door. I run to her, touch her feet and say to her, weeping: 'Mother, I am dying of hunger'. Tears well up in her eyes as she lifts me up to embrace and says: 'Son, never again go to a foreign country. See how your face has become so pale and dry because of hunger. Come, let me feed you.' Then, lifting me up by one hand and brushing off dust from my hair with another, she takes me inside and gives me food. I drink from my old water bowl and buttermilk from the same old earthen pot. I am surrounded by my childhood friends. One of them asks: 'Where have you been all this time?' I reply: 'Fiji'.

My eyes opened as soon I uttered that word. I was crying. I realised that I was all alone, not in India among my friends, family and familiar surroundings, but in the haunted line in Fiji, ruined and helpless.

Somehow, I regained composure and spent the night tossing and turning in bed. The next day, Wednesday, was cloudy and drizzling. The cold breeze means nothing to the robust and the well-fed but to one who was starving, it was hell. I felt a hint of fever and wondered what a good idea it would be to be let off work. As I was thinking this, the overseer arrived. He said: 'You will go to Field No 34 and cut grass. Come on, move.'

When I heard this, it seemed as if a mountain had fallen on my shoulders; my hope for a break was dashed. Fearing that I might end up in a prison [for absence], I picked up my hoe and set out for work. I had walked a little distance when my legs began to tremble and I broke out into sweat. When I felt slightly better, I got up and somehow arrived at the field at ten. I had reached the field alright, but did not have the strength to do any work. How could I when I could not even stand up straight? So I threw away the hoe to one side and began to weed some soft grass with my hands. At two in the afternoon, the overseer came around to inspect the work. As I was so feeble, I had not been able to do much work. The overseer said to me: 'Well, you haven't done any work today'. 'I am sick, sir', I said. Overseer: 'What kind of sickness?' I said: 'An attack of indigestion'. Overseer: 'What? I have never heard of that. Are you telling the truth?' I said: 'There is an ailment of the stomach which, without medication, burns like fire and makes a person weak and listless, leading to his death soon afterwards. I have had this illness for three days.' Overseer: 'Don't you have any medicine?' I said: 'There was some, but I gave it to five patients on Sunday and now there is none left. My legs are trembling and I have become very weak.' The overseer gave me a note saying: 'Okay, go and get some medicine at the hospital and come to work tomorrow'.

I went to the hospital with the note, but the doctor said nothing was the matter with me and asked me to leave. I came back to my room, pondering how to survive the next two days. Then an idea came to me and I went off to the home of a Saraswati Brahmin hoping that he might offer me a meal. My friend spread a blanket on the doorstep and asked me to sit down while he excused himself and went away to prepare the meal. He then ate the food and put the rest away, forgetting in the haste even to ask me if I might want some. Then he invited a dozen or so neighbours to his place and said to me: 'Well friend, let's hear the story of the *Mahabharata*'. I said: 'There are still four days to go till Sunday. I am reading the story of the exile of Raja Nal and Damyanti. I have been so moved by it that my legs are trembling and my voice has become very weak. I came just to pay my respects to you. I will tell you the story of the *Mahabharata* at an appropriate time.'

I then took leave. As I was walking, I saw the sugar mill and it occurred to me that if I went in, some of my friends working there might give me some cane juice which would assuage my hunger. I entered the factory and was wandering about when I saw some of my compatriots sipping cane juice. One of them offered me a cup. Just as I was about to drink it, the sugar chemist arrived on the scene. My countrymen quickly dispersed. Snatching the cup from me, the chemist asked me where I worked. I said I was a field labourer. He said that a field labourer was not allowed to drink cane juice. As he said this, he slapped me on the head and seizing my ears marched me out of the factory.

I stood outside for a while and then went to my line. It was evening. At around eight, I shut the doors and windows, thinking to myself: I haven't had food for three days, my body is weak, my throat is parched, and I won't be able to go to work tomorrow. Every ounce of strength has deserted my body. What type of human beings will understand my plight? Only the poor people of the villages who have experienced hardship; it would be useless to relate my suffering to self-seeking and degraded slaves. Oh Lord, how will I live through five years of *girmit*. You are the friend of the poor and the helpless, but it seems You have neglected me. Perhaps I am paying for the misdeeds of my previous life. At the moment, I am completely helpless. I see everyone here suffering, but my plight is unbearable. My future looks bleak as I reflect on what happened today. What should I do? It is a dark, rainy and desolate night, and I am alone in this haunted line. When people find themselves so helpless and alone, they take their own lives. For me, both the time and place are right to do this. I should leave this place forever. There is no other way to end my misery.

I immediately got up and tied a rope to the beam. I then took my shirt off and fastened my *dhoti* [loin cloth] determined to end my life. I bid farewell to the *Gita* inscribed by my brother. Then as I closed my eyes and prayed, I began to cry. I climbed on to the bed which was about five feet from the floor and made a noose on the rope. It was completely dark inside. I took a deep breath and said: 'Oh Lord, I do not want to live without your blessing'. Just then I felt something biting my little finger. As I lifted my hand, I saw a rat dangling from my finger. I flung it away. Then I tore a piece of my dhoti and tied it around my bitten finger. As I was placing the noose around my neck, someone knocked on the door saying: 'Brother, open the door quickly'. I was puzzled and released the rope. What is this? Who could it be at this time of the night? Are there really ghosts in this line? I climbed down from the bed, thinking let me attend to this before I complete my job. I peered out of my window but because it was dark

outside, I could not see anything and sat down. I began to think about the teaching that tells man to stay away from evil. I thought that before one does any deed, one should properly consider whether it is moral or immoral. If it is immoral, then it should be discarded (I thought of my mother who used to teach me this when I was young). Is it not cowardly for me to contemplate this horrendous deed just because I am starving? No, no, never. My mother suffered enormous hardships and brought me up in the hope that I would look after her in her old age. No matter what the hardship, I have no right to end my life. Life is a struggle, and only the brave and courageous emerge victorious. I should confront the struggles of life with patience and courage. The Good Lord never falters; He provides for everyone from cradle to grave. My mother did not touch food for eight days after my father's death and still survived. If I live, I will one day humbly tell my mother: 'Your son is present before you, permit him to serve you'. Parents desire nothing more than the devotion and service of their sons. My mother will be very happy with my decision. I will do whatever she asks me to. How my thoughts have strayed today. A person who does not have stability of mind is like an unstable dinghy. In this struggle of life, I will confront all the challenges with truth and strength, and will never waver. Cowardliness is an evil which I should banish from my life.

I was wrapped in these thoughts when someone again asked me to open the door. I got up and went to the window to see who it was. 'It's me', came the reply. Unafraid, I said 'Are you a ghost?' 'Yes, I am a ghost. Open the door.' Well, let's confront this ghost today, I thought, as I opened the door. Four men at once entered the room. I lit a candle and saw that these were not ghosts but indigenous Fijians. The four sat down on the floor. One of them could speak a little Hindi. He used to live in this line before. He had run away from it after eight of his companions had died there. I asked his name. He said his name was Sam and pointed out others—Maciu, Joni and Joe. Then, as they were seated, Sam said: 'Brother, give us some food'. I was very embarrassed at hearing this request. With tears in my eyes, I said to myself: 'Lord, why are you trying to test me in this state? What can I feed these guests?' I told Sam I had no food in the house, but seeing the pot on the stove, he said to me: 'Look at that pot and you say there is no food?' I told him to look inside it himself. He lifted the lid and found a small amount of leftover rice from Sunday. I had completely forgotten about it. They shared the rice among themselves, had a drink of water and prepared to leave. They left Joe behind with me as he had an acute stomach ache. Sam said they were returning from his brother's funeral in Suva. He told

me that I had now become his friend because I had given him some food which had given them enough strength to continue on their journey. He told me not to go off to sleep as they would be back in a couple of hours. I was relieved that everything had worked out well.

Sam returned as he had promised. There were seven others with him. They brought with them four bundles of sweet potato, yams and other vegetables. Sam cleaned the pots, got some water from the river and boiled the vegetables. He then served me food on a plantain leaf, asking me to partake of it first. Sam's eyes caught the rope which I had intended to use to end my life. He quickly climbed up, unknotted it and asked me if he could take it with him to tie his boat. Saying this, he wrapped it around his waist. Then they left with some of the boiled food, leaving the four bundles behind. By now, it was 5 am. I got up, brushed my teeth and was about to eat when I remembered the *shloka* 'Followers of Vishnu. . .' I was overcome with emotion and thanked the Lord for saving me from taking my own life. I had my meal. Slowly the darkness disappeared. People were up and about. Soon it was daylight and the beginning of a new life for me.

(With Barry Shineberg)

## Endnotes

1. K. L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: a history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne 1962), 147.
2. Strictly speaking, the Indian indentured labourers entered into an agreement—*girit*, as they called it—with the Government of Fiji which then allocated the immigrants to different employers, of which the CSR was, by far, the largest. Altogether, some 60,000 indentured labourers came to Fiji, 45,000 from North India and the remainder from the south. For a detailed discussion, see Brij V Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra 1983).
3. A coolie line here refers to the plantation housing provided to the indentured workers.
4. *seer* is an Indian unit of measure equivalent to about one kilogram.
5. Followers of Vishnu should not trouble themselves with material things. Lord Vishnu is the provider of the world.
6. *Tulsi* or basil plant is generally regarded as sacred by Hindus.