

## Girmit Connections

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Indians of the indentured diaspora have a remarkable lot in common. Meeting as 'foreign' students in India, the girmitiya descendants from Guyana, Mauritius, Fiji and Natal immediately develop a close bonding because of their use of common words, similarity of names, culinary preferences and transported texts. In similar manner, when Brij Lal visited Trinidad in 1998, both his physical as well as his spiritual being enabled him to blend immediately with his Bhojpuri brethren in Chinidad Tapu. His book, *Chalo Jahaji*, focusses ostensibly on the girmit experience in Fiji. It seeks to tell the story of 60,000 Indians who were indentured there between 1879 and 1916. But *Chalo Jahaji* is a good deal more than that. In many ways, it is the story of 1.3 million Indians who were sent to many lands to the East and West of India. Indians were regarded as precious parts of a body trade and could be sent anywhere. Brij Lal's *aja* (grandfather) and Totaram Sanadhya, two of the principal characters in the narrative, understood initially that they were destined for the Caribbean; instead they ended up in Fiji. Governor Arthur Gordon, having successfully overseen the settlement of indentured Indians in Trinidad, introduced them to Fiji. The causes of the departure from the same place in Oudh or Madras were identical and the earthly experience of narak, hell, is as Caribbean or South African as it is Fijian. At the same time, the Fijian Indian experience, like that of the other jahajis, is an amazing saga of the indomitable will of thousands of women, children and men to succeed against all manner of physical, legal and moral dilemmas. In the process, these diasporic Indians have developed a spirit of resilience and inventiveness which now mark them as being different from their continental cousins. Indeed, in the same way that these overseas Indians continue to be inspired by Bharat's spiritual development, they now have lessons for the ancestral place in religious tolerance and in dealing with a culturally different western world. These are the larger diasporic themes which this comprehensive book covers. It is milestone in subaltern studies, a biographical journey penned by a living relic of the indentured experience and a scholar whose thoroughly interdisciplinary approach is a good example for the anthropologist, the sociologist or the economist who wish to see the proper integration of their disciplines in a major historical work.

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A young Indo-Fijian woman dressed in traditional costume and jewellery. Racial prejudice and male power often combined to put a 'veil of dishonour' around the face of girmitiya women.