OUR RECENT HISTORY

133 YEARS since GIRMIT & ongoing dilemma of the ‘Twice Banished’ Indo-Fijians

Jiten Sharma – VAS Satsang - 14/4/12
List of colonies & number of Labourers Transported under indenture – GIRMIT, Contractee, KONTRAKIS etc

Mauritius 453,063
British Guyana 238,909
Trinidad 143,939
Jamaica 36,412
Grenada 3,200
St Lucia 4,350
Natal 152,184
St Kitts 337
St Vincent 2,472
Reunion 26,507
Surinam 34,304
Fiji 60,965
East Africa 32,000
Seychelles 6,315
### Fiji Girmit Events in Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>Britain abolishes slavery</td>
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<td>1834</td>
<td>Indenture system, became an alternate source of labour for British empire. Started with the labourers being sent to work in Mauritius, Uganda and Nigeria for an initial 5 year period. This system became widely known as &quot;Girmit&quot; - a mispronunciation of the word &quot;Agreement&quot; by the non-English speaking Indian labourers.</td>
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<td>1874</td>
<td>Fiji's Deed of Cession to Britan</td>
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<td>1879</td>
<td>First indentured labourers arrive in Fiji aboard the Leonidas. The ship disembarked Calcutta on 03 March and arrived in Fiji on 14 May, with 373 male and 149 female labourers. 17 of these labourers were infected with diseases such as Cholera, dysentery and smallpox on board the ship</td>
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<td>1882</td>
<td>Colonial Sugar Refining (CSR) company of Australia sets up its first sugar mill in Nausori. Second emigrant ship arrives in Fiji</td>
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<td>1884</td>
<td>The fifth emigrant ship to Fiji, Syria was wrecked on the Nasilai reef, off Nausori on May 11 killing 56 immigrants and three Indian sailors. First lot of labourers complete their 5 year contract. 60% chose to remain in Fiji</td>
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<td>1908</td>
<td>Size of &quot;Lines&quot; in which the labourer are housed is changed from 10 ft by 7 ft to 10 ft by 12 ft.</td>
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<td>1912</td>
<td>Legislation passed requiring employers of indentured labourers to provide school buildings.</td>
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<td>1916</td>
<td>Britain officially abolished the Indenture System. The last shipload of labourers arrive in November aboard the Sutlej V. This is the 87th ship that brought labourers to Fiji. Approximately 60,500+ labourers came to Fiji between 1879 - 1916.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>All indenture in Fiji is cancelled</td>
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Where most of the North Indian girmitya’s came from?
The “narak” from your own “sardar” & from the white “Kulumber”

- Though much cruelty was suffered by Girmityas’, very little literature is actually documented objectively, this extract makes very grim reading:

On the estates, in cell-like hutments, the coolies ate, slept, bickered, or pushed their children into corners in order to gain room to copulate. On the pay-list pages were still the headings Ganges, Sutlej, Fultala and other hellships by present standards, which had brought them from the alleyways of Calcutta and Bombay, from the clutches of rural and urban moneylenders; from famine areas, or from a thousand other situations which said starve or go. The indenture they signed was for five years; slavery in the cane fields of his Britannic Majesty’s Crown Colony of Fiji - to them it was a girmit, an agreement - and it contained some of the most pernicious clauses thought up by man. There were such things expressed and inferred as; a fixed immigration ratio of four men to one woman; no choice of place or method of employment; women to work in the fields for at least the first seven months of their pregnancy; housing conditions worse if anything than those from which they had escaped; working hours unlimited. And all for a few pence a day;

If we, the overseers and sardars caught up in the rotten system of indenture servitude fathered by Big Business on that most fecund of whores, cheap Asiatic labour, had managed to survive in the tooth-and-claw jungle of the cane game, it was only by out-animalizing the horde of near-human apes in our charge. And I mean apes, because a percentage of the men and women, regardless of what they were when they left India, had been changed by the terrors and conditions of the sea journey, and their years of servitude, into something like simian humans. It was also typical of the era that we white men had no inkling of wrong-doing, and when it came to coolie eating coolie, the sardar system left the whites, as sadistic bullies, in the infant class. So if; to excuse is to accuse,; then I have done just that.

These are words of Walter Gill, an overseer in the very last years of the system from the book “Girmit” - The Indenture Experience in Fiji Introduced by Ahmed Ali, Director, Institute of Social and Administrative Studies, University of the South Pacific Bulletin of the FIJI MUSEUM, No. 5, 1979

- A bidesia (folk song), composed by one of the girmityas’, reflects the depth of their suffering: Churi, kudaari ke sung, ab bitay din aur ratian, Ganne ki hari hari patiya, Jaane hamari dil ki batiyaan. The lyricist tells of the widespread suffering in the sugarcane fields, saying that knife and hoe are their companions day and night. Atrocities against them are so blatant that even the green leaves of sugarcane bear witness to the flames of anguish that consumes their heart.” quoted from the pages of Rajendra Prasad’s “Tears in Paradise”

- Poems from Pradeep Lal of Labasa

- For most, Girmit was an enslaving experience, for others it probably was also a liberation from the vicious cycle of poverty and destitution at home – where no possibility of emancipation existed in their life, or in their Children’s or even grandchildren’s. Many documented cases of descendents of Girmityas who went about discovering their roots have actually confirmed this (Satish Rai, Dr Ram Kakhan, Dr Kamlesh Sharma etc. etc)
Major Cultural transformation - Loss of caste and rituals

• who were our forefathers, where they came from, what were their social and caste status, their economic circumstances, reasons for leaving home etc to go across “kaala pani”. Professor Brij Lal from ANU, has analysed details of all the 45,000 Emigration Passes of all those who embarked for Fiji from the port of Calcutta. He concluded that statistically these indentured labourers to Fiji were not just low caste “riff raff” people. They represented a fair cross-section of rural Indian society, including higher, middle and lower castes. They came from sections of society which was under great hardship due to recurring natural calamities and also due to the effects of British revenue and land ownership policy which had resulted in indebtedness, fragmented land holdings and scattered families.

The way the caste system has broken down amongst Indo-Fijian demonstrate how once “divinely” ordained social and cultural institutions and practices can change. The Religious tolerance we have developed for others is another example. This was probably due to a combination of:

• All girmityas’ were treated as working class ‘Slaves’ - they were simply units of labour to be exploited by multinationals for profit
• Concept of “jhajibhai” a bonding developed from the terrors and conditions of the sea journey
• years of servitude with loss of privacy and dignity in the fields and in the “lines”
• Shortage of woman (approx 25% only and only approx 13,000 registered as single woman when they departed)
• Development of common and distinctive Fiji Hindi - its distinct from various Hindi dialects & Urdu spoken in the sub-continent. Arising from communication requirement for labourers with different dialects and sub-dialects working together. Also probably due to young children being left during working hours - in early versions of day care centres!

Details of Fiji Hindi Wikipedia [http://hif.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pahila_Panna](http://hif.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pahila_Panna)
Our cultural transformation – is really in our names

- amidst all the hardship and hopelessness during and after GIRMIT our forefathers maintained their language, dressing, dietary habits, songs and music etc. using very elementary stuff (like *dandtaal, dholak, majira, harmonium*), celebrating common festivals (*Diwali, Eid, holi*), home pooja area etc. - till subsequent trade, independent migration and cultural exchange and influence from India.

In India you can roughly tell a person’s village or occupation by his or her name (a naming practise still very common in South), however

- Most girmityas names were after events, calamities, days, flowers and birds: *Bipti, Bhola, Budhai, Dukhia, Garib, Genda, Mangal, Sukkhu, etc.*

- An interesting observation is the Girmityas named their children after Gods and Goddesses (with religious connotations): *Dharam Raji, Janki Devi, Mahadeo, Latchman, Ram Charan, Ram Jattan, Ram Autar, Shiu Wati, Suruj Bali, Tulsi Ram* etc. A consequence of this is no one can tell whether Shiu Pali or Ram Charan were Guptas, Ahir, Chamar or Kurmi or something else?

- Our parents named us *Daven, Mahendra, Maya, Mohini, Padma, Satendra, Vijay, Rajesh, Satish* etc. Some even randomly selected family surname; such names have absolutely no cultural or religious connotation whatsoever.

- Inter-marriages within the Indo-Fijian community have completely erased hierarchies based on caste and to an extent even ritual purity amongst us - including elimination of the dowry system.

- However, liberation of woman probably took a back seat in a male dominated post Girmit era in Fiji
Our cultural transformation – our work ethic, but...

• From such small beginnings, the Indo-Fijians have emerged as a resourceful and very resilient community of people, always determined to build a better future for themselves and their children, a trait probably sharpened from our Girmit past. **My son thinks that I am hallucinating whenever I remind him that I was born on a farm and grew up without piped water. I walked 3.5 km each way to primary school daily, a 1.5km walk to bus stop and 12km by bus trip each way to high school on dusty unpaved roads.** We lived without electricity, without TV or internet or even regular newspapers for most part of my early adulthood.

• I remember my father’s stern words to us kids, when we were being very restless and naughty towards the end of a Satsang; “to excel an Indo-Fijian needed to think like a Brahmin, fight like a Kshatriya, trade like a Vaishya and toil like a Sudra”.

• However, what history teaches us is that we never learn from history? While subsequent generations of our community in Fiji were reaping the benefits of Grimityas’ pains, sacrifices and hard work, we forgot our past too quickly. In schools, many of them built by Girmitiyas, we were taught history of arrival of native Fijians, arrival of Europeans, and about Queen and her castles in England. If we studied Geography we were even taught about wheat farming in Australia, about sheep farming in New Zealand or about life style of Bushman of Kalhari desert. But not a word about where we came from, arrival of our ancestors, their sacrifices and contributions.

• While growing up in rural Labasa I listened to hindi radio, attended Ramayan recitals and Satsangs; witnessed Birhas, Nagara, Shaenai and saw Lehnga ke naach at weddings etc. I read stories of Sarvan Kumar, Prahalad, together with Prashant ke Lahere at school and at home. However, I do not remember reading or hearing much stories about our Girmit past apart from those on radio around the Girmit Centenary Celebration in 1979. Surveying published literature now I see that most material on our Girmit history is written post 1987 and mostly written off-shore.
Twice banished from India to Fiji to Australia – our unique culture under stress and where from here?

- We have forgotten and consigned our Girmit heritage just like a worn-out shoe and we had a rude awakening after 1987 coups for we had forgotten the way our ancestors were treated, and we were becoming accustomed of thinking Fiji was our home. Since then over 125,000 of our people have left Fiji due to a variety of reasons (political marginalisation, racial discrimination, economic hardship, a deep desire for personal betterment, personal choice, etc.) and more leave as opportunity arises. Many amongst us still see our history with a certain degree of embarrassment and shame. Some still see our past history covered in silent darkness and do not want to be reminded of our humble beginnings. It is very easy to influence this vulnerable group of Indo-Fijians, who probably would adopt a Westernise culture in a flash.

- Now we are living in a very confined and dispersed nuclear families in a very Western society, with long working hour demands on both parents (time-poor families) and where there is shortage of cultural role models and a complete lack of wise elders or lack of grandparents influence on our kids. Our women and children enjoy much more freedom and liberation. Therefore marriage breakdown, divorce rates and frustrations with unfulfilled expectations of children amongst Indo-Fijians migrants are relatively high.

- Question is - will Fiji gradually recede from the cultural horizons of our new generations growing up here? Will our unique culture with Indian, Western & Pacific influence be diluted or even be lost from here onwards? Will it be remembered, if remembered at all, just as a temporary stopover for a people?

- Sometimes I wonder should the format of our gatherings change to accommodate some teaching of our unique history and culture? or will sub-standard Bollywood movies or sub-standard Indian pay tv going to become our only cultural alternative now? And how are we going to make our children aware of their heritage?

- Our Girmit history is the most motivating and uniting catalyst for both our children and our community. Culturally and in our hearts we may have become NRIs (Non-Resident Indian) of a different kind?
  
  NRI - Newly-Rich Indians (this is the kind that mother India is seeking for their wealth & Expertise)
  NRI - Non-Reliable Indians (we know many of them)
  NRI - Not Really Indian! I think we belong to this category