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Banished and Excluded Heroes of Fiji: The Girmityas

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Abstract:

Heroes of a country, a community or religion are often preserved, however there are heroes whose sacrifices are unknown, forgotten or given little importance to be cared about. The topic of research of this paper are heroes of Fiji; ‘Girmityas’ and their contribution in building up present Fiji in spite being victims of European colonial expansions. ‘Girmit’ a distorted word for ‘agreement’ gave birth to ‘Girmityas’. The demand for cheap laborers after the abolition of slavery in 1834 lead to birth of a more refined form of slavery known as indentured laborers, whereby men and women from Asian and African colonies were taken abroad to work in sugar and tea plantations. Millions of people undertook the miserable journey through the ‘kala pani’ to an unknown land with one motive of returning back laden with fortune. The reasons of calling these Girmityas as heroes is not because they fought wars or even won any battles in Fiji but they are heroes for the cause that they made the barren land of Fiji fertile through their hard work dedication, patience and passion in spite of the continuous struggle, torments, exclusion, discrimination by both the natives as well as their colonial masters. The paper also attempts to analyze the works of various Indo Fijian writers who have preserved the heroic deeds of their ancestors in their literature. Writers like Vijay Mishra, Satendra Nandan, Sudesh Mishra, Subramani has seen the struggle and sufferings of these Girmityas through the eyes of their ancestors and has beautifully presented them as heroes of Fiji in their writings.

Keywords: Girmityas, indenture laborers, heroes, resilience, agreement.

Aftermath of Britain's abolition of the slave trade (1807) and then slavery itself (1834), the colonial administration of India oversaw a system of labor migration through which close to one million Indians signed contracts of indenture in the Macarena Islands, east and south Africa, the West Indies, Fiji, Mauritius and Trinidad. The demand of cheap labors and the need of effective work lead to a new system of slavery known as 'indenture laborers'. It offered a form of migration where the people signed an 'agreement' to go to a foreign land for a period of five years with the provision of returning according to one's choice. . The word 'Girmityas' is a distorted word for 'agreement'. As the workers were generally illiterate, the system came to be known as 'Girmit' (derived from the word 'agreement'), and later the laborers came to be called 'Girmityas'. The end of slavery leads to refusal of man and woman to work in British colonies on low wages. The indenture was an experiment of the British to show the world 'free' labor over 'slave' labour. Lurked with the desire of better life and work opportunities, thousands of Indians specially from part of Northern and Southern India undertook the miserable journey through 'kaala pani'. Many died on their way to these islands, the one who survived underwent the miserable path of torments, struggle and hardships to achieve citizenship in present Fiji.

The indenture was essentially a 'contract' whereby the recruit agreed to work for an employer to whom he or she was assigned. The wages, hours, and types of work were partly stipulated in the contract and partly set by the planters... He was required to live on the plantation in quarters provided to him and to abide by whatever regime of plantation life was decreed by the planter. (Jayewardene 41)

Heroes of a country, a community or religion are often preserved, however there are heroes whose sacrifices are unknown, forgotten or given little importance to be cared about. The Girmityas also would have gone unnoticed and forgotten, had their children not taken the responsibilities of bringing in light of the world, the saga of revival and resistance of a community who has played a vital role in building up present Fiji despite being victim of all inhuman suppressions.

The purpose of designating the Girmityas as Heroes is because their story lacks no less adventure as one could find in any superheroes. They possessed no superpowers but they were common people with only the strength of resistance. If we see the journey of this Girmits from

their homeland itself, we see how they were treated no less than herds who were loaded into ships and had to pursue a journey of months without having proper food, nor having adequate space to even sleep. Many died on their way itself. The one that survived didn't have little idea of what horrific life was awaiting them. When they reached Fiji, people were separated from each other and taken to various farms and thrown into nightmares of endless work without food and basic amenities. Men, women and children were compelled to work for sixteen to seventeen hours a day with deplorable conditions of survival. Ahmed Ali throws light on the humanistic way of life.

For most, *girmit* was *narak* (hell) because life on an indentured plantation constituted a form of human degradation. First, they all had to be "coolies", a term though harmless in derivation, carried extremely derogative connotations in Fiji where in sound it was nearly identical to the Fijian word for dog. For most labourers *girmit* was indeed a dog's life. It was a time when the individual lost his *izzat* (self respect). (67).

The significance of the Girmityas for Fiji is because they have fought any battles or won any war for Fiji but because in spite of facing all the torments, negligence and sufferings they managed to survive in a land that offered no sense of belongingness. They made the barren land of Fiji fertile through their hard work as though they were not workers but owners. But despite the contribution of the "Girmityas" in the economic development of Fiji, their condition remained as mere laborers. The descendants of Girmityas faced the same political, economic and social marginalization as their forefathers. In the post *Girmit* and pre independence period (1920-1970), Indo-Fijians strived for economic equality, political opportunities and equal social standing for themselves but they only retained second class citizenry. They had no role in government plans and policies to the extent that they were also denied of benefits given by the government to the people. The British on the other hand followed the policy of "divide and rule" to continue their domination. The Indo-Fijians as well as Fijians came to be ruled by provincial and tribal chiefs. Sir Arthur Gordon on arrival of Indian indentured laborers stated that Fiji indigenous interest should be of paramount importance. On arriving in Fiji Indians quickly realize the rigors of plantation system.

Indians had come to Fiji in search of security but their immediate encounter did not realize this desire. Instead, for five years they had existence which dehumanized and

brutalized them.... Indian politics thereafter was to become a search for the goal of citizenship which consisted of security and izzat. (67)

The Indo Fijians in the academia has played a vital role in highlighting to the world the saga of how the common, illiterate and the labor class are no less hero. It is through their resistance and determination; they have survived the period of indenture making at least amicable environment for their descendants to get a better life away from the sugar farms. Writers like Satendra Nandan, Subramani, Brij.V.Lal brings to the world this history of mass human transportation, transmission and displacement not just of one generation but many to come.

The girmityas in my memory have remained as the symbols of sacrifice and inspiration, as all pioneers and pathfinders are...for me, are the lives of these ordinary men and women who were truly the most extraordinary...No group of Indians had ever ventured this far in the Pacific...They wrought a sea change in more than their lives. History has hardly recorded the truth of their lives. (Nandan, Between the lines 53)

These lines of Satendra Nandan portrays his sense of pride in being born a descendant of a Girmitya and therefore, when he has reached a position where he could bring the immortal history of misery and sufferings, he becomes a harbinger of Indo-Fijian. The central focus of almost all the Indo-Fijian writers remains the Girmityas and their history, ancestry, their resistance and their revival. Brij.V.Lal who has received enormous fame as an Indo-Fijian historian had contributed a lot in bringing to the world the history of the origin of the Girmityas and their struggle over a period of hundred years in establishing their present status in an alien country. The Indo-Fijians became agents of suppression from both their colonial masters as well as the indigenous people. The indigenous people never accepted the Indo-Fijians rather they saw them threat to their land; people who have come to take over their political, social and economic establishments. On the other hand, the colonial masters seeing the vulnerability of the Indo-Fijians took advantages of them by ruining them physically, mentally, socially and morally. Various instances portray how the Indo-Fijian men and women became source of sexual pleasure for their British masters and have attempted or committed suicide to avoid such circumstance. One amongst such incident is “Kunti’s Cry” by Brij. V. Lal, that demonstrates that how the Indo-

Fijian women were exploited to the core by the British masters and the system did its best to protect her culprit.

In the chapter “Violence in the fields”, Prasad tells shocking stories of violence by overseers and violence among girmityas. Rajendra Prasad comments:

Cases of grievous physical assaults, torture and torment by the employers against the girmityas abounded during the periods of gimit. These contributed to a general air of anxiety, anger, anguish and fear. They sometimes led to extreme retaliatory measures. These occurred when the kulambars (white overseers) and sardars (sirdars; girmitya heads appointed by kulambars) breached the limits of tolerance. (59).

Kunti, an Indo-Fijian worker was isolated from her group and sent away where she was forced by her colonial master on being ‘a great deal of trouble’. She ran to save herself and jumped into the river to save herself. Fortunately, she was saved by a village lad. This created uproar amongst the Indo-Fijian community and the people worldwide. Though, Kunti’s case came into light of the world, many cases went unnoticed and many women committed suicide out of shame. Besides this Lal’s analysis show that how women were given the status of ‘loose character’ and became agent of male domination. “The brutality of the overseers and their sirdars led the labourers who felt their heavy hand to commit suicide” (Lal, 200)

Satya Srivastava, had actually closed examined the situation and the condition that had forced these women to adopt the tag of morally weak. Her work “Resilience and Adversity: The Saga of Indian Indentured Women in Fiji” critically examines the deplorable life of Indo Fijian in a foreign land. She also projects the role played by women in socio, political, economic wellbeing of the Nation. She writes:

Life for the Indian Indentured woman in Fiji was an incessant round of drudgery and suffering. She suffered on the plantations and the ‘lines’, at the hands of sirdars and overseers, through her own men, and also because of the biased policies of the capitalist and the colonialists. (Srivastava 18)

It was not just the women, but men suffered immensely too. Totaram testimony of “My Twenty one Years in Fiji”, describe the pathetic lives of the Indo-Fijian community in the barracks. Totaram states how men and women were confined to single rooms.

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. (Lal 263)

Also, the ration supplied to the people was very less in quantity which was supposed to last for a whole week and if it ends in between, they had no rights to demand it again. Instead, they were charged with penalty and even put to prison. In addition to it, they were compelled to work sixteen to eighteen hours a day failing to do, had heavy price to pay.

Many individual either died or committed suicide, but many also took it as an opportunity and therefore saw no option but to become resistance pertaining the situation. They created a small community of all the jahajis similar to what was in India. This community came as one because everyone has taken the same journey and was facing the same horrific life, unaware of what future awaits them. They saw their life similar to that of Ram who was exiled from his kingdom and sent to exile for a period of fourteen years. The fact that they shared similar fate like God gave them strength, making their journey a little ease.

Beside this we see that the Indo-Fijians on their journey to the ‘kala pani’, took with them nothing but the values and cultures of India which they have managed to preserve till date. Despite living in a foreign land, they remain unaffected by the alien culture and in fact protected, promoted and propagated the Indianness which has been their strength their entire life. Almost all the writers has elaborated the role of the epics in the lives of the Indo-Fijians and how they have grown up hearing stories of adventure of Ram and the Pandavas , making them understand the strength and impact of these stories upon their ancestors. The teachings and values became a perennial source of survival.

Tulsidas’s Ramcharitramanas is a large tome; it allowed indentured workers to sit around it and recite the inspiring verses. While the girmityas identified themselves with the tale of Rama’s exile, seeing in it their own exile, as a child growing up in that impoverished post-indenture world, I found my first great hero in Sri Ram. (Subramani, 22-23)

The Girmitiyas felt the need of passing the same attitude of reliance to their children. The children of the Indo-Fijians were born in Fiji and therefore they saw it as their motherland. They have known no other land except then the path and grounds they have run, played and slept. However, they have failed to understand that the land which they have accepted their own has never accepted them, the people have not accepted them and nor the system recognises them. Thus, in spite of a hundred years service, the Indo-Fijians still suffer the same amount of hardships. The various coups that occurred in different years suggest the ways of how people conspired to banish these people from their land. In the name of coups, various farms, houses, temples of the Indo-Fijians were set on fire, their property destroyed and homes were looted, people were murdered, women were raped and killed, while people who have rose to power were banished from the land itself. As Satendra Nandan writes:

Yet homeless, nameless between earth-sky
 A race without a place must forever die;
 Uprooted, transplanted lives grow in pain,
 To live must their generations die again? (Nandan, Lonliness 49)

Nandan who from a poor Indo-Fijian family rose to the position of becoming the Member of Parliament in 1987, has been himself a victim of the existing hatred and racism and therefore he always had a voice against it. The fact that in Fiji, a group of people who has no political right have the power to overthrow a democratically elected government and threatened the parliamentarians to death, show what amount of inequality and racism still exist amongst the indigenous towards the Indo-Fijians. He couldn't accept the fact that how a country could not recognize the various affords made by people who came as just 'indenture labourers' and reject all their rights in the land, just in the name of 'Fiji for Fijians'. In "Author's Note" of *Fiji: Paradise in Pieces* Nandan writes:

The first coup on May 14, 1987, had affected Fiji as a heart attack. The second on September 25 was like a stroke. Together they led to a fearful political paralysis and the internal hemorrhage continued. More than 77,000 Fiji citizens, who had known no other country, left for other lands with feeling of disgust, betrayal, shame and the hurt of history. You cannot judge the size of the internal injury by superficial scars. (8)

The country which was built with the blood and flesh of their forefathers was creating circumstances that forced exile of many to yet another country. People migrated leaving their

homes, lands, job to restart again. Thus, within a moment many Indo-Fijians lost their identity became alienated and most important homeless.

Though, many Indo-Fijians migrated to Western countries in search of new life opportunities, some couldn't because of many circumstances. They stayed in Fiji and became adaptive to whatever evils came their way. The fact remains that the Indo-Fijians had made enormous contribution in the upliftment of Fiji; they have made the barren land of Fiji fertile through their flesh and blood. In the present time the Indo-Fijian constitutes around 37% of Fiji population and constitutes a major section of middle-class family. They have important role in deciding the socio, economic and political scenario of Fiji. It is their attitude of resistance and resilience that have enabled them to undertake the beautiful adventure from the slums of India in becoming the builder of a foreign nation. The sacrifices made by them are what need to be celebrated. Nandan beautifully sums up the life of the Indo-Fijians.

You are our glory, our deepest grief
You are the poems of living dead-
Giving meaning to every grain of sand,
And to every beloved tree, a green leaf. (Nandan, "Loneliness..." 48).

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