The Indentured Diaspora - Fiji

By Professor Prem Misir

“I feel somewhat like a mother concerned about the welfare of a married daughter who has set up home far away.” Indira Gandhi, in Fiji, September 1981.

At the Girmit centenary celebrations in 1979, two representatives of the Government of India Dr. Sushila Nayar and Dr. Sarojini Mahishi advocated harmonious Indian-Fijian relations, thus:

“You have adopted Fiji as a country and you have to dedicate yourself to make this nation a developed one and a happy place for all. In many ways Indians in Fiji have made more progress than the people in India.”

“I regard Fiji as an important partner for India. We have deep and enduring ties of history and culture. Fiji is an influential voice in the Pacific Region and
the developing world, and our partner in multilateral institutions,” Narendra Modi at a press conference in Fiji in 2014.

The winds of change have spread all over the world the seeds of the tree of India; and the currents that carry these seeds have used so many different paths, producing blooms that are different one to another, except for their common root. The people who came out of India through the Girmit almost two hundred years ago are quite different from those who are now immigrating to North America, the United Kingdom, the Middle East, and, indeed, Australia and New Zealand. In this speech, I am addressing the Indian Fijians’ indenture experience; of which Brij Lal concluded on Indian Fijians, thus:

“…Their reaction is symptomatic of the general Indo-Fijian ambivalence about their past. They have moved on in the world, made something of themselves; they do not want to know, or be reminded of, the sorry circumstances of their forebears and the long distance that the xvii community has travelled since girmit ended nearly a century ago. For them, the past is past. There is no need for literary or intellectual engagement with it. There is no consciousness of history in the community and, sadder still, no urgency to know about it-sad because Indo-Fijians place so much store by education which has made them what they are. I hope this
volume will contribute in a small way toward reversing this trend. By showing that girmit is a site of inspirational, not embarrassing, history. That history matters…”

At this time this year on May 14, the Fiji people celebrate 137 years since their fore parents arrived in Fiji in 1879. And also, this year 2016 marks 100 years since the Girmit or indentureship ended. But as you engage in this celebration, you are aware that Indian Fijians’ contributions to Fiji society have involved a preservation of their culture and a reproduction of social institutions, that is, they have set up systems to meet their needs; but in contributing to their cultural development and developing organizations and systems to meet their needs, Indian Fijians generally have interactions with other ethnic groups, in this case, mainly the i-Taukei people; and that is how as it must be, since Fiji is not a monoethnic society; Fiji is a polyethnic society. These Indian-Fijian and i-Taukei interactions shape the total socio-cultural environment in which both groups inhabit. So as you celebrate, think about the many interactions you have each day with other groups.

It was 137 years ago that simple Indians left India for Fiji under a deceptive and fraudulent system of indenture labor (Girmit) that quickly transformed itself into a system of degradation and immorality. During the indenture years between 1879 and 1916 in Fiji, the British brought 60,537 Indians from India, with 45,439 North
Indians, and over the same period, 24,655 persons returned to India. The Leonidas brought the first Indians to Fiji on May 14, 1879, a total of 498 persons, 273 men, 146 women, 47 boys, and 32 girls.

There were in total 42 ships and 87 voyages that brought Indians to Fiji between the first ship Leonidas in 1879 and the Sutlej V in 1916. There also was the wreck of ship called Syria at sea in 1884 where 56 would-be Indian indentureds lost their lives. Fiji was the last sugar colony where the Girmit was used. But how did this India-Fiji connection start?

The newly-established British Crown Colony called Fiji was given to Queen Victoria in 1874 by the Fijian chiefs. In the Deed of Cession, the first Governor of Fiji Sir Arthur Gordon had promised to take care of the indigenous Fijian interests. And so notwithstanding the shortage of labor to man the cotton and coconut plantations, the Governor decided not to use the indigenous Fijians because he felt that would destroy their village way of life and would produce family disorganization; and, of course, he made a promise to the chiefs not to do so; the indigenous Fijians also had little interest in routine work.
Undoubtedly then in the colonial period, the British secured the cultural preservation of indigenous Fijians, and so any discussion and presentation of indigenous Fijian experiences must reference the British Governor’s role in sustaining the indigenous Fijian culture; and which would explain why the indigenous Fijians essentially were not part of the colony’s labor force for sugar.

With no indigenous Fijians for the sugar labor force, Sir Arthur Gordon, with experiences in Trinidad and Mauritius, knew that Indians from India were the automatic choice of labor for Fiji, as Indians already were successfully utilized in Mauritius, Guyana, Natal and elsewhere to man the sugar plantations; the British saw Indians as docile (quiet, passive) labor. Let me hasten to add, however, that the Indians in other sugar colonies were not docile, as evidenced through their constant resistance to the British planters’ brutal tactics of dehumanization and humiliation.

And so while other sugar colonies had numerous forms of Indian resistance, this was not the case with Indian Fijians. Perhaps, Indian Fijians’ non-resistance against the planters’ brutality was a strategy for survival. And so any analysis of
Indian Fijians must reference these lived-in inhuman and degrading conditions in the Girmit years, and their consequences for Indian Fijians’ growth today.

Indians were imported through the indenture or Girmit system which controlled recruitment, labor contracts, and living conditions. Under the agreement (Girmit) with India, Indians were required to serve for five years uninterrupted as laborers, work for seven hours in the field or ten hours in the factory, and do five days of work per week. Once the five years of compulsory work were completed, they could return to India at their own expense. But if they stayed on for another five years, and then they wanted to return to India, then the British would have had to pay their passages and those of their children.

However, one year into the India-Fiji connection, that is, in 1880, the British encouraged the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR Company) of Sydney, Australia, to expand the company’s activities to Fiji. The CSR Company came to Fiji and stayed on until 1973. Sugar thrived in Fiji and its expansion ensured the continued arrival of Indians from India, thus sustaining the India-Fiji degrading and immoral connection for the supply of labor and for the perpetuation of inhuman working conditions.
In his fight to end the Girmit system of labor, Madan Mohan Malaviya told the Imperial legislative Council (Malaviya, 1909), thus:

“It is one under which simple, illiterate, ignorant village people, belonging largely to the poorest classes, are inveigled into entering into a very solemn agreement which compels them to leave their homes, to leave their kith and kin, and to go to a distant country of the conditions of existence in which they are entirely ignorant, to work in circumstances in which they are practically at the mercy of their employers, for a continuous period of five years, to work under men who do not understand their language, custom and manners, who have no sympathy with them, under conditions in settling which they have no voice without being informed that they will be liable to be punished criminally, the punishment extending sometimes to two or three months’ hard labour, if they fail to perform the tasks which are assigned to them, tasks, in the fixing of which they have no voice and in making complaints against which they find but little support.”

On the Guyana scene, Bechu, a Bengali immigrant, accorded upper-caste status by planters, aggressively articulated the abuses of indentureship; in November 1896, in penning his first among many letters to the newspaper, Bechu[11] spoke about White overseers’ sexual exploitation of Indian females; refusal of estate hospitals
to provide medical treatment to unindentured Indians; blatant inducement of Indians to remain in Guyana, although they eagerly wanted to return to India; and planters’ frequent breaches of labor laws pointedly intended to exert total control of Indians. It is remarkable that Bechu was the first Indian to present evidence to a Royal Commission, the West India Royal Commission in 1897.

Sir Arthur Gordon, Governor of Mauritius had this to say about the degradation of women in 1870: “Too generally the planters had mistresses, usually half-castes, while the overseers and managers almost invariably lived with Indian women; and I was assured that the provision of pretty girls was almost a recognized form of hospitality on a plantation when the visitors were young men. The traditions of the time of slavery were retained.”

Unquestionably, indentured Indians inhabited a dehumanized total institutional environment, with no mobility, enslaved by the tyranny of the rule of law, and reduced to a history of humiliation. Against this background of brutality and degradation, 333 Indians, mainly males, committed suicide between 1879 and 1916; and that the suicides happened within the first six months of indentureship. In Fiji, since women were less than 30% of the Girmitiyas, sexual jealousy was advanced as the reason for the male suicides because of such a small number of
women compared to men; but because the largest number of suicides happened largely within the first six months of the Girmit, it was hardly likely that sexual jealousy would have been a strong contributing factor; the real reason for the male suicides related to the cultural and social disruption vis-à-vis the trauma and despair brought about by social dislocation within the harsh plantation system.

Today, suicides remain a major social issue in Fiji, with an average of 120 suicides per year, according to the Business Standard. According to the Fiji Alliance for Mental Health, there were 422 suicides between January 2012 and July 2015. These figures could be higher due to some unreported suicides. And the rate of suicide today is even greater than the rate during the indenture period. According to Wainiquolo et al, in 2012, most of the suicides are from the young age group and from the Indian Fijian background. Guyana also has a high suicide rate among Indians. Perhaps, we could do a joint study on suicides for the two countries where both share the indenture experience.

Today, 64% of women in an intimate relationship experiences physical/sexual violence by a husband or intimate partner, and each day, 43 women receive injuries, based on the New Zealand Family Violence Clearing House.
The Caribbean and Fiji have considerable similarities. At the end of indentureship in 1917, 238,960 Indians came to Guyana, and less than a third (75,236) returned to India. Nearly three quarters (70.3%) of Indians originated from Uttar Pradesh, 15.3% from Bihar, and 4.4% from South India, with 86.3% Hindus and 16.3% Muslims.

In Fiji, 45,439 (75%) Indians came from North India. The majority (87%) were young under age 26.

Indian population: Mauritius: 68%; Guyana: about 44%, still the majority; Fiji: 37%.

The British used the Girmit system of labor between 1834 and 1916, where 1.3 million Girmitiyas were brought from India to Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, and other parts of the Caribbean, South Africa, Suriname, and Fiji. The Girmitiyas have strong similarities in terms of names, culinary preferences, and transported texts. And today, there are about 25 million Indians globally, constituting the Indian Diaspora. Today, the movement of Indians happens not only from India, but from other parts of the world; but it is a movement devoid of the Girmit system of labor, or the indenture system of labor.