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## Navigating the Aftermath: Scrutinizing the Challenges of the Fiji Girmitiya Community in the Aftermath of Deception and Hypocrisy

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### Abstract

This research delves deep into the profound sufferings of the Fiji girmitiyas, tracing their journey from the exploitative living conditions of indentured labor to the multifaceted deceptions embedded in their daily lives. It is a sincere effort to unveil the harsh conditions the Fiji girmitiyas were subjected to in the name of lucrative work opportunities abroad. It further examines the sufferings of the Fiji girmitiya women who found themselves at the intersection of gender-based exploitation. The narrative encompasses incidents of abuse and the dire conditions of women. The perennial existence of cheating and hypocrisy is a global phenomenon. This study endeavours to examine the root causes and resultant effects of these practices, exploring the diverse levels at which they manifest. The research aims to delineate both the instigators and the victims involved in these acts, providing a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics at play. Furthermore, the paper highlights the remarkable resilience displayed by girmitiya descendants. It explores how, despite the adversities faced by their ancestors, the girmitiyas have preserved their cultural heritage in foreign lands.

**Keywords:** Girmitiya, migrants, deception, indentured, hypocrisy

### 1. Introduction

Before plunging directly into the topic, it is important to discuss a brief history of the term girmitiya. The term 'girmit' was used for the English term 'agreement' between indentured labourers from the subcontinent with the British government. Another term used for them was 'Jahajis' as they came through ships (jahaaz) via kala paani. The girmitiya system was the brainchild of William Gladstone, as the end of slavery in the 1830s meant the necessity of cheap labour for the sugar plantations, thus bringing India and China into the scene, both of which had a huge population and thus came to be regarded as the best option for the system to function. (Carter 1996). In his book 'Chalo Jahaji', Brij V Lal, a girmitiya descendant writes the 'girmitiyas were caught between the demands and pulls of two worlds, one which they had left but not completely escaped, and one which they had entered but not fully embraced. They had left one home and, at least emotionally, not found another in their lifetime. They lived and died in an acute state of tension and ambivalence. They were a people caught in-between, neither here nor there, or else everywhere all at once.' (preface, p x) 'Whether indenture was slavery or not is a question that will be debated long after we ourselves are gone; but there can be little argument that it was a harsh, brutalizing experience. The girmitiyas called it 'narak' which means hell, an experience which robbed them of 'izzat', honour, which denied them 'insaf', justice. The words are theirs, not mine.' (preface, p x),

Lal further writes. Hugh Tinker called it a 'new system of slavery', as slavery changes its form but never ends. Indentured labourers were vital to the economy of the colonies because they could be exploited with long working hours and low wages, which were further reduced through massive penalties for petty offenses. He (1974) identified the following common characteristics of slavery and indenture:

- i). The plantation was cordoned off and intended to isolate the labourers from contact with the outside world;
- ii). The establishment of an authoritative, repressive chain of command within the plantations in all the sugar colonies; and
- iii). The incentive to work was based on punishment rather than reward.

The need for fostering more dialogue on this topic comes from the fact that for a long time, the girmitiyas were portrayed in a very different light. As Chinua Achebe says: the lion must write his story, it becomes important that the facts come to the front: how and why the migration happened? What happened during the agreement tenure? How did the Fiji girmitiyas fall prey to cheating and hypocrisy?

The migrants came from a world caught in turmoil. The effects of British revenue settlements, as well as the destruction of indigenous handicraft industries, the subdivision of land holdings due to population growth and family disputes, hardships caused by droughts, floods, and

famines, and the resultant poverty and increasing indebtedness among peasants.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### Materials

**Primary Sources:** Chalo Jahaji by Brij.V. Lal serves as the primary source of information for my research paper. The book with its twenty-two chapters provides a comprehensive account of the lives of Indians who migrated to Fiji in the name of lucrative job opportunities. The book covers all segments of life on Fiji plantations extensively.

### Secondary Sources

- Scholarly Articles: Various related research papers focusing on the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the Fiji-girmitiya community.
- Historical Documents and Records: Various historical documents including government reports were corroborated to supplement the information in 'Chalo Jahaji'

### Methods

- Literary Analysis: A detailed analysis of the book 'Chalo Jahaji' was done to identify the various themes, historical events, and anecdotes pervading through the text.
- Historical Contextualization: The history of the girmitiyas was researched extensively before delving into the writing of the paper. This included studying the socio-economic conditions in colonial India and Fiji, and the policies of the British among other things.

#### a) Deception and Cheating in Indenture Agreements

The terms and conditions of the agreement were stated in English, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, and Telegu. As per the agreement, the tenure of work for Fiji girmitiyas was for five years starting from the day they landed in Fiji. They were required to work for nine hours for five days, five hours on Saturdays with the only off day as Sunday. For every term of work, each male was to be paid not less than one shilling and females not less than nine pence. Children were to be paid proportionately as per the amount of work done. The regulations stated that the employer could assign only one task per day and for extra tasks, the workers were to be paid extra. The girmitiyas were to receive rations from their employers for the first six months for the daily cost of four pence. Housing with free rent was to be provided to the girmitiyas. Hospital facilities, medical attention and medicines were to be provided to the ill for free. A girmitiya could return to India at his own expense after a period of five years. A further five years of 'industrial residence' allowed the girmitiyas to return on the government's expense provided they returned within twelve years. However, how much of it was actually in praxis? That is the real question. Misleading recruitment tactics were employed to lure the workers with the dream of a better life. The indenture contracts were in favour of the British supervisors. There was a lack of transparency about the harsh working conditions at the plantation fields. And the legal rights of the workers were kept hidden from them which allowed the supervisors to exploit them. In reality, the workers were paid sometimes even less than the agreed amount. For instance, 'the indenture agreement entitled men to one shilling per day and women nine pennies. In 1897, for example, 79 percent of the male immigrants earned only eight pennies per working day and 63 percent of women five pennies. The pattern was repeated in

other colonies as well.' (ch 3, p 50, *The Odyssey of Adventure*) In case of sickness, if a worker worked slower than usual as is the case with someone who is sick, he was flogged and beaten by the supervisor and paid less, if he took the day off his salary was deducted and he had to suffer the consequences the next day. Plantation work was extremely demanding. The majority of the indentured labourers came from an agricultural and labouring background in India therefore, field work was not new to them. However, any absence from respite from the relentless pace of work, harsh discipline for the most trivial breaches of labour, and absence of the normal comforts of a settled life such as the support of family, religion, community, caste, homeland made the suffering of the labourers unbearable. The wage was fixed for 5 years, taking no account of the increase in the cost of living or the wage earned by free labour.

South Indians were completely enveloped by the feeling of deception (or misunderstanding according to the immigration officials) regarding the nature and mode of employment they were promised before leaving India. Many of the South Indians maintained that they had been promised non-agricultural jobs such as that of teachers, interpreters, clerks, policemen, soldiers, etc. Some remonstrated that they were not fully apprised of the details of indenture such as the inability to change employers, the penal sanctions for breaches of the labour laws, and the cost of living in Fiji. Some of the folksongs and poems express the lamentations and the anguish of the Fiji girmitiyas.

One labourer sings:

I hoe all day and cannot sleep at night,

Today my whole body aches,

Damnation to you, arkatis. (114)

#### b) Deception and Cheating of Girmitiya Women

Women in the girmitiya community faced different kinds of problems. The women who rejected the advances of their employers were sometimes harassed and not given their payments. They were beaten and treated badly. There are numerous recorded incidents such as Kunti's story in chapter 11 (*Kunti's Cry*) in *Chalo Jahaji*:

In 1913, a female indentured labourer Kunti was sent alone to weed an isolated banana patch. Kunti was put in enforced isolation for giving trouble to her supervisor. Later, the overseer Crobcraft came and made some inappropriate suggestions to Kunti. To escape him, she jumped into a river and was fortunately saved by someone.

In another chapter, chapter 18 (*Narayani's Story*): Narayani was a twenty-four-year old indentured woman who had come to Fiji in 1910. She was pregnant when she arrived and was to receive a ration for six months. She gave birth to a child who died prematurely 4 days later. Her life was riddled with violence at home. On a Saturday, the day her child died, the overseer Harold Bloomfield told Naraini to come to work from Monday. The woman's Sirdar, Muniram who heard the exchange claims that she had not asked for work. Naraini, anyway showed up for work on Monday, just two days after the death of her child and 6 days after giving birth. She started breaking stones with a hammer. But, her body could not take the exertion and after a while, she sat down. Upon being asked to keep working, she made futile attempts to work. After a while, the Sirdar informed the overseer that she was unable to work as she was bleeding from her private parts but the overseer came and kicked her. She began to cry. Unable to understand the reason for her crying, he picked up a stick and started beating Naraini.

Other than that, there are numerous instances of the Fiji girmitiya women being exploited at the hands of their supervisors and also at the hands of the plantation male workers as the ratio between the men and women was highly disproportionate. They were often not paid due remuneration for their work and would be left with no other choice than to go for forced prostitution to earn their livelihood.

### c) Deception and Hypocrisy in the Name of Religion

People are usually sentimental when it comes to religion, practices, and customs. In a foreign land, where the girmitiyas' sense of identity and home had been uprooted, anything close to their beliefs, and their practices could be encashed. And it happened so. Many people took advantage of this situation and played with the sentiments of innocent people. Some also did it to save enough money so that they could return to their homeland. One of such characters is Totaram Sanadhya. He became a victim of cheating when he was being brought to Fiji. He confesses his story of how he was recruited from the local market on the promise of a well-paying easy job. He was asked to lie by the magistrate and list himself as a Kshatriya instead of his actual caste Brahmin to increase his chances of being recruited. When he changed his mind, he was locked up in prison until he gave in. He then reveals how the wages were so low that it was nearly impossible to save enough to return to India after the period of indenture was over. So, he resorted to becoming a priest in Fiji. He states, "As the people arrived, I would busy myself in the prayer room, hidden from them by the cloth partition. To impress the people with my new priestly role, I would take a long time decorating my forehead with tilak marks." He had been a victim of deception. He too resorted to clever tricks to earn money. Another incident is that of Baba Ramnath who founded the Nath sect in Fiji and had around 300 followers. Once, he asked one of his followers to send his wife to his Kuti. The baba impregnated the woman and later eloped with her to India. The founder of Nanak sect in Fiji was Chota Singh with a notorious reputation. He too eloped with a disciple's wife and later abandoned her too. The founders of the Satnami and Dadu sects managed to collect enough money through donations to return to India. In this way, we can see how rampant cheating and hypocrisy became in the name of religion and God. People used these as a means to fulfill their goals.

### 3. Conclusion

This research paper delves into the evocative and complex history of the Fiji Girmitiyas, drawing extensively from Brij V. Lal's "Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji" as well as various scholarly articles and historical records. Lal's meticulous documentation and storytelling provide a rich rendering of the socio-economic and cultural impacts of the indenture system on the Indian diaspora in Fiji. The themes of migration, identity, resistance, and cultural transformation emerge as central to understanding the plight of the Girmitiyas. The study of the Fiji Girmitiyas not only sheds light on a significant historical phenomenon but also contributes to the broader discourse on migration, colonialism, and diaspora studies. Displacement and loss of identity are serious issues not just of bygone days but also of contemporary times. With migration becoming so commonplace for a number of reasons, one finds it difficult to adjust to a new place. As the saying goes, Home is where the heart is. For most, the home lies where one has been born brought up, lived, been treated as a first-class citizen, where

one has fond memories and connections. However, we saw how the Fiji girmitiyas struggled to make sense of their identity in a foreign land which had become a point of no return for them. When one is in a foreign land, survival becomes tough and one becomes prone to cheating, deception, and hypocrisy. One is taken advantage of until one finally learns the ways of the land. Something similar happened to Fiji girmitiyas. They experienced cheating and deception in many forms. Some adopted these ways too as a means of reaching their goals. However, the pain of being separated from one's homeland is incomparable. Below is an original short poem based on the plight of those who experience migration.

#### **Ghar Hi Toh Tha**

*The aroma of the gajar ka halwa  
where I grew up  
Fill up my nostrils.  
It brings back the little me.  
Running around in lose fitting kurta  
Held together by amateur stitches  
Of the wrong coloured thread.  
My Amma's bangles  
I can hear in the distant memories  
As she churns milk in a huge cauldron to make ghee.  
Amina, Rashida, and Rani-my friends  
Giggling and gossiping  
Adjusting their dupattas  
As they reach my home.  
Karim, the dhobi who would make small talk  
With my brother and me.  
And sometimes gets me sour imli.  
  
Here in a foreign land,  
My identity feels hybrid.  
No halwa.  
No loose-fitted kurta.  
No mismatched coloured threads.  
No Amma's clinking of bangles.  
No Ameena. No Rashida. No Rani.  
No time for small talk. No Kareem.  
Just me. And this paper. And ink.*

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