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Khemendra K. Kumar

Abstract

Totaram Sanadhya's Fiji Dwip Mein Mere Ikkis Varsh (1914), later translated as My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands (1991), is the first book written by an indentured labourer or 'giritiya' in Fiji. The book encompasses the author's first-hand experiences and anecdotes from the point of view of an Indian. As a result, Sanadhya's book counters many western biases generally highlighted in history texts about the Indenture System. For the scholars of diaspora studies, this book provides insights into why many Indians chose to indenture themselves and eventually became part of 'old' diaspora. This paper seeks to review and highlight the major threads of My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands. The main threads are treachery used in recruiting labourers, unjust/unfair treatment, social and moral degeneration, and racism suffered by the giritiyas in Fiji.

Introducing Sanadhya – *The Man of the People*

Kelly, the co-translator of *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*, introduces the book by stating its uniqueness. The book gives special insights into the girit experience and history. He introduces the translated edition by stating:

While a great number of books have been written about the indenture system and the lives of giritiya labourers in Fiji and elsewhere, only this one was written at the time of indenture, from the Indian point of view, and from first-hand experience of the life of the giritiyas in Fiji (1991: 1)

Kelly qualifies Sanadhya as a remarkable man who spent twenty-one years in Fiji. After completing his indentureship in Fiji, he fought for the rights of his fellow giritiyas. Upon his return to India, Sanadhya devoted his life to abolishing the Indenture System that initially sent him to Fiji. His departure from Fiji in 1914 was a significant event that received attention in the Pacific Herald. This rare mention was a feat of a man otherwise reduced to coolie status by colonial apparatus. Complementary to this, Sanadhya found an audience in J.W. Burton's *The Fiji of Today* (1910). As a Christian missionary, Burton, who carried 'The White Man's Burden', was dismayed by Sanadhya's paganistic practices but later acknowledged Sanadhya's intelligence. Similarly, when Sanadhya wrote back, fond encounters with Burton was mentioned.

In the second edition of *Fiji Dwip Mein Mere Ikkis Varsh*, Benarsidas Chaturvedi introduces Sanadhya as highly respected by his countrymen in Fiji for his noble deeds (1991: 2). Sanadhya was instrumental in reviving Sanatan Dharm amongst Hindus in Fiji. Also, he wrote to Mahatma Gandhi and requested him to send a barrister to represent Indians in Fiji. To bring Dr. Manilal, a barrister, Sanadhya went on foot from one plantation to another to collect funds. Moreover, Sanadhya expended his earnings towards Manilal's arrival. As an esteemed religious leader, he organized the first Ram Lila festival in 1902 in Navua. As a political leader, he drafted and sent the telegram of support from Fiji Indians for Rajrishi Gokhale's resolution before the Indian Legislative Council to end the Indenture System. When he returned to India, he traveled widely to speak against the Indenture System. His work reached a pinnacle when Sanadhya addressed the Fiji Indian issue at the Madras Congress. In his old age, like many other followers of Mahatma Gandhi, Totaram Sanadhya spent the rest of his life at the Sabarmati Ashram.

The Birth of *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*

Fiji Dwip Mein Mere Ikkis Varsh / My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands is the first book on the aberrations of girmity in Fiji written by a girmityia. Even though the book lacks the finer literary skills, it delivers anecdotes and interpretations apt for analysis and generalization. In writing the book, Sanadhya aimed to 'expose the evils of the indenture, to make the frequent appeal of the readers, to address them directly, and to try and shame them to action' (1991: 7). The perceived purpose was the abolition of the Indenture System. His target audience was the educated, influential Indians and intellectuals in India. Due to this slant, the book falls in the category of testimonia (Beverly 2008: 571; Mishra 2015: 551; Schroer 2016: 151) and polemic writing. The question of authorship is tricky, though. It is believed that Sanadhya shared his experience through his narrations with Benarsidas Chaturvedi, who wrote these into a booklet form. For some reason, Chaturvedi's name as the editor appeared only in and after the second edition.

In a nutshell, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands* is a source of insight into Fiji's Indenture System and the girmityias within it. It does not merely report facts that are unavailable elsewhere about the Indenture System. It also reflects the truth from the girmityia's point of view, the reality of that time as perceived by the system's participants. It is an invaluable bridge from the participant's point of view in a particular historical episode.

Sanadhya, Poverty, and Recruitment

Totaram Sanadhya was born in 1876 in Hirangau (Firozabad). His father, Pandit Revati Ram Ji, died eleven years later in 1887, leaving him, his two elder brothers, and his mother in poverty. According to Sanadhya, his father left about four thousand rupees worth of jewellery. The jewellery fetched very little money in exchange. Within one year, the family experienced extreme poverty. His eldest brother went off to Calcutta and worked as an assistant at Reilly Brothers. He sent home meagre 8 rupees a month, a sum that was insufficient to maintain their household.

Sanadhya and his family's plight was no different from many other Indians. In *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Mike Davis states that pauperization accompanied modernization and commercialization in India (2002: 311-312). Poverty forced poor Indians far and wide in search of work; indenture became an option for survival. It was economic emancipation for the poor Indians to travel across the sea and earn money. Like so many others, Sanadhya, at the tender age of sixteen, left home to search of work in 1893. He looked for work in Prayag and

Tirtharaj for many days. In a market near Katwali, he met an *arakati* (local agent/recruiter) who asked if he wanted employment. Upon agreement, the man said, 'Good, I can get you a very good job. It's the sort of work which will make your heart joyful' (1991: 35).

This *arakati*, with his sugar-coated words, brought Sanadhya to a safe house. Here Sanadhya witnessed about one hundred men and women sitting in a line. As a rule, no one could go out of that house. The *arakati* explained:

Look brothers, the place where you will work you will never have to suffer any sorrows. There will never be any kind of problems there. You will eat a lot of bananas and a stomach full of sugar cane, and play flutes in relaxation (1991: 36).

After three days, the *arakatis* brought them to a magistrate. They had, in advance, coached them to say 'Yes' to any question; otherwise, they would be sent to prison. After affirming 'Yes' to the magistrate, an immigration officer rounded them up and said:

You are going to Fiji. You will get 12 annas a day there, and you will have to do fieldwork for five years. If you return from there after five years then you will pay your fare yourself, and if you return after ten years then the government will give you your fare. You will be able to get many rupees from here. Not only 12 annas. You will be able to earn much more above this. You will live with great bliss there. What is Fiji? It is heaven! (1991: 37).

After a convincing yet slippery talk, the *arakatis* asked Sanadhya and others to hand over their clothes, jewellery, and other valuables for safekeeping. Sadly, they never saw their belongings again. Considering five long years, Sanadhya decided not to travel. Upon hearing this, he was locked up in a room without food and water until he agreed. Once out of the cell, Sanadhya, a Brahmin, was forced to eat meals on re-used plates and drink water from the same cup as the lower castes. Violence subdued any form of resistance. Thus, began the pollution of his caste and ordeal before embarking on the ship to Fiji. This is Sanadhya's brief account of his recruitment.

Sanadhya highlights that *arakatis* used trickery to recruit labourers. At numerous times, he uses the word *bahakana*, meaning tricked. The recruiters did not explain the underlying reality and the unjust social transformation to come. What caused more trauma is that their fellow Indians as *arakatis* tricked many into accepting girmity.

Brutality, Violence, and Injustice: An Integral Part of Girmity Narrative

Girmity is generally perceived as a time of hardship and abasement for the

Indian labourers. The Indenture System was likened to a 'new milch cow' or 'a new system of slavery' by critics such as Hugh Tinker (Cohen, 2008: 63-64), while Burton sums up the girmitiya perception that life in the lines was hell. But Sanadhya's view of girmitiya is metaphysical. This contradicts Burton's assertion. Instead of seeing girmitiya as a point of no return, he had all hopes of ending that brutal system. For that reason, he stresses the omnipresence of *kasht* (1991: 15). Hell has a connotation of a place after death as a punishment. But Sanadhya had all hopes for improvement. He relates *kasht* to hardships, distress, troubles, and problems of girmitiya that were temporary. For that reason, the word *kasht* becomes more relevant.

The harshness and brutalities of the Britishers are vividly highlighted by Sanadhya. The Hindi word *atyachar* denotes atrocities and outrages. Brutality, beatings, and violence became part of coolie life. Kelly emphasizes that the notion of 'atrocities' or 'outrage' one finds expressed here extends quite beyond the violence itself. Outrageous events such as the case of Kabuli Pathans or the violence on Narayani demonstrate the injustice at the hands of European authority figures. Other injustices highlighted by Sanadhya are brutality and violence inflicted by overseers, misrepresentations by lawyers, overcharging by western merchants, shortchanging for goods bought from girmitiyas, and the government officers' failure to treat the girmitiyas fairly.

Coolie Lines: A Hub of Social and Moral Degeneration

Many observers of girmitiya record a 'degeneration of Indian social and moral order in the coolie lines' (Kelly, in his introduction to Sanadhya, 1991: 20). The caste system did not survive in Fiji (Scarr, 1984: 81). To a certain extent, it is true that the Indians broke the bonds of a rigid system and moved from 'ascribed' social roles to 'freedom'. But Sanadhya affirms that it was not a one-sided attempt. The rigid plantation hierarchy and the imposed 'coolie' status by the British officials forced the violation of their caste. Deliberate attempts were made so that the Indians were brought to contact with sources of pollution such as eating, drinking, and clothing. Protest over these matters led to hostility and punishment from the British authorities. As a result, the Indians were made into a new kind of people, forced into a new lowest social status called 'coolies' (1991: 18).

Sanadhya highlighted many anecdotes to support his underlying arguments. After Sanadhya and his fellow recruits underwent a medical examination by a male doctor, they were given prisoner's shirts, caps, and pants to wear and a tin jar as a water cup, a tin plate for food, and a small sack for keeping their belongings. Once in the ship, they were allocated one and a half feet wide and six feet wide space to sleep and keep their belongings. They were given dog

biscuits and one-sixteenth of a pound of sugar (1991: 39). An officer assigned different work in the ship to some people. Any recruit refusing work was beaten and forced to pick up filth. They could drink water twice a day. Their meal consisted of fish and rice. Many people suffered from seasickness. Few unfortunate ones died. Their corpses were thrown in the sea (1991: 41).

The journey from India to Fiji is mentioned as crossing the '*kalapani*' or black waters. After suffering three months and twelve days of ordeal, they arrived at Nukulau, a small island near Viti Levu used as a quarantine and sanitizing station. The conditions on the state/plantations were poor too. The law outlined, 'Employers of Indian Labourers must provide at their own expense suitable dwellings for immigrants. The style and dimension of these buildings are fixed by regulations' (1991: 43).

Each room was twelve by eight feet. A married couple occupied a single room. Otherwise, three men or three women shared a single room. Adjusting to the new coolie status was most troublesome. The state provided the provisions. In return, the planter deducted two shillings and fourpence from their week's pay. Most Indians finished the week's provision by the fourth day. After that, they had to either fast or borrow from other Indians.

Kabuli Pathans: Divide and Rule

'Sixty Kabuli Pathans were recruited and sent to Fiji' (1991: 44). The Kabuli Pathans were unaware of the type of work and the conditions in Fiji. As usual, the planter provided the same provisions to each of them. Unfortunately, their ration finished within three days. When asked to work, the Kabuli Pathans refrained from working. Instead, their planter allegedly reported to police that they were refraining from working. The planter also reportedly said that the Kabuli Pathans threatened to loot and kill them. The police came right away. Although the Kabuli Pathans explained their situation, the police sided with the planter. Police later fired a gun to frighten them, but the Kabuli Pathans remained steadfast (1991: 44). After some discussion amongst the planter and the police, the Kabuli Pathans were led to the Nukulau depot, where they would be given food. As they were about to eat, a whistle was blown, and suddenly 500 or more native Fijians with weapons rounded them up, caught them, divided them into groups, put them into dinghies, and sent them to different plantations.

This act of betrayal was in collusion with the planters, police, and the Immigration Department. Native Fijians were used to carry out their dirty deed of breaking the strength of the Kabuli Pathans (1991: 45).

The Rape of Kunti

Kunti and her husband were from Gorakhpur. She was in her early twenties when a Sardar and an overseer tried to destroy her virtue. She was tasked with cutting grass far away from the other girmitiyas. The Sardar and the overseer attempted to rape Kunti, but she escaped by jumping into a nearby river. Her plantation owner ignored Kunti's complaint. Instead, she received an extra task of weeding and her husband was beaten half-dead. Through some means, her story was published in *Bharat Mitra* (1991: 48). The government of India noticed this account and asked for an investigation of the incident. In Fiji, an Immigration officer threatened Kunti, but she was steadfast on her version. The perpetrators eventually escaped punishment. The above event highlights how the *sardars*, overseers, and planters conspired to abuse the girmitiyas.

Narayani: The Madwoman from Navo

Narayani's story is equally heart-wrenching. She worked in Nadi district at Navo Plantation. A child was born to her who died. According to government law, a woman should rest and recover for three months after giving birth to a child (1991: 49). Just two or three days after she gave birth, an overseer ordered her to work. When Narayani refrained, she was beaten till she fell unconscious. A white sub-inspector investigated the incident and brought Narayani to the hospital. The overseer was arrested and the case reached the Supreme Court. In the end, the white overseer was found not guilty and freed. The suffering of child-birth, the death of her child, beatings by the overseer, and eventual defeat at the hands of law led Narayani to mental illness (1991: 49).

Racism and Third Class Treatment

Racism was rife in Fiji. Just like Gandhi suffered at the hands of whites in a train in Pietermaritzburg in South Africa, Indians in Fiji had to endure many similar hardships on steamers. On one occasion, Sanadhya was forced to sit with pigs and other animals. At night, it began to rain. He was soaked and shivering with cold and fever. He even offered to pay full fare and get into a room, but his request was denied. Many Indians suffered similar treatment as Sanadhya (1991: 51).

The buying price of sugar cane and bananas by the merchants differed from Europeans and Indians. While the Europeans received fourteen shillings for their sugar cane, Indians received only 9 shillings. Planters such as Banner

Sahib and Barristers such as Berkeley cheated and committed fraud against Indians. They were successful in their unlawful acts because no Indian was educated enough to counter the European elite and the law system. It was Sanadhya who wrote to Gandhi and asked for a barrister. Because of his effort, Manilal arrived and fought legal cases on behalf of the Indians.

In the second half of *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*, Sanadhya briefs about the climate and landscape of Fiji. It is heartening to note that there were some Europeans, such as John Wear Burton (author of *Fiji of Today*) and Miss. Hannah Dudley, who sympathized with the plights of girmitiyas. They also voiced the ills of the Indenture System in their writings (1991: 79).

Conclusion

In writing *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*, Sanadhya has highlighted the ills of the Indenture System in Fiji from the subaltern's point of view. The main threads are treachery used in recruiting labourers, unjust/unfair treatment, social and moral degeneration, and racism suffered by the girmitiyas in Fiji. Sanadhya makes a compelling case that gimit in Fiji was far from what was promised of Fiji—a heaven. Instead, for many of them, it turns out a hellish experience. This book gives insights into what the girmitiyas went through in Fiji.

Sanadhya has attained a place in girmitiya historiography for good reasons. He has been perceived as a 'man of the people' for articulating the plight of girmitiyas and taking the plight of girmitiyas to political ranks in India. But little examined in his book has been his early days. Was he a casteist in his early days? Poverty was a great leveller, yet Sanadhya carried his superior caste attitude of a Brahmin upon recruitment. But the *arakatis* treated him otherwise. He was forced to eat with *chamars* and other lower castes on re-used plates and drink water from the same cup (1991: 38). Thus, began the pollution of his caste and ordeal before embarking on the ship to Fiji. Obviously, Sanadhya was deeply affected, and his anger is aimed at the *arakatis* in India.

A pressing question one can ask is why Sanadhya chose to stay in Fiji for twenty-one long years, many more years after the expiry of his indenture. One can make an argument, on the basis of the subtext of his writings, that Sanadhya possibly had similar intentions as the English. Like the English tried to forge an 'England away from England', was Sanadhya interested in making Fiji 'India away from India'? Revival of Sanatan Dharma, connecting to nationalist political leaders in India, attempting religious and cultural interactions with J.W. Burton and native Fijians, and inviting a lawyer, would give credence to a proposition that Sanadhya perhaps had a vision of a 'little India' away from India, which departed Fiji along with his voyage back to India.

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