

## **Indians Against the Indenture System**

### **Introduction**

During colonial India more than a million Indian workers traversed across the oceans on the sugar plantations of European capitalists. This huge global migration of Indians was propelled by the British Government under the pressure of sugar speculators/planters who were depressed with the outlawing of slavery from the empire by the British Parliament in 1833. The British capitalists, who had their sugar plantations in the Caribbean, dominated the British Parliament at the time. Sugar, in the beginning of the nineteenth century became one of the most desirous ingredients in the British and European diet. Hence, sugar was at the heart of the global capitalism. Slaves who were deputed on the plantations did not choose to remain be on the plantations once the abolition was announced. The scheme of apprenticeship became unsuccessful. To mitigate the problem of labour on the sugar plantations, William Gladstone, a prominent planter parliamentarian and father of James Gladstone – who was the future Prime Minister and the British Liberal Party statesman, took a lead role in designing a new system of labour supply. For experiment, he tapped some hill coolies from Bengal in August 1834 and transported them to his plantations in Mauritius.

India at the time was over populated. He found India as suitable place for plantation labour. The trial India labour gone between 1834 and 1837 under which an agreement had to sign by parties, labourers and planters. Around 7000 labourers reached Mauritius during the period. (Kumar, 2017:57). In 1837 the British parliament passed a law to legalize the introduction of Indian labourers under a system of contract, known as the indenture system. The idea of ‘Indenture’ was borrowed from a European practice appeared during thirteenth century but became common practice in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Kumar, 2017:1). General features of the Indian indenture system were that intending emigrants had to sign and agreement consenting to work on overseas sugar plantations for five years. The terms and conditions of employment were stated on a form of agreement in English as well as in Indian vernacular languages such as Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Malayali, Kannad, Tamil etc. The



Original Copy of the first agreement and correspondences related to Hunter Arbuthnot & Co. of Mauritius and Hill Coolies of Bengal, Source: RA-341, National Archives of Mauritius.

### **AGREEMENT ENTERED INTO BY THE PARTIES<sup>1</sup>**

Between the undersigned G. Arbuthnot acting on behalf of Hunter Arbuthnot & Co. of Mauritius and the 36 natives whose names are hereunto affixed, the following agreement has been entered into the several parties binding themselves to the observance of the conditions thereof.

The natives agree to proceed to Mauritius to work as labourers there upon a sugar estate, the property of Hunter Arbuthnot & Co. and to remain there as required for the term of 5 years.

The passages of the natives to the Mauritius shall be paid H. & A. & Co. who shall also provide a passage again to this country at the end of 5 years for each native who may then wish to return; but if any individual from any cause, should leave the employment of H.A. & Co. for a passage.

The pay of the natives shall be fixed at the rate of rupees per month for each man and rupees per month for each women (no women accompany this expedition), it being understood, that the proportion of the latter does not exceed women for 30 men. The same labour will required from both, that of digging holes, weeding canes, or working in the sugar house, the quantity of daily labour required from each to be fixed by the manager of the property – the pay of 1sirdar shall be fixed at 10 rupees per month and that of one mate at 8 rupees.

As H.A. & Co. must be responsible to government tht the natives shall not be a burden to the colony, in the event of their leaving their employment, one rupees per month shall be retained from the pay of each individual till a sufficient sum to provide a passage for each to

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<sup>1</sup> Series RA-341, National Archives of Mauritius.

Calcutta shall be collected. Should no such contingency take place the money shall be restored at the end of 5 years.

In addition to the pay as above fixed, food and clothing shall be supplied to each as follows for each man per day:

½ lb of dhol

2 oz. of salt and some oil and tamarinds

and annually for each; clothing as follows:

4 Dhotees

1 Sheet

2 Blankets

1 Jacket

2 Caps

Each individual shall receive 6 months pay in advance for which he shall give an acknowledgement here, their pay to commence from the date of their going on board the ship.

The nature of this agreement, which shall be registered at the Police, is such that each native is individually responsible for the observance of its conditions by every one whose name it bears.

George Abraham Grierson's report of 1883 shows that till 1883 the total of 506,443 Indian workers left homeland under the indenture system to the following British and Foreign colonies<sup>2</sup>:

#### **Colonies Importing Indian Indentured Labour Between 1834- 1883**

<i>British Possessions</i>		
<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Colonies</b>	<b>Indian Indentured Population</b>
1	Mauritius	2, 48,000
2	Demerara	88,000
3	Trinidad	51,000
4	Jamaica	11,000
5	Grenada	1500
6	St. Lucia	1000
7	St. kitts	200

<sup>2</sup> Report on Emigration from the Bengal Presidency [hereafter Grierson Report], Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Emigration, A Pros. 9-12 August 1883, Para 7, p. 2.

8	St. Vicent	2000
9	Nevis	300
10	Natal	25000
11	Fiji	1400
	<b>Total</b>	<b>429,400</b>
<i>Foreign Possession</i>		
1.	Reunion (French Colonies)	45, 000
2.	Ceyenne (French Colonies)	4,300
3.	Guadeloupe (French Colonies)	13,500
4.	Martinique (French Colonies)	10,000
5.	St. Croix (Danish Colony)	87
6.	Surinam (Dutch Colony)	4,156
	<b>Total</b>	<b>77,043</b>
<b>Grand total coolie population in all colonies</b>		<b>506,433</b>

During the eighty-three years (1834-1917) of indentured emigration, over 1.3 million Indians were introduced into these colonies.<sup>3</sup>

<i>British Possessions</i>			
Sl. No.	Colonies	Period of Emigration	No. of Emigrants
1	Mauritius	1834-1900	453,063
2	Demerara/ British Guiana	1838-1916	238,909
3	Trinidad	1845-1916	143,939
4	Jamaica	1845-1913	36,412
5	Grenada	1856-1885	3200
6	St. Lucia	1858-1895	4350
7	St. Kitts	1860-61	337
8	St. Vincent	1860-1880	2472
9	Nevis		300
10	Natal	1860-1911	152,184
11	Fiji	1879-1916	60,965
12	Malay	1844-1910	250,000
13	East Africa	1896-1921	39,000
14	Seychelles	1904-1916	6315
	<b>Total</b>		<b>1,178,818</b>

<sup>3</sup>B.V. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji: On Journey Through Indenture in Fiji*, (Canberra: Suva Musium, , 2000), p.42.

<i>Foreign Possession</i>			
1.	Reunion (French Colonies)	1861-1883	26,282
2.	Ceyenne (French Colonies)	-1883	4,300
3.	Guadeloupe (French Colonies)	-1883	13,500
4.	Martinique (French Colonies)	-1883	10,000
5.	St. Croix (Danish Colony)	-1883	87
6.	Surinam (Dutch Colony)	1873-1916	34,304
	<b>Total</b>		<b>88169</b>
<b>Grand total coolie population in all colonies</b>			<b>1,266,987</b>

As soon as the indenture system was announced, the humanitarians and anti-slavery society members registered a protest in the British Parliament. Lord Brougham spoke in the British Parliament:

What hopes can we entertain of ever being able to make a Hindoo, a coolie from the inland territory of the country, a poor native who has never seen the ocean, or any sheet of water larger than the tank in his village, or the stream in which he bathes – comprehend the nature of a ship and a voyage, the discomforts of a crowded hold, the sufferings of four months at sea, the labours of a sugar plantation... (Kale, 2010:111).

Anti-slavery society members visited the plantations of Caribbean and published their findings in form of small booklets and pamphlets showing the brutality of this this new system. They claimed that the new system was nothing more than slavery. The *British Emancipator* published an article on the 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1838 where the paper denounced the scheme through which Indian labourers were being employed on the sugar plantation was ‘giving birth to a new system of slavery.’ (Kumar, 2017:3). John Scobal, a British abolitionist campaigner visited British Guiana during 1838-40 and published pamphlets in which he contended that the condition of Indian labourers on the plantations of Demerara was similar to the slaves. According to him, tapping the labourers under the indenture system was based on ‘kidnapping’ and the whole business of Indian coolies was just as ‘slave trade’. (Kumar, 2017:3).

While anti-slavery campaigners were much vocal against the indenture system, in India, the early nationalist leaders such as Mahadev Govind Ranade and Surendranath Banerjee found the indentured emigration an advantage for poor peasants of the country. The early nationalism in India began with the criticism of colonial economic policies such 'drain of wealth' de-industrialization and commercialization of agriculture. Dadabhai Naoroji expounded the economic drain theory and Romesh Chander Dutt taken it forward.<sup>4</sup> But in an article written in '*The Bengali*', on 6 February 1892, Surendranath Banerjee counted the benefits of the indentured labour migration and saw the potentialities for the economic development.<sup>5</sup> But from the beginning of twentieth century, the system came under the attack of Indian nationalists as well as from some professional and religious communities of India. Indian nationalists chose the platform of Indian National Congress, an association that originated to protect the interests of Indians and hence organizing Indians for their independence from British rule. But there were many associations; groups and individuals unattached to Indian National Congress also came forward aggressively to stop the migration of Indian labourers to the colonies. Many writers also made the subject of their writings and composed many popular songs, poems, plays and novels. The composers of these songs and poems constructed a unique cultural and moral identity of India, which was under threat due to the colonial policy of indentured migration.

In the following sections I will discuss the four main areas where anti-indenture campaign were expressed: Resolutions in Legislative Assembly; Returned emigrants and their participation through speeches and writings; Nationalist mobilisation in public sphere and; nationalist writings in the form of poems, plays, songs and novels.

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<sup>4</sup> See for discussion on these economic critics of empire in Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880-1905*, Delhi, 1977; Sumit Sarkar, *Modern Indian, 1885-1947*, Delhi, 2001. Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the later nineteenth century*, Cambridge, 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Cited from Karen A Roy, *Abolition of Indentured Emigration and Politics of Indian Nationalism, 1894-1917*, Unpublished PhD thesis, McGill University. 1981, p. 19

## **Anti- Indenture Resolutions in Legislative Assembly**

The political route of anti-indenture legislation was the grievances of Indians in South Africa where Indian mercantile communities were debarred from the franchise rights in the council elections. Indian National Congress raised the South African Indian grievances many times on its platforms. Despite the various attempts of negotiations and protest, South African government did not provide the political and legal rights to Indian mercantile groups.<sup>6</sup> Hence, Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866-1915) moved a resolution on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1910 in Legislative council of India to abolish the indentured migration to South Africa.<sup>7</sup> He started his speech by saying that the debate on Indians in South was twofold; ‘First, to call the attention of the Council to the position of British Indians in South Africa, and secondly, to strengthen the hands of the Government of India in applying a remedy to the situation to the extent to which a remedy can be applied’. Gokhale claimed that ‘the whole of the Indian problem in South Africa has arisen out of supply of indentured labour to Natal.’ To make the issues of Indians in South Africa understandable he described three types of Indians residing in South Africa; first, Indentured Indians (confined to Natal); second, the ex-indentured and their descendants, by the ex-indentured being meant those who have completed their term of indenture but have not returned to India nor have got themselves re-indentured but who are struggling amidst great difficulties to earn their livelihood as free Indians. This class has of course grown out of the first and; third, traders and other Indians who have gone to South Africa at their own expense. These persons have gone there in the wake of the indentured Indians and primarily to supply their needs. According to Gokhale the recent problems of Indian in South Africa is directly related to the introduction the indenture system in Natal. He further said:

...it is not merely on its own account that I advocate an abolition of this system; I also advocate it because this continued influx of indentured labour into South Africa and the consequent inevitable annual additions to the ranks of the ex-indentured tends steadily to lower the whole

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<sup>6</sup> For a full discussion on the various grievances of Indian mercantile community in South Africa as well as the point of negotiations to solve the problem see, Ashutosh Kumar, *Indian Nationalists and End of the Indentured Emigration*, Occasional Paper Series No. 48, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Proceedings of Legislative Department, Calcutta, 3 March 1910, pp. 239–285.

position of the free Indian population. The feeling of contempt with which the indentured Indian is generally regarded comes to extend itself not only to the ex-indentured but even to traders and other Indians of independent means.<sup>8</sup>

Gokhale also showed considerable anxiety on the issue of the political rights of free Indians in South Africa. He continued ‘they [Natal Government] also objected to the trading community which are about 15,000 today and who have been feeling the weight of harsh and unjust treatment for the fifteen years. At one time this community possessed both political and municipal franchise’.<sup>9</sup> Gokhale’s next point of criticism was the annual license tax of £3 and the £1 poll tax for ex-indentured Indians. According to Gokhale these taxes caused enormous suffering. ‘It has broken up families, it has had driven men to crime, and it has driven women to a life of shame’. They are people who ‘having probably lost caste in India by reason of their going to Africa, daring not to return to this country to face a life of poverty added to social disgrace and who therefore have no choice but to stay in south Africa, for whose sake they have left their country, and to whose service they have given five years of their best years.’<sup>10</sup> Gokhale’s focus again was the issue of the economic rights of Indian migrants, especially of free migrants, who were being pushed around by the South African Government and the political right of Indians in the British Dominion. His concern with indentured coolies was only of tax of one pound for ex-indentured which was difficult for them to pay, and so these ‘low caste’ coolies turned to social degradation. Their non-acceptance in Indian society left them no choice but to stay put in South Africa.

Supporting the resolution Dadabhai Naoroji pressed the Government of India to apply pressure on the South African Government.

Of the South African colonies Natal employs a large number of Indians under a system of indenture. So many as five to six thousand labourers emigrate to that colony every year from India. This is a lever in the hands of the government,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.244.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp.243-44.

which can be used to great advantage in any settlement of the Indian question throughout South Africa.’<sup>11</sup>

Gangadhar Rao Chitnavis also supported the resolution and argued that ‘the restriction of overseas migration is in the circumstances bound to help the development of the country both agricultural and industrial’.<sup>12</sup> When Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in supporting the resolution, spoke of ‘the highest pitch of indignation and honour at the harsh and cruel treatment that is meted out to Indians in South Africa’, the presiding officer of the Assembly objected to Jinnah’s language. ‘I think that is rather too strong word “cruelty”. The Honourable member must remember that he is talking of a friendly part of the empire, and he must really adopt his language to the circumstances.’<sup>13</sup> Jinnah then put the argument differently:

It was in 1860, as far back as fifty years, that a cry came from the colony of Natal for help, so to say from India. They wanted labour from India, and the authorities here as well as the authorities in Natal arranged that labour should go. ...After the colony was developed, after the colony got its constitution and independence, the first measure against the Indians the colony put on the statute book ... are known as the indentured laws. Some of the provisions of that law are opposed to every principle of justice.<sup>14</sup>

Sardar Partab Singh, Subba Rao, Maxwell, Sir Vithaldas D.Thackersey, Mudholkar, Maharajadhiraja Bahadur of Burdwan, Nawab Saiyid Muhammad Sahib Bahadur, Mazharul Haque, Babu Bhupendra Nath Basu, Sachidanand Sinha, Ghaznavi, the Raja of Dighapatia were the other members who supported the resolution. As a result the resolution was passed by the Legislative Assembly, with the assurance that “emigration will not be closed without full discussion of the circumstances of the case with the country concerned.”<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that while Gokhale moved a resolution for abolition of indenture system, his central focus was the political rights of non-indentured Indians in South Africa. The policy of 3 pound extra tax burden on ex-

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<sup>11</sup> Dadabhai Naoroji, in *Ibid*, p.251.

<sup>12</sup> Gangadhar Rao Chitanavis, in *Ibid*, p.253.

<sup>13</sup> Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in *Ibid*,p 254.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.254

<sup>15</sup> Robertson, *Ibid*.,p 575.

indentured was the only issue in his resolution for indentured population against government policy.

Meanwhile, Sanderson committee, which had been appointed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1909, submitted its report on April 1910. The committee had to consider the following questions:

The general question of emigration from India to the Crown Colonies.

The particular colonies in which Indian immigration may be most usefully encouraged.

The general advantages to be reaped in each case-

(i) by India itself;

(ii) by each particular colony.<sup>16</sup>

The Committee pointed out the positive and negative aspects of the indenture system, and recommended some modifications. With the publication of Sanderson Committee report by the Government, Indian nationalists, especially Gokhale took up the issues once again. In spite of prohibition of indentured labour recruitment from India to Natal, free Indians could not get equal political rights in South Africa. The Sanderson Committee report provoked Indian nationalists to stand against the indenture system. It was now retaliation time against the British Government, as Indian Nationalists saw that it was the British Government that was conniving at the discrimination against diverse British subjects in the Empire. Gokhale took advantage of the evidences of the Sanderson Committee report, and soon proposed a resolution in Legislative Assembly for the abolition of indenture labour system altogether.

On 4<sup>th</sup> March 1912, Gopal Krishna Gokhale moved a resolution in the Council of the Governor General of India for the taking of necessary steps to prohibit the recruitment of Indian labourers under contract of indenture, whether for employment at home or in any British Colony.<sup>17</sup> Gokhale contended that ‘the system is a monstrous system, iniquitous in itself, based on fraud and maintained by force’. He spoke, ‘the

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<sup>16</sup> Report of the committee on Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates, 1910. (Here after Report of Sanderson Committee).

<sup>17</sup> Proceedings Legislative Department, Calcutta, 1912, pp. 363-397.

victims of the system are generally simple, ignorant, illiterate, resourceless people belonging to the poorest classes of this country and they are induced to enter - or it would be more correct to say are entrapped into entering – into these agreement by the unscrupulous representations of wily professional recruiters, who are paid so much per head for the labour they supply.’<sup>18</sup> Gokhale criticised the indentured system on five counts: first, utter inequality between parties. He pointed out that labourers had to sign an agreement under a criminal penal clause. Instead of ordinary civil law ‘indentured contract enforced special criminal penal law’, making the labourer liable to imprisonment with hard labour for any breach of contract or even for trivial faults such as negligence, for carelessness of work. According to Gokhale the illiterate ignorant people did not understand the language in which these laws are enforced.<sup>19</sup>

Second, the safeguards that were provided to prevent hardship and injustice, such as the Protector of Emigrants and the Magistrates tended to be biased as they belonged to the same class as the planters. Gokhale quoted the evidence of the Sanderson’s Committee that had found that Magistrates and the Protectors are the friends of planters.<sup>20</sup> Third, due to the cruelties in the system, poor, innocent people were forced to take their own lives and numerous suicides and murders adduced enough evidence. Mortality on ship and on plantations was another ghastly feature of the system.<sup>21</sup> He also quoted Curzon’s speech of 1901 in the Legislative Council, ‘even if such cases have occurred only in a few instances, the very fact such cases can occur under the system constitutes a severe condemnation of the system’.<sup>22</sup>

Fourth, the system made the ‘adorable peasants immoral’ with the incorporation of women of ‘loose character’ to fulfil the quota of female indenture under plantation Gokhale quoted Jenkins’, the first Agent General of Canada, that ‘the women are not recruited for any special work, and they certainly are not taken there for ornamental purposes.’<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.364

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.365.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 367.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 367

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 368.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Fifth, the system degraded the people of India from a national point of view. According to him due to the indenture system, Indians were known as coolie, no matter what their position was. According to Gokhale, planters cleverly turned indentured Indians into a state of perpetual servitude by means of repeated re-indenture. In the context of Natal, he argued that the government of the colony imposed an annual tax of 3 pounds on those ex-indentured that wanted to settle as free persons. It was very difficult for a person who earned 25 shillings a month (that was the average wage) to sustain his life, and so it drove men to crime and women to shame! Gokhale criticised the government for favouring and protecting the system and not ensuring “neutrality”.

The recruiters are granted licences to recruit by district magistrates. That, in itself, imposes a responsibility upon the government, because, by granting licenses to these persons, the government make themselves to a certain extent responsible for the representation by which these men secure recruits. Then the magistrates, before whom the poor emigrants are taken and made to agreements, are the servants of government.<sup>24</sup>

Gokhale also alleged that the government had been carrying out unfair practices with the illiterate peasants of the country. The penal nature of contract had been carefully kept out of all agreements all these years. If penal liability was indispensable, he asked, why had the government not taken steps all these years to see to it that this part of contract was explained to the emigrants before they entered into the agreement? Gokhale added that such a system had degraded the self-respect of Indians.<sup>25</sup>

Gokhale in his second resolution on indentured emigration, picked the actual errors of system. But in his criticism he based himself on the issues already raised by the nineteenth century humanitarians just after the announcement of the system. So Gokhale’s criticism did not successfully affect the government attitude towards indentured emigration. Over the period of time, the system had accommodated the considerable improvements and had produced an economically enhanced new class in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.370.

<sup>25</sup> Gokhale, op.cit. p. 370.

the colonies who were more concerned about their rising social status. For instance, in South Africa, two major organisations, the Natal Indian Patriotic Union (NIPU) and the Colonial Born Indian Association (CBIA) founded respectively in 1908 and 1911, whose members were the former indentured Indians and their offspring who emerged as a newly emergent elite, were centrally concerned about their rising social status rather to abolish the system.<sup>26</sup> Since the opposition of the system did not come from actual recruits or indentured labourers, the government of India did give more importance on the Indian nationalists' criticism of the system. Hence, some of the government officials counted the benefits of the system in front of the nationalists in the Legislative Council.

Fremantle as an official member of the Legislative Council with experience of North Indian labour market, strongly objected to the grounds on which the system was criticised by Gokhale.<sup>27</sup> He contended that people from Gonda, Fyzabad, Basti, Gorakhpur and Benaras were very well acquainted with the conditions of service in the colonies. 'Every man goes because his own people or relations have been there and knows perfectly well the conditions under which they work.'<sup>28</sup> To reject the views of Gokhale, he provided the statistics of land acquired by indentured Indians in the various colonies:

Indians in British Guiana own property averaging pound 2 per head for each man, women and child in the community; that in Trinidad in 14 years 70,000 acres of crown lands have been bought by the Indians; that in Fiji between the years 1898 and 1908 the land held by the Indians, whether on leasehold or freehold terms, increase from 6,600 acres to 46,000 acres. 46,000 acres would

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<sup>26</sup> Surendra Bhana, *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal, 1860-1902*, Romilla & Co, New Delhi, 1991, p.116.

<sup>27</sup> In 1905, S. H. Fremantle had enquired into the scarcity of labour, and had in course of that inquiry visited a large number of emigrants depots in United Provinces and Bengal. See S. H. Fremantle, *Report on the supply of labour in the United Provinces and in Bengal*, Lucknow, 1906. In subsequent years, as a registrar of Co-operative Societies, he also toured around United Provinces and talked to the returnee coolies from colonies and those who were leaving for the first time for work in plantations.

<sup>28</sup> Fremantle, *Proceedings Legislative Department, Delhi, 1912*, op.cit., pp.373-4.

be 17 acres per head for every man, woman and child in the free community in Fiji.<sup>29</sup>

Fremantle quoted the two English-educated children of indentured labour, Francis Edward Muhammad Hussain and George Fitzpatrik, who testified before the Sanderson committee that coolies were well treated in the colonies, and ended up becoming prosperous. Fitzpatrik had stated in his memorial submitted to the Sanderson Committee:

The east Indians, after their term of indenture, have proved themselves to be desirable colonists; they have purchased Crown lands, and have successfully opened up the country; they undertake cane farming, kitchen-gardening, and on them the colony is largely dependent for vegetables, &c. they became skilled labourers and are employed by the local roads, municipalities, railways, etc. They and their descendants became proprietors, merchants, shopkeepers, contractors, teachers, etc., all of whom are most loyal and patriotic, thus forming an important factor in the colony.<sup>30</sup>

Further, Fremantle contended that the conditions and wages of emigrants were far better than that of the *sawak* labourers of Bahraich.<sup>31</sup> Fremantle, the Indian Civil Service officer, tried to reverse the nationalist argument. For him, Gokhale's resolution was an attempt to cut the ladder from under the poor labourers becoming proprietors of land and self-respecting citizens of the empire:

...Only last week I read in the *Statesman* about a class of self-tenants in the vicinity of Giridih who in return for a loan of from Rs. 20 to Rs. 40 practically

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<sup>29</sup> Fremantle, *ibid.*, p.374.

<sup>30</sup> Cited by Fremantle, *ibid. op.cit.*, p.374.

<sup>31</sup> The system of *Sawak* labour was common in the districts of Gonda and Bahraich. 'The *Sawak* is a member of the lower castes such as Koris, Chamars or Lunnias, who for a fixed sum of a money, almost invariably required for marriage expenses, binds himself in serfdom to the zamindar until the loan be repaid- a contingency which hardly ever occurs in actual experience. The consideration varies with the necessities of the borrower but rarely exceeds one hundred or is less than twenty rupees. A man in this position receives the ploughman's customary share in the produce, supplemented by contributions from his master, which are converted at the market rate and added to the principal.' Gonda District Gazetteer, 1905, cited in Fremantle, *ibid.*

sell themselves into perpetual servitude. It is said, indeed, that the position becomes hereditary, the son taking over the burden of his father's debt. Well, that is some indication of the position to which these poor labourers, with their dependants numbering some 46 millions in this Indian empire, may fall, and I think that a class of men who are exposed to such economic conditions and who are liable to fall into a state of lifelong hopeless servitude will hardly object to a five years' indentureship and to a free life to come; and I think that they will not thank the Hon'ble Mr. Gokhale for the attempt which he is now making to cut away the ladder to becoming proprietors of land and self-respecting citizens of Empire.<sup>32</sup>

This time 22 members supported Gokhale's resolution and 33 opposed it. So the resolution was rejected. It needs stressing that except Syed Ali Imam every Indian member favoured it. This defeat on indentured resolution was frustrating for the nationalists. Gokhale promised to keep introducing such motion until one got passed. Now nationalists tried to consolidate themselves on the issue of treatment of Indians in Empire and pressed full-steam for the abolition of indenture. On the eve of the First World War, Indian nationalists organised themselves on this issue and started mass campaign against indenture. I have discussed the mass campaign in the later sections of this article.

It was in such a charged atmosphere of considerable propaganda and mobilisation on the indenture issue that Madan Mohan Malaviya moved a resolution on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1916 in Indian Legislative Council Assembly for the abolition of the system of Indian indentured labour. On this occasion he criticised the system and repeated the points raised by many nationalist in their earlier resolutions. To put his point eloquently he quoted the statement of a government official, Mr. J.A. Brown, C.S.I., Commissioner of United Provinces, to the Sanderson committee:

'My impression is that the recruiting staff is very bad; the recruiters are the worst kind of men they could possibly have. They are generally very low class men, and as far as I understand, they are paid by the results, by the number of emigrants that they get. The consequence is that they very

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<sup>32</sup> Fremontle, Proceedings of Legislative Department, Delhi, 1912. Ibid. p.374.

often try to entice married women away from their husbands and try to get any body they can.<sup>33</sup>

Malaviya also highlighted the commercial aspects of recruitment such as the giving of more commission for every woman recruited. Hence for more commission, recruiters tried to induce women through fraud and deception. Many people left India without having any clear idea of the duties they were to perform. He referred a private enquiry recently published by Mr. Andrews and Pearson on Fiji:

“In a very large number of cases the coolie's own home people knew nothing about his recruitment...It was noticeable among the women how were recruited at the pilgrim centres. The common narrative was, that the recruiting agent came up, offering to take the women to her relations, or to show her some sacred shrine, and then took her to the depot instead.”<sup>34</sup>

Another point of criticism of the system was the large number of prosecution of indentures and went on to contend that Indians were prosecuted not only for desertion or criminal conduct, but also for even using insulting words or gestures.<sup>35</sup>

Malaviya raised the issue of immorality and considered it as the most degrading feature of the indenture system. He felt that the paucity of women and the character of the women recruited have been the main source of immorality. About the character of the women recruited, Malaviya quotes the Sanderson Committee and the Committee 1913 report:

“The government of India wrote long ago to the secretary of state that they largely consisted of prostitute, or women of the lowest classes in whom habits of honesty and decency are non-existent.”

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p.4

<sup>35</sup> On same issue Dipesh Chakravarty looks into the mode of functioning of authority in Mills of Calcutta and shown how the managers, with lacking of language of worker their manners and habits which was cause of standing of workers against them, tried to enforced the ‘Ma-Baap’ relationship with workers. Dipesh Chakravarty, ‘On Deifying and Defying Authority: Managers and Workers in the Jute Mills of Bengal circa 1890-1940’, *Past and Present*, No. 100 (Aug., 1983), pp. 124-146.

'the women who come out consist, as to one-third, of married women who accompany their husbands, the remainder being mostly widows and women who have run away from their husbands or been put away by them. A small percentage are ordinary prostitutes.'<sup>36</sup>

The Government of India accepted Madan Mohan Malaviya's resolution pressing for abolition, on the condition that they will make sure that the emigration of Indian labour will continue in a different form. While the Government of India and colonial government were asking various authorities to suggest an alternative system, at the same time protest against the continuance of indentured emigration to colonies were on the rise all over India.<sup>37</sup>

### **Communities against indenture: Arya Samaj and Marwaris**

While debate on the position of Indians in the overseas colonies was going on in the Legislative Assembly, some some religious and trading community came forward to against the Indian emigration under the contract of indenture. From the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century the *Arya Samaj* and Marwari community of Calcutta got themselves involved in the anti-indenture movement.<sup>38</sup> The

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<sup>36</sup> Malaviya Resolution, op.cit., p.8. Equivalent of *bhekh* in Ranajit Guha, 'Chandra's Death', *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. V, Ranajit Guha (eds), OUP, 1987.

<sup>37</sup> Resolution passed by the All-India Moslem League, Lucknow, on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1916, the Bengal provincial congress committee held on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1916, at Allahabad on the 19<sup>th</sup> January 1917, Aligarh on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1917, Cawnpore on the 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1917, Allahabad on the 28<sup>th</sup> January 1917, Tuticorin on the 30<sup>th</sup> January 1917, Madura on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 1917, United Provinces Congress Committee held on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 1917, Belgaum on the 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1917, Punjab Provincial Muslim League Held on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1917, Trinchinpoly on the 4<sup>th</sup> February 1917, by the Ladies' branch of the Home Rule League, Kumbhakonam, on the 7<sup>th</sup> February 1917, at Cocanada on the 15<sup>th</sup> February 1917, Allahabad on the 16<sup>th</sup> February 1917 under the Auspices of the League for the Abolition of indentured Emigration.

<sup>38</sup> Marwari is a Vaisya caste originally belonged to Marwar of Rajasthan and spread all over India. In Calcutta after 1897 they emerged as the wealthiest and most successful business and industrial communities widely known by a homogenous category 'Marwari'. They ran the Mills of Calcutta and they were seeking cheap and plenty of labour for their industries. Emigration of labouring population of India under the indenture contract created problem to them in obtaining cheap and reliable labour force for their Mills. See Hardgrove, 2004; Marwaris have been a moving business and industrial community from 14<sup>th</sup> century.

*Arya Samaji* movement against the indenture system was based in U.P and Bihar, and *Marwari Sahayak Samiti* was working in Calcutta and its adjoining areas. They formed an association the “Indentured Cooly Protection Society or anti-Indentured emigration League” and had its office at 160, Harrison Road, (Sutta Patti) Calcutta.<sup>39</sup> There were many causes of the Marwaris’ oppositions to the labour emigration. One economic reason was that they were running the Mills of Calcutta and they were seeking cheap and plenty of labour for their industries. Emigration of labouring population of India under the indenture contract created problem to them in obtaining cheap and reliable labour force for their Mills. This cause was served when cases of kidnapping of Marwaris ladies by indenture recruiters came into light. Among the various cases, Lakshmi case became significant for the Marwari association to start opposition to the emigration. Lakshmi was a Marwari lady who was kidnapped by a recruiter in way to her husband house and was sent to Calcutta depot. In Calcutta she manage to send a message to a famous Marwari named Hiralal Motilal (though she was not of his relative but send a message to him that she is his relative). After a police complaint she got released.<sup>40</sup> After this incident, in Calcutta the wealthy Marwaris ascertained the relatives of indentured coolies and brought them to Calcutta in order to claim the release of indentured coolies. They sometimes raided the bogies of trains carrying indentured labourers to Calcutta.

While Marwaris were protesting against emigration in Calcutta, in United Provinces *Arya Samaj* were opposing the indenture system. On 14<sup>th</sup> August, A. Marsden, Government Emigration Agent, Benaras wrote to the Colonial Office about the gathering movement to secure the termination of indentured labour.<sup>41</sup> He warned that an association akin to the ‘anti-slavery society’ of Britain has been formed and its objective was to terminate the system of indentured labour. He informed that the Association ‘consisted of a number of natives influenced by caste prejudices’ and have

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<sup>39</sup> See, Letter No. 322, dated Darjeeling, 14<sup>th</sup> October 1915, from James Donald, secretary to the GoB Financial Department to the Secretary to GoI, C&I, Emigration.

<sup>40</sup> Statement of woman identified only as Lakshmi, included in memorial from Marwari Association, Calcutta to the government of India, 7 February 1916, government of India, Commerce and Industry Department, B proceedings 30-33, April 1916.

<sup>41</sup> IOR/P/9778, BL; Govt Emigration Agent, Benaras to Colonial Office, 23 July 1914, GoI C&I, Emigration, A Progs Nos. 43, December 1915, NAI.

‘political motives’. ‘They don’t want to hear favourable reports of indentures’ and are ‘opposed on principal (sic) Indians crossing the sea and so losing their caste’.<sup>42</sup> The members of the association were distributing pamphlets throughout the recruiting districts and were warning the people not to be conned by the recruiters. As proof, the Emigration Agent, Benaras attached an anti-recruitment pamphlet that was being circulated in the districts:

Save Yourself from Depot Wallas

Be Careful !!! Be Careful !!! Be Careful !!!

It is not service but pure deception.

Don’t get enmeshed in their meshes, you will repent.

They take you over seas !!!

To Jamaica, Fiji, Damra, Mauritius

British Guiana, Trinidad and Honduras.

They are not Colonies but jails.

Save, be careful from depot wallas,

They spoil your religion under the pretence of service.

Don’t hear sweet talks, they are your enemies.

Dear brothers,

You will find these “*arkatis*” at the station, at the bazaar and enquire if you are in need of service. They have not got services to offer. They will take you to Calcutta and *sell you in other people’s hands* on agreement.

They got money for this, with including talks; by offering sweets they induce you.

They say they will offer you service. They take you to *sahebs*.

Don’t entangle yourself with their cajoling.

Don’t hear what they say, don’t stand near them. They have sub-depots and agencies everywhere. Wherever you go be careful of these people, don’t forget. Circulate this news to all villages.

Satyadeva

Satya Granthamala, Johnstongunj, Allahabad.

Printed at Swadharma Pracharak Press, Delhi.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> English translation, Emigration Agent Benaras, to Colonial Office [hereafter CO] 23 July 1914 in *Ibid.* This undated pamphlet is attached in the letter of Marsden.

The members of the anti-indentured organisation of U.P. were also addressing the public in market places and delivering lectures denouncing emigration. They had established their branches in Allahabad and Delhi and chose places like Muttra [Mathura], Allahabad, Benaras, and adjoining areas in U.P., from where most of emigrants belonged, for public lectures. The recruiters were also attacked. Marsden saw such activities as a 'crusade against colonial recruiting'. These protests gradually caused a slight decline in intending emigrants.<sup>44</sup>

Anti indenture campaign also appeared in Bihar. A number of pamphlets were distributed, lectures organised against indentured emigration and people warned against recruiters in the districts of Patna, Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga.<sup>45</sup> Swami Satyadev was the main leader here, who published and distributed pamphlets and delivered lectures in Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga against the indenture system.<sup>46</sup> Purushottam Das was another leader active in Muzaffarpur against the coolie system. He printed twenty thousand pamphlets in Hindi against indentured emigration. These were distributed widely in the district. A translation reads as follows:

ESCAPE FROM DECEIVERS.

ESCAPE FROM THE DEPOT PEOPLE

BEWARE ! BEWARE ! BEWARE !

*It is not service. It is woe.*

Don't fall in to their snare. They will ruin you.

You will weep your life along.

Instead of rupees, rubbish will fall (on you).

*They are taking you across the sea!*

To Mauritius, to Demerara, to Fiji, to Jamaica, to Trinidad, to Honduras.

*They are not islands; they are hell.*

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, see letter of 7<sup>th</sup> June 1915, Ranchi, E. L. L. Hammod, Secretary GoB and Orissa, Municipal Department to Secretary GoI, C&I, Emigration.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* Notwithstanding their opposition to the indentured system, the Arya Samaj sent their leaders to various colonies to establish branches and teach what in their view was 'proper' Hinduism.

Do not go by mistake. By exciting your greed for money they will destroy your caste. There you will have to break stones. On board ship people only get one *seer*<sup>47</sup> of water in twenty-four hours. At stations, on pilgrimages, in *dharmshalas*, in the bazaar they will ask you if you want employment. They have no employment to give. They will take you to Calcutta where by contact.

*They will sell you into the hands of sahibs.*

These men are given money to deceive people. They delude them with sweet words and sweetmeat.

*Fall not into their snare.*

Do not listen to their words. These men are to be found everywhere. Proclaim this loudly in all villages.

The petitioner Purushottam Das, Vaishnav, Muzaffarpur [Let any one who wishes, ask for this notice free of charge.]

Every literate brother is prayed to read this to his illiterate brethren and sisters. It will be as meritorious as a *yajna*.

Narayan Press, Muzaffarpur, no. 68, 6-6-15, 20,000 copies printed.<sup>48</sup>

### **Girmitiyas' Writings and Anti-indenture Mobilisation**

While Indian nationalists and various societies were campaigning against the indenture system, in the meanwhile some indentured labourers such Totaram Sanadhya, Baba Ramchandra and Kunti returned from Fiji after finishing their contracts. These returnees became significant for the nationalists to mobilised for the abolition of the system as these returned emigrants wrote and lectured their experience of plantation regime of Fiji. Totaram Sanadhya with the help of Banarasidas Chaturvedi wrote his experience as an indentured labourer in Fiji in a form of book titled "*Fijidwip me Mere Ikkis Varsh*".<sup>49</sup> This book attracted attention to the wider public and became so popular soon. Many translation of this book came in various vernacular languages of India such as Urdu, Marathi, English etc. In his book Totaram

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<sup>47</sup> Old Indian weight, approximately a litre.

<sup>48</sup> See letter dated Ranchi, 13<sup>th</sup> September 1915, from E. L. L.Hammond, Secretary, GoB and Orissa, Municipal to the Secretary GoI, C&I, Emigration; IOR/P/9778, BL.

<sup>49</sup> Totaram Sanadhya, *Fijiwip me Mere Ikkis Varsh*,

Sanadhya criticised the whole system of indenture and urged leaders of Indian National Congress and general masses to come forward for the abolition of the indenture system.<sup>50</sup>

Totaram Sanadhya was another Fijian Girmitiya who returned from Fiji in April 1914 after spending twenty-one years there. Totaram was already in contact with anti indenture campaigners like Manilal, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Gandhi, C. F. Andrews and Burton and after his return, he stayed at Dharamtalla in Calcutta for a month and delivered 13 speeches and distributed some 15,000 pamphlets with the help of Marwaris, who were already campaigning against indenture and had formed an “*Indentured Cooly Protection Society or anti-Indentured emigration League*”.<sup>51</sup>

After campaigning against the indenture system in Calcutta, Totaram moved to Firozabad, U.P. in June 1914, where he came in contact with Banarasi Das Chaturvedi at the Bharati Bhawan Library. To expose the humiliation of the indenture system and to mobilise Indians against the Coolie System, Totaram with the help of Banarsidas published his own experiences in the form of an autobiography called “*Fiji Dwip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh*”. The book played a significant role in the nationalist mobilisation against the coolie System. A government reader wrote:

... he describes in stirring language the brutal atrocities practiced on Indians in Fiji and the numerous ways in which violence is done to their feelings.<sup>52</sup>

Totaram moved from village to village to let the public know the real truth of the indentured system. He delivered speeches at Calcutta, Lahore, Ambala, Mathura etc. against the Coolie system. He appeared as a representative of Fiji Indians at the 29<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> I have done a detailed study of Totaram Sanadhya’s publications and role in anti-indentured movement in my Phd. See Ashutosh Kumar, *Indentured Migration from Northern India, c.1830-1920: Historiography, Experience, Representation*, PhD thesis, Department of History, University of Delhi, 2012. See Also, Ashutosh Kumar, *Indian Nationalists and the End of the Indentured Emigration*, op.cit.

<sup>51</sup> Totaram Sanadhya, *Fiji Dwip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh*, printed by Kunwar Hanumant Singh Raghubanshi at the Rajput Anglo-Oriental Press, Agra; published by Bharti Bhawan, Firozabad, U.P., 1914.

<sup>52</sup> Note 1151, C.I.D., U.P., 20 April 1915, in U.P. Government to Madras Government, Madras, Public, Ordinary Series, G.O. N. 1331, 13 September 1915, NAI.

session of Indian National Congress at Madras and delivered a 30 minutes speech against the system. ‘*Bharat Mitra*’, a Calcutta based magazine commented:

*Kuliyon ke kasht ke vishay me hamare pathak bahut kuchh jante hai, parantu congress wale is vishay me kuchh bhi nahi jante. Yadi Fiji pravashi bhai Totaram ji ko apna pratinidhi banakar nahi bhejte to iski bhi asha na thi.*<sup>53</sup>

(Our readers know a lot about the sufferings of coolies but not Congress, which does not have any knowledge about it. There was no hope of this either, if the Fiji overseas Indians had not sent Totaramji as their representative.)

At the *Kumbh Mela* in Haridwar, Totaram campaigned against the coolie system and distributed 50,000 pamphlets against the *arkatis*. Influenced by Totaram’s autobiography, many nationalist writers wrote against the system. Lakshman Singh Chauhan wrote a play named “*Kuli – Pratha arthat Biswi sadi ki Gulami*” and published it in *Pratap*, a popular newspaper of U.P.<sup>54</sup> The play condemned the policies of British Government and tried to raised patriotic feelings among the people. However, the Government of India banned this play under the Press Act of 1910.<sup>55</sup> The literature on indentured system was also distributed amongst the Indian revolutionaries. Bal Gangadhar Tilak too published two articles on such pamphlets in *Kesari*. Such literature was also found on the person of conspirators of the Mainpuri case.<sup>56</sup> Rambriksh Benipuri, a Hindi writer in his biography on Jai Prakash Narayan notes that he was influenced by Totaram’s autobiography. Jai Prakash Narayan himself wrote in the visitors’ scrapbook of Bharti Bhawan Library of Firozabad:

*Mujhe aj Bharti Bhawan me akar badi khushi hui. Apne bachpan me yaha se prakashit pandit Totaram Sanadhya Ki Fiji Me Mere Ikkis Varsh maine padhi thi jiska gahara asar mujh par huwa tha. Aj us*

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<sup>53</sup> Cited in Totaram Sanadhyaya, *Fiji Dwip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh*, op.cit. p.16.

<sup>54</sup> Karen A. Roy in her PhD thesis noted wrongly that Totaram Sanadhyaya returned to India around January 1915, see p.214 and *Kuli-Pratha* was Totaram’s own work, see p.220.

<sup>55</sup> Proscription of *Kuli –Pratha* under 1910 Press Act, note by Seton, 27 March 1917, J. and P. 1109/17, IOR.

<sup>56</sup> Totaram Sanadhyaya, op.cit. p.19.

*sanstha ka darshan kar mai bada khush huwa, jisne wah sahitya desh ke samne rakha tha. Mai Bharti Bhawan ki utarottar unnati ki kamana karta hu.*<sup>57</sup>

(I am very happy to have visited the Bharati Bhawan today. I had read ‘My 21 Years in Fiji by Totaram in childhood, published from here. It had impacted me deeply. I am very happy to see today the institution that circulated this literature in our country.)

While Totaram Sanadhya was making aware about the shortcoming of the system through lecture and pamphlets delivered and distributed at many places of labour recruitment such as Mathura, Benaras, Allahabad (mostly pilgrim places where people come for their religious believes and had the main recruitment ground for indenture), Kunti an indentured woman came from Fiji. Kunti was already well known as a year ago she wrote a letter regarding outrages on her by sardar and overseer of the plantation in Fiji. The stories of Kunti provided the strong base to critic the colonial rule.<sup>58</sup> Soon after completion of five years indenture contract in May 1914, Kunti did not stay in Fiji as an industrial labour resident and returned to Calcutta in July 1914 on her own expenses with her husband and two daughters. According to Kunti, she had no money and when requested for free passage to government officials, they did not help as they came to know her name. In a very difficult situation she received money raised by Indians for her return passage. Emigration officials in India were anxious to hear the news of Kunti’s return to Calcutta. They were afraid of her joining with anti-indentured campaigners. When she arrived in Calcutta in June 1914, according to Kunti, she again did not receive any help from emigration officials to reach to her village in Gorakhpur. While she was crying, one Sitaram Halwai gave her money to eat and to take steamer to reach in Calcutta town. Due to her husband’s illness she did not manage to return to her village and came into contact with Dr. Rambihari Tandon, an anti-emigrationist. She stayed at 160 Harrison Road, which was the main office of

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<sup>57</sup> Jai Prakash Narayan note, 14.3.1963 in Ibid. p.19.

<sup>58</sup> For a detailed study of Kunti’s case see, Anti-Indentured Bhojpuri Folk Songs and Poems from Northern India, *Man in India: An International Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 93 (4): 509-519. Also appear as ‘Songs of Abolition: The Anti- Indenture Campaign in Early Twentieth Century India’, in Prof. em. Pratap Kumar Penumala, ed., *Socio- Cultural and the Religious World of The Indian Diaspora*, Brill Publication, Amsterdam, 2015, pp. 38-51.

“Indentured Cooly Protection Society or anti-Indentured emigration League”.<sup>59</sup> As soon Totaram heard the news of return of Kunti from Fiji, he went to meet her. With the help of Totaram, Kunti too delivered lectures against the indenture system and addressed public meetings on the ‘evils of the indentured system’.<sup>60</sup>

### **Gandhi and Indian Nationalists’ Mobilisation in Public Sphere**

When news reached India about the discrimination of Indians in Natal, the Indian National Congress passed a resolution against such Bill in 1894. At the Poona Session of Congress, President Parmeswaram Pillai pointed out that the Natal Government had not differentiated between different classes of Indians, referring to all as “coolly immigrants”.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, for the early nationalists, it was a case of racism against free Indians, which was the issue. Pillai said, ‘Many of our brethren being equally competent with white settlers in point of wealth and ability to exercise the right to vote, are disenfranchised and are further subjected to other disabilities, *for no other reason that some of the Indians have to work as coolies.*’<sup>62</sup> So, indentured were seen as cause and effect for the recent political event of South Africa. But at the same time the Act itself was seen as a racist attitude against [free] Indians.

Gandhi in the meantime had returned to India in 1896, and delivered a speech against such discrimination raising the issue at INC held in Madras.

“ Every Indian, without exception, is a coolie in the estimation of the general body of the Europeans. Storekeepers are ‘coolie storekeepers’. Indian clerks and schoolmasters are ‘coolie clerks’ and ‘coolie

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<sup>59</sup> CSOMP, 8865/15, NAF. Kunti recorded her statement in an affidavit and declared before Amylya Chandra Dutt, Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1915.

<sup>60</sup> See letter of 6th September 1915, from Government Emigration Agent, Calcutta to the Acting Colonial Secretary, CSOMP, 8865/15, NAF.

<sup>61</sup> Parmeswaram Pillai, Report of Eleven Congress, 1895, Poona, 1896, p. 106.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.107. Emphasis added.

schoolmasters'. Naturally, neither the traders nor the English-educated Indians are treated with any respect."<sup>63</sup>

"Every Indians without distinction is contemptuously called a 'coolie'."<sup>64</sup>

In 1901 at the Calcutta Congress while raising the issue of racism being faced by Indians in South Africa, Gandhi himself came up with an upper caste elitist argument:

Gentlemen, throughout South Africa, our grievances are arises [sic!] from the reproduction of that anti- Indian feeling in anti-Indian attitude of the European Colonialist... I may tell you that all the Indians, no matter who they may be, are classes as a coolie. If our worthy president [D.E.Wacha] were to go to South Africa, I am afraid; he too will class as a coolie.'<sup>65</sup>

So here while the Indian nationalists were considering the Act of the Natal Government against non-indentured Indian mercantile groups as racist at the same time they were discriminating between the indentured and non-indentured Indians where they saw the latter as superior to the former. Hence, even though at the Ahmedabad session of 1902 the issue of indentured Indians came up for discussion, and in 1904, indentured labourers other than those in South Africa came to figure in the proceedings of the Congress, yet as shown above, till the first decade of the twentieth century the indenture system itself was not at the centre of criticism. Rather it was the discrimination faced by the free Indians that was the focal point of criticism by Gandhi and the nationalists. Indentured labourers or 'coolies' came into the picture only subsequently in contextualising the inferior status of free Indians in relation to others. It was then that Gandhi and Indian nationalist criticised the institutionalised tendency by the whites of South Africa to look at all Indians under one category.

When Gandhi and INC saw no hope from the government in securing equal treatment for free Indians in South Africa, they found a better way of bargaining. They thought that if they could cut off the supply of indentured labour from India, the

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<sup>63</sup> Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, [hereafter CWMG] Vol. 2, p. 409, speech at Bombay on 26.09.1896.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid* p.428, speech at Madras on 26.10.1896.

<sup>65</sup> *CWMG*, Vol. 11, 1897-1902, Speech at Calcutta Congress, p. 429. See also Report of the Seventeenth All Indian National Congress [hereafter INC], Calcutta, 1901.

prosperity of Natal would decline. Ultimately when they failed in this limited effort in 1905 then INC passed a resolution asking the Government of India and Her Majesty Government to prohibit the recruitment of indentured labourer for Natal. It was a frustrating moment for Indian nationalists, when the union of South Africa in 1909 initially passed the Bill, with no rights for British Indians.

In the meanwhile Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and started campaigning against the indenture system. Gandhi took the anti-indenture campaign his own hand and delivered many lectures in the public. In the December issue of Gujarati Magazine *Samalochak* Gandhi wrote an article titled “Indenture or Slavery” and explained the indenture system as follows:

*Girmit* is a corrupt form of the English word agreement.<sup>66</sup> The term cannot be dispensed with. What it suggests, “agreement” does not. There is an alternative word in the language. The document under which thousands of labourers used to emigrate and still emigrate to Natal and other countries on contract for five years is known by the labourers and employers as *girmit*. A labourer so emigrating under *girmit* is a *girmitya*. About 12,000 such indentured labourers emigrate

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<sup>66</sup> The word *Girmit* and *Girmitya* was used by the indentured labourers of Fiji. In their petitions, indentured labourers identified themselves as a *girmityas*. See petition filed by Nazirat, C.SO.M.P. 850/1903, NAF; Among Indian nationalist Gandhi was first who used this term. Brij V. Lal in his Phd Thesis, *Leaves of Banyan Tree: Origin and Background of Fiji's North India Indentured Emigrants, 1879-1916*, Australian National University, 1980 contend that the word was used by their grandparents. On the ground of anecdotal evidence, Brij Lal thinks that it were the Fiji indentured who used such terms as a Bhojpurisation of English word “agreement”. It is interesting that Grierson, a distinguished linguist and compiler of North Indian Peasant Life, did not mention such word in his monumental enquiry report on indenture labour migration from Bihar. Pitcher and Grierson went through many other words like ‘*arkati*’ for recruiter, *mirich* for Mauritius, *Chinichat* for Trinidad etc. but did not mention any word like *girmit* or *girmitya* for agreement or the illiterate peasant’s language for the system. Even Sanderson, McNeill-Chimmanlal did not go through with such term in their substantial enquiry reports. Andrews and Pearson in their independent enquiry report mention the term “*girmit-wala*” for indentured Indians.

annually from India, mostly to the Fiji Island near Australia, Jamaica near South America, British Guiana and Trinidad.<sup>67</sup>

Gandhi further wrote:

Indenture is indeed a state of semi-slavery. Like the slave before him, the indentured labourer cannot buy his freedom. A slave was punished for not working; so also is an indentured labourer. If he is negligent, does not attend work for a day, if he answered back, - he will suffer imprisonment for any one of these lapses. A slave could be sold and handed over by one owner to another, so too indentured labourer can be transferred from one employer to another. The children of a slave inherited the taint of slavery; much in the same way, the children of an indentured labourer are subject to law specially passed for them. The only difference between the two states is that while slavery ended only with life, an indentured labourer can be free after a certain number of years. It should be noted, moreover, that the indenture came after the abolition of slavery and that indentured labourer were recruited to take the place of slaves.<sup>68</sup>

Here Gandhi sided with the views of nineteenth century humanitarians like John Russell, John Scoble etc. who had previously criticised the system and described it as a legacy of slavery. Gandhi also criticised the system for making moral and religious Indians immoral.

In the countries to which they emigrate, they receive no moral or religious education. Most of them are unmarried. On every ship carrying indentured labourers, there is provision for taking women to the extent of 40 percent. Some of these are women of ill fame... Going to lands so far away, they get into the habit of drinking. Women, who in

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<sup>67</sup> *Samalochak*, December, 1915 in *CWVG* vol.15, p.74.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p.74.

India would never touch wine, are sometimes found lying dead-drunk on the roads.<sup>69</sup>

It is now well-established that the peasants who left India belonged to every social strata of the society and a sizeable number of them were of high and medium social standing. As Lal has shown, of all women who emigrated to Fiji, 31.4% were of middle castes, 29.1% of low caste, 9% of Kshatriya, 4.1% of Brahman and 16.8% Muslims.<sup>70</sup> It is also important to note that men who were listed as single in the plantation were actually not single in many instances. Many of them were not interested in marriage because they had left their wives behind in India and wanted to return back after finishing their indenture contract. John D. Kelly has argued that Gandhi borrowed much of his theory of labour and critique of capitalism from Western anti capitalist writers like Ruskin, Tolstoy, and others, and his party was allied in the struggle against indenture with the European anti-indenture critics, including missionaries and anti-slavery campaigners.<sup>71</sup>

### **Independent Enquiry by Andrew and Pearson**

To look into the evils and sufferings of indentured labourers, it was in the context of such an anti-indenture build up that Gandhi's great friend Deshbandhu Charles Freer Andrews along with William Winstanley Pearson went to Fiji as joint honorary secretaries of the league for the abolition of indenture labour in 1915.<sup>72</sup> They published their independent enquiry report in February 1916.<sup>73</sup> Andrews reported many stories showing how recruiters deceived and brought men and women coolies to depots. For these purposes recruiters chose pilgrim places such as Mathura (especially

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* p. 75.

<sup>70</sup> Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiya, the origin of the Fiji Indians*, Lautoka, 2004, p.137.

<sup>71</sup> John D. Kelly, *A Politics Venture: Hinduism, Sexuality and Countercolonial Discourse in Fiji*, The University of Chicago Press, 2005, p.63.

<sup>72</sup> Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940) born in England, became a priest in 1896, leaving the avocation in 1899 due to poor health, Charles Freer Andrews reached India in 1904 as a teacher at the Saint Stephen's College, Delhi; William Winstanley Pearson (1881-1923), a Christian Missionary and an active supporter of Indians; for some time a teacher at Santiniketan.

<sup>73</sup> C. F. Andrews and W. W. Pearson, *Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji: An Independent Enquiry*, Allahabad, 1916.

for women), Allahabad, Benaras etc. Andrews and Pearson were surprised to find a very large proportion of women recruited at pilgrim centres.<sup>74</sup> They reported that the system had produced abnormal number of murders and kindred crimes among Indians. For them the cause of such crimes was the disproportion between the number of male and females. They reported that:

The majority of those found guilty of such crimes are otherwise quite and law abiding; and the murders, for which they are condemned to death, is not due to any murderous instinct in them, but really to sexual jealousy.<sup>75</sup>

The colonial Government also contended that the murders in the plantation was due to sexual jealousy and so to solve the problem the Government passed a rule of 40:100 of the proportion of women and men in the recruitment for sugar plantations. An interesting petition filed by the Fiji Indians also contended that the murders in the plantation were due to disproportion of sexes in the colonies.<sup>76</sup> Some newspapers also reported:

“News has just reached Suva of another of those ‘cutting up’ incidents, so common amongst Indians in Fiji, which occurred on the Wadoi Estate. In this case the motive is the usual one of jealous, a women being the victim and a man the aggressor. Although badly hacked the women is expected to recover. We understand that the owner of the estate were aware that trouble was brewing but were prevented by the regulations from removing the man to another plantation, which action would have prevented the crime. Another aspect of the case is that if the assailant is sentenced to more than six months, his employers suffer by loosing the time, as the indentures cannot be extended for a longer period than six months. The law as it stands has an undoubted tendency to encourage the employer to hush up any such cases which may occur amongst his labourers.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.,p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> See, Andrews and Pearson Report, p.19.

<sup>77</sup> *Western Pacific Herald*, cited in Ibid p.33.

Andrews and Pearson reported that the system had produced many evils amongst the Indians. As one Fiji Indian told Andrews, “sahib, our women have lost all shame: they change their husbands as they change their dress”.<sup>78</sup>

Explaining the causes of murders on plantation, Lal has argued convincingly that the murders of women in the colonies were not due solely to sexual jealousy but due to the breakdown of the social system under the plantation regime. To quote him, ‘sexual jealousy was a symptom rather than the cause of the problems that bedevilled indenture...it was the disturbance of the integrative institutions of society- family, marriage, caste, kinship and religion- that was the underlying cause of suicides and other ills afflicting the Indian indentured population in Fiji.’<sup>79</sup> In an interesting article, Prabhu Mohapatra argues that the murder of wives in the plantations was due to the discriminating nature of labour regime, which had effectively disarmed them from the heavy weapons such as cutlasses. According to him, ‘the division of labour on plantations had ensured that the women were employed primarily in the lowest paying tasks, in the weeding gangs, while the heavier tasks requiring the use of cutlass, hoes, and shovels were reserved for men.’ Hence, women were unable to defend themselves against the attacks of men.<sup>80</sup>

What has been overlooked by these scholars that there was patriarchal mind set of Indian men behind the murders on the plantations. Such kind of patriarchal frustration was due to the total freedom of women in the colonies free from any patriarchal restrictions. The plantation system had produced a free society devoid of any kind of patriarchal restriction. It had provided a level playing field in the context of gender and society. Hence, it provided a space for women to choose their own interest in every matter. Whenever women faced any problem with her legal husband or partner, they were quite free either to walk out of the marriage or to divorce him. The plantation system had also broken restriction on cross caste/ religion marriages.

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p.34.

<sup>79</sup> Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji*, *op.cit.*, p.218.

<sup>80</sup> P. P. Mohapatra, 'Restoring the Family': Wife Murders and the Making of a Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labour in the British Caribbean Colonies, 1860-1920, *Studies in History*, August 1995, 11: 227-260.

Most often, the choice of couples was the basis of marriages in plantations. The Indian nationalist saw such new developments as deeply disturbing. Andrews reported:

Divorces were equally common. Women left their husbands for the sake of jewellery and went to live with other men. They seemed to do just what they pleased, and to live just as they liked. Caste and religion were mixed together in common jumble. Hindu girls were sold in marriage to mahomdans and vice versa. Sweepers' children were sometimes married to Brahmans. If this admixture had been due to enlightened motive of humanity and in accordance with conscience, all might have been well. But it was just the reverse, - a matter of greed and lust. ... these immigration department marriages are called by the Indians '*marit*' and it was always necessary in Fiji to ask a man, or women, if they had a '*marit*' for nothing else was legal.<sup>81</sup>

Andrew's Report highlighted many cases of "honour killings" in which women were killed by men for saving honour of their family and religion, and to preserve '*dharma*', for choosing a life partner by herself. For Andrews and Pearson, the moral ruin was the most pitiful. They reported that the Hindu women in the coolie lines, having no semblance even of a separate home of her own, which she can cherish, and, divorced from all her old home ties, has abandoned religion itself. For them the system 'divorced' adorable Indian women from their religious duty of morning offerings at the bank of rivers and though there were beautiful and stately rivers in Fiji but no temples rose on their banks, there was no household shrine and Hindus had departed from their religious spirit.<sup>82</sup>

Andrews and Pearson, in their report, praised the *Arya Samaj*, which was working amongst the Fiji Indians for restoring their lost culture and religious faith, and for schools where the Arya Samajist teachers taught religion. It was relief for nationalist supporters that the Fiji Indians had not lost their inner appreciation of their old Hindu life. For them, the brightest side of Indian life in Fiji was the love of India itself, which were still kept warm within every heart. According to them ' there was practically no religious bitterness; Hindus, Mahomdens and Christians lived amicably together side by side, because the one tie of India itself bound them together. Such a

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

description does not match with the one given by Baba Ramchandra, a *girmitiya* in Fiji. Baba Ramchandra writes that after the coming of *Arya Samaj* in Fiji tensions arose amongst the Hindus and Muslims.<sup>83</sup> According to Andrews and Pearson, the entire Indian population in Fiji was divided into two classes, an inferior and a superior, called “indenture” and “free”, “*girit-wala*” and “*khalas*” to give them their local names. ‘*Girit-wala*’ reflected a sense of degradation; “*khalas*” gave the free Indians a sense of pride.<sup>84</sup>

On the whole, Andrews and Pearson tried to show that the indentured system broke the every Indian socio-cultural norm and led to the emergence of a different society, where caste and religion were no barriers in marriages. For them, it was degradation of Indian moral-cultural values. All such developments were seen as a danger to Hinduism and to the self-respect of India. To highlight the issue of the disproportion of the women, sexual jealousy among indentured and honour killings, Andrews and Pearson put the women’s sexuality in the centre where these women lost their morality. In doing so they totally ignored the issue that these women were also workers in their own right.

### **Popular literature and anti- indenture campaign**

To make the anti-indenture campaign intense and popular among masses many nationalist poems were written. They took the case of Kunti and Totaram Sanadhya and composed songs and poems. Nationalist’s writers, poets and leaders praised Kunti for her courage. A poem became popular on Kunti’s episode:

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<sup>83</sup> Baba Ramchandra Papers [hereafter BRP], Speeches and Writings [hereafter SW], F. No. 2A, Note Book No. 1, p. 34, NMML; Baba Ramchandra was a Fijian Indentured returned to India in 1915 and became a peasant leader of Awadh. See Kapil Kumar, Peasants' Perception of Gandhi and His Programme: Oudh, 1920-1922 *Social Scientist* Vol. 11, No. 2 (Feb., 1983), pp. 16-30; S. K. Mittal and Kapil Kumar, Baba Ram Chandra and Peasant Upsurge in Oudh: 1920-21 *Social Scientist* Vol. 6, No. 11 (Jun., 1978), pp. 35-56; Kapil Kumar, The use of Ramcharitmanas as a radical text: Baba Ram Chandra in Oudh, 1920-50, NMML, 1986; Gyanendra Pandey, Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism, 1920-22 , *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. I, Ranajit Guha (eds), Oxford University Press, 1982.

<sup>84</sup> Andrews and Pearson Report, p. 42.

<i>Satiyon ka dharm digane ko jab,</i>	To attack the virtue of pure women ( <i>satis</i> )
<i>Anyayiyon ne kamar kasi.</i>	The unjust people got ready,
<i>Jal agam me Kunti kud padi,</i>	Kunti plunged into the bottomless water.
<i>Par bahi majhdhar nahi.</i>	But did not flow in the midstream.
<i>Atyachar ki chakki me,</i>	In the mill of oppression,
<i>Pis kar dharm nahi chhoda.</i>	Did not abandon her duty.
<i>Hindupan apna kho baithen,</i>	The brave will not relinquish their
<i>Bharat ke vir ganwar nahin.</i>	righteous Hindu way of life; They are not
	fools.
<i>Is patan ka to yatna karo,</i>	This degradation must be addressed.
<i>Har kunti ka jivan safal rhe.</i>	Every Kunti's life must carry on.
<i>Bina dharm dharan kiye,</i>	Without adopting a righteous way of life,
<i>Such shanty ka sanchar nahi.</i> <sup>85</sup>	Truth cannot prevail.

The stories of Totaram Sanadhya and Kunti as indentured labourers were used to design a play to convince wider mass of north india to come forward for the movement for the abolition of the system. Hence, Lakshman, wrote a play titled '*Coolie Pratha*' which became so popular in north India.<sup>86</sup> The play *Cooli-Pratha* attacked the indenture system and compared it with slavery. The verse of the front page begins with a poem:

*Hai ghulam-vyapar yah coolie-pratha ke vesh me*

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<sup>85</sup> See Dhira Varma, *Fiji ke Hindi Lok Geet: Girmityayon ke Maukhik Dastavej*, *Gagananchal*, April-June 2000, p.212.

<sup>86</sup> Lakshman, *Coolie-Pratha Arthat Bisawi Shatabdi ki Ghulami*, publisher Shivnarayan Mishra, Pratap Karyalay, Kanpur, 1916. Totaram Sanadhya writes in his preface of forth edition of *Fijidwip me Mere Ikkis Varsh* that government banned his book and he also helped Lakshman Singh Chauhan in writing the play *Cooli-Pratha*, which was proscribed by government of India.

*Jo ab tak dekha na tha dekha Bharat desh me*

(This coolie-system is a form of slave trade

We now see in India what we never saw before)

In the dedication section, the playbook wish that it may not fall into the hands of those honourable members, Rajas and Rai Bahadurs who secure votes by payment and frustrate the hopes of the their countrymen. It writes:

*Jo ki kiraye ki 'voton' par chad council ko jate hain*

*Ban kar member government se honourable kahalate hain*

*Deshwasiyon ki asha ko kuchal chur karne wali*

*Sansay sanyukt mananiyata dhan bal se jinane pa li*

*Un sab raja raybahadur ityadi ke shri kar me*

*Kabhi na pahuche yah pushtak he ish! Mangta hu var main*

The play was divided into three acts, having twenty-four scenes. In the first scene there was a prayer sung by pilgrims to god Jagannath in the temple at Puri, praying the god to grant them the physical and mental powers and the glory and splendour that once belonged to them. In the play, Brij Lal who was a recruiter uses the various devices and deceptions to motivate villagers to emigrate. In the play 'kunti', the original character who was an indentured labourer in Fiji and Bhola her husband are two characters who came under the net of the recruiter and went to Fiji. Plays shown that how bot cheated and Kunti was separated from her husband and faced humiliations during medical examination. On the episode Kunti sings:

*Kaise dharungi dhairya nath ha! Tum bin mai abla nari,*

*Mere lochan tum bin andhe shunya mujhe basudha sari*

*Jiwan ki yatra bhari hai path bhavi me chhipa huwa*

*Vipada ki nadiyen bahti hain bipin bhayanak sansari*

*Isi liye he nath mujhe tum tajo nahi ha! Daya karo,*

*Mujhe bachana nath satawengen jab dusht atyachari.<sup>87</sup>*

On the plantation the overseer beat Bhola to death. Play also depicted that how Kunti faced lots of troubles on the plantation. After killing of Kunti's husband when white inspector comes to Kunti to get her love, Kunti blasted with the following lines:

Fod dungi anguliyon se mai teri aankhe jabhi

Khinch leungi tere is pet ki anten sabhi

Ragad dungi adiyon se nich tera hriday bhi

Bas dukhmay is jagat me shanti paungi tabhi.<sup>88</sup>

In one scene some youngsters read the story of Indians overseas in newspapers where one finds a poem depicting the condition of Indians overseas:

*Arya bhu, tab shantija ramniyata wah hai kaha?*

*Kyo mlan hai, tera badan yah dinta kaisi yaha?*

*Mam balakon ke pair me hai dasta bedi padi*

*Hath me unke jadi nihshastrata ki hathkadi*

*Pardesh ke sab dwar unke hetu bilkul band hain*

*Ja sakenge to kuli ban, bhagya unke mand hain.<sup>89</sup>*

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p.34.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p.59

(the peace and pleasant of India[Arya land] is not here?

why your body is dirty and how poor you are here?

The chain of slavery is in young children here

And hands are bound with chain of non-arms)

In the play, it has also shown that how government sponsored enquiries were giving false information about the conditions of Indian workers in various colonies. At the end play wind up with the conclusion that the condition of Indians in Fiji is deplorable and council's resolutions are not the solutions of the problem rather mass active mobilisation and protest are the only alternative to save our coolie brethren in the colonies.

Apart from the dramatic form of anti-indentured campaign many nationalist writers wrote poems and novels on the issue. Nationalist poet Maithalisharan Gupta captured the plight of indentured labourers and the loss to India of Indians in a long poem. He wrote in his poem titled "*Kisan*" on the miserable conditions of peasants that forces them into migration to Fiji, and how *Arkatis* cheated and used fraud means to recruit illiterate peasants and in plantation how they suffered a lot:

*Ek jan ne yo triveni-tir par mujhse kaha-* A person just asked me on the bank of the *Triveni*

Oh! I moved to pity to see you.

*Taras mujhko aa raha hai dekhkar tumko aha!*

You seem sad, what troubles do you have?

*Tum dukhon-se dikhte ho, kya tumhe kuchh kasht hai?*

It is hard to live on, as this country is ruined!

*Kathin hai nirvah bhi, yah desh aisa*

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p.18.

*nasht hai!*

*Kintu ab chinta nahin, tu par hui  
prabhu ki daya*

*Aaj lo bas, aaj se hi din fire, dukh  
mit gaya.*

*Vastra-bhojan aur pandrah ka  
mahina, dham bhi;*

*Kam bhi aisa ki jisme nam bhi aram  
bhi.*

*Sair sagar ki karoge drishya dekh  
naye naye,*

*Jante ho puri ko? Dwarika bhi ho  
gaye?*

*Yah bahu hai? Thik hai bas, bhagya  
ne awasar diya,*

*Yad mujhko bhi karoge, tha kisi ne  
hit kiya!*

*Mai chakit sa rah gaya, yah manuj  
hai ya devta;*

*Par laga pichhe mujhe us arkati ka*

But there is no need to be worried  
now, you have the blessings of  
God now.

Today, and just from today your  
troubles are over, your bad days  
are over.

Clothes-food and a monthly  
salary of fifteen rupees,  
pilgrimage too;

Work that gives you name and  
fame and also leisure.

You will be sailing the seas and  
wonderful sights you will see.

Do you know of *Puri*? Have you  
ever been to *Dwarika*?

Is she daughter-in-law/ wife?  
Very well then, this is an  
opportunity designed by destiny.

You will remember me; some one  
there was who was concerned  
about me!

I was surprised, is he human or  
divine;

But later I came to know about  
that *arkati* (recruiter)!

Beware! Countrymen, yes in your

*pata!*

country

Many devils roams in the guise of  
human!

*Sawdhan! Swadeshwasi, han!*

*Tumhare desh me*

*Ghumte hai dusht danav manvon ke  
bhash men!*<sup>90</sup>

In the next part sub-titled “*FIJI*” he writes:

*Adham arkati kahta tha-Fiji swarg  
hai bhu par,*

The evil *Arkati* had said--Fiji is  
heaven on the earth,

*Nabh ke niche rahkar bhi wah  
pahunch gaya hai upar!*

Even though under the sky, it  
soars above in the heaven!

*Mai kahta hu Fiji swarg hai to fir  
narak kahan hai?*

I say if Fiji is heaven, then where  
is hell?

*Narak kahi ho kintu narak se  
badhkar dasha yaha hai.*<sup>91</sup>

Wherever hell may be but the  
conditions [in Fiji] are worst than  
hell could never be.

Gupta also praised Andrews and Pearson for their restless work for the indentured labourers and abolition of the coolie system. He wrote:

*Do sahriday sahab shighra waha  
par aye,*

Two kind hearted persons came  
there soon.

*Dukh dekh hamara char netra bhar  
laye.*

Seeing our miseries, tears welled  
up in their eyes.

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<sup>90</sup> Maithilisharan Gupta, *Kisan*, Sahitya Sadan, Chirgaon, Jhansi, 1916, subtitle *Deshtyag*, pp.31-32.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*p.36.

*Andrews-pearson vidit nam hain unke,* Their names are Andrews-Pearson

*Manujochit mangal manskam hai unke.*<sup>92</sup>

They worked for the welfare of humanity.

The latter-poet laureate Gupta also praised Lord Hardinge, the Governor General of India, for abolishing the Indenture system:

*Samjhi Bharat sarkar ant me baten.*

Finally, the government of India took cognizance of the matter

*Nij kuli pratha ke sath yaha ki ghaten.*

The breach of trust inherent in the voluntary coolie system.

Lord Hardinge a man of stature, may he be blessed,

*The bade lat harding-bhala ho unka,*

Did not tolerate weevil in justice!

*Sah sake na lagna nayay dand me ghun ka!*

Where there was one woman among three men,

*Thi tin naron me jahan ek hi nari,*

That unethical kuli system finally, came to an end.

*Tuti akhir wahkuli-pratha vyabhichari.*<sup>93</sup>

Some other writes also made the subject the issue of their writings. Manna Dwivedi Gajpuri in his novel, Ramlal portrayed the issue:

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p.42.



Ek dwar ghere rama him kotwalwa se,	One door (gate) encircling Rama
Tin dwar sindhu dhahrawe re batohiya.	Himalaya sentinel like, Three door (gate)
Jahu jahu bhैया re batohi hind dekhi aau,	sea roars O traveller.
Jahawa kuhuki koeli bole re batohiya.	Want to go O traveller to see Hindustan,
Pawan sugandh mand agar gaganava se,	Where Cuckoo sings coos O traveller.
Kamini birah rag gawe re batohiya...	Scented air breeze slowly from the sky,
Ganga re jamunwa ke jhagmag paniya se,	Wife sings a song of separation O
Sarju jhamaki laharawe re batohiya...	traveller...
Agra Prayag Kashi Dilli Kalkatwa se,	Pure and transparent water of Ganga and
Mor pran base sarju tir re batohiya...	Jamuna,
Apar Pradesh desh subhag sudhar bes,	Sarju runs ripples O traveller...
Mor hind jag ke nichod re batohiya.	Agra, Prayag, Kashi, Delhi, Calcutta,
Sundar subhumi bhैया भारत के भूमि	My life (soul) lives Sarju's bank O
jehi,	traveller.
Jan 'Raghubir' sir nave re batohiya. <sup>96</sup>	All areas of country are fortunate with
	nice faces,
	My Hindustan is essence of world O
	traveller.
	Beautiful good land brother India its land
	where,
	People 'Raghubir' head down O traveller.

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<sup>96</sup> Raghubir Narayan Sahay, *Raghuvir patra-pushpa*, cited in Sri Durga Prasad Singh, *Bhojpuri Ke Kavi aur Kabya*, Bihar Rashtra Bhasha Parishad, Patna, 1958, second edition, 2001, pp. 216-7; see also Gramophone Recordings from the Linguistic Survey of India, South Asia Digital Library, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/lsi/6591AK>.

Influenced by the nationalist campaign many folk songs were also composed tallying with the contemporary rhythm of popular folk presentations such as *Bidesiya* of Pandit Beniram of mid nineteenth century and later presentation of very popular play *Bidesiya* of Bhikhari Thakur, depicting the fraudulence in recruitment, hardship on plantations of Sugar Colonies.<sup>97</sup> A song can be seen which was composed on the theme of *Bidesiya*:

<p>Firangiya ke rajuwa me chhuta mora desuwa ho,</p> <p>Gori sarkar chali chal re bidesiya...</p> <p>Bholi hame dekh arkati bharmaye ho,</p> <p>Kalkatta par jao panch sal re bidesiya.</p> <p>Dipuwa me laye pakarao kagaduwa ho,</p> <p>Anguthawa lagaye del har re bidesiya.</p> <p>Pal ke jahajuwa ma roy-dhoy baithi ho,</p> <p>Kiase hoi kalapani par re bidesiya...</p> <p>Kali kothariya ma bite nahi ratiya ho,</p> <p>Kisase batae ham pir re bidesiya.<sup>98</sup></p>	<p>In the regime of British, I was compelled to leave country, White government played a trick O migrant ...</p> <p>To see me innocent an arkati/recruiter mised me,</p> <p>Go beyond Calcutta for five years O migrant.</p> <p>To bring into depot make over the [contract] paper,</p> <p>Took fingerprints on it O migrant.</p> <p>In the sailing ship sit with lots of cry,</p> <p>How would I cross the black-water O migrant...</p> <p>In the dark room the night was not passing,</p>
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<sup>97</sup> Pandit Beniram , a contemporary of Bhartendu Harishchandra was a great composer of *kajari*, a kind of Bhojpuri song. Beniram composed a *Kajari Bidesiya* around 1860s. See Sri Durga Prasad Singh, *ibid.*, p.142. During second decade of twentieth century Bhikhari Thakur composed a play *Bidesiya* that became very popular in northern India. The theme of play was on migration and separation of family/ newly married wife. See *Bhikhari Thakur Rachanawali*, ed., Nagendra Prasad Singh, Bihar Rashtra Bhasha Parishad, Patna, 2005.

<sup>98</sup> Vishwamitra Upadhyay, *Lokgitan me Krantikari Chetna*, Prakashan Vibhag, Suchana aur Prasaran Mantralay, Bharat Sarkar, 1997, p. 42-3.

How do I express my pain O migrant?

### Voices of *girmitiyas* from colonies

While Indian writers were writing literatures on the deplorable conditions of Indian indentured labourers in the various colonies, poets and labourers in the colonies also composed many folksongs and poems. These songs contended the hard life on the plantations. In Fiji, Colonial Sugar Refinery was controlling the whole sugar production. When Indian indentured reached Fiji they were allotted rooms which was 6 fits wreathe and 8 fits long. There were kitchen and field cutters as well. A folksong depicts in taunting way as follow:

Sab such khan CSR ki kotharia	Everything is in the house of CSR
Chhah fut chaudi, aath fut lambi	Sis fit wreathe and 8 fit long
Usi me dhari hai kamane ki kudariya	There is a cutlass in side this
Usi me sil aur usi me chulha	There is a kitchen inside this
Usi me dhari hai jalane ki lakadiya	There is wood as well for fire
Usi me mahal, usi me dumahala	This also a palace and grand palace
Usi me bani hai sone ki atariya <sup>99</sup>	There is a bed inside to sleep

Another version of this folksong sung by the Indians of Nausori, Fiji is as follow:

Sab dukh khan CSR ki kotharia	Every sorrow is inside the CSR house
Yahi me khana yahi me sona	One has to eat and sleep in this

<sup>99</sup> Dhira Verma, Fiji ke Hindi Lokgeet: Girmitiyon ke Maukhik Dastavej, *Gagananchal*, April-June, 2000, p. 209.

Yahi me bahat panariya	There is a seepage inside
Pas khada sardarwa dekhe	The sardar watch standing near by
Sar par hardam hanata kudariya	Everyone has to do their work always with cutlass
Mud fatat hai, deh dukhat hai	Body is paining and mind is rounding
Tuti jawai sabki kamariya <sup>100</sup>	Our backbone is craking.

Indentured labourers had to live a very regulated life on the plantations. They had to wake up in early morning and had to prepare their food and then had to go to the fields. Male and female indentured found it very difficult. This has been expressed in the following song:

Sone walo ko to bewaqt utha ke chhoda

Chot chabuk se bina nind sula ke chhoda.<sup>101</sup>

(Made wake up to those who were sleeping, made also us sleep with sticks.)

Jo mai aisa janti Fiji aay dukh hoy

Nagar dindhora pitati Fiji na jaye koi.<sup>102</sup>

(If I knew that I will be in trouble in Fiji, I let the whole country know, no one should go to Fiji.)

Many a time labourers sang songs while performing in the field when there were no overseers. Totaram Sandhya mentioned some songs, which labourers usually sung:

Panon le le hansiya aur pura kat pachas ji

Gail me chhaele jhopda, pyare me puja uteri aas ji.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p.210

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Totaram Sanadhya mentions that on the plantations of Fiji Indian labourers used various religious and non religious books. Ramayan, Mahabharat, satyanarayan Katha etc were the religious text used by labourers at the same time many non religious romantic texts also existed on the plantations such Sanraga-Sadabrij, Tota-maina, Indra Jal etc. since there was paucity of women on the plantations, some labourers used romantic songs to seduce female labourers. These activities sometimes led to contestation between them. The following songs Totaram mentions which relates to such contestations:

Are lal Dev yah tu bak raha hai kya

Mere parishta me kam insan ka kya.<sup>104</sup>

On the basis of writings of Totaram - Kunti and Andrew – Pearson, Indian nationalists aroused a great movement against indentured which ‘enlisted wider public support than any other movement in modern Indian history, more even than the movement for independence’.<sup>105</sup> For them, it was colonialism which diminished the Indian superior moral and value system of ‘inner domain’ (Partha Chatterji) to send Indian women under the indentured system on the sugar plantations. Their claim of interference in their ‘inner domain’, which degraded the Indian womanhood in the colonies, became successful when government of India decided to abolish the system with the resolution moved by M.M.Malaviya in 1916.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of indentured Indians in the overseas colonies became so significant during the second decades of twentieth century. Gandhi, who has already had experience of Satyagraha campaign in South Africa, boosted the issue of treatment of Indians labourers when he returned to India in 1915, which enlisted wider public support than any nationalist movement before in India. The nationalists’ writers, to mobilized masses against the indenture system, composed various popular literature,

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<sup>103</sup> Totaram Sanadhya, Bhutlen Ki katha: Girit ke Anubhav eds. Brij V Lal, Ashutosh Kumar and Yogendra Yadav, Rajkamal Prakashan, Delhi, 2012. Also in Dhira Verma, op.cit. p.211.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> K. Gillion, p.182.

poems and dramas. Various vernacular writings, dramas and folksongs presented deplorable conditions of Indian in the sugar colonies, which became popular tools for the nationalists to protest against the British rule in India. The participation of various societies such as Arya Samaj and Marwaris proved to be a crushed against British rule. The wide base of anti-indentured movement in India, especially in north India compelled the Governor General Lord Hardinge to abolish the system altogether. The system abolished in March 1917.