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Dialogue

**Charles Freer Andrews:
12 February 1871 – 5 April 1940
The Abolition of Indenture: A Centennial Essay¹**

Satendra Nandan

In July 2002, I was a guest of Dr Alastair Niven, the principal of Cumberland Lodge, in the Great Windsor Park, London. Dr Niven, an eminent scholar of 'Commonwealth Literature' became a dear friend and launched one of my books, *Requiem for a Rainbow* (2001), at the Commonwealth literary meeting at Cumberland Lodge that July. I spent very fruitful few days at the Lodge and was invited to the Sunday service in the ancient royal chapel attended by the Queen and Prince Philip. For me it was a memorable occasion: two writers, Ben Okri from Nigeria and Satendra Nandan from Fiji, were officially 'presented' to Her Majesty.

It was at Cumberland Lodge, after my talk and book launch, a lady gave me a copy of a book when she discovered I was from Fiji. The book's title is Charles Freer Andrews: A Narrative by Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Majorie Sykes with a page-foreword by M K Gandhi, written in his long-hand. The volume was published in 1949, almost a decade after my birth. I'm now profoundly grateful to Sandra Wilson who gave me the book: it has been part of my personal library and only in 2016, after Christmas, I felt inspired to read the epic story of C F Andrews, because I was thinking of the Abolition of the Fiji Indenture in 1917. This year, 2017, is its centennial commemoration. On my way from Cumberland Lodge to a friend's place near Heathrow, I left my handbag with all the things I'd collected in the hired taxi, including the money from the sale of my book, which disappeared in the London traffic: a loss my grandparents must have experienced a century ago in Calcutta. Luck-

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and are not necessarily shared by the publisher.

ily, the book given to me was in my suitcase. And today I realize what a precious gift this first edition is.

I'd often walked barefooted past the Andrews Government primary school in Nadi on my way to Shri Vivekananda High School, the new secondary school established in Nadi town in 1949. No one had told me or my generation of students much about Rev C F Andrews who had visited Fiji twice and was responsible for the eventual abolition of the abomination termed 'girmit'. I'd briefly met Benarsidas Chaturvedi in the Rajya Sabha in New Delhi when I was an undergraduate student there. A scribbled note from him to the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University had changed the trajectory of my young life -- I was able to transfer from Delhi College to Hindu College, opposite St Stephen's College, on the University campus full of trees, flowers, monkeys and peacocks. I spent four years on it in enduring friendships and deepening love. Pundit Nehru was the Prime Minister and Dr S. Radhakrishnan, the President of the Indian Republic, was also the Chancellor of the university.

Years later I discovered that C F Andrews had taught at St Stephen's as a Lecturer and subsequently became its vice-principal. It has taken me almost sixty years to appreciate the two remarkable men, Andrews and Chaturvedi, and to read about the former written by the latter in a book that was so thoughtfully presented to me in London by a young librarian. She was from Canberra living and working at the Royal Cumberland Lodge.

At one time I was keen to enrol for my Masters at St Stephen's but went instead to the Central Institute of Education for my teacher training after the BA Hons I'd completed creditably from Hindu College. At CIE I met the light of my life - but that is another story.

Below I tell the story of Charles Freer Andrews with affection and many remembrances of a remarkable Englishman who did so much for India and Fiji and shaped many lives world-wide during the most tumultuous years of the history of Indians in several countries. His friendship with Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindra Nath Tagore is the stuff of legends. His love for India and Indians is an epic narrative that I feel should be known better. Charles Freer Andrews' gravestone is in Calcutta where he wished to be buried. Men like him redeem more than an empire and restore our faith in humanity.

My four grandparents and their jahajibhais and jahajins made their journeys in sailing ships to the Fiji islands from May 1879 when C F Andrews was barely 10 years old.

I. 'The abolition of the indentured labour system,' said a distinguished Civil Servant, who had known him since his Cambridge days, 'was Andrews' greatest single service to the Indian people' (in Charles Freer Andrews, p. 126)

Charles Freer Andrews was born on 12 February, 1871, to Mary Charlotte Andrews, wife of John Edward Andrews, 'a gentleman' on Newcastle-on-Tyne in England. His Christian father believed that the British Empire was the noblest thing on earth. Charlie, 'the very Dear One', Andrews had another kind of sensibility and the influence of his mother was deepest on his life and vivid imagination. In that he resembled young Mohandas Gandhi, whose mother had an equally profound and protean influence in shaping his life. That one day Gandhi and Andrews would become close friends is the incredible miracle of destiny through the travails and travels of the empire. Both would be responsible, joined in spirit and action, for the dismantling of the greatest imperial experiment in human history.

From his early childhood C F Andrews could share the thoughts of a poet:

*There is a ceaseless music of the earth,
Tender and deep, for those who have ears to hear,
In mountains lone, and woods, and murmuring trees,
And in the sky at midnight, when the stars
Chant, without sound, the song of all the spheres.*

This is a fragment of his story of how his life got entangled in India and her independence, and in Fiji's history connected with the abolition of the Indian indenture which had started in the 1830s and was finally abolished in 1917. This year is the centennial commemoration of that abolition.

Andrews was deeply attached to his devout and loving mother; like Gandhi he possessed an androgynous nature: 'It is because of this unchanging motherly influence', he himself wrote, 'that the mother in me has grown so strong. My life seems only able to blossom into flower when I can pour out my affection upon other as my mother did upon me.'

And when one of their trusted friends absconded with the mother's inheritance, his father prayed: 'for it is not an open enemy that hath done me this dishonor; for then I could have borne it; but it was even thou, my companion, my guide, and my own familiar friend ...'

Andrews, part of a large family, had the soul of a poet, and a knowl-

edge of human pain acquired during his youthful years seen especially in the struggles of his mother.

One day when he attended a church service early morning, he had an epiphanic experience: 'as the blessing in church next morning was pronounced, the flood of God's abounding love was poured upon me like a great ocean, wave after wave, while I knelt with bowed head to receive it'. For much of his life he crossed many seas and oceans in the service of other people but with a firm faith in his spiritual tradition symbolized in the life and love of Jesus Christ.

That spiritual side became the leitmotiv of his life. But it was connected to the sordid realities of daily life that he encountered on the streets of his city.

He didn't live too far from the slums of his English home and walked the squalid streets and was determined to end such squalor. His sympathy for the poor deepened and he thought of going to Central Africa but fate decreed otherwise: India became his home, his deepest commitment of love-in-action: ahimsa.

Being a brilliant student, he got a scholarship to Cambridge where he acquired the fundamental certainty that god is love, wherein 'the supernatural fertilizes, but does not annihilate, the natural'. In the life of Christ he saw the *Lux Mundi*--the light of the world. And his teachers taught him that nothing, nothing that is truly human can be left outside the Christian faith.

He placed India side by side with Greece--these, he said, were two great *thinking* nations who had made the history of the world; as Greece had been the leader of Europe, India would always be the leader of Asia, as far as the human spirit's enlightenment goes.

In June 1897 C F Andrews was ordained as a priest. And finally he decided to leave for India on 28 Feb 1904, with a Sanskrit dictionary in his pocket for the voyage and presumably a cricket ball in his bundle of clothing. Cricket was his game and he was a fine coach. He landed at Bombay on 20 March 1904.

He called it his Indian birthday--he became twice-born! He joined St Stephen's College in Delhi as a lecturer and later became the vice-principal of the famous college, then near Kashmiri Gate now in Old Delhi. New Delhi had yet to be conceived. The vice-principal of the college was one Susil Kumar Rudra and of whom Andrews wrote, 'I owe to Susil Rudra what I owe to no one else in the world, a friendship which has made India from the first not a strange land but a familiar country.'

And that friendship lasted a life-time: Andrews was responsible in making him the first Indian Principal of the college despite strong opposi-

tion from the English Church fathers.

The first thing young Andrews noticed in India was the hubris of race and the havoc it had wrought in human relationships and imperial politics. E M Forster's *A Passage to India* was still two decades away. Among the caste-ridden Indian society was added one more caste - he called it the 'white caste', the worst of all.

But here he also met people like Maulvi Shamsud Din, Maulvi Zhaka Ullah, men of great learning and wisdom and devotion. And later the great Arya Samajist Munshi Ram, Swami Rama Thirtha, among others.

Andrews was present at the Delhi Durbar on December 12th, 1911, when King George declared the transfer of the seat of Government of India from Calcutta to the ancient capital of Delhi.

But the currents were sweeping young Andrews away from Delhi to even wider seas of thought and action. Meeting these men changed him into the passionate prophet of racial equality. He began to understand that there was a renaissance in the Indian movement for liberty: something that England and the English Church had experienced in their struggles for centuries in their own islands.

Education, he realised early, was the key to all progress: without it the foundations of modern India will be built on shifting sands, he declared. And this included hygiene, and material advancement of the poor and neglected millions. He preached for mutual frankness between the races. But also realized that Indians were a subject race and freedom alone could give them the voice of mutual frankness born out of a feeling of equality and human dignity. He understood that this encounter between the English and the people of the subcontinent was like no other and its consequences would affect the world.

He also perceived in his readings and thinking that the Christian thought was the final fulfillment of Indian religious thought from ancient times. This was heresy to some but to Andrews it became an article of his deepest faith.

In June 1912, Andrews went to London to attend the Congress of the Universities of the Empire, a precursor perhaps of the contemporary meeting of the Commonwealth universities. It's here that he met Rabindranath Tagore whose book, *Gitanjali*, was being translated into English by the Irish poet W B Yeats.

It was a historic meeting and reading. Tagore's poems, offerings, opened the world a bit more for the Christian missionary: its lovely simplicity, universal humanity, and lofty faith touched his soul. Across thou-

sands of miles and across countless ages of traditions, the poems were speaking to the hearts of the English, to the soul of an Englishman.

But most importantly it opened new visions and vistas for Charles Andrews in friendship with Tagore with whom he spent many visits to Shantiniketan where Tagore had established his remarkable institution, Vishwa Bharati.

More than ever he was convinced that his service to India was through education and freedom. My thoughts, he wrote, turn more and more to India that shall be really independent. It's been said that C F Andrews was the first man in the century to think of an *Independent* India. Others thought of India in terms of a Dominion and self-rule under the banner of the imperial British Empire.

After his meeting with the poet, he began re-reading Hindu and Buddhist scriptures with a new appreciation. Tagore had condensed them into the simplest lines of his poems. The idea of an exclusive faith undefiled by other thoughts was now a revulsion to poetically inclined Andrews. His meeting with the great Arya Samajist personality, Mahatma Munshi Rama, further deepened his understanding of the Indian spirituality. He even visited Gurukul, near Hardwar. They became dear friends and Andrews wrote of Gurukul:

Here by the clear translucent waters was the ancient pathway of the pilgrims, the threshold of the great ascent, leading up and up to the eternal snows...the motherland, not worn and sorrowful, but ever fresh and young with springtime of immortal youth. Here in the Gurukula was the new India, the sacred stream of young Indian life nearest its pure unsullied source.'

In Albrecht Schweitzer's book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* he came across his favourite quote: 'Christ comes to us as One Unknown, without a name, just as of old by the lakeside he came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words, "follow thou me" and sets us to those tasks which he has to fulfil for our time. He commands. And those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings, which they shall pass through in his fellowship. And as an ineffable mystery they shall learn in their own experience who He is.'

These lines rekindled his devotion and his desire for service to the poor and downtrodden. The line from *Gitanjali* had embedded itself into his imagination: 'the poorest, the lowliest and the lost....' and then a new call came soon enough.

Andrews, with G K Gokhale, decided to go to South Africa. They were aware of young Gandhi's battles there on behalf of indentured Indians and small merchants. WW Pearson joined him. They arrived in Durban waters on January 1, 1914. Henry Polak, whom he had met in India was there at the quay to receive Andrews and when he enquired, 'Where's Mr Gandhi?' Polak turned to a slight, ascetic figure, dressed in humble coolie clothes. Andrews bent down and touched Gandhi's feet.

Later Andrews went to Gandhi's Phoenix farm, 15 miles from Durban. There for the first time he met an indentured labourer overseas and had his first glimpse of the compassionate tenderness of Gandhi's care of the beaten man. A poor runaway Tamil coolie, with marks of cruel beating on his emaciated body, had sought refuge in the ashram; Andrews' eyes filled with tears as he watched Gandhi nursing him.

Andrews joined with Gandhi in his fight for Indian self-respect against General Smuts. His mother, who was ill in England, died and he couldn't visit her. On Jan 27 he wrote in a letter to Tagore:

I had so often wondered what it was in my mother's love that made me love India with such intense love. I can now see what a unique part my dearest mother's love and devotion played in quickening my love for India herself. I was so constantly being reminded of all that I saw and read and learned about Indian motherhood by what I knew of my own mother.... I have been able to leap to the recognition of Indian devotion because it is so like my mother's. It has made India my home in a peculiar way and her death will make me find her in Indian homes. Her spirit will shine out at me through Indian eyes and Indian mothers' faces.

He remembered seeing Gandhi seated under an open sky nursing a sick child on his lap, a little Muslim boy, and next to him was a Christian Zulu girl from the mission across the hill. These images remained etched indelibly on his conscience. On April 17 he was back in India, never to leave India again. Or so he thought. Indeed he got so involved in active social-political life that he gave up his priesthood.

II. The Abolition of an Abomination

Yet it is all the while merely picking up a grain of sand here and there from the infinite shore of misery that he saw in Simla and South Africa, a new fire breathed in him. He took up the cause of Indentured la-

bour. In March 1912, G K Gokhale had made a powerful and eloquent plea in the Central Legislative Assembly of India that the degrading system of Indenture should be abolished.

For years Andrews had watched the position of Indians in other parts of the Empire. It was relevant to his own struggle against racial discrimination to be ignored, and it was one of those national causes in which Indians of every caste, community and creed could fight side by side on a clear moral issue.

India had learned of the degradation of the system when Gandhi had returned to India briefly in 1896. In 1909 Henry Polak had come from South Africa to place before the Government of India and the people the grievances and disabilities of South African Indians and to press for the termination of the system of indentured emigration to Natal. Andrews met Polak and got the details of the violation and mistreatment of these labourers.

Gokhale and Andrews were soon campaigning against the abolition of the system, defined in 1840 by Lord Russell as 'a new system of slavery', at Gandhi's initiations.

Andrews also read W G Burton's *Fiji of Today* and *My Twenty-one years in Fiji* by Totaram Sanadhaya who had gone to Fiji as a boy from Benaras. His story was ghost-written by the great Hindi journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi. These documents Andrews studied and also realized the wealthy and all-powerful Australian CSR company had sent a deputation to counteract Gokhale's anti-indenture campaign.

The great Gokhale died; Andrews took up his unfinished task. He became obsessed with the fate of these indentured labourers, mainly peasants lured to work for a pittance in distant lands of the Empire, their passages across three oceans: the Atlantic, the Indian and finally the Pacific. Like Gandhi he began to identify himself with them.

'One morning', he writes, 'about noonday while I was thinking of these things, lying on a chair on the verandah, I saw in front of me the face of a man in a vision. I was not sleeping; my eyes were quite open. It was that poor run-away coolie I had seen in Natal. As I was looking, the face seemed to change in front of me and appeared as the face of Jesus Christ. He seemed to look into my face for a long time and then the vision faded away.'

Out of this came the poem:

The Indentured Coolie

*There he crouched,
Back and arms scarred, like a haunted thing,
Terror-stricken.
All within me surged towards him,
While the tears rushed.
Then, a change.
Through his eyes I saw Thy glorious face -
Ah, the wonder!
Calm, unveiled in deathless beauty,
Lord of sorrow.*

(written in Simla, July, 1915)

He wrote to all the Provincial Governors and the Viceroy, especially about the women living the life of immorality - victims of all and sundry. Andrews realized that he had to take a journey to the South Sea islands to find out for himself. WW Pearson agreed to accompany him.

Before he left India, he visited every important depot between Allahabad and Calcutta. And enquired into the methods used to recruit the labourers. Deception had misled around 80 percent of them in 1915. Promises were made; few kept. And once on the islands, they were marooned. It was by and large a fraudulent system, Andrews realized. Many women were recruited through intimidation and kidnapping and the arkatis were given extra payment for every woman they could snare in their deceptive net. Andrews estimated around 80 percent were thus ensnared.

So via Melbourne and Sydney, Andrews arrived in Fiji waters: in early November under a leaden sky broken with bars of golden light, the mountains of Fiji loomed along the Northern horizon. And the loveliness of the islands was palpably visible, breakers on the reefs, white ribbon of palm-fringed beaches. One lad said to him: Everything god made is beautiful in Fiji only man is vile.

The view from the deck of a ship though was different from the one he confronted in the coolie lines and in the plantation lives. Andrews was in Fiji for five weeks and worked in different areas, meeting workers, sirdars, coolumbers, planters and officials of the colony. On 7th December he met the Planters Association. He gave warm thanks to some for the resettlement of freed labourers who opted to remain in Fiji after completing their 10-year indenture. But he made it clear the Indenture system must go: I am anxious that Indians should come to Fiji but the conditions must be consistent with India's self-respect. He set conditions:

- No labour contract could be contemplated which was not free civil

contract.

- No recruiting except in family units;
- Good houses with proper privacy and not the filthy lines with respect for the sanctities of family life.
- A good public steamer service should replace the disgraceful coolie ships, and
- Fiji must be kept in a healthy contact with India.

Andrews said you've treated their religion as if it were nothing at all, and insisted the sacred side of their marriage ceremonies must be recognized.

The evidence that Andrews presented was never challenged by the company's unsympathetic officials in Sydney; but when the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, saw it, he accepted Pandit M M Malviya's motion for the abolition of indenture. On March 20th 1916 he announced in the Imperial Legislative Assembly: I have obtained from His Majesty's government the promise of the abolition of the system in due course - that is, within such reasonable time as will allow of the alternative arrangements being introduced.

Andrews' wrote to N B Mitter, his interpreter in Fiji: We feel today that God has overwhelmed us with his goodness in allowing us to have our share in this great fact. It means taking away of one more abomination from God's earth.

III. End of Indenture

In 1916 Andrews stayed at Tagore's Shantineketan, helping Tagore in his translations. He also accompanied him to Japan and the USA. It's here he saw how beauty of a civilization can change into the idolatry of war. He got to see the beauteous temples and ruins of Buddhism and while visiting Borobudur in Java he thought of the Gautama Buddha:

There came to me a new vision of humanity in its suffering and sorrow, its sacrifice and love of service, intimately bound up with the supreme personality of the Buddha himself... preaching to the human race -- nay preaching also as St Francis did to the very birds and beasts and trees and flowers, the same message of universal love.

After all in one of the sacred texts when a sage asked the other what happens when a man dies, the reply was:

When a person dies, his voice enters fire, his breath enters

the wind, his eyes the sun, his mind the moon, his ears the quarters, his body the earth, his self space, his hair of the body the plants, the hair of his head the trees, and his blood and life giving fluids repose in the waters...

Andrews knew his classics and the Bible and India's multiple religious texts. And he was probably the most travelled activist traveler of the day.

Faced with the indenture experience in Fiji, he set three major and immediate tasks:

First to increase the wages of the labourers; he got them increased by 25 percent. Three pence a day from August 1917. He also ensured that the woman too got freed of her indenture once her husband's term expired.

Thirdly he asked for the cancellation of all remaining indentures by Jan 1, 1920.

The governor's committee disagreed until a new system of migrant labour was installed.

So when he returned to India Andrew laid the devastating official medical report, especially as it related to the treatment of women, of the Government of Fiji in front of the Secretary of State in India: That settles it, said Mr C. Montagu. Ask what you like, he told Andrew.

On Jan 1, 1920 the last indentured labourer was freed, as Andrews had stipulated. It was a great achievement, against powerful odds. The distinguished civil servant, Sir Geoffrey de Montmorency, who had known him since his Cambridge days, says this was Andrews greatest single service to the Indian people.

Andrews visited Fiji again in 1917 to give ideas and advice on building healthy Indian community life. Fiji had no colour prejudice unlike South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, colonies he had visited, but there was racial discrimination of many kinds. And at many levels.

He spent his time among the poorest and the ordinary. It is here in Fiji he was given the moving sobriquet of Deenbandhu, the brother of the poor, as the 'Mahatma', the Great Soul, was bestowed on Mohandas Gandhi for his work among the indentured in South Africa. Both were friends and their love remains one of the great and sublime stories of the British-Indian encounter - perhaps the noblest in the multiple narratives, tragic and inspiring, that C F Andrews had in India. It ennobled both, Andrews and India. And it benefited the people of Indian origins in many

remote and obscure colonies of the British Empire.

C F Andrews, believing in the British sense of justice and fair-play, and his faith in his Christ and Christian upbringing, wanted for the indentured and their descendants equality of citizenship and rights for generations had fought in Britain and elsewhere, and justice and human dignity to which all men and women were entitled in the embracing love of Christ, the echoes of which he found in the Indian scriptures and individual lives of a galaxy of Indian friends and followers such as Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, among numerous others.

Lord Salisbury had declared in 1876, as the approval of Indian Indenture to Fiji was being considered:

Above all things we must confidently expect as an indispensable condition of the proposed arrangements that the colonial laws and their administration will be such that Indian settlers who have completed their term of service will be in all respects free men with privileges no whit inferior to those any class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the colonies.

C F Andrews and Tagore died before India's independence, as the Second World War created its own havoc and after it the greatest empire unravelled; the world changed more radically than ever before; India was tragically partitioned in 1947; Gandhi was assassinated on 30 January 1948.

In Fiji the struggle for that equality has taken us almost another century to achieve. Only in the current (2013) constitution we have that. And it's a momentous and historic achievement, finally made possible under the courageous and visionary leadership of a man of the seas: a commodore.

C F Andrews' enduring contribution is part of that story which we ought to know ourselves and teach our children's children for a Fiji that Andrews saw as a place of beauty and possibilities despite chapters of cruel history.

We may not be able to change history but we can certainly learn the lessons and avoid the disastrous pitfalls so common among so many so-called post colonial nations and their myopic, murderous leaders.

As we commemorate the Centennial of the abolition of Indenture, it's important to remember how close the indentured labourers' fate and journeys were to both Andrews and Gandhi - and how both were significantly shaped by the Fijian experience: an extraordinary achievement generated by a small colony in the South Seas.

Andrews like Gandhi was a writer and had written over a score of books; the last on *The Life of Christ* remained incomplete, except that he himself had lived the life of his Christ in relation to other men, women and children. He gave his best years to India and the Indians, including the indentured. He became their Deenbandhu--there's a school which bears that name in Suva. Only the Mahatma was, I feel, more revered in the hearts and history of the indentured.

IV. Girit: Its Legacies and Lessons

For Fiji and Fijians the Girit experience has many lasting legacies and lessons: the indentured labourers came in the sailing ships; they crossed the kala pani and in those dark waters they lost many of the superstitions and oppressive structures, suppressive strictures of a darker age like the caste system and zamindari where the powerful plundered the poor and all were plundered by foreign rulers with the help of the privileged natives; and they arrived in unknown islands, unknowing and unknown, thousands of miles away from their ancient habitats and peasantry untouched by the reform of sorts of the 19th century. Nobody I recall talked of the great 1857 rebellion against the insidious annexing power of the East India Company.

They knew nothing about the life or the history of the South Sea islanders among whom they were transported and transplanted. They were separated by culture and ways of life and imperial manipulations and calculations, sometimes well-intentioned but always in the interest of the ruling, colonising class. People mattered less than profits. And the prophets preached acceptance in the name of kismet and karma.

The giritiyas had sailed in the same ships from different parts of the subcontinent in the garbs of several castes and communal colourings, but the emerging concepts of jahajibhais and jahajins was genuine. They were travellers together. Migration led to a sense of freedom and loosening of rust-covered shackles of serfdom and a new sense of cultivating not only sugar-cane but self-respect and respect for one another as people, despite their other shortcomings in difficult and desperate circumstances. So far from their homeland, in the loneliness of islands, their life acquired value, even if the price was high. They may have come as victims of circumstances and conditions of a subjugated, feudal culture, but slowly and painstakingly they developed a sense of their own individual fate, life and liberty. The vital importance of dependence and relationships of passengers in the same boat. Their passages were through wild seas and cy-

clones but they saw their future in flashes of lightning and Diwali lights.

I saw it in my own family how the old visitors were treated by my paternal grandfather, aaja, and my maternal grandmother, nani, whenever an old shipmate arrived, either in Magania or Lega Lega, looking like the Ancient Mariner. They were treated with great reverence and stayed as long as they wanted in the bure. Suddenly one fine morning they were gone as they had come, unannounced, uninvited. Many were destitute; many didn't have a stable home and they were wanderers: the Wandering Indians lost in the dust of history and the ashes of death.

I can't think of a more independent-minded person than my father who educated his four sons from a village where most lived as peasant farmers. And how our village became one of the most progressive: luck and the times had something to do with that but also courage and vision and immense hard work and a community of feelings and techniques of survival together. And somehow they understood the value of education, though they never had much themselves.

It was a remarkable community relationship of people who, as strangers, were travellers in the same boat across the seven seas, with hardly any knowledge of geography or history. Deep in them was their ancestral knowledge of life and the wisdom of oceans of stories. And that helped them survive with some sense of wholeness in the alien, hostile landscapes. They might have emerged out of a well but it was their well and they knew it well. The vast Pacific was a different world. And education, they realized, was the key to their sense of self-independence as their ancestral land Mother India struggled for her independence. The waves from the Indian Ocean touched the island shores and their consciousness.

That they and India, after terrible sacrifices, achieved freedom that was scarred and marred is of course a sad and saddening narrative. But the struggle continues in many forms, features, faces and futures in lands no longer foreign but a homeland.

The journey of course changed them in a myriad ways--once you have left your habitus, the world changes and you have to learn to swim or sink. Exile is never a permanent, unalterable condition. It teaches one to find ways and means of living and loving. And surviving. We should know it because 108 years later their progeny were once again in the same boat, so to speak; though they were flying in Boeing 747. And this time it was the misguided colonel, who had fed on their labour and sacrifice, had misbehaved. And caused so much suffering.

Once again their children's children found ways of surviving and building their worlds in new and more urbane worlds: in Australasia, and

North America, former British colonies. But the gift of this resilience had come from their many illiterate ancestors. I've often wondered: where did this strength of character come towards the resistance of the cowardly tactics of those in power? Doubtless from the gimit experience: Gandhi had understood it as no other man or woman and used it against the mightiest empire.

The Girmityas became enmeshed in a system that was dehumanizing and degrading; but the fact that they had come from a living community, gave them the will and wisdom to create another in an alien land. Today no matter what different histories, what differing religious values, what distinct destinations we may have, we've one thing in common: a common country and destiny that gives us all a common identity on which a decent present can be created and a vibrant future forged. Because of our globalised world, migration, diaspora, education, professionalism, human services, interdependence, the world for us has expanded unbelievably: the Fijians have become world travellers as never before: indigenous and migrants and their connections is a beneficial aspect of our Fijian life for the region and beyond. And these sea-changes have materialised within three decades.

From their growing up in Fiji: the language, the multicultural world, the ability to get along with people who look different and have differences, it's their country Fiji that gave them as a gift and it proved invaluable - as invaluable as India's gift of the acceptance of life and its many vicissitudes in multitudinous colours.

Added to this was the understanding of suffering as an indispensable condition of our being and becoming. India for them was not a rich country but they knew it as their *mulk* - their inalienable homeland. And home was home, poor or rich. Many of their stories and legends heightened their awareness of these facts of life. Like death, suffering was always present like shadows under the green boughs of the tree of life. But the tree grew in their soil out of which their soul was shaped in infinite ways.

Out of indenture grew a spirit of adventure. Suddenly the frogs from the well were swimming like fish in the ocean. They were not fully aware of the sharks and crocodiles but they knew they had to survive by being together. And they did cling into a culture of caring and compassion: that is how temples, mosques, gurudwaras, came in dilapidated, garish buildings but out of these places of worship and simple prayers, small schools sprouted and a kind of elementary education began.

To think our girmityas had arrived in Fiji in 1879 and the first secondary school of some substance for the children of farmers and workers

really began in 1949, that is, 70 years later when you contrast it with universal education in England in 1870, meant that generations had gone without education. That single secondary school changed radically the political and educational landscapes of Fiji, producing eminent politicians, including a prime minister, and one or two poets of remarkable versatility! Once again this life-changing secondary school was built by a mission, and farmers, workers, teachers and small businessmen of Nadi, on the banks of a holy river.

Andrews was right in saying Education was one sure way of liberating the indentured not only from the shackles of gimit but freeing the mind of men and women and instilling in them self-respect. After the 1950s, secondary schools mushroomed all over Fiji; this great story is yet to be told. Today we've three universities for a million people. This is, I feel, is an extraordinary achievement of the past almost fifty years. Few countries can boast of this in such a brief period. Our people invested in their children's education - I can see it in my own family, immediate and extended. It's the finest story of many more from all over Fiji.

This is another lesson of the Gimit Experience: we must keep creating even if some keep plotting their coups!

There was great unity in diversity of the girmityas. The partition of India of course affected Indian everywhere most radically within India. Fiji was a distant archipelago but even here the waves battered our shores of prejudice and misunderstandings. And there were people who took full advantage of this. Luckily we survived without abandoning our human decency that was part of the gimit experience. We had learnt it by living with the native people whose general generosity became integral to our inheritance.

You'll see that reflected in many incidents of history, including during the wreck of Syria in 1884 and Totaram's 'Bhootlen ki Katha'. The sensitive indentured labourer was saved from hanging himself by the knock on the door by a group of natives searching for food: it's marvelously poignant story - those who were searching for food, came back later with an abundance of food that Totaram had never had or seen in his life. They had a feast together.

This, too, is part of our heritage and we must not let a minor colonel's actions destroy that.

After all, it is a commodore who has given the descendants of the girmityas their greatest gift: a common name and equality of citizenship. Whatever shortcomings Fiji may be experiencing - and democracy has many discontents, many discontented people everywhere - think of the

USA and India, and you get some idea - the current constitutional government offers us possibilities unimagined a decade ago.

One ~~also~~ has to move beyond the scars and legacies of the indenture system. And this sense of internal liberation will come only if we remember history wisely and interpret our future in the light of that dark past so that the present and the future are bright.

We live in a region that's by and large the most salubrious and with immense potential for progress and peace and prosperity. This, too, is a gift of the girmityas: if they had not embarked on these journeys, we'd not be where we are today - and they say the world is our oyster and we can be the pearl in it.

Ultimately the fate of a people is determined by the people themselves. It's true of communities and individuals.

V. In the Shadows of a Tree

*Winter breaks your mind,
Summer harrows your heart,
Memories float in the wind
Till death may make us part.*

*Some evenings I sit on a bench
In a city's neat and tidy park
Trimmed like my moustache:
A dry wind whistles in the dark.
The pale moon floats - a withered leaf,
Memories, too, have become brief.*

*In front of me is a gnarled tree
Swaying with scars of its own;
It's a ghostly gum: where birds fly,
Its branches almost touch the sky
Or so it always to me seems
And reach for my lost dreams.
Its bark is peeling, its boughs,
Are like arteries and veins
In a body: now mainly of bones.
Below are lines and lines of ants
Burdened with their wounded and the dead.*

*On distant hills sheep, cattle graze
My mind, a pouch, is a kangaroo maze;
It falters: a friend has dementia
His distressed wife writes to me:
He cannot recognize his own home:
Lucky if he died in his bed.*

*The tree like every tree tells many stories:
You can cut it down:
Make firewood; use it as timber
To build your big house.
But memory, that little mouse,
Keeps nibbling at everything;
As silverfish ruin your new clothes
And cockroaches ruin the kitchen food
Fireflies glow in the corners of your room:
Is there nothing wholesome and good?*

*The tree is really my grandfather:
I often think of him
Among the old, he looked the oldest:
Was he ever as young as my son?
Born an unnumbered waves away
Where his ancestors lived and died
In mud-huts, with no ifs and buts,
Uncounted but not unaccommodated.*

*Generations must have passed:
Unmourned, unremembered
But a kind of life they had
And it wasn't all that bad;
When things began to die
Hope alone remained
In the corners of their hearts.*

*Then they walked:
Cozened, conned, canned into ships
What did their inarticulate lips say:
One simple, single word distorted:
'Girmit' I have signed*

*With my Left Thumb Mark
Before on this journey I did embark
With this bond of trust
To work in rain and shine
The life of heat and dust was mine.*

*Who did they kiss and curse?
To which gods did they pray?
Now you who write the verse
What can you honestly say?*

*But my grandfather was alone:
I never saw a woman in his life
She died young? His wife
When he was away from home?
All I knew was when he was old
The same story was always told:
We lived by a well of croaking frogs,
With a cat, a mare, two black dogs.
How he brought the crabs in a keti
They wouldn't let one escape its fate.
We sat in the dimly lit bure
Pounded the shells and ate
Fed ourselves till our stomachs ached
And slept like logs lined in a pyre
Waiting for the mantras and fire.*

*Storms always brew on distant shores
And slowly travelled to our islands
A visitor sent by a god because
He still kept herrings in tomato sauce.
Then nothing else really mattered:
What god destroyed could easily be mended
It's man's karma that needed to be amended.*

*So they built again little homes shattered
In the sun's shadow and the kindness of rain.*

*He never returned to his little village
Where ancient customs and pillage*

*Had driven him away:
I wonder if his mother waited by the river
Or the little well near the mango grove
Where her son was lost, a song of a dove,
And the evening became so terribly long.
How long can life be
From here to eternity?
In a moment or two
When breath and death become one.*

*Miles away from the place of birth;
And on this unaccustomed earth
You now move like the apparitions
In new civilizations
How deep was the ocean
When they crossed the seven seas
Thrown into storm-tossed waves
They haven't left behind any graves.*

*I sit in the park on a wooden bench
Where my grandson plays
And many a giant he slays,
While I think of an old man
In an elephant land.
And when he calls me 'Grandpa'
In him I see my grandfather's face
Full of a stranger's transfigured grace.*

*Then the tree reaches out to me
Like a ship lost in some cruel sea,
Thro' the mists of place and time
In the tree's shadows of life sublime
Had finally reached its safest haven
With many men: and a few women.
Then my ageing heart quietly grieves
While my grandson collects fallen leaves.*

Author

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