



Connecting with the Roots: Girmitiya Memoirs

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

The scholarly discussions on Indian diaspora focus on girmitiyas and the connection of girmitiya descendants with India in present time. Recently The Girmitiya Conference 2021 was conducted virtually on the theme 'Changing Identities, Shifting Trends, and Roles.' where a number of descendants of girmitiyas expressed their views on their connection with India. Major topics discussed were the tribulation their forefathers suffered during girmit, their contribution in their host-countries and their contribution in keeping Indian culture alive in their host-lands. Some also discussed that girmitiyas face marginality in their host countries and expect support from Indian government. Few also argued that Indian government gives priority to NRIs and place the PIOs on second position. At this juncture, it is important to note that besides keeping the Indian culture alive in foreign lands, these girmitiyas have played a vital role in enhancing the stature of India abroad and that they are a part of India's soft power. These girmitiyas look towards India and revere India as their home, once lost and where once their forefathers wished to return but could not. India should identify this emotional attachment of girmitiyas and reciprocate the same love and concern for them. During the aforesaid conference, few of the girmitiya descendants spoke about their expectations from India, and today Indian government has been trying to appease the girmitiya sentiments by a number of programmes and schemes such as the Know India Programme, The Scholarship Programme for Diaspora Children, the Bharat Ko Janniye Quiz and the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas. The Indian Government works to advocate for the growth and benefits of Diaspora under 4 Cs – care, connect, celebrate and contribute. But these efforts by the Indian government seems lacking something. Somewhere the Indian government has failed to properly understand the girmitiya sentiments. This paper tries to explain and interpret these sentiments through some excerpts from the memoirs by girmitiyas and from the aforesaid conference speeches and then to presume the possible points that are missed in understanding girmitiya sentiments.

Keywords: Girmitiya, diaspora, migraton, memoiry, identity, roots.

Introduction:

In the scholarly discussions on Indian diaspora, the girmitiyas and the connection of girmitiya descendants with India has been a widely discussed topic. Recently the Girmitiya Conference 2021 was conducted on 16-17 September, 2021, virtually with the support of the Overseas Indian Affairs (OIA-II) Division of the Ministry of External Affairs. The theme of the conference was 'Changing identities, shifting trends, and roles'. At this event, 38 speakers and over 70 participants debated and discussed the issues, contributions, successes and tribulations of girmitiyas across the world focusing on their history, identity formation, cultural preservation, and their evolving relationship with India. This was perhaps the first conference that brought together Indian descendants from 18 countries and provided a voice for them to express their views. The outcome of the conference, can be summarized in one sentence that the girmitiyas love India and consider India their *Matrubhumi*, the land of their forefathers, their roots, and they expect the same love and concern from India.

These girmitiyas were labour migrants who migrated nearly a century ago on contract or agreement to work on plantations of the colonial government in different countries. These poor people were unable to pronounce the word 'agreement' and therefore the corrupt form 'girmit' was used and the people who were

on agreement or 'giriti' were called giritiyas. After the abolition of slavery in 1833, the colonial government faced shortage of cheap labour in their plantations. To meet their requirement, they devised a new system called Indenture Labour System. Under this system a number of poor and illiterate people were sent as bonded labourers to countries like Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Suriname, South Africa, Ceylon, Trinidad and Tobago etc. Between 1834 and 1917 nearly two million people migrated under this system. These Indentured workers (known derogatively as 'coolies') were recruited initially for 5 years to work on sugar, cotton and tea plantations. They were meant to receive wages, a small amount of land and in some cases, promise of a return passage once their contract was over. In reality, this seldom happened, and the conditions were harsh and their wages low. They were cruelly exploited for profit. Huge Tinker called the Indentured Labour System as 'a new system of

Slavery'. (Tinker 1976). Out of this hostile environment, these people have rose to higher position today with the help of their perseverance and resilience. These giritiyas have created a multiple homelands in terms of Indian culture and religion. They are the cultural ambassadors of India in foreign lands. Besides, they have been instrumental in the socio-economic progress of their host-countries. Despite a number of hardships, these people have become successful and many of them have achieved higher political and professional positions. Today there are number of giritiya descendants residing in the giritiya countries, who are trying to find their roots as they are emotionally attached to India. Indian government has taken number of initiatives to help these people. Every year Pravasi Bharatiya Divas is celebrated where these giritiya descendants can be provided a platform to discuss their issues.

The story of Giritiya is filled with pain - physical exploitation, abuse, cruelty, poverty and mental trauma. Brij V Lal writes,

This was a community, struggling to escape the shadow of servitude, cut off from its cultural roots and cooped up in a hostile environment, making do with what it could, starting all over again, on its own, without a helping hand. And yet, despite all the asperities and alienations of a hostile world which impinged on their lives, they managed in time to build a cohesive and coherent community. Within a generation, people who had begun with nothing, had achieved so much. The triumph of the human spirit in the face of the greatest odds is the legacy the giritiyas have left for us. (Lal 2005:viii)

What was there that sustained the giritiyas amid this dire circumstances was their belief in religion and God. The deep-rooted Indian religion and cultural heritage supported them during their hardships. Author Rajendra Prasad who is also a giritiya descendant writes in his book *Tears in Paradise*,

"These conditions had also created in Indian people the traits of resilience, endurance and an ability to co-exist with others. To allay their suffering, they had not relied totally on the sword, but had sought solace and comfort in God. In their prayers and meditations, Indians found their anchor and the Indian race benefited from the philosophy of its saints, seers and sages over the ages. Many of these holy people had renounced the world and spent their lives as ascetics in meditation. They have left, for India and its people, a rich legacy and culture and a resilient and vibrant tradition." (Prasad 45)

Regarding Indian culture Rajendra Prasad describes its wonderful traits. He was of the view that Indian Culture has, in its fabric, the power of endurance. He believed that Indian culture has unique values. "It did not seek to subdue other cultures, but was open to the values of others and yet maintained its own vibrancy." (Prasad 87). He further describes how Indian culture proved to be the powerful force behind the spirit of endurance among the giritiyas. He writes,

Indian resilience in adversity was one of their finest traits. Their culture and religion inspired them with that endurance and resilience, sheltered them spiritually and philosophically. Fiji provided a unique environment for the Indian culture to germinate. Yet there were initial adjustments to make between the cultures of two distinct communities, with different languages, customs and traditions — one from the North and the other from the South of India. In time, and with both internal and external influences, the two communities gradually came together in the new environment. (Prasad 87)

The giritiyas taught the same spirit of endurance and tolerance to the next generation. Even after their migration, religion was having a stronghold among these Giritiyas and so they could not leave certain religious practices. The religious gatherings e.g. Ram Lila, *Ram Katha*, *Satyanarayan Pooja* etc. were some of the religious practices that continued to be performed at different occasions in the giritiya colonies.

These types of religious gatherings played a vital role in uniting them and keeping their cultural values alive. By organising the staging of Ram Leela he facilitated the gathering of Indian Indentured labourers in one place and created a sense of unity among them. This was in fact, the platform where these labourers could discuss their problems. According to Subramani,

Tulsidas's Ramcharitramanas is a large tome; it allowed indentured workers to sit around it and recite the inspiring verses. While the giritiyas identified themselves with the tale of Rama's exile, seeing in it their own exile, as a child growing up in that impoverished post-indenture world, I found my first great hero in Sri Ram. (Subramani 22-23)

Parekh argues that there were three features that were particular to Hindu indentured workers and that helped them to create a distinctive diasporic consciousness - the reconstitution of family life, their religious conviction in general and, more specifically, the adoption of the Ramayana as 'the essential text of the Hindu diaspora.' (Parekh 603-20)

Giritiyas continued to live in the same Indian ways of living and tried to pass on the same traditional values

to their children. Besides, the folk songs, festivals, wedding, birth and death rituals and cuisine have played a vital role in keeping Indian culture alive. Brij V Lal, a well-known writer and another girmitiya descendant writes in his book *Chalo Jahaji* that he grew up in an Indian traditional environment. He says that he recognises the broad contours of Indian culture, its art, music, literature. He had grown up with the songs of Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, K L Saigal, CH Atma, Hemant Kumar, Mukesh, Manna Dey. He writes that this music still fills our houses. A number of Fijian boys of his generation secretly aspire to be like those popular screen heroes Dev Anand or Rajendra Kumar, Balraj Sahni or Dilip Kumar. Lal writes that he had read Premchand's *Godan*, *Gift of a Cow*, in Hindi and moved to tears by Hori's plight, and he knows in his heart that Phaneshwar Singh Renu's unheralded *Maila Anchal*, *Soiled Borders*, would one day be recognised as one of this century's great novels. This is the Indian culture and background that not only Lal experienced in his childhood but most of the girmitiya children also had grown up with.

Today the girmitiya descendants identify themselves with India and Indian culture. In the second and third generation of girmitiyas, their Indian identity is something reconnecting with their roots. Both Rajendra Prasad and Brij V Lal, after visiting India, felt that India has given them their true identity. India is a place with which they are rooted. It is their true home.

Rajendra Prasad in his *Tears in Paradise* writes that his visit to India was taken by the local villages of his homeland as Lord Rama's return after fourteen years in exile. Prasad feels that journey to India was a kind of pilgrimage. He writes:

In this pilgrimage, I had found a new joy and a new identity in my roots. It changed my life completely and I was clear in my mind that I was able to restore that broken family link. I came to accept that, although I was an individual, I was also part of a larger web that I could not ignore as it gave me an identity. (Prasad 41)

Prasad admits that whenever he memorises about his Indian roots he feels a strong attachment to it. He is associated with India in a way a child is attached to a mother. He depicts this feeling thus,

From time to time, I returned to those memories to relish them and to experience again the power and magnetism of my roots. I realised that nothing could separate me. My ancestral roots were like the umbilical cord that tie mother and child together. If the cord was detached, the child died. My visit to India itself gave a new meaning and new dimension to my personal life. (Prasad 41)

After his visit to India he realized the superiority of his cultural heritage. He considers it to be a matter of great pride to belong to a country of rich heritage and culture as he writes:

I returned to Fiji with renewed pride in my heritage. In the pervading colonial atmosphere of Fiji I had lost my identity and in some respects was happy to have lost it. Colonialism treated us with contempt, keeping us under the shadow of the sahibs; we had lost the dignity to which we had an inherent right. In the presence of the sahibs, I was cowed by their vanity and arrogance. India restored in me the inner strength to see that the sahibs were in no way superior to me. This pilgrimage to my roots also opened a new opportunity for me to understand the hidden mystery that was girmit. (Prasad 43)

It is interesting to note that Brij V Lal also had similar feelings regarding his Indian roots. He writes in *Chalo Jahaji* that though on the one hand he feels that his grandfather's country is not his yet it is true that, Curiously, it is in India that I discover the depth of my Fijian roots, the influence of an oceanic culture on my being: a deep commitment to egalitarianism, a certain impatience with protocol and ritual, a zest for living her and now, humility and tolerance and compassionate concern for fellow human beings as kindred travellers in the same canoe of life. (Lal 30)

In the aforesaid conference also, most of the girmitiya descendants reflected the view that they consider India as their own country. Dr. Kirk Meighoo Public Relation Officer, United National Congress, Trinidad and Tabago spoke on 'Girmitiya and India: A Complex Relationship in Constant Flux' He said that one never loses connection with one's ancestral country. He himself is the sixth generation Indian in Trinidad and despite that he has not. He further said that within the global context of slavery, indenturedship is a minor part of history. He however believes that this migration is central to world history. If the East India Company was the most powerful then this part of history must be important too. He pointed out that Indian consciousness is somehow seen as racist and undermining and this prevents some Indian descendants from getting close to India. The same is not felt by Africans – they are free to feel as African as they wish to be.

At the conference, Dr. Satish Rai, a girmitiya descendant from Fiji, expressed his view that the girmitiya descendants can have multiple homes and identities and need not be restricted to one. He himself considers Fiji as his *Janambhumi*, Australia where he presently resides as his *karmabhumi* as and India as his *Matrabhumi*. He feels strong connection to India because his ancestors belonged to the country and he contends that most of the diaspora feel the same way.

Gabriel Pate, (Retired Public Officer Balize), in his speech at the conference, highlighted the contribution of East-Indians in Balize. He ended by quoting Mexican Ambassador who had visited Balize and had said "you can take an Indian out of India, but you cannot take India out of an Indian."

Mr. Virendra Gupta (Former Ambassador) highlighted three distinct aspects of diaspora i.e. the diaspora in the Gulf, the diaspora in developed countries and the third is the Girmitiya diaspora. He said that "The Girmitiya diaspora's feeling of warmth and attachment to India is unmatched as compared to the other two groups. Despite living very far away the Girmitiyas have been the most emotionally attached to India." (India Foundation) He spoke at length about the movement of the Girmitiyas and how they were dispatched. This helped in creating a sense of a new identity. A very strong factor that held them together

was their religion. Though they held very strongly to the Hindu identity the caste distinction faded when they moved to a new region, and religion indeed became a strong glue to bind them. Lastly he recommended the role of the Indian diaspora community especially the Girmit community should be highlighted more when one talks about India's soft power.

Mr. Ravi Dev, (HSS Guyana) mentioned that the past is not dead and this is seen through features in Guyana. What is called the coloniality of powers takes three forms – systems of hierarchy, systems of knowledge and conscious systems from which India and ex-colonized world is still trying to extricate itself from. The most popular among these are race, where the white race is put on top. The feeling of Caucasian-ness needs to go if one wants an equal society. One must not forget that it was Indian capital that was used to build the colonies.

Interpretation of Girmitiya Sentiments:

After reading the above excerpts, it seems that girmitiya descendants wish to be a part of India because it is the land of their ancestors. They wish to be acknowledged as members of the big Indian family. They are not much interested in One-day Meet on Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, or some scholarship or Quiz. What they wish is a long-term connection with their ancestral roots. They need a proper platform for this connection. Besides they wish to preserve their heritage, their language, their culture. They wish that their future generation learn the great values and heritage to which they have inherent right. Dr. Satish Rai expressed his view at the conference that the languages like Bhojpuri and Awadhi should be preserved but ICCR is not helpful as much an extent as Hindi. Mr. Vishnu Bisram, (Political Scientist and Journalist, Guyana) said that Hindi is under threat in Fiji and there is very little emphasis on reviving the language or even the culture in these countries. Mr. Vishnu further regretted that there is no platform to bring the diaspora together and discuss their needs, achievements and challenges. He said that in India there is not much being done to support the girmit diaspora. Engaging with the diaspora is viewed as a burden as it does not bring in much revenue, and is therefore neglected altogether. He said few people care about preserving Indian culture, and India does not seem to be bothered either. He further suggested that research on diaspora should be encouraged in India. He suggested that the girmitiyas expect India to do a lot more than what is being done. "There can be regional offices, there can be regional programmes and conferences, yearly meetings in Delhi, meetings in girmit towns rather in capital cities where girmits do not reside. Perhaps there could even be a think tank that focuses on girmits in India." (India Foundation).

The most important point is that girmitiyas expect that India take such steps that they feel protected even in foreign lands such as a child feels protected under the care of parents. In the condition of Indian diaspora's facing injustice in foreign lands, India should protest and take initiatives to protect and support them. This point can be understood by Mr. Ravi Dev (HSS Guyana) said at the conference that today girmitiyas asked, 'what is in it for us? He said it is time for India to define who is *Bharatiya* or Indian. Maybe India should learn from the recently concluded African – CARICOM. Girmitiyas need to be granted special relationship with India, rather than a second place platform, for all that the community does in maintaining ties with India and keeping its culture alive. He regretted that they do not get enough support from India. He said, "Why did India not condemn the rigging of elections in Guyana? He said it disappointed the community by not doing so." (India Foundation)

Conclusion:

By studying the excerpts from girmitiya memoirs and from the speeches at the afore- mentioned conference, it is found that the girmitiyas have shown unmatched spirit of tolerance and perseverance. It is important to note that Indian culture and religion was the force behind them. Indian cultural values taught them the virtues of hard-work and respect for others. In this sense, these girmitiya descendants are the living examples of what India can teach to the world. It is the duty of the Indian government to properly address their sentiments.

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