

The Hague Immigration Lecture, 2008

Marking the 135th Anniversary of the Arrival of Indian People in Suriname

Brij V. Lal
The Australian National University

I am immensely honoured to be invited to speak on this occasion marking the 135th anniversary of the arrival of Indian people in Suriname. I am pleased for many reasons. This is my first visit to this part of the world. In books we read at school many years ago, we saw beautiful pictures of your country, its canals and windmills, the magical tulip gardens and the neatly manicured flat green fields stretching into the distance as far as the eye could see, its great seaports and magnificent churches, its ancient centres of learning. To now physically see them with my own eyes is a childhood dream fulfilled. So, thank you for the invitation.

Like you – or many of you – I, too, am a descendant of an indentured labourer. My grandfather, from Bahraich district in eastern Uttar Pradesh, went to Fiji as a *girmitya* in 1908. *Girmit* comes from the Agreement, and those who went under the Agreement became known as *girmityas*, just as your forebears who went to Surinam under the Contract system became known as *Kontrakis*. My grandfather was one of 60,000 who crossed the *kala pani* to that remote Pacific archipelago, almost twice the number who went to your country in the Caribbean. Our forebears were a part of the massive migration of Indian indentured labour which began with Mauritius in 1834 and continued until the early years of the 20th century. By then, over a million had crossed the oceans to the ‘King Sugar’ colonies scattered around the globe. So I share with you a common historical experience of migration and displacement.

Like most of you, I, too, am a part of the diaspora of the ‘Twice Banished,’ in your case from India to Suriname and then to the Netherlands, and in my case from India to Fiji to Australia. For a variety of reasons – personal choice, racial discrimination, political marginalisation, economic hardship, a deep desire for personal betterment – over 120,000 of my people have left Fiji for other lands since the military coups of 1987, and more will leave as the opportunity arises.

We, too, have crossed our own *kala pani*. So your story of migration and re-migration, of starting from scratch in foreign lands is familiar to me, with all its pains and joys of adapting to new situations.

I have been to Suriname, so places like Nikeri and Paramaribo are not just idle, exotic names on a map, but places with faces and memories. I have eaten *dhallbhari roti* and duck curry at Roopram's Roti shop in the capital city. And who can forget the *masquita* and *macchari* of Nikeri! I was overwhelmed by the warm hospitality of the Surinamese Indian community. I knew something about the Surinamese Indians before I went to Suriname. In 1995, Ram Soekhoe, working for one of the television stations here, went to Fiji to make a documentary on the situation of the Indian community there. He interviewed many people, including me, but was especially keen on meeting some local community leaders. We took him to a small town called Nausori to meet with Mr Bal Dev. Ram laughed out loud when he heard the name. Why we wondered, puzzled. He said in Suriname, the name referred to someone of few means, without a fixed abode, harmless, who lives on free feed by telling people: '*Hamaar naam Baldeb, hum khaaye pi ke chal deb.*'!

Like so many of you in post-war Suriname I, too, grew up in the countryside in rural Fiji. I too was brought up on the *Ramchatramanas*, the story of Sarvan Kumar, *Allha Khand*, the *Birhas* and the *Bidesias* and the *Baithak Gana*, the *Lehnga ke naach* (what you call *Ahirwa ke naach*). A few days ago, I listened to the songs of Ramdev Chaitoe and Andre Mohan. The evocative words about love and loss and impermanence, the melancholic mood of the music, the rustic musical instruments, took me back to my childhood, bringing back memories long forgotten. I remembered how, amidst all the poverty and destitution and hopelessness in the aftermath of indenture, songs and music, elementary stuff, nothing fancy or sophisticated (just *dandtaal*, *dholak*, *majira* and harmonium) kept our culture alive, our collective soul intact. Apparently, it was the same in your part of the world. And I am so delighted that fragments from that fractured past still survive in the Netherlands.

And the names too: Ramdev, Mohan, Nanhoe, Chaitoe, Soekhlal. These, too, were familiar to me. They were common enough in rural Fiji in the post-war years. They could easily have been the names of uncles and older cousins. Names are strange things, aren't they? Why do we give certain names and not others? As I thought about this, I realised the important role naming plays in the way in which we negotiate issues of culture and identity and find our place in the world. Let me share with you the Fiji experience. Indentured labourers from

rural India were named after events, calamities, days, after flowers and birds. So: Mangal, Bhola, Dukhia, Genda, Budhai, Sanicharee, Bipti, Sukkhu, Garib, and so on. If you knew the Indian cultural code, you could roughly tell a person's station in life by his or her name. When the time came for the *girmitiyas* to name their children, they began naming them after gods and goddesses and with words having religious connotations, to erase distinctions based on caste and class: Ram Charan, Shiu Wati, Mahadeo, Latchman, Dharam Raji, Ram Jattan, Suruj Bali, Janki Devi. Who could tell whether Ram Charan was a chamar or a kurmi or something else? Our parents went further, naming their children Mahendra, Satendra, Vijay, Rajesh, Satish, Maya, Padma, and so on, with absolutely no cultural or religious connotation whatsoever, at least not any that I can recognise. Inventive names erased hierarchies based on caste and ritual purity. Such were the silent, subtle processes of cultural change and transformation in Fiji.

The isolated, self-contained world of my childhood has now almost vanished beyond recall. My children think that I am hallucinating when I tell them that I was born on my father's farm, delivered by an illiterate Indo-Fijian mid-wife, and grew up without piped water, paved roads, electricity and regular newspapers. Radio came late to the village, in the late 1950s. There was no television then, of course, no internet, no mobile phones. I sometimes wonder how we managed to survive through those difficult times. Not only survive but actually triumph (although I have to admit to being a Luddite when it comes to even the most basic of modern technologies!). From that kind of background to this has been a remarkable journey of exploration and unexpected discoveries. In this regard, too, I share much in common with you.

For more than a century, people of Indian indentured diaspora lived in complete isolation and ignorance of each other. Given the vast distance that separated us – you were in the Atlantic Ocean while we were in the Pacific – this is not surprising. There was simply no way of knowing. We lacked education, and the colonial education that we did receive focused our intellectual attention squarely on the cultural and technological accomplishments of our colonial masters. For the most part, we were preoccupied with eking out an existence, often without a helping hand and frequently in circumstances on the outer edges of desperation. Those who wrote about us were outsiders, who had little inkling of the deeper impulses of our lives, what made us tick. Some, though well meaning, were actually apologists for the colonial government and the plantocracy, which saw our forebears simply as units of labour to be exploited for profit. For them to accord us a measure of humanity would have

undermined their project of economic exploitation; it would have been morally indefensible for one group of human beings in good conscience to oppress another. Our colonial masters saw us as potentially troublesome subjects to be controlled and managed. But we must also accept a part of the blame, for we saw our own history with a certain degree of embarrassment and shame. We saw our past as covered in silent darkness and loathed being reminded of our humble origins, especially by those who wanted us to know our place in the larger scheme of things so that we didn't grow too big for our boots. The past, for us, was truly past; that was then; we had moved on.

But things have been changing in the last two decades or so as the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of indentured labourers have themselves undertaken the task of understanding and interpreting their past, to comprehend the truth of their historical experience in all its maddening complexity and variety. I have devoted a very large part of my professional life as a historian, now spanning some thirty years, trying to rescue our history from the enormous condescension of posterity. In my first book, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (first published in 1983), I tried to understand the background of the indentured who went to Fiji (and to other places across the globe), who they were, where they came from, their social and caste status, their economic circumstances, the reason they might have left their homes for strange, unknown places. Much, cruelly, was assumed about the girmitiyas, but very little actually known.

To find out, I did two things. I went through each and every one of the 45,000 Emigration Passes of all those who embarked for Fiji from the port of Calcutta. It had to be done, the whole thing; there was no way around it, no short cuts. I suppose in some inexplicable sense, it was my way of paying homage to those who had undertaken the journey. I coded and transcribed the data (on the district of origin and registration, caste, sex, next-of-kin, age, date of recruitment and embarkation, and so on: a horrendously tedious task that I would not wish even upon my worst enemy) and analysed it using the computer (in those prehistoric days of the late 1970s!). And I spent more than six months travelling through and living in the impoverished villages of eastern UP districts of Basti, Faizabad, Gorakhpur, Gonda, Bahraich, and many others from where the girmitiyas had come. I wanted to understand the place of migration in popular culture of the region. I travelled in rickety, overcrowded buses carrying sheep and goat besides people, slept in foul smelling, bug-infested beds, ate greasy food from sooty *dhabas*, drank tea from mud cups, and did other strange, blush-inducing things (out of necessity, of course!) which are now best left un-

recalled. All I will say is that it is not an experience I would recommend to the finicky or the faint-hearted.

I proved conclusively, statistically, that the indentured labourers were not all low caste riff raff, but represented a fair cross-section of rural Indian society, including higher, middling and lower castes, and coming from sections of society which, in the late 19th century, were under great stress because of recurring natural calamities (droughts and famines) and the crippling effects of British revenue policy which caused crippling indebtedness, fragmented land holdings and scattered families. I showed, too, that while many were deceived into emigrating – fraudulence is present in most forms of labour recruitment, even in our own age – many came from an already uprooted mass of humanity on the move – to the Calcutta jute mills, Assam tea gardens, the Bihar coal mines, Bombay textile mills – in search of employment. I argued that migration to the colonies was an extension of the process of displacement already underway on the subcontinent. I suggested that indentured migration was a complex, multilayered narrative, susceptible to multiple readings, but the whips-and-chains version full of violence and brutality is usually given prominence in popular renditions of indenture. That, alas, is the way things will remain. Some matters of popular belief will always remain impervious to reason or reasoned research.

In my later work, I looked at the experience of the indentured labourers on the plantations in Fiji. There can be no argument that indenture was a harsh, brutalising experience, which broke many and left others by the wayside. Pain and suffering and violence were an integral part of the indenture experience. All this is clear from the historical record, but it is by no means the full story. The plantation was not everywhere the ‘total institution’ it was alleged to be. In some places, indenture was a life sentence, in others it was a limited detention of five or at most ten years. For some men and women, it was an enslaving experience, for others it was liberation from the vicious cycle of poverty and destitution at home, from which there was no possibility of emancipation in this life, or the next or the one after the next: actually, never. We must accord some measure of humanity and agency to our forebears. They were simple people from simple backgrounds, but they were not simpletons.

What we are celebrating on this occasion is the triumph of the human spirit over life’s great adversities. For, from the debris of indenture emerged a community of people, at once resilient and resourceful, determined to build a better future for themselves and their children. From the remembered fragments of their motherland, they established new communities, built *pathshalas* and *mandirs* and *mazjids* and social and cultural institutions. A new lingua franca emerged – Fiji Baat, Sarnami Hindi – and a new composite culture combining the new and

the old, pragmatic and utilitarian in approach and world view, more egalitarian and less respectful of oppressive and moribund traditions and rituals which sanctioned hierarchy and difference. It is this wonderful story of change and adaption, resourcefulness and creativity, which we are celebrating today. When you come to think of it, we of the Indian indentured diaspora – whether in Suriname, Guyana, Mauritius or Fiji – have a lesson to teach the world, especially Mother India. We have demonstrated how, in certain circumstances and under certain conditions, apparently divinely ordained social and cultural institutions and practices deemed immutable can, in fact, change. The way the caste system has broken down in the Indian indentured diaspora is a good example. Religious tolerance is another. *Hum pragti aur parivartan ke jeete jaagte namune hain.*

I don't know about Suriname, but one institution of migration and indenture which acquired a particular significance in the life of the indentured labourers in Fiji was *jahajibhai*, the brotherhood of the crossing. It was close to real kinship, just as real as the brotherhood of blood, a pillar upon which many a community was built. I suspect a new kind of *jahajibhai* relationship is being forged now. It is the *jahajibhai* of the cyberspace. The internet has shrunk our world, brought us closer. We email each other, visit each other's websites. Hardly a week goes by when I don't receive a request for help with this project or that, often from complete strangers, mostly descendants of indentured labourers in various parts of the world. Just a few weeks back, I received an email from Nalini Mohabir, a Canadian of Indo-Guyanese descent doing a doctorate in Geography at Leeds University, who wants to visit Fiji for research, and sought my advice about where to go, who to see and talk to. She is one among hundreds of children of the Indian diaspora who are now expressing an interest in knowing their past.

There are many reasons for this. It is a natural human phenomenon to know who you are and where you have come from. It is not peculiar to the people of Indian origin. 'Roots' and 'Identity' are big subjects in universities around the world. The desire to know is also sharpened by the levelling forces of globalisation, making us want to hang on to something that is uniquely ours, that gives a particular sense of identity and belonging. I detect an awakening sense of the past among our people, and a desire, too, to pay homage to the sacrifices and struggles of our forebears. In time, the 'Girmit Divas' and the '5th of June' may become important secular celebrations of great symbolic significance.

There is a gathering sense of pride in our collective achievements in so many diverse fields. When a haunting novel about a struggling man of unfulfilled literary ambition, humbled and humiliated in his own extended family – I am, of course, referring to *House for Mr Biswas* – helps VS Naipaul win the Nobel Prize for literature, we all feel a vicarious sense of pride in his great personal achievement. When Vijay Singh, the son of an airport worker in Fiji, scales the greatest heights of world golf, we applaud. It gives us immense pleasure to know that a great-grandson of an indentured labourer in Fiji, Anand Satyanand, is the Governor General of New Zealand, or that Jai Ram Reddy, again from Fiji, sits as a Permanent Judge of the International Criminal Court for Rwanda. The list goes on and on. We appreciate the accomplishments of the children of the indentured diaspora more than most because we know how very difficult and unpredictable the journey has been.

Travel and technology have complicated grounded, ethnographic notions of citizenship which too has played its part in fostering a new, overarching sense of identity for us. There was time, not too long ago, when questions of identity and citizenship were a one-way traffic. You were either this or that, but never both. Dual attachment was considered to be disloyalty. But that zero-sum game, that ideology of complete assimilation into the social and cultural fabric of the host society now mercifully lies buried in the graveyards of discarded history. Now, we celebrate pluralism and diversity. That is why, Fatima Meer, the distinguished South African intellectual and activist, can claim herself to be a proud South African as well as a child of India. That is why Lord Dholakia is a proud British peer as well as proud son of Gujarat. I am a proud Indo-Fijian as well as a proud Australian. This openness and flexibility enables us, without apology, to cherish and celebrate the various multicultural strands of our particular identity and heritage.

India itself has played a large part in the last decade or so to foster a greater consciousness of an Indian diaspora. This resulted from a massive increase in the size of the Indian diaspora in recent decades. It is now some twenty million strong, and increasing daily. India's effort to harness the diaspora's immense intellectual and financial resources to promote the subcontinent's economic modernisation program – much in the same manner as China had done earlier with its own large diaspora – has played an important role. The annual *Pravasi Bhartiye Divas* symbolises this effort. So far the main focus has been economic, specifically, how the diaspora can help India. I hope that with time, this relationship will become less one-sided and more mutually beneficial. We know what India wants: it wants our goodwill, support and, very important,

naturally, our dollars.

There is a puzzle here. India reminds us incessantly to be loyal to our countries of birth (and this started with Jawaharlal Nehru's speech at Bandung in 1954 and was repeated by Minister Vyala Ravi this evening), but it would also like us to commit 'fiscal treason' (if that's not too strong a word) to our countries of birth by asking us to invest our resources in the ancestral homeland of our forebears. India's position is understandable. It is on its way to becoming a superpower of the 21st century. We, from the Old Diaspora, need to ask what is it that we want from India, what the terms of relationship should be from the perspective of our needs and aspirations. We should have a MAD relationship with India, asking for 'Mutually Acceptable Development', and not being content with having a one-sided, self seeking one.

I should now like to correct myself. I have so far spoken of the Indian diaspora in the singular, but it is, of course, the result of many causes and countless crossings over many centuries. We can distinguish at least three distinct phases. First, in the era before the emergence of European dominance, was the 'Age of Merchants,' when enterprising Indian traders travelled over land and sea to central Asia and east Africa. The memory of their journeys and explorations now survives in grand monuments and ancient artefacts of history. The second phase was the 'Age of Colonial Capital' of the 19th and 20th centuries of which we, the descendants of the indentured diaspora, are the products. And the third phase, 'The Age of Globalisation,' is essentially a product of the post-World War II era. Given our diverse origins and circumstance of migration, it is understandable that our attachment to, and feeling for, India will vary considerably. The 'Dollar Diaspora' and the 'Desperate Diaspora' will see things differently.

An obvious point, you might say, but it is not always appreciated. Sometimes we are all classified under the category NRI. Now, the standard interpretation of NRI is, as you all know, *Non-Resident Indian*. That is fine, but there are other meanings as well. For instance, *Newly-Rich Indians*, in whom India is interested for their wealth and expertise. Then there are the *Never-Returning Indians*, who turn their face on the place of their birth and wash off their hands completely. We all know a few *Non-Reliable Indians*! And then there are NRIs like myself: *Not Really Indian*! The point I want to make is that we are not all peas in the same pod. We converge and diverge as members of an amorphous Indian diaspora, depending on need and circumstance. We share many things in common – food, faith, fashion – but we are also acutely of the different

historical and cultural influences which have shaped our unique identities and our perceptions of things around us. Thus I am not an 'Indian Overseas' nor an 'Overseas Indian,' but a Fijian, of Indian descent. I am an Indo-Fijian whose soul is nourished by three distinct cultural and civilizational influences: Indian, Western and Pacific (Fijian). Without any one of these, I will be the poorer.

Earlier, I spoke of the diaspora of the Twice Banished. This developing diaspora needs more study. It is a complex phenomenon. It presents challenges as well as opportunities. Questions of homeland and territoriality, of belong and attachment, become more complex and contested. Our civilizational home is India, but we were born in Suriname or Fiji. And we now live in the Netherlands and Australia. As new identities get formed and transformed, how do we balance within our inner lives influences which have made us what we are? Let me put this more directly. As you make new homes in the Netherlands, what aspects of Sarnami culture do you still carry with you in your daily lives and which you will transmit to the next generation? What are the Sarnami ties that bind? Or will Surinam gradually recede from the intellectual and cultural horizons of the new generations growing up here and remembered, if remembered at all, as a temporary stopover for a people destined to wander the globe? I don't have any answers, but I think the question is worth asking.

I salute the achievements of the Sarnami community both here and in Suriname. We are all *jahajibhais* in this journey begun by our forebears over a century ago who, I have no doubt, will be looking on our achievements with immense pride. Indenture in the remote corners of the globe was the destination of our grandparents and great-grandparents. Through their hard work and sacrifice, they ensured that it wasn't going to become our destiny. We pay respectful homage to this beautiful legacy they bequeathed us. *Ghamand se kaho ke aap kontracki ke santaan ho.*

About the Lecturer

Brij Vilash Lal, grandson of an Indian indentured labourer, is Professor of Pacific and Asian History in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University. He was born in Fiji and educated there and in Canada and Australia. His research has taken him to all the countries across the globe where Indian indentured labourers went, from the Caribbean to South and East Africa to Southeast Asia. His many well-regarded books include *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*, *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey of Indenture in Fiji*, *Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey*, *Turnings: Fiji Factions* and, as editor, *Pacific Islands: An encyclopaedia* and the *Encyclopaedia of the Indian Diaspora*. His many awards include the 'Centenary Medal of the Government of Australia' for his distinguished service to the Humanities there, the UNSECO-sponsored 'Inaugural Distinguished Pacific Scholar Medal,' Fellowship of the Australian Humanities Academy and 'Officer of the Order of Fiji,' for his distinguished contribution to public life there. He was named by the Fiji Millennium Committee as one of 75 people whose contribution helped shape the history of 20th century Fiji. Professor Lal is also one of the architects of Fiji's 1997 constitution.