



Indian Diaspora and Gandhian Identity

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Abstract:

A majority of Indian Diaspora is consisted of Indian Indentured Labourers and their descendents. Indenture Labour System was devised by the colonial government after the abolition of slavery in British Empire in 1834 in order to meet the shortage of cheap labourers to work in their plantations. This indentured migration resulted in the development of large Indian diaspora and the growth of Indo-Caribbean, Indo-Fijian, Indo-Mauritian and Indo-African population. It is interesting to note that it was amidst the Indian Diaspora people that Gandhi's true identity began to shape in South Africa. And after more than a century it is Gandhi who is providing an identity to the Diasporic people across the Globe. In South Africa Gandhi began his movement against injustice by fighting for the rights of the Indians especially the indentured labourers. An integral aspect of the emotional and ethnic history of the migrants and their descendants is the indenture system and the long battle against it. Shri J.C. Sharma, an Indian ambassador writes: "Gandhi has been one of the key figures in the making of Indian diaspora and so also the diaspora in the making of Gandhi. Gandhi's major weapon of revolution "Satyagrah" was experimented in the diaspora (South Africa) and, at the same time, his Satyagrah success story in India permeated to several diasporic countries across the globe."¹ Besides, his means of Satyagraha and non-violence have reconstructed a unique Oriental or the 'Indian' identity which is a unifying force for the Diasporic people across the world. This paper tries to bring out the deep influence of Gandhi on the Indian Diaspora and the reasons behind it. It also tries to bring out the importance of Gandhian identity today for the Indian Diaspora people.

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Key words: Girmitiya, Gandhi, Indenture labour system, Indian Diaspora

Introduction:

It is a known fact that it was in South Africa that Gandhi started his first movement against injustice. He fought in South Africa against the discriminatory policy of the South African government toward the Indians. On April 11, 1947 when Dr. Y.M. Dadoo and Dr. G.M. Naicker, leaders of the passive resistance movement in South Africa met Gandhiji, he confessed to them: "Truly speaking, it was after I went to South Africa that I became what I am now."² Profound scholar of Gandhian literature and life in South Africa Shri Hashim Sidat once said to Giriraj Kishore, the author of the book 'Pehala Girmitiya' that "I feel proud that the world's biggest diamond came out of our mines, but I feel still more proud on the fact that we have returned you a more precious and watery diamond in the form of Gandhi". (Giriraj Kishore: Pehla Girmitiya)

After returning from London in 1891, and having law practice in Rajkot and Bombay, Gandhi went to South Africa with a contract of one year (Tendukar 1951). In South Africa all type of Indians – traders, clerks and labourers were called "Sami" or "Coolie" (Which is originally a Tamil word for labourer). Whether rich trader or an indentured labourer, they were all

² Gandhi's talk with DR. Y. M. Dadoo and DR. G. M. Naicker, April 11, 1947

looked down. On landing in Durban the port of Natal in South Africa, Gandhiji observed that the Indians were not held in much respect. 'I could not fail to notice a sort of snobbishness about the manner in which those who knew Abdulla Sheth behaved towards him and it stung me.' (Gandhi 1927). This was his first experience of discrimination. In fact Gandhi had gone to South Africa as a legal professional whose passage was paid by his client Abdullah Sheth. His status was thus hybrid – neither a “*girmit*” (one on an indentured contract or agreement) nor was he a “Passenger Indian who had paid his own passage.

In South Africa Gandhi established Natal Indian Congress in 1894 and fought there for the equal rights to the Indians. It was in South Africa that he came to know about the inhuman treatment and injustices done to the indentured labourers. In his autobiography he has mentioned that he came to know about the inhuman treatment of the indentured workers through a Tamil indentured servant named Balasundaram who was physically abused by his white employer. Gandhi helped him with the doctor's fees and medical treatment. He took up the cause of the indentured labourers. To identify himself with the indentured workers he called himself a 'Girmitiya' (the corrupt form of agreement). In 1895 He addressed a petition to Chamberlain protesting against the pound 3 tax that was to be levied on ex-indentured Indians. He also advocated the ending of the indenture system under various reasons. "If the Colony cannot put up with the Indians ... the only course . . . is to stop a future immigration to

Natal, at any rate for the time being. Such stopping of immigration will not, your Memorialists submit, materially effect the congested parts of India".³ Other issues such as the validity of Indian marriages and the right to vote to the Indian citizen in South Africa were also taken up by Gandhiji.

The Indenture System was devised by the colonial government to meet the shortage of cheap labour that arose after slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834. Under this system the workers were bonded by contract or “agreement” (the corrupted form *Girmit*) for five years. It was infact “a new system of slavery” as Hugh Tinker calls it in his book. (*New System of Slavery*, Hug Tinker, p-70). The labourers were confined to the plantations under harsh conditions with long working hours and low wages and they were meted out inhuman treatment. Some of the practices on the plantations were carried over from the days of slavery. They could not easily move outside their estates and if they were caught without their 'immigration ticket' they were jailed for 'vagrancy'. It was a living “hell” for the indentured workers. By implementing this indentured labour system the colonisers wanted to appear morally right without losing profits. Over a million Indians were taken to work in the plantations of colonizers, which was the chief factor of growth of the colonial economies.

Though the Indenture labour system was a voluntary migration but there had been number of mal-practices in the system. The labourers were recruited through deception,

³ The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1 (Delhi, 1958) pp.116-28

duplicity and sharp-dealing. The poor and mostly illiterate village folk were duped by the arkatis (recruiters) by giving number of temptations of fanciful tales of a comfortable living and handsome sum of money. The migrants signed or put their thumb print on the indenture contract without knowing what they had signed.

The stories of the ill-treatment of indentured workers reached India. Many of the prominent Indian nationalists called for ending the indentured migration. Over-work with punitive fines made life miserable for the workers, which resulted in high rate of mortality and suicides among workers. Indian migrants sent petitions and plantation workers resorted to strikes, but these were put down by force by the colonial authorities. Several resolutions were introduced in the Legislative Council in India to bring an end to the practice.

After returning to India, Gandhi took the lead in the struggle. By 1915, the campaign against indenture had become part of the nationalist discourse against the British colonial government. In order to know the actual condition of the indentured workers, the Nationalist groups sent representatives to the colonies and prepare their reports. Father CF Andrews, an associate of Gandhiji, sent reports about the conditions in Fiji, which raised a furore in India. The nationalists' agitation and pressure from other groups in India and the UK eventually forced the British India government to stop indenture recruitment in 1917.

K. A. Ray observed "Historically, for almost 50 years after the beginning of indentured migration

in 1834 neither the colonial government of India nor the general population had been particularly concerned about the maltreatment of Indian indentured workers abroad. It was only Gandhi's threat of a nationwide Satyagraha (passive resistance) which brought end to recruitment in 1917. (Ray 1993:283)

In Mauritius, the birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi is celebrated every year. In October 2001, the centenary anniversary of the visit of Gandhiji to Mauritius was commemorated at a national level. The Mauritians believe that the visit of Mohandas Gandhi has had a long-lasting impact on their country's history. In 1924, as the President of the Indian National Congress, Gandhi protested against the inhumane treatment of the indentured Indians in Mauritius. Gandhi encouraged a number of Mauritians to work for the social, political and economic betterment of all Mauritians. In Fiji also the indentured labourers have a unique feeling for India and Gandhi. The well-known author Subramani's introduction to *The Indo-Fijian Experience* (1979), a collection he edited to mark the centenary of indentured labourers in Fiji, is an example of a unique relation to an ancestral land. "India remained an important emotion" for the ex-girmitiyas, he writes, because "in an environment where the Indo-Fijian was still insecure, it was a symbol of home" (Subramani, 1979).

It is not only because of the cause of Indentured labourers that has made Gandhi monumental. Another more important factor is that Gandhiji has constructed "Indianness" as a

platform for linking the Diaspora. The colonial community in South Africa believed that they were the representative of western civilization and India, that of oriental Civilization. The Orientals represent – simplicity, perseverance, patience, frugality and otherworldliness. Westerners are enterprising, impatient and materialistic. By putting into practice the ideals of the Orientalism in his own life-style and by means of Satyagraha and non-violence Gandhiji has reconstructed a strong Oriental Identity which in turn can be identified as an “Indian Identity”.

His means of Satyagraha and non-violence in the era of World War had attracted world-wide attention. Romain Rolland, a French writer was quite fascinated by the non-violence movement of Gandhi, whose biography he wrote in 1924. His biography of Gandhi was subtitled “The Man Who Became One with the Being of the Universe”. Rolland found that Gandhian doctrine of “Satyagraha” was based on strong religious and spiritual foundations and therefore Gandhism was encouraging and reassuring. He compared Gandhi with Christ, St. Francis and St. Paul to emphasize religious associations for the European readers. He contrasted Gandhi’s non-violence with repressive policies in Europe, including Bolshevik practices. He stressed the values of purity, self-mastery and silent suffering which were inherent in Gandhian thought:

“To create the new India, it is necessary to create new souls, souls strong and pure, which are truly Indian and wrought out of Indian elements. And in order to create them, it is

necessary to form a sacred legion of apostles who like those of Christ are the salt of the earth. Gandhi is not like our European revolutionaries, a maker of laws and decrees. He is the moulder of a new humanity.”

According to Rolland, Gandhian ideology introduced non-violent solutions to fight against oppression and tyranny. The post war world had seen terrible bloodshed and it was the need of an hour that non-violent solutions should be found out in order to establish peace and harmony. At this time, Rolland found Gandhian thought very relevant and helpful. Gandhism provided a universal hope.

Gandhian Ideology has thus become a driving force, a guiding spirit in the fight against injustice and oppression. Number of leaders across the globe followed Gandhian ways and became successful. Nelson Mandela is called Gandhi of South Africa. In Guyana, Cheddi Jagan is considered as Guyana’s Mahatma Gandhi. Recently Anna Hazare’s anti-corruption movement in India greatly attracted young Diasporas because of its Gandhian Principles. There had been a 240 mile Dandi March walk in San Francisco in support of Anna’s fast on April 9, 2011 against corruption and an urge for one-day fast in several cities across US. Today Mahatma Gandhi is the considered the most influential icon for the Indian Diaspora.

As Mr. Vinay Lal observes, “Gandhi’s name evidently has cultural capital everywhere in the world...” (Vinay Lal, 2009). The Mahatma Gandhi Institute Indian Immigration Archives is undoubtedly the largest repository documentation and

photographic collection of the 19th Century Indian Indentured Labourers recruited in Mauritius. Similarly, The Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Cultural Cooperation, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago is the platform for promoting India and diaspora relations. Besides, in almost all the countries across the globe where there is Indian Diaspora presence, there are number of research institutions, cultural centres, social organizations running under Mahatma Gandhi's name and following his ideology. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) have also complied with the diasporas' demand for Gandhi's presence through instituting institutions, installing statues and other forms of promotions. It is also decided to celebrate "Pravasi Bharatiya Divas" in order to sustain interactions of the Indian Diaspora with India. It is significant that it is decided to organize the event on the day of Gandhi's return from South Africa.

Conclusion:

Gandhi has been and will remain the monumental figure in the world. As Albert Einstein said of Mahatma Gandhi on his 70th birthday, "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth." For Indian Diaspora today Gandhi is a representation of an ideology. He is a way of living, an identity upon which they can take pride. He is the unique identity of the Orientalists as well as the Indians. For the Diaspora people, he is also a unifying force with the mother country.

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