



Cultural Hybridity and Identity Crisis among the Indo-Fijians

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Abstract:

After the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, a new system was devised by the British to meet the shortage of cheap labour in the colonial plantations in the absence of slave labourers. This system was known as Indenture Labour System. The Indenture Labour System was in fact an unjust policy under which the labourers were exploited. The girmity period was a kind of hell in which these labourers faced a lot of hardships. These people somehow adjusted in the foreign lands. But their plight did not end there. These people had to face discrimination against the native people. In Fiji they had to face coups and so these people were living under constant threat. Under such circumstances the descendants of these girmityas migrated to other countries like New Zealand, Australia, Canada etc. Now these people are faced with number of issues regarding their identity and belongingness. Their life-style is a mixture of number of aspects. They follow Indian customs and tradition but at the same time, they have also adopted the local style and customs. Their culture is a hybrid culture. In this case, what is their true identity, where do they actually belong? For India they are now foreigners, or PIOs, for the country of their birth, they are vulagi or visitors, or outsiders, for the country where they have migrated they are minority groups. This identity issues are highlighted in a number of works by these girmitya descendants. The researcher has tried in this paper to bring out those issues with special reference to Indo-Fijians.

Key words: girmitya, migration, indentured labourers, culture, identity crisis

Introduction:

After the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, an acute shortage of labour was felt among the plantation owners under the colonial government. To sort out this problem, a new system was devised by the British in 1843 to get cheap labour. This system was known as Indenture Labour System. Under this system a number of Indians agreed to become indentured labourers to escape the widespread poverty and famine in 19th century. These labourers are known as *girmityas* (corrupt form of agreement is *girmity* and those who signed the agreement are *girmityas*). They were sent to colonies producing high value

crops such as sugar in Africa and the Caribbean. These people were recruited by giving number of promises and temptations by the recruiting agents but on reaching the foreign lands they realized their real plight. Some cases of abductions were also noted. Hugh Tinker called this system, "A new system of Slavery" (Tinker 1974) Most of these labourers were from Northern part of India. They migrated to countries like Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa, Guyana etc.

Fiji is one such country where number of Indians migrated during girmity period. The descendants of these *girmityas* are known as Indo-Fijians. Today these Indo-Fijians face a kind of identity crisis in foreign lands. Authors

like Professor Brij V Lal, Dr. Rajendra Prasad etc. who are the *girmitiya* descendants have reflected this issue in their books.

The first generation of *girmitiyas* had brought with them the seeds of Indian culture which they strived hard to retain amid the harsh condition of *girmit* period. But gradually, with the passage of time, and amid hardships in foreign lands, this culture was forgotten. The *girmitiyas* suffered a lot of atrocities and injustice during their *girmit* period. These hardships made them forget their true culture and identity. They were given only one identity being a coolie. As Prasad writes in *Tears in Paradise*,

Not only caste but also race, religion and culture became casualties for the *girmitiyas* In the nemesis of indenture, *girmitiyas* lost their identity, recognition and respect as human beings. Their masters called them coolie with contempt. (Prasad 86-87)

As K. L. Gillion has written, 'Most of their caste scruples gone, without their traditional leaders and elders and generally without kin, they were resigned to the future and very vulnerable' (Gillion 1920: 67). Rajendra Prasad writes in *Tears in Paradise*,

The harsh conditions impacted in various ways on the culture of the *girmitiyas*. It underwent rigorous

change, and gave rise to a new culture, conditioned by a new environment. When in 1879 the ship *Leonidas* berthed at Levuka wharf with 489 indentured labourers they had arrived with a seed of the Indian culture. In isolation the culture underwent transformation having to adjust, modify and mould itself to form a distinct Indo – Fijian culture. In the course of this, the caste distinctions were largely lost and by the turn of the century had disappeared completely. (Prasad 85)

Brij V Lal writes in *Chalo Jahaji*, For indenture violated many of the values and subverted the social and cultural practices and institutions the indentured emigrants brought with them, among its most notable victims being the caste system. Social taboos regarding food, diet, social space, rituals of purity and impurity, prayer and worship could not be maintained on the voyage and on the plantations And paucity of women necessitated marriages across caste lines. (Lal 53)

Though people may stop following culture for a period of time, but culture is a phenomenon that cannot be easily erased from memory. According to an author culture in terms of heritage becomes an unforgettable historical fact which is shared in memory through interaction with other members of the community. It becomes a source of their action, voices, selection of material behavior self-perception and world view. Culture is used to confirm, reinforce, maintain, change or deny a particular arrangement of states, power and identity. (Mintz 1970). In this way culture and identity are two sides of the same coin.

In an attempt to adjust in the foreign environment and culture the migrants adopt few of the cultural aspects of the host countries and at the same time leave some aspects of their own culture. A new hybrid culture emerges out of this, which is called sandwich culture. Brij V Lal writes in *Chalo Jahaji*

The *girmitiyas* were caught between the demands of the two worlds one which they had left but not completely escaped and one which they had entered but not fully embraced. They had left one home and, at least emotionally not found another in their own lifetime. They lived and died in an acute state of tension and ambivalence. They were a people caught in between neither here

nor there or less everywhere all at once. (Lal x)

Their state is further described by Lal using a metaphor of ship wreck as under

There was something strange something incongruous about these people. Now in their mellow twilight, they seemed to be shipwrecked by fate in a place they did not perhaps could not fully embrace and they could not return to a place they so dearly loved. They were a people caught in between the tensions of culture and history resisting assimilation into the ways of their adopted homeland by re-enacting archaic customs from a remembered past. (Lal 26)

In order to understand the identity crisis among the *girmitiya* descendants, one must consider the role of culture in shaping the identity. According to Gilroy, through identity, individuals understand the interplay between cultural and historical contexts and our “subjective experiences”. (Gilroy) He further comments,

Identity mainly involves belongingness through which people share fixed and collective categories with others; such as

kinship, homeland, biological or cultural heritage The fixed notion of identity provides comfort for certain individuals because they act upon given roles accordingly; it also functions as political solidarity to mobilise nationalism. (Gilroy 301-345)

Among the second or third generation of migrants the problem of identity occurs as they can not totally identify themselves with either the culture of their forefathers or with the culture of the country they live in. Their children i.e. the descendants of *girmityas* lived and experienced Indian culture since their childhood. As Lal writes in *Chalo Jahaji*,

I recognize the broad contours of Indian culture, its art, music, literature; I have grown up with the songs of Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, K L Saigal, CH Atma, Hemant Kumar, Mukesh, Manna Dey: their music still fills my house. (Lal 32)

Lal further writes that most of the Indo- Fijian boys of his generation were fans of popular Hindi cinema and secretly wished to be screen heroes like Dev Anand or Dilip Kumar. But at the same time these *girmitya* descendants feel that the culture that they lived since their childhood is not their own. They have moved on with time and besides, the culture which was brought by their forefathers was different from

the culture at present time. Therefore, Lal is also very much conscious that “I know that my India is the India of yesteryear, frozen at a particular moment in time (my childhood);” (Lal 32) This clearly shows that they feel a kind of aloofness from India and Indian culture today.

These people in the long run feel a kind of rootlessness or sense of loss. As Brij V Lal laments in *Chalo Jahaji*,

There are times when, surrounded by so much history and the depth of richness of Indian culture, I experience a vague sense of loss, of being somehow incomplete. The sheer variety of sounds and colours of various festivals, the shape of the landscape, people at home in multiple (but to me incomprehensible) languages is astonishing to someone born on a tiny island in a shallow, uprooted immigrant culture. (Lal 32)

In fact, this loss of culture can be considered a break that was temporary. After the *girmitya* period the *girmityas* strived hard to revive their culture and identity. In this search, these people find the culture of their original root to be their own.

As stated by Stuart Hall in his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged

outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not one and for all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories - and histories have their real addresses us as a simple factual 'past' since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always - already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification the unstable points of identification or stature which are made within the discourses of history and culture. (Hall 1993:392-403)

The sense of loss or rootlessness is further intensified when these people face discrimination and marginalized in their host countries. Brij V Lal writes in *Chalo Jahaji* In Fiji, Indians had to face the brunt of racism from the Europeans as well as the native Fijian leaders. Lal has provided details about the political conditions in Fiji in his book *Broken Wave*. Before Fiji gained independence in 1970 two political parties were

formed. These two parties were ethnically based. In fact racial politics developed in Fiji since 1950 till the coups of 1987. (Lal 165-315) Even after that, other coups followed. The upheavals caused by coup events a number of Indian families migrated from Fiji and settled in democratic countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada etc.

After migrating to a foreign country, people feel aloof and alien in their host countries and ultimately they are driven to search for their own identity, their own roots. Gradually these Indo-Fijians felt attachment towards their own roots. On returning Fiji after his visit to India, Lal writes, curiously, it is in India that I discovered the depth of my Fijian roots. (Lal 30) For Rajendra Prasad, visit to India is like a pilgrimage in which he found "a new joy and a new identity." (Prasad 41) He asserts that after his visit to India,

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 respect 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. (Prasad 43)

Conclusion:

The identity issues reflected in the writings of Indo-Fijians show that culture and identity are something for which people need to find their original

roots. People may temporarily forget their own culture or identity but ultimately they return to their own culture and find the true identity.

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