

A Tribute to Pt. Totaram Sanadhya - A Visionary Girmitya By Dr. Satish Rai

He was transported to Fiji as 17-year-old girmitya...he returned to India after 21 years as Pt Totaram Sanadhya. He championed the abolishment of the Indian indenture (girmit) system

In 1893, 17-year-old Totaram left his home in Agra to look for work in Prayagraj. He had lost his father earlier and his older brother had gone to Calcutta for work. Totaram had left his widowed mother behind in Agra. He was unsuccessful in getting a job. It is then, according to him in his book *My 21 Years in Fiji*, he was tricked by local recruiters to agree to indenture and was transported to Calcutta along with many more. There he tried to get out of indenture agreement and join his brother. He was prevented from doing so and was then transported to Fiji.

After completing his 5-year indenture (girmit) in Rewa area with much difficulty, including attempted suicide in *bhootlen* (ghost line) where he was given shabby accommodation away from rest of the fellow girmityas, he launched concerted efforts to improve the lives of fellow girmityas. He corresponded to even Gandhi on the terrible conditions of the girmityas in Fiji and asked for his assistance. He was instrumental in collecting money for the passage and other costs of Manilal Doctor to come to Fiji to assist girmityas in legal matters. He wrote to press in India about the issues of the girmityas.

In the meantime, he learnt Hindu religious texts and being a Brahman, became a priest. In 1914, nearly 1 year before Mahatma Gandhi did, Totaram returned to India on advice from Manilal Doctor. After 21 years since leaving India as 17-year-old Totaram, he returned home to Agra as Pandit Totaram Sanadhya. He met with Pt Banarsidas Chaturvedi in nearby Firozabad; who assisted him to write his time and work in Fiji in a book *Mera Ikkis Warsh Fijidwip Mei*, which was later translated into *My Twenty-One Years in Fiji*. This book was widely read in India.

M. K. Gandhi also went to South Africa in 1893 as a 23-year-old lawyer. His passage and one-year salary were paid by an Indian businessman in South Africa. He was called to South Africa to fight the legal battle of his benefactor there. In 21 years in South Africa Gandhi did a lot of things for the free Indian migrants living there as well as the girmityas. He even took 800 free Indians there in around 1896.

Gandhi returned to India via London nearly a year after Totaram did. He returned as Mahatma Gandhi and later became the father of the nation.

It is now being recognised that Pt Totaram Sanadhya's work in Fiji, his correspondence to India and others plus his book *My 21 Years* plus other articles, had played a crucial role in the Indian indenture (girmit) abolishment movement in India. He personally, along with Kunti, his fellow girmitya in Fiji, campaigned extensively in India against girmit.

Hence it is such a pity that Pt Totaram Sanadhya's enormous contributions to the welfare of girmityas in Fiji and to India's first national political campaign in form of abolition of Indian indenture system has been consigned to the dustbin of history in India as well as globally.

For example, in Fiji schools have been named after Mahatma Gandhi and even in the name of Charles Andrews (Gandhi's envoy to Fiji). I don't recall any such school dedicated to Pt Sanadhya. I don't recall even a tiny monument in his name!

I personally dedicate 2020 to the memory, contributions and legacy of this brave son of India and Fiji who played a huge role in ending the dreadful girmit system in 1917 and termination of all the existing indenture agreements in 2020.

Dr. Satish Rai is Director, Director-Indian Diaspora Council of Australia Inc. (IDCA). Dr Rai is Sydney based academic, film/tv producer, journalist and community development worker. He was born in Fiji where he received his primary, secondary and part of his tertiary education (University of South Pacific & Fiji School of Medicine). He migrated to UK in 1980 and after working as a Metropolitan police officer for five years, (1982-1987) he retired to complete his BA (Hons) degree in Sociology, majoring in race equality issues. He became a politician (elected councillor in London Borough of Greenwich, 1990-94), and a community development officer; becoming a Principal Race Equality Officer for a London Borough Council. He is creator of Raivision Academy of Film, TV & Music. In 2011, he completed a profession Doctor of Creative Arts degree (in film production) from the same university. This involved making a documentary drama based his research thesis "which was on exile of the Indian girmityas in Fiji". Dr Rai's had made a film based on his research – In Exile at Home – A Fiji Indian Story; recipient of the prestigious Uttar Pradesh Apravasi Bharatiya Ratna Award.

