

Swadeshi Giritology

**A Critical Study of Eurocentric History of the
Indian Indenture System with Indian perspective**

Dr. Satish Rai



Introducing Swadeshi Giritology

I started to study the Indian indenture System in 1988 as a part of my Sociology BA Honours degree course in London. Because of my experience of racism in the Metropolitan Police service (1982-87) and as a volunteer at the Greenwich Action Committee against Racist Attacks (GACARA) after resigning from the Met Police, I took of Race Studies as my core subject in the degree course.

This was the first time I read about the Eurocentric racism that coincided with the European colonial expansions. I read about the European strategies of appropriating native land, near wiping out of the original inhabitants of these lands and mass transportation of natives of other countries to provide free or cheap labour for European profits. Soon I linked the transportation of Africans as slaves and Indians as indentured Indians (*girmityas*) as two sides of the same coin.

In 1994 I wrote a book *Silent Cries-a Journey through 4 Continents* in which I articulated the connection between the African Slavery and Indian indenture system which had replaced it when slavery was eventually abolished. The second part of the book dealt with how the Eurocentric ideology thus built contributed to racism in UK and rest of Europe.

In 1996 I decided to complete my MA degree that I had started in London before migrating to Australia. My study shifted from Social Policy & Administration to Communication & Cultural Studies and my focus this time was on Fiji. I wanted to take a closer look at Fiji, which I had left some 16 years ago. My thesis was Colonial Legacy and Political Coups in Fiji. An integral part of Fiji's colonial policies included transportation, exploitation and exile of some 60,500 young Indian men, women and children to Fiji.

During this one year study I read for the first time many books on the Indian indenture system that had brought the Indians to Fiji. I had felt at that time that these books looked at Fiji's indenture system in isolation not only from the Indian indenture system that had started in 1828, but also in isolation from the African slavery as well as transportation of Irish people to Americas and British underclass as convicts to Australia. I felt at that time that if those writing about the indenture system (*girit pratha*) had linked Fiji's indenture system with the much longer and wider European strategy of illegal foreign native land acquisitions, decimation of local native populations and mass transportation of human beings of other countries for free or cheap labour, their writings would have provided a better accounts of Fiji's indenture system.

For my Doctor of Creative Arts degree I studied Fiji's indenture system in much greater detail from 2005 to 2011. My thesis *In Exile at Home-a Fiji Indian Story* was published in a form of a written thesis and a 45 minute documentary drama by the same name. This four year long study convinced me that Fiji's indenture (*girit*) history was mainly written in isolation from the dreadful European colonial expansion strategies that was triggered when Christopher Columbus landed in the Caribbean while trying to find an alternate route to facilitate trade with India when Europe found its land route to India was cut off by the Muslims.

Having lived, worked and studied in UK for 15 years, I could work out why the European men writing Fiji's indenture (*girit*) history would be inclined to justify the system in favour of the European colonisers. I also had some idea as to why the descendants of the *girmityas* would write uncritically about Fiji's indenture (*girit*) history and often regurgitate what the white men had written about it.

I often wondered about why little voice or concern was raised in Fiji or in the global *girit* diaspora about many misrepresentations and inconsistencies inherent in the white men and the brown men's writing on Fiji's *girit* history. On the other hand my work on *girit* since 1994 had revealed to me that the history of Fiji's *girit* both by white and brown men (it is only recently brown women have started to write about it), had adversely impacted the descendants of the *girmityas* about how they viewed Fiji's *girit* and *girmityas*.

I also benefitted by visiting India regularly since 1994 and to date I have visited India some 20 times. I have not visited India as a tourist but first as a person who was searching for his identity and ancestral

roots and later as a film maker to make films and to search for ancestral roots of others. These visits took me to many parts of India; to the cities as well as to many villages. More importantly I visited all the states from where some 1.2 million young Indian men, woman and children were transported to the European colonies mainly to provide cheap labour to colonial plantations. It is estimated that total number of Indians transported to colonial countries which Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Malaysia increases to some 3.5 million.

I visited Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Punjab, Gujarat, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh as well as Kolkata from where all the girmityas left the shores of mother India; majority of them were kept in the colonies to ensure continues supply of cheap labour as well as to reduce the expenses of recruiting and transporting new Indians to the colonies as well as save repatriation expenses. I have proved this in case of Fiji girmityas in my doctoral thesis and hope researchers would do similar researchers in all other former girmity colonies. This is one aspect of research on global girmity which is presently lacking. This research is urgently needed to counter the damaging Eurocentric reasons provided by the white historians, and parroted by the brown researchers, as to why the girmityas did not return to their homes and families in India.

Since 2011 I have produced 5 documentary films in India, including 3 films in Milaap: Discover Indian Roots trilogy. During the making of these three films I visited many villages and homes of girmityas transported to Fiji, Trinidad & Tobago, Mauritius, South Africa and Sri Lanka. I spoke to many people in each of these villages, including many descendants of the girmityas. From them I learnt a lot about the girmityas and the fact that many of them still remember their ancestors who had been taken away from them more than 140 years ago. The landscapes in these areas, the fields and well built social structures leads to the question; why would the girmityas want to willingly leave their families, village and country to live in an unknown country many thousands of miles away? The second question is why they would not want to return to their families and the well established social structures after discovering that they had to break their backs on barren land for pittance and where they did not have any social infrastructures that existed back in India?

But for the most important question was that how people who may not have ever visited India wrote so much about their history. A few may have gone to India for a few weeks or months during their academic pursuits and imagined that they knew all that was to be known about 5000 plus years of Indian history and people to justifiably write about the Indians who were transported to the colonies as girmityas.

For few years I noticed that a few more researchers, scholars and writers who began to critically examine the existing misplaced and misleading girmity history. I also noticed that a few universities across the world began hosting conferences on girmity and many of them featured the brown 'sepoys' of the Eurocentric versions of girmity history. I also came across a white man with substantial amount of grants to influence girmity conferences and buy out at least one brown person to help him in his perseverance with the old Eurocentric girmity history. If this trend continues I see the white men's version of girmity and girmityas resurfacing and they would employ the brown 'sepoys' to defend their historical engagement of mass human trafficking to maximise profit for European.

Recently I proposed publication of a Girmitya Encyclopaedia or a Concise History of Global Girmityas to provide an alternative version of the global girmity history to counter the current Eurocentric version of global girmity history. This proposal has met with some success and the projects of such publication will be discussed at Girmity Conferences in India in January 2019.

A few months ago I received via email a link to Rajiv Malhotra's video titled *Rajiv Malhotra's Lecture at British Parliament on 'Soft Power Reparations'* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDvNGAQhSYs>). This was the first time I had watched anything from Rajiv Malhotra. I was very impressed with his address in this video and decided to explore him more. I watched another video which include his address at Oxford titled: *My Oxford Lecture on 'Decolonizing Academics'* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVIM_a8lmBI). I identified a lot with the second video of Rajiv Malhotra. I shared a lot of what he had stated in this lecture and a lot of

things that he stated in his hour long address resonated with my own thoughts collected over my 25 years study of Indian history and my work on Fiji and global girmith history and heritage.

In this short essay I will illuminate on some of the pertinent issues that Rajiv Malhotra has highlighted in his Oxford address. The first thing that impressed me is that he saw the colonial rule in India not confined just to the 200 years of British Raj but with the start of the European colonial and imperial expansion starting way back in 16th century. Since 1988 I have formed a firm belief that the Indian indenture system (girmith pratha) is intrinsically linked to that period and neither the British Raj nor global girmith history can and should be studied in isolation. I would also like to add here is knowledge of how the British political system, tertiary education system and major government institutions as police services work. A good understanding of these institutions would provide a good glimpse into the psyche of the ruling class of Britain of the past and today. This is essential to understand how and why the British and the other European countries sought out alternative route to India, stumbled upon the Americas, appropriated the already occupied land, killed off the original inhabitants and began a 400 year trade in mass human trafficking for cheap labour and profit. Any study of any aspect of the British and European colonialism without a thorough understanding of the above would leave a huge gap in the grasp of that aspect and would fall short of providing a good understanding of the same. During the 400 plus years of global land and human exploitation of the Americas, Aborigines, Irish, Africans and Indians, the white writers have become experts in justifying the unjustifiable. They have also managed to create what Malcolm X called *the home niggers* (referring to the African slaves who sided with their white masters as opposed to the field niggers who generally rebelled against their white master) and Rajiv Malhotra has called the brown sepoys 2.0 in the case of Indian academics and writers. Any writer who now critically examines the girmith history must be aware of these facts.

Moving on Rajiv Malhotra mentions post colonial writers such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Ramachandra Guha. He states that he has read all of them and continues:

...the courageous, imaginative, creative project I don't see in the academy.
That is why before academy can claim that they are decolonising they got to decolonise themselves.

I too read these writers during my academic life and did not give much credence to their work. For me most of what I read of their work made little sense. What I personally identified with Rajiv Malhotra's statement is that the academics who *...claim that they are decolonising they got to decolonise themselves*.

For me my decolonising process started that day I landed in London in the cold winter day of November in 1980. As the car I was travelling entered the city of London from Heathrow airport, I saw a white man cleaning the street. In Fiji I had never seen a white person ever working, let alone working on the streets of Fiji. They mainly lived in large bungalows in exclusive residential areas which were generally not accessible to non-whites. Even after Fiji had gained independence in 1970, the white people generally behaved like colonial masters in Fiji. Seeing this white man cleaning a London street was a revelation to me and at that moment all the illusions that I had about the white men being superior beings disappeared. During the 15 years I lived, studied and worked in UK, I had many opportunities to study the white men's Britain at close quarters as a policeman, politician and community worker. The experience was instrumental in erasing the colonial handover that I had accumulated due to growing up in colonial Fiji, where the system operated to remind us about Fiji being a colonial enterprise. I distinctly remember the flag ceremonies during which we sang *God Save the Queen*. Even the majestic illusion of the British monarchy was shattered by the shenanigans of the royalty during this period.

Rajiv Malhotra further states that the post colonial studies that had started in 1970s with Said's publication *Orientalism* produced a lot of good work. However he asserted that:

But they did not know how to replace the colonial narrative that they were decolonising with something correct about India.

This struck a cord with me because my reading of the academic literature on girmityas revealed to me that the most of the writers had failed to critically examine the western narratives of the girmityas and replace them with alternative narratives that told the history of girmityas from the girmityas perspective or from a perspective that challenged the western narratives that justified girmityas with the narrative that exposes how and why the *girmityas pratha* (system) was started by the British and other colonial powers to fuel their colonial endeavours.

For me it is essential part of public writing that *purva paksha*, due diligence is done on any topic before the writing is shared on public platforms. This is what I have been doing since I started writing on public issues way back in late 80s. This started with writing the first ever policy and procedure on service delivery to victims of racism and addressing racism in Greenwich. This document became a policy for London Borough of Greenwich and was later became a model for other local governments in UK. In order to write this policy I did a thorough research in Greenwich and read whole lot of books on racism in UK and other parts of the world. Without that research, *purva paksha*, such convincing policy and procedure could not have been written. Rajiv Malhotra states:

Need to know Indian grand narrative in order to know what you are replacing with. It is one thing to destroy and another to construct. You need both...so you need to have both disruptions of what you don't need and a construction of what you do need. So post colonial people were very good at disrupting colonial enterprise but when it came to constructing there was a big problem.

For me what this translates to is that those writing on grand narrative of India or girmityas must first undertake a very wide research and get to understand all those pertinent factors from the history that shapes the grand narrative of India or British imposed Indian girmityas pratha. Absence of such in-depth research will only provide only partial truth at best and more likely half truth that both Indology and Girmityalogy seems to presently have.

Next I wish to highlight something Rajiv Malhotra has said about India that struck a cord with me as far as girmityas literature is concerned. He said:

India was land of exporting knowledge...there were knowledge centres; they were Cambridge and Oxfords of that era...the idea of a knowledge producing society is well documented...This got dismantled in the Mogul era, while these universities (Nalanda, Taxila and others) got dismantled and new ones were not built so a civilization took a different turn.

The writers of girmityas have almost universally stated that the girmityas were illiterate. This means that they were uneducated, uninformed, ignorant, not conversant or untaught. From the first day that I read this I felt that something was wrong with the description of the girmityas as illiterate. From my early childhood I did Hawan and read Ramayana. I also books on Gita, Mahabharata and books on general history of India. I had done these entire well before I read the first book on girmityas in my mid 20s. As a child I used to sit and talk with Bholu, a girmityas counting his last days at Natabua Old Peoples Home. He could multiply and tell you square root of any number correctly. We tested him with a calculator, a awesome gadget in that era. He certainly was not illiterate!

My childhood readings and experiences as well as later research and visits inform me that the girmityas could never be labelled as illiterate. They were products of more than 5,000 years of enduring civilisation. As noted by Malhotra, this civilisation was somewhat interrupted by the Islamic and British invasion and rule; but not entirely destroyed. The question that arises here is why these academics, scholars would and writers derogatorily label the millions of Indians as illiterate? The answer may lie in what Malhotra goes on to state

For me colonisation starts with the Mogul era; you cannot dismiss that. And then the Portuguese era; and then the British era...then the colonisation by the brown sepoys today based in Oxford and various other places who became the new intellectual elite bringing the colonial lens; wearing and looking at India through colonial lenses. I mean that is the new canonicalization. So

these are sepoy 2.0. The first sepoy 2.0 were the type who fired bullets at the Jallianwala bagh under general Dyer's command and they the sepoy 2.0 that fought for the British in so many wars and the new sepoy 2.0 are not wearing the military uniforms of the British and carrying Union Jack. They are intellectuals and they are basically working for a western framework and intellectual apparatus. They are very important mercenaries in that sense working for the western apparatus.

Based my research and readings I have come to a conclusion that many of the academics on girmity also fall into the above definition of Malhotra. I suspect many of them have gained their higher education, especially their MA and PhD from the universities of the west; and hence were subjected to the western apparatus mentioned by Malhotra in his Oxford address. Many of their studies may well have been financed by the west and hence they would have had to stick to the strict rules and regulations of the western academia. They would have had to work within the strict straight jacket of the western academic ideologies that have been in operation since the western colonial adventurism going back to the 16th century. The white west knows all, including what is best for the non-whites and the non-whites must be guided by them. I am alluding to the post-colonial academics and scholars of 1950s to perhaps early 2000.

Malhotra states in his Oxford address and in many of his other addresses that the west still think that they own the exclusive right to de-colonial studies of the former colonies. Here he states:

It is easy for them to say we are decolonising. Why do you need to do it? We are going to do decolonising. We were told at Oxford, one of the reactions was why is he going to talk about decolonisation? Doesn't he know we have whole lot of mechanisms? We find it insulting that somebody should come and talk about decolonisation. In other words insiders of one of the biggest colonial enterprise in the world, which is Oxford, feel that they have the exclusive right to decolonise and it is not something that outsiders should ever talk about.

He also mentions that the person who led the objection to his address at Oxford was a lecturer there; a brown sepoy 2.0, who may well have been a puppet in the hands of his white Oxford masters. I have come to know that a complaint has been lodged to investigate the attempt to stop Malhotra speaking at Oxford. If the complaint is not stifled, we would come to know who this person is. Name of a brown sepoy 2.0 has already come up.

Malhotra goes on to say what I have been thinking and say to a few about the issue of decolonising the colonised minds of the academics who have been regurgitating the history of girmity written by the white men. He states:

So one of the key decolonising process is to decolonise the academic people themselves, especially those people who claim to be in the post colonial studies need to be decolonised.

I have stated that in order to deconstruct the colonial history told by the west and the brown sepoy 2.0, and replace it with a Swadeshi Girmityology; we have to be post-post colonial thinkers and writers. In simple terms it means that the brown sepoy 2.0 have to get rid of their colonial hangovers and re-examine the girmity history from a fresh angle. It means that they should first understand thoroughly the reason for mass transportation of humans and inhuman exploitation of them by the Europeans as an integral part of their colonial expansions from the 15th century. It also means that they have re-look at the white writers of the girmity history as their attempt to justify this system of human trafficking, either intentionally or otherwise. That is not to say that these white writers did not provide accounts of global girmity. They could not have written on girmity without including some accounts of the system. However there are sufficient inaccuracies and justifications and so on in their writings from it can be easily concluded that they were justifying recruitment, transportation, exploitation and finally the exile of the girmityas by the colonialists.

I have come across a lot of writings by the brown sepoys 2.0 which tells me that they have not done purva paksha, due diligence, on the Eurocentric writers. They simply parroted what the white male writers wrote, with some additional information interspaced among them. Malhotra states:

The study of India called the Indian Indology enterprise is: ...that enterprise after independence shifted with a large number of Indians being given custody of that enterprise in India and in the west.

I feel the same about the indentured Indian enterprise or the global girmity enterprise. Malhotra's statement in reference to Indology may well be applicable to Girmityology. He states:

So it started out with 5 stages of Indology after independence. All these 5 stages are made in the west and imported into India; none of them in the Indian social theory. None of them were pioneered by an Indian...So the first was Marxism brought to India. Second was post colonial studies...the third was subaltern study...the fourth was post modernism. Post modernism stated that grand narratives are not good, grand narratives are bad...let Indians deconstruct their own grand narrative, which means that breaking of their own foundation. Let me tell you the post modern project has been an export project with India as the most successful market.

The brown sepoys 2.0 of Girmityology most likely went through the above 5 post independent stages because they were also subjected to the same western system of education that was imposed by the west in India. What these academics and writers failed to grasp is that Girmityology needed to be and must be studied and understood from the perspective of the girmityas and instead of being voices of the colonialists, any girmity writing must be voices of the girmityas. Malhotra states:

So what the left and the post colonialist and subalterns who became post modernist did not understand is that Indians have a natural need, just like anyone else, to have a grand narrative, so that they can pass on a positive story of who we are.

For me the brown sepoys 2.0 of Girmityology have largely failed to speak for the girmityas. In the process they have continued the white men's strategies to demean the girmityas. I feel this is unforgivable because what they have written has had damaging impact on the millions of the descendants of the global girmityas. One is that majority of the descendants of the girmityas feel ashamed of the girmityas, mainly because of what the white men and the brown sepoys 2.0 have written about them and India generally.

However in recent years a few Girmityologists have begun to deconstruct the girmity history written by the white men and the brown sepoys 2.0. I also receive emails and messages from descendants of the girmityas who wish to challenge the old versions of girmity history. Malhotra echoes the voices of these people when he states:

Indians got sick and tired of being told we are bad people, we have nothing but violence, we are uncivilised and we need westerners to come and civilise us...

Similarly the descendants of the global girmityas are getting and tired of being told that their ancestors were illiterate, ran away from their homes in India to seek better lives in the colonies, their girmitya women were prostitutes from Calcutta, that they chose to stay in the colonies, about the stupidity of *Kala Pani* and so on.

Finally I agree with Malhotra's soft power reparation in which he states:

I propose soft power reparation in that regard which has nothing to do with money; it has to do with restoration of history; restoration of texts, restoration of whole intellectual ideas we have and which we got distorted,

got taken away. The whole project of decolonising for me is the process of working together to restore our grand narrative, undoing the harm the extreme left have done to destroy our grand narrative.

Malhotra proposed soft power reparation strategy for Indology. I would like to add Girmityology in that strategy. I am very surprised that no one has so far has not included Girmityology as an interregal part of Indology. In the first such attempt I have written a long essay titled *A Glimpse into the Forgotten Girmitya families of India*. It is important to note that all the global girmityas were transported to the colonies as Indians and they lived and died as Indians in the colonies. The millions of their family members from whom they were stolen were Indians and their descendants are Indians as well.

I propose that an integral part of both Indology and Girmityology should include study of the impact of girmity on the families of the millions of the girmityas. This should include the socio-economic impacts of girmity pratha on these families, the villages they lived in and the states where these families and villages were located. The study must also look at the impact of girmity on these families today. The loss of young Indian men, women and children is in many ways more horrendous than the stolen generations in Australia. The dreadful stolen generation children of Australia were removed from their families and taken to missions in Australia. The stolen children of India were transported to thousands of miles across the seas to the colonies, often without knowledge of their parents. Majority of them were prevented from returning to their homes in India. Many had committed suicide; majority died painfully in exile in these colonies.

India as well as the former colonies has forgotten the girmityas as well as their families in India. They all have consigned them to dust bin of history, forgetting that millions of the descendants of this terrible tragedy of humanity are still living.

Swadeshi Girmityology is not only about rectifying distorted and disturbing history; it is also about providing justice to the girmityas, their families in India and the descendants of both

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