

The Adventure of Indenture: A New Anthology

Satendra Nandan¹

We Mark Your Memory: Writing from the Descendants of Indenture, ISBN 978-1-912250-07-3, School of Advanced Study, University of London, pp175.

On the eve of ANZAC Day, 2018, I received a copy of a rich and diverse collection of writings titled *We Mark Your Memory: Writing From the Descendants of Indenture*. The volume of 175 pages is elegantly edited by the gifted Guyanese writer David Dabydeen, with Maria del Piklar Kaladeen and Tina K Ramanarine.

Dabydeen, originally from Guyana, has been a pioneer in the narration of the indenture experience, giving it a universal resonance through his poetry and fiction. His talented co-editors also live in London. The anthology is published by the School of Advanced Study, University of London, under the aegis of Commonwealth Writers and the Commonwealth Foundation. It was published during the recent CHOGM meeting.

To mark the centenary of the abolition of indenture in the British Empire, this anthology is a selection of pieces by descendants of indentured labourers from across the Commonwealth. Included are poems, short stories, essays, personal reminiscences, exploring the legacy of an experience that shaped and changed the contours of many postcolonial nations, some large, some quite small. The Commonwealth comprises one-fourth of the world's population.

The volume has a special significance in the Australasian region. Fijian writing features prominently: there's a short story, 'Famished Eels', by Mary Rokonadravu, a poem 'Gandhi and the Girmitya' by

¹ Nandan declares that he is a contributor to this Anthology

Satendra Nandan, and one prose piece by Brij V Lal, 'The Tamarind Tree'.

The editors in their introductory remarks recognize the transnational literary legacy of indentured labourers' descendants as 'rich and substantial', including V S Naipaul and others. Indentured creative writing by writers like Subramani, Raymond Pillay and Satendra Nandan merit a special mention, among others.

A new Fijian piece in the volume is 'Brotherhood of Boat: Fijians and Football in North America' by Akhtar Mohammed.

Akhtar is a new voice to me and he concludes his essay on Fijian football in North America with these words: 'I'm sure those few to set foot on the *SS Leonidas* never imagined that their great-grandchildren would become formidable football players, with organized leagues and international tournaments. I'm sure the British didn't either. We exist, as a periphery among the periphery, but quite content with that, always moving forward and forever united by football.'

In the echoes of football and the footfalls of the girmityas, 'moving forward' is as good a message as any, even if not always united. Fiji, of course, has its greatest opportunity now beyond the football fields.

That the volume should have arrived at my desk on the eve of ANZAC Day commemoration may be coincidental but it has a certain poignant connection for me. The girmityas were the diggers of the soil where they planted new seeds which led to the greening of many a landscape.

ANZAC in Australia is commemorated with dawn services on 25 April in many parts of the island continent: remembering and celebrating the sacrifices of young Australian Diggers at Gallipoli and beyond during the Great War where so many young people perished in the name of the Great Empire, thousands of miles away from their home-soil.

It's become a sacred memory in the Australian mind and national imaginary. And one is always deeply moved by the faces of these passing generations, their hands held by their children and grandchildren in morning parades.

Exactly 62,000 Diggers perished in those imperial wars of European powers. And there were many thousands of Indian soldiers from British India who died under the Union Jack, defending the Empire. All in all, 888, 246 British and 'Commonwealth' soldiers were killed in the Great War.

But as they say the army marches on its stomach. Around 60 000 indentured labourers were carted from India, via Calcutta and Madras, to work on the plantations owned by Australian and British interests in once

distant Fiji Islands. More than two million such peasants were transported to the colonies of Great Britain across the seven seas, from Mauritius to Guyana, South Africa to the South Pacific.

The British Indenture was an imperially devised system after the abolition of slavery in the 1800s to supply labour to the plantations. The volume commemorates the centenary of the end of indentureship in the English Empire, with a variety of 'Englishes' with their special grammar, accents and memorable tales.

Indian indenture bracketed the period of the Atlantic slave trade and spread African, Chinese, European and Indian populations, among many others, across four continents. Some were brought to Queensland and subsequently transferred to the Fiji islands where the CSR company owned the sugar estates.

In the nineteenth century, it was cheap, agricultural workforce that the imperial conquests required or how else could one maintain the many colonies and build the cobbled streets of several English towns and those huge manor-houses in the English countryside, some now owned by the Indians from the subcontinent or mortgaged to Chinese trading interests. The first Indian indentured labourers had arrived in Mauritius in 1834. In 1838, John Gladstone, father of the future prime minister William Gladstone, engaged a Calcutta firm to recruit labour force for his estates in Guyana. The migrants became known as 'Gladstone's coolies', perpetuating 'a new system of slavery'.

In a brief but brilliant introduction the editors give us an historical bird's eye-view of this major strand in imperial history. In fact, the indenture system was started even before slavery became the most brutal form of recruitment of Africans across the Middle Passage. Millions perished; many millions survived--that history is still finding its truth in the experimental democracy of the Americas.

Although the anthology is inspired by the period of Indian indenture, 1834-1917, White European labourers were taken to North America in the seventeenth century, under the indenture system, prior to even slavery. It extended itself to the Caribbean sugar plantations. This was followed by the cruel enslavement of Africans, and later by the Chinese labourers.

History of course has its own inexorability: China is today the most economically powerful nation in our contemporary world.; there are 53 nations on the African continent. After European diasporas, the great migrations are the African, Chinese and Indian. Most of us are part of the

consequences of historical forces and revolutions.

The uniqueness of the Girit diaspora is that there's no evidence of any genocide perpetrated by our forebears. And that is an extraordinary achievement and blessing.

The struggle goes on today even as human traffic is still prevalent and refugees are created daily in new imperial wars. Many Caribbean descendants are still fighting for their citizenship in Mother England, the 'Windrush generation'. And in Mother India, Dalits and women are on the march for equality and recognition of their human dignity, denied over many millennia.

The editors give a larger historical perspective of this human trade:...' it is important to acknowledge the presence of other groups in nineteenth century indenture system. In the Caribbean, indentured labourers from Africa, the American South and Madeira had arrived in the region from 1834 onwards. In addition, before its abolition in 1917, indenturees travelled to Australia, Fiji, Malaysia (Malaya), Mynamar (Burma), South Africa and Sri Lanka. Within the Caribbean, while Guyana and Trinidad received the majority of such labourers, places like Belize (British Honduras), Grenada, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis and St Vincent all had indentured populations too. In the Caribbean, Mauritius, and South Africa, Chinese workers formed part of the indentured workforce and more than 60 000 South Sea Islanders, were indentured, many forcibly, to Queensland, Australia'.

This is still the hidden history of many migrants and their descendants. They connect us at so many levels of our human condition, in inhumane circumstances.

The volume has writings by thirty authors: it's selection done by the editors who have attempted to give a comprehensive picture of Indenture from several postcolonial territories. Often the pieces give glimpses of history and the details of life on the plantations. It's written by the children and grandchildren of the indentured labourers, most of whom were illiterate but educated in oral traditions and narrations of their past in myths and legends of great force and sustaining power. Their descendants give them a face, voice, value and identity.

The girit people had acquired their self-knowledge from the two great Indian epics, their exilic experience, religious rituals, festivals, and celebrations that gave them a sense of community on distant continents and islands.

In a deeper sense than Oz mateship, they were jahajibhais and jahajins--shipmates, men and women who had crossed the kalapani, black

waters, in the same boats-- thousands of them.

History is a good teacher but it seldom has worthy pupils. This lesson of being together is the greatest lesson of the gimit experience, our great adventure of indenture. It doesn't mean some facile façade of unity but an awareness that we are still in the same boat, sailing in the same seas and that we must learn to live and extend the boundaries of our knowledge and relationship to the land and its people who give breath to our lives and bones to our bodies.

Imagine I'm writing this in Canberra: what other civilization offers my children the great gifts of the most ancient continuous culture of the Aboriginal people on an island continent? How profoundly enriching is their Indian-Fijian and Australasian inheritance. And to be part of the Indian-Pacific oceans.

Today many descendants of the indenturees are in the imperial cities from London to New York, from Toronto to Sydney. We're migrants of both mind and heart. But the undertow of much of the writing in the volume is about remembering not forgetting, about loss and love for the lost lives and landscapes. Life is really an imaginative recreation of the past that is yet not history but a living memory.

It's obvious that the great grandchildren of the gimitiyas remember their ancestors with a deeper affection than anyone else in the Indian diaspora.

And this is a strengthening experience for in the suffering of one's ancestors one also finds the resilience of the human spirit in circumstances which today are unimaginable, intolerable.

The sad episodes of Fiji and Fijians are not unique. What we make of it together by extending our boundaries and horizons could be the most enduring memorials to men and women who travelled thousand of miles across turbulent seas, surviving storms of many kinds, but created worlds from which we have travelled the world.

Their grandchildren and great grand children are giving meaning through words and narrations to their lives' myriad messages in words on pages, published from Nadi to London via New Delhi and New York. It's not a heritage of loss or shame, but one of pride and name. Few descendants of migrants have such an epic tale to tell in a world where history and bigotry have become the pitiless witnesses for what their winning ancestors did to defenceless peoples.

We Mark Your Memory gives glimpses of both the past and the possibilities inherent in an extraordinary experience of the Indian

migrants, outside the immediate ambience of the subcontinent.

It is, to me, the noblest epic of the Indian experience, not found even in the epical grandeur of the ancient epical texts. It's about the most ordinary men and women who charted an extraordinary destiny for us. It's our story.

The great challenge for us, in our part of the world, is: How do we mark this memory that is worthy of both the dead and the living, of the past and the future? Above all, worthy of ourselves.

Author:

Satendra Nandan's volume of poems, *The Loneliness of Islands*, was published in 2007. His fifth volume of poems *Across the Seven Seas* was published in March this year, marking the centennial of the abolition of indenture, 1917- 2017. He's an Emeritus Professor at the University of Canberra and a former cabinet minister from Fiji. He's a member of the world's first International Institute of Poetry Studies at UC and a Visiting Fellow at the Humanities Research Centre, ANU, and an Adjunct Research Professor at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, CSU, ACT.