

Re-visiting Migration and Memory in Satendra Nandan's Select Poems and Totaram Sanadhya's *The Haunted Lines*

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Abstract

Renowned Indian-origin personalities like V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukherjee, and Sujata Bhatt migrated from their homeland and achieved success in literature. In 1879, the first batch of Girmityas from India, under the agreement, arrived in Fiji in search of a better life, unaware that returning home was being erased from their lives. Many Indo-Fijian writers and historians, such as Subramani have preserved the history and memory of their ancestors' migration. Satendra Nandan is a well-known writer whose ancestors were Indian. His poetry reveals the struggles and pain they faced when they realized the dark reality of working on sugar plantations. The migration was not just a migration for them. It came with their establishment of a new identity, which was Indo-Fijian, and they thrived in the field of literature and politics. The paper is an attempt to trace out and focus on Nandan's poems, *Lines Across Black Waters* and *Sailing Together*, highlighting the agony of the migration of

Indians to Fiji, unaware of the misery that awaited them, by keeping the memory alive, and Totaram Sanadhya's *The Haunted Lines*, which depicts his personal story. The paper concludes that although migration had mentally devastated the Girmityas, it enabled Indo-Fijian writers like Satendra Nandan to succeed in education and politics, and that migration did not let them fall but instead helped them rise again to establish an identity for themselves. Today, the Girmitya writers are well known, and justice has been done to their future through their writings.

Keywords: Migration, Poetry, Girmityas, Identity, Struggle, Pain

Whether it is forced migration or migration under an agreement, like the Girmityas, Displacement from home is the hardest part a diaspora individual goes through. While the individual is still processing the displacement, the crisis of identity knocks at their door, and they try hard to deal with both displacement and identity issues. Their happiness at exploring the new land and a new job opportunity had given them the most traumatic moment of their lives. As Vijay Mishra pens in *The Diasporic Imaginary*, "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way" (1). The Girmityas' happiness had turned into misery, and every day was a struggle and a trauma for them in the sugar plantations. They missed their homeland, where they were never going back, but some chose to return after the five-year agreement ended, and the majority stayed to establish themselves in the host land.

Many Indo-Fijian writers and historians, such as Brij V. Lal, Totaram Sanadhya, Satendra Nandan, Vijay Mishra, and Sudesh Mishra, established themselves through their work that depicted the dark, traumatic history of their ancestors. Satendra Nandan, an Indo-Fijian

The writer was born in Fiji, and he is the third generation of his grandparents, who came to Fiji as indentured labourers. He is a well-known writer and a former Member of Parliament in Fiji. His works speak of the pain of the Girmityas and how they established themselves in

Fiji. In his poems *Tota's Tale* and *Sailing Together*, he depicts the pain, trauma and struggle of the Girmityas. The first batch of Girmityas arrived in Fiji from India in 1879. Ignorant of the reality ahead, Indians were sailing to Fiji in search of better work opportunities. *Sailing Together* illustrates the innocence of the Indians on the ship waiting for the destination to arrive as:

So we thought we were sailing together
 Across the ocean in the torn light of day
 Passages of joy and dark beauty
 Touched us in ripples of bliss. (Nandan,
 lines 1-4)

At dawn, the Indians began their journey by ship. The sea was the path to a life that they were not aware of, and that was filled with trauma and horror. The Indians had no option but to accept whatever awaited them. Their home was left behind, and Fiji was to be their new place to work and live. When they reached Fiji by ship, the journey was not an easy one because some of them died of illness and disease while sailing, and they could do nothing about it. However, they just accepted the process. Nandan has described this feeling of Girmityas in the poem *Sailing Together* as:

Suddenly the barren rocks reared:
 Shattered we awakened And knew:
 While sailing together We had drifted apart
 From the blood-bondage of our hearts (Nandan, lines 15-20).

Reaching Fiji, they had realized the most heartbreaking knowledge that they had lost many of their loved ones while sailing, and also, they had lost the connection with their families in India. The first-generation Girmityas are more attached to and rooted in their culture than those born after them. They knew then they had to establish a new identity in the host land, and

later faced the feeling of being different from the native Fijians. This is well enlightened by Bawa as:

First-generation migrants often experience an intense, visceral attachment to their homeland that is qualitatively different from that of their children. For the first generation, the homeland represents a fixed point of origin. Their identities were formed in a world where language, social status, and cultural rituals were “given” and unquestioned. In a new country they often face “otherization” or a loss of social status (e.g., A professional in the homeland becomes a laborer in the host country). (238)

The Girmityas who had lost their homes now had to work according to the given rules. Also, they had no option but to adopt Fiji's identity alongside India. They were given the place to establish themselves; they did not have a choice to discuss or select the place they wanted to work. Hence, a new identity with a lost home was established, and what remained was just the memory. The Girmityas in Fiji were given their rooms and assigned to work on the sugar plantations, but the way they were treated was distressing to all of them. Between all of this, they were adjusting to the new host land and quietly worked under the colonial rule, which nearly made them die. Totaram Sanadhya was also one of them who had come to Fiji and later returned to India to speak for the Indo-Fijians to end the slavery and the trauma they were receiving.

Migration for the Indians might have turned into a nightmare for them, but it did come up with a golden opportunity for them. Despite being under colonialism, these Indians established themselves at various platforms like education, along with dealing with an identity crisis and the feeling of nostalgia. Their Indian roots remained alive, and they passed them on to the next generation. However, the psychological feeling for Indians who suffered migration remains there. Dr Richa Bawa exemplifies migration as:

Migration has historically been central to the Indian experience, from colonial indenture to contemporary globalization. The movement of the Indians across continents has produced a rich body of Diaspora Literature that explores the psychological, cultural and social consequences of displacement. Indian diaspora literature articulates the tension between “roots”, associated with homeland and cultural origin, and “routes”, signifying journeys, migration, and transnational mobility. (238)

Sanadhya’s story, titled *The Story of the Haunted Line*, begins with Totaram recounting his arrival in Fiji. He reached Fiji on 28th May, 1893, under the agreement to work in the Nausori Plantation in the Rewa district, Fiji (Sandhya 133). Along with one hundred and forty companions, he was also to be allotted a house in the coolie line, but he got one that was haunted. All the Girmityas were new to the land, and new houses were about to become their residences while working under colonial rule. There were twenty-six coolie lines for the indentured labourers, and they had to stay there while working on the plantation. Each coolie line had twenty-four rooms, which were eight feet wide and twelve feet long. Three men used to live in one room, but married couples were given a separate room as they had kids (Sanadhya 133). He mentions the haunted line, where he was allotted the room. He describes this as:

Separately at a distance of six chains from these twenty-six lines was the ‘haunted line’ in which indigenous Fijians who were working for the company used to live.

When eight Fijians had died from illness, the rest of the Fijians left this line and ran away. Since then, this line got the name “haunted line”. No one was willing to live here.

No one would pass by that line at night. If any new man came to live there

without knowing about the line, as soon as he learned the story he fled from fear.

(Sandhya, pp 133)

Satendra Nandan has penned down the painful story of Sanadhya in *Tota’s Tale*.

Sandhya was allotted a separate room, which was no less than hell. In the voice of Sanadhya,

Nandan has depicted Totaram's feelings upon getting his room as:

I alone was sent to the haunted line
 It was there- apart, like a grave
 Saddening the landscape,
 An empty line of twenty-four rooms:
 Eight feet by twelve feet.
 Once it housed native workers
 Torn from their villages.
 Eight died; others fled
 Who would live among the dead?
 Homeless I had come in search of paradise
 This house of hell was now all mine. (Nandan, lines 9-19)

The process of trauma had begun for Sandhya the moment he was allotted his room. He was told not to leave the room and stay there, otherwise he would be sent to prison (Sanadhya 133). Totaram had cleaned the room all by himself, despite the struggle of dealing with the mosquitoes, rats and flies. He mentions this as, "Just when I sat down, mosquitoes from the tall grass outside, hungry from several days, clung to my body in hordes. There was no place on my body left open. Bumps rose all over my body from the bites" (Sanadhya 133).

Sandhya had a deep attachment with his cultural roots. His love and understanding of God and spirituality led him to bring The Gita, given to him by his brother, which helped him survive the colonial manipulation. While settling into the room, he was alone with the thought of just surviving the routine imposed by the colonizers, and Nandan reflects this feeling of Sanadhya as, "Survival is more than a technique/ Routine becomes ritual" (Nandan, lines 32-33).

Sanadhya indicates that the ration for only seven days was distributed and was not to

be shared with others. No extra food was to be given. He writes how and what the manager said while giving out the rations to the Giritiyas:

These supplies are for seven days' food. They should not be sold. Don't get anything else instead. Don't feed anyone else. Those who don't obey this order will be sent to prison for one to three weeks. If you finish the supply in the middle of the week, then you die of hunger. You won't get the supply from the office in the middle of the week. (Sanadhya 135).

The Gita, which Sanadhya received from his brother, was like a saviour to him. Upon learning of Sanadhya's knowledge of Indian mythology and spirituality, the Giritiyas were fascinated and sought his help whenever they needed it, as he knew it all. But later, he was tired of these people. He made them go away by telling them anything because the Giritiyas had gained trust and considered Totaram like a guru. Days in Sanadhya's life were beyond struggling, and the process of trauma did not end after he received his room. There were days when he had no food and had to work on an empty stomach. When he told the Sahab he was sick, he was told to go to the hospital for treatment, but he returned empty-handed. He did not even get to drink sugarcane juice from the sugar mill because he was told that workers were not allowed to drink it (Sandhya 143).

Sandhya had not eaten in the last three days, and he tried to attempt suicide by hanging with a rope, but a bite from a mouse, followed by a forceful knock at the door, had saved his life. Thinking the ghost was at his door, he was determined not to even face it. To his surprise, there was no ghost, but four Fiji men, and only one of them knew a little Hindi. One of them, named Samu, communicated to Sanadhya that they needed food, and upon hearing this, Sanadhya was disheartened, as he himself was having pangs of hunger. He had no food. However, Samu suddenly saw a pot in Sanadhya's room, with some rice in it, a leftover from days ago when Sanadhya had cooked. They all ate that rice, and Sanadhya was tremendously

grateful to God that the guests would not have to return on an empty stomach. He just watched those men eat, and later they left but returned with proper food, which Sandhya had not dreamt of, and he realized that his act returned to him as a blessing (Sanadhya 146). After giving him all the stock of food, Samu's eyes fell on a rope that Totaram used for attempting suicide, and took that away with him as it was useful for the boat (Sandhya 147).

The turn of events was just destined for Sanadhya. An empty stomach for 3 days and just a small act of kindness had blessed him. God had saved him from the trauma of hunger and from the struggle. Totaram's gift from his brother, *The Gita*, had made him survive the harsh realities of colonialism. His dark moments did not just make him weak, but also made him rise and work for his people. He wanted to make sure that his past would not be the same for other people, especially Indians. To address the horrors of the past, he began working with Indo-Fijians so they and others could participate in education, politics, and socio-cultural events.

As seen, the ancestors of the Indo-Fijians played a significant role in Fiji's political and economic development. The outcome of their battle was that the Labour Party of the Indo-Fijians emerged as a commanding political force in Fiji. As a result, many Indian migrants had risen to respectable posts in Parliament. However, despite all such hard work, recognition and identity, the Indo-Fijians still face racial discrimination in Fiji today.

Conclusion

Totaram Sanadhya came to Fiji for the best opportunity he had encountered. Little did he know that his days of pain, trauma, identity crisis, struggle, displacement and hunger would squeeze him later. However, he did not lose hope. His traumatic journey had begun the day he was allotted a room in the haunted lines. The room he was allotted was no less than hell, where he was to live alone with the insects flying all over. Keeping in mind the room's past, Sanadhya did not get frightened but chose to live every day. It was believed that the room was haunted and that anyone living there would experience unnatural feelings and fear. These Girmityas were away from their birthland, and in the host land, they were establishing an image for themselves by keeping the memory of India and the journey to Fiji intact in their hearts and minds. In *The Plight and the Metamorphosis of Indo-Fijians*, this has been exemplified as:

The girmityas' memories of India united them, made them distinct, and helped them create a home away from home. But what was important is in all these aspects, the girmityas adopted an egalitarian ethos and practicality and changed themselves (Sridhar and Vardhan 26).

This journey, filled with agony and struggle, had not let Totaram die or lose the war of slavery. He wrote about the history of how he faced the colonial trauma, and this past has been stored for years. Through Totaram's works and also those of other writers, many Indo-Fijians had reached an understanding of their ancestors, and how they strove and breathed the suffocating life in Fiji, where there were limited food rations, denied access to sugarcane juice, beatings and torture, and they just had to follow the rules from the colonizers. Sanadhya's story was published in Fiji but banned by the colonial authorities, and later published in 1991 in English by the Fiji Museum. After the end of the traumatic indenture period, Totaram had worked as a farmer, remained in Fiji for some years, became a respected

and known priest in Rewa, organized a petition signed by 200 Indians to request educational facilities and political representation for Indo-Fijians in Fiji, wrote his story, *Fiji Dweep Mei Mere Ikkis Varsh*, on returning to India. Many Indo-Fijians had denied going back to India because of the economic conditions and the socio-religious backwardness of the Indian rural society. Their society did not accept the Indians who returned to India. They were also purified on the banks of the Ganges in Banaras. So, due to the expensive arrangements required for all the religious ceremonies on their return to India, the Girmityas decided to stay back in Fiji with their new identity. Today, the future of the Girmityas has been very different from the past. The generations after the indenture ended brought up many Indo-Fijians who contributed to socio-political platforms and the economic department.

Satendra Nandan has respected the past of Girmityas and Totaram, and has narrated their history beautifully in *Sailing Together* and *Tota's Tale*. Not only Nandan and Sanadhya, but other writers/historians have also kept the history of trauma and pain alive, thereby bridging the gap between past and present. Sanadhya and Nandan have not only expressed the sufferings of Indo-Fijians in their writings but have also represented the Girmityas in the Parliament of Fiji by establishing a social and political organisation.

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