

# **A Glimpse into the Forgotten *Girmitiya* families of India**

**Dr. Satish Rai**



*Sukhdev and Gokul Rai from Utraula Uttar Pradesh India*

## ***A Glimpse into the Forgotten Girmitiya families of India***

On the second day of 2018 I took a breather from our post production work on our Bollywood film production and flew from the warm and beautiful Mumbai to the wintry Varanasi. I had one sole reason to go to this part of Uttar Pradesh, from where majority of the global girmitiyas were recruited, sent to Calcutta and later transported to many parts of the British and other European colonies. The reason for this visit was to search for the remaining relatives of a girmitiya called Nandlal.

Nandlal was 18 years old when he was 'recruited' by local recruiting agents known now as *arkatis*. He would have been taken from where he was recruited to some 700 kms to Calcutta (Kolkata) for vetting; medical examination and agreement to his indenture by putting his thumbprint on a document written in English and which he would not have read or understood even a word of. He would then be placed in a depot along with many others until such time when 400-500 of similarly recruited young Indian men, women and children were collected, sufficient for an economically viable transportation on specially commissioned ships. Nandlal made this journey on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of April 1900 on a ship named Rhine.

Nandlal left behind him his father Sudhalal, brother Babulal and uncle Ramlal. They lived in a village called Nadiapara, in the police area of Sarai Khwaja in the district of Sultanpur. This is the information which was provided by his descendant who now lives in Sydney, Australia. I have not known this person as the request to search for his ancestral home and relatives was communicated via social media.

Sultanpur is situated some 140 kms from the holy and the oldest city in the world, Varanasi. On the evening of my arrival in Varanasi I met with Milan bhai, a friend who had agreed to be my local guide. We planned the journey and the next morning we travelled by a hired van towards Sultanpur. Milan sat with the driver in front seat and I sat in the back. The journey was slow as a major road work was in progress which will eventually end up as a highway from Agra in the western Uttar Pradesh to Ballia in the eastern end of the state.

I did not mind the slow progress of my trip because it gave me a chance to enjoy the growing city and then the greenery of the rural fields and the constant activities of the people going about their daily business. It soon transported me to my village way back in my teen years in Fiji. This kind of life is non-existent in the many cities that I have lived and worked since leaving my village at the age of eighteen.

As I travelled my thoughts from my own village in Natabua Fiji Islands and my teenage visits to my relatives living in other villages in my district of Lautoka and other districts of Fiji led to reflect on my first visit to India to search for our own ancestral village in Uttar Pradesh. My interest in my ancestral home in India grew out of the results of the two racist coups that took place in Fiji in space of a few months in May 1987. I had witnessed this brutal acts unfold on the television in London. When I had left Fiji seven years prior to these defining events in Fiji, the island nation was known for peace and prosperity. Most of the descendants of the brutalized and exiled girmitiyas had almost forgotten girmit and girmitiyas and considered only Fiji as their homes. I was no different and even the 100th anniversary celebrations of the beginning of the Indian indenture system in Fiji in 1979 meant little for University of South Pacific friends and I. If it wasn't for appeasement of my British wife I would not have migrated to

UK. Fiji was known as a paradise and the way the world should be. Even when I visited Fiji from London in 1984 I had no reason to suspect that a few short years later the events in Fiji would irreversibly change Fiji and turn it from an almost developed country into a third world country and make me an exile in the farthest country from Fiji.

I cast my mind back to my first visit to the ancestral home of a Fiji girmitya in Uttar Pradesh, India. I arrived at the Delhi airport in 1994 and I was very fortunate to be met by my cousin Jayant Prakash at the airport. A last minute call from London to my brother Pramodh in Fiji informed me that Jayant was living in Delhi with his family. During a Chivas Regal and fiery fried fish session on the balcony of his beautiful flat in Haus Khas suburb of South Delhi, Jenu bhaiya, as cousin Jayant was fondly known by us all, informed me about his ancestral homes in Uttar Pradesh. I was vaguely aware even when I was living in Fiji that one of our relatives had visited his ancestral home in India several decades ago. According to Jenu, the ancestral home of his paternal grandfather was located in Surana village of Ghaziabad. New to India I did not have a clue where this village was but I was informed that it was not far from Delhi. Jenu informed me that his maternal grandparent's home was located much further away; in village of Diwakarpur and district of Basti in Uttar Pradesh.

The next morning Jenu took me to a bus depot in Delhi and we boarded an old bus to take us to Surana. Jenu had already informed his cousin in Surana that we were going to visit. After a rather slow and painful journey of approximately 3 hours to reach the bus stop which was located on the village fringe, we negotiated our way through a cluster of thatched houses to the home of Jenu's uncle. He was sitting on a roped bed, surrounded by members of his male family, relatives and a few villagers. I was struck by a few cows looking out towards us from a *tabela*, cattle shed. The crowd was gathered on a small open space next to this *tabela*. I found it very strange that cows were kept so near the living areas of the family in India. Back in Fiji cows, bullocks and larger animals were kept in open area away from the homes. This was one of the many things I discovered in India that was so different in Fiji and UK where I lived then.

I found someone standing in front of me with folded hands. He introduced me as Jenu's cousin and we exchanged greetings. By this time Jenu had walked up to his uncle. The uncle blessed him in traditional Indian fashion when Jenu bent down to touch his feet. I was a bit surprised and amused to watch this manner of greetings as this culture had almost disappeared from Fiji's socio-cultural scene. I had seen this happen only in Bollywood films that we were addicts of during my teen years in Fiji. Undecided what to do and perhaps compelled by Jenu's action, I moved forward and awkwardly bent down to touch his feet. To my relief he grabbed my shoulders and stopped me before my hands touched his feet. He blessed me and requested me to sit on a chair that was placed in front of him.

Jenu's uncle explained in Hindi that a few decades ago two of his family members had arrived in his village. One died in India due to illness and thus did not return to Fiji. The other did return to Fiji after his visit to his ancestral home. I recalled that as a teenager I did hear stories about this visit. I did not know of the person who had died in India, but did hear about 'Rajaram aaja's' Indian tour. Rajaram aaja was a well-known businessman in Ba, Fiji and a well-respected member of our extended family and

relatives. To date I still do not know exactly how I am related to him but I believe Jenu is directly related to him.

After drinking syrupy tea in small cups, I was taken for a tour around the family sugarcane farm. This was the first time I was looking at a sugarcane farm in India. Being born on a farmstead surrounded by sugarcane and having worked on the farms during teenage years, the sight of sugarcane farm took me instantly to my own farm in Natabua, Fiji Islands. It was like walking along the sugarcane farm pathways and memories came flooding back to me. I had left that farm some twenty years earlier and Fiji some fifteen years ago. Nostalgia was fused with the sense of realisation that the two sugarcane farms connected the ancestors of the girmityas (indentured Indians) to Fiji and rest of the global girmity colonies. At that time my knowledge of girmity issues was my undergraduate degree studies but sufficient to know that one of the leading factors that had compelled the British and other Europeans to recruit and transport Indians from India's sugarcane belt was their knowledge of sugarcane farming. Many of the older ones would have had experience of working on farms like that I was visiting in the village that was surrounded by sugarcane farms. The children and some of the women may not have actually worked on the farms, but would have had some knowledge of sugarcane farming. The highlight of the farm tour was the taste of sugarcane that was handed to me by one of the village boys who had joined us on the tour.

That night we had dinner in the village and stayed the night in a small room at Jenu's uncle's home. Jenu, being shorter and thinner than my larger 6 feet frame, slept well that night. I struggled to fit in the small bed with a thin mattress thrown on the roped bed. The next morning after a typical Indian breakfast Jenu's family bid us farewell and his cousin escorted us to the bus stop. Three hours later we were back in Delhi and then caught a rickshaw back to Jenu's rather comfortable flat in Haus Khas.

A few days later I ventured out on my own for the first time in India. Since arriving there I was escorted everywhere by Jenu and his wife. I learnt some of the vital tricks of surviving in India as a tourist. One of the best lessons that I learnt was the trick of bargaining when out shopping in India. The concept of bargaining is something I had not practiced since living in London and found the concept very interesting and at times troublesome. In London we generally did not bargain but apart from asking for small discounts on larger items, we paid the asking price. In Delhi I was told that if I paid even 50% of the asking price, it means that I was robbed by the seller.

The lessons that I learnt in Delhi instilled some confidence in me as I boarded an overnight train to Ayodhya, the nearest train station from Delhi to reach Utraula, where I believed my maternal ancestral village was located. When Jenu learnt of my intention to trace my ancestral roots in Uttar Pradesh, he informed me that the district of Balrampur was not far from Basti, where his maternal ancestral village was located. He requested that if I had a chance I should visit his ancestral village of Diwakarapur in Basti. I was unsure whether I would find my ancestral village because I did not have much information about my ancestors and had little clue how to find them in such vast and populous country that I was visiting for the first time.

When I had decided to visit India I called my uncle in Fiji and with a lot of persuasion managed to obtain some basic information about my ancestral village from him. All I got was my maternal grandmother and

her father's name and that they lived in a village in Utraula in Balrampur. He also told me that my grandmother and grandfather lived in a place called Faizabad before they were recruited by the arkatis and transported to Calcutta along with their two children aged five and one year. My grandfather used to write to his brother in India but stopped writing when he came to know that his brother had died. Should I not find my ancestral village, a visit to Jenu's ancestral village would make the long and arduous journey worthwhile.

I reached Faizabad railway station early in the morning after a long overnight train journey. I travelled in a second class air-conditioned carriage so had an opportunity to sleep after a rather good food that was served in the cabin. The railway station was located only a few kilometres from Ayodhia; the ancient and holy city that is the birth place of Lord Ram. Like many descendants of the girmityas, I too read *Ramayana* in the *Ram Lila Kuti* that existed only a few meters from my home in Natabua in Fiji. Today, the importance of *Ramayana* in the survival of the girmityas is recognised across the gimit world. Ayodhia existed in our hearts and mind as the birth place of Lord Ram, from where he set out on 14 years of exile with his wife Sita and brother Laxman. This holy city is the nucleus of the region from where many thousands of young Indian men, women and children also made a start to their journeys first to Calcutta and later to Fiji and various European colonies during the gimit period.

I had this beautiful feeling of accomplishment that I was walking on the land once walked on by Lord Ram. I paused for a few seconds outside the railway station to take in the occasion before I embarked on my search for the two ancestral villages. I walked up to the rickshawalas who were lined up to start their business for that day. A few of them dashed towards me when they realised that I was a potential customer. I sought out the oldest among them and asked him if he could take me to Utraula. He scratched his head and looked at his inquisitive colleagues. They all looked clueless. The old man asked me if I knew where Utraula was. I told him I was from overseas and didn't have a clue about where the place was. He scratched his head again and asked me the name of the person I was looking for. When he heard the name Uma Rai, he immediately informed me that I was looking for a Bhumihar Brahmin. He asked me what my relationship with Uma Rai was and when he learnt that he was my great grandfather, I detected a sudden respect towards me. This is the first time I had heard of this term and was thus very surprised. The old man explained that Bhumihar Brahmins were land owning Brahmins and the words of my uncle in Fiji flashed in my mind. He has informed me that his grandfather Uma Rai's family had owned some 27 villages in Utraula at one stage. Hence this rickshawala's assertion that my grandparents were Bhumihar Brahmins made some sense. However none of the rickshawalas could tell me where my ancestral village was. Disappointed I decided to defer my search for my ancestral village and asked them about village Diwakarpur in district of Basti. They knew of Diwakarpur and offered to help me get there. However they informed me that the distance to the village was some 50 km and would take some one hour to reach it, it was advisable for me to travel there by a rickshaw. The old rickshawalas then took me to a place not far away and arranged a jeep to take me there. The driver and his assistance reminded me of the small scale goondas of Bollywood film and hesitated for a moment. Seeing my hesitation the old man took me aside and reassured me that I could trust them. He also negotiated a good fare for me and finally I decided to hire the two.

We set out on our journey to Jenu's second ancestral village. The journey took us past the ancient and holy city of Ayodhia. Since the time I can recall of my young days, Ramayana was a crucial part of my life. Although, as a family that followed Arya Samaj version of the Sanatan Vedic Dharam, we were also encouraged to participate in all the events held at the adjacent *Ram Lila Kuti*. A few years ago I found a photograph in which I stood beside my father, holding his hand in my tiny fingers. He was standing alongside with his four brothers and a priest performing a ritual before the start of *Ram Lila*, an eight day play based on the Ramayana. A few short years later I began preaching at the same Kuti and a few years after that I participated in the last ever Ram Lila held at the Kuti. I played dual role of Hanuman and Bali. Unfortunately all these came to an abrupt halt when I left my village to pursue a medical degree at the University of South Pacific located in the capital city on the other side of the island.

Like so many others in the global girmit community, I too had a romantic view of the birthplace of Lord Ram. The palace of Lord Ram must be grand and dazzling. It must stand tall and magnificent and be a beacon for everyone to marvel. Driving past the glorious city of the Ramayana my first impression was disappointing. Living in London the image of a palace was that of Buckingham Palace. The vision of the present day Ayodhia was not in any way near to the grandeur of the magnificent Buckingham Palace! The disappointment was soon replaced by reflections on the age of the city of Ayodhia. I read that the Ayodhia city is several thousand years old, whereas the London palace is a few hundred years old. The city that I was watching stretched along the waterworks for some distance until; it reached the banks of Sarayu River. I wondered what the size of the population in that region was during the period of the Ramayana and how grand the city would have looked in that period. Majority of the ancient cities and palaces fall into ruins but Ayodhia, although in need of serious makeover, is standing and is the nucleus of a thriving city.

We drove past the city and after passing the bridge over River Sarayu we headed towards Basti and the village of Diwakarpur. The reservations that I held towards the driver and his assistant disappear as we entered a small village and came to stop in front of a couple of thatched house. In the background I could see larger double story buildings which I soon discovered belonged to the Thakurs of the village. A number of young and older women appeared on the large lawn as I got out of the van. The driver walked up to the oldest woman and had a brief conversation with her. She looked towards me and nodded. She spoke briefly to a short young girl and then walked towards me. I explained to her who I was and she smiled at me. She recalled visits by Jenu and his relatives to the village. By this time a roped bed had appeared near me and I gingerly sat on it. The short young girl walked towards me with a basin and sat in front of me. She picked up one of my foot and began to take my shoes off. . I was shocked and gently stopped her. The driver explained to me that it is the Indian way in the villages to welcome guests. I knew about this tradition but never expected this to happen to me. I politely told the girl that I was not comfortable with this tradition and she did not protest. She may have experienced similar responses from others who had visited them from overseas prior to me.

By this time the young Thakur had appeared and introduced himself as Dilip Singh. I greeted him and thereafter he was the one who spoke to me on behalf of Jenu's relatives. I was glad for his intervention. He invited me for tea at his home and took me on a tour of his estate. He was an affable man who

appeared to look after Jenu's relatives well. After a couple of hours I bid farewell, promising to visit them again when I was in Basti next. This was my first visit to an Indian village on my own and the experience was both exciting and draining. By the time I returned to Faizabad I was too tired to pursue search for my own ancestral village in Utraula in Balrampur. After staying overnight in a rather nice hotel in Faizabad I took a train back to Delhi. A few days later I bid Jenu and his family good bye and returned to London.

In January 1995 I returned to India again. This time the main purpose of my Indian visit was to get my novel *Silent Cries* printed in Delhi. When my brother learnt of my proposed visit to India, he decided to join me there with his wife. He stated that an Indian pundit who lived in Fiji at that time would help us to trace our ancestral village in Utraula. When I reached Delhi a few days later than my brother (my brother), he informed me that the pundit had informed him that it would not be possible to trace our village. Instead the pundit persuaded him to travel to Ambala in Haryana. I had no interest in travelling to Ambala; the only thing I know of Ambala was the Ambala Sweets shop in London from where I frequently bought and enjoyed very tasty Indian sweets. However I did join my brother, sister-in-law and the pretentious pundit on the tour of Ambala. I was glad to return to Delhi and away from the pundit, who, when away from my brother, tried to impress on me how the women in Fiji were so impressed with his Amitabh Bachchan like look and about his affairs with Fijian girls and women.

As far as tracing my ancestral roots was concerned the second trip to India was disappointing. However I did manage to spend some quality time with my brother and sister-in-law and return to London with copies of my novel *Silent Cries*. Upon my return to London I wrote a paper, *Discover Your Indian Roots* project in which I outlined the difficulties I had encountered during search for my ancestral roots in India and suggested ways that Indian authorities can assist the descendants of global indentured Indians to reconnect with their ancestral roots in India. I provided some facts and figures on transportation of the global indentured Indians (girmityas) and outlined the benefits to India as well as the descendants of global indentured Indians. I posted copies of this paper to the Office of India Foreign Affairs department and Uttar Pradesh Government in Lucknow. Later that year I migrated to Australia and these issues was thrust into background as I struggled to settle in a new country for the second time in my life.

However I continued with the girmity issues at academic level when I wrote my MA thesis *Colonial Policies and Coups in Fiji*. By 1999 I was settled in Sydney and published a monthly magazine of the Indian community. Internet had become a powerful tool for global research and during one such research I found out that the UP government's Tourism department had launched *Discover Indian Roots Project* to help the descendants of global girmityas to reconnect with their ancestral roots in Uttar Pradesh (UP). I was curious to know how a project that I had conceived a few years earlier was launched in UP. I sent a few emails to addresses provided on the website but did not receive reply to any.

I was about to give up on this issue when I received a call from my cousin Asha who lived in Fiji at that time. She is younger sister of Jenu and we became good friends when I joined her at the University of South Pacific in Fiji. She requested me to accompany her on her first ever visit to her ancestral villages in Uttar Pradesh. I said to her that I would accompany her provided that she would allow me to document

her visit. From 1997 I began making films and purchased filming and editing equipment which I operated as well. She agreed for me to make a documentary film on her visit and thus began planning for my first ever documentary film.

I was back in the village of Surana in Ghaziabad once again. This time I was the escort to Jenu's sister Asha and our producer and anchor Anju. Six years on I could see visible changes in the village because of the money sent to them by the relatives of Asha. A new toilet was constructed and the houses were renovated and looked very impressive. On our arrival we once again sat in the courtyard near the cattle shed for our initial chat. This was an emotional meeting between Asha and her uncle. They hugged each other and Asha was unable to say anything and sat (beside) quietly beside her for a little while; tears rolling down her eyes. Anju also shed a few tears and I too became teary eyed behind the camera. No one had to say anything, by now everyone in the village knew of the two families estranged for more than 100 years. As usually is the case in India, someone brought in syrupy tea in small cups and we all were pleased with the interruption. Once the emotions ebbed a bit the uncle comforted Asha and the two began to converse with each other.

The interaction between the uncle and his niece was an emotional one, especially for Asha, who was visiting her ancestral roots for the first time. The occasion was overwhelming for her and this made everyone else emotional as well. This ended when the uncle escorted us to the living section of the home which was across the road from where we were sitting. Asha and Anju were more comfortable here because they met the women of the family for the first time here. They soon chatted with each other as the men stood in the yard. After the short meeting Asha's cousin took us to the sugar manufacturing plant set in middle of their farm. This plant comprised of two parts. The first part of this modest plant consisted of extracting juice from sugarcane. The juice was then placed in a large receptacle then boiled on a high heat over a long time until the juice turned into a solid form which is called *gudh*. *Gudh* is widely used in India and in the Indian diaspora as sugar substitute and from what I learnt from these farmers in Surana, also contributes towards rural economy. The highlight of this farm visit was the tasting of the freshly prepared and hot *gudh*. It was sublimely delicious and I wish I was younger and could eat as much as I would have liked to.

We said good byes to the family and the villagers and made our way to Delhi for well-earned rest. A Couple of days later we took an overnight train to Lucknow, the capital city of UP. We took a taxi to UP Tourist Department to a pre-arranged meeting with Mr Verma, the Director of the UP Tourism and the person behind the UP Discover Indian Roots Project. We met in his rather large office and Anju interviewed him about the project with me behind the camera once again. He stated that he had thought of the project on his own, which made me smile a bit behind the camera. I was amused to know two projects, almost identical in all aspects, could be conceived across several thousand miles and four years apart.

We were then introduced to two officials of the department who informed us of another Indo-Fijian man from Canada who visited their office recently with his wife. They were on their way to visit the man's ancestral village in Gorakhpur district of UP. I was very surprised when I was informed of the name of

the man from Canada. He was born only a few kilometres from my own home in Natabua, Fiji Islands and his extended family were very closely associated with ours in our village. We decided to visit this family in Gorakhpur before we visited Asha's village in Basti. However before we could leave for Gorakhpur, one of the officers invited us to visit a village where he had located a family who had migrated to Guyana as *girmityas* more than 150 years ago. We decided to accept his offer and he quickly arranged a transport to take us to this village in Rae Bareilly

We travelled along a reasonably well maintained road to Rae Bareilly situated some 70 kms south of Lucknow city. We arrived in the village in about one and half hours and were led by the UP Tourism officer to the home of the *girmitya*. By the time we reached the home some 100 people had gathered around us and a few ladies sang village folk songs for us. We had conversations with some of the village elders and the school head teacher who informed us about the family of the *girmitya*. It was obvious to us that the family and the whole village were aware that one of their own had gone missing from the village some 150 years ago. It was not until he tried to contact his family back in the village that they became aware of him being transported to another country. We filmed this visit as well and headed back to Lucknow.

After resting in Lucknow overnight we travelled by train to Gorakhpur, located on the eastern fringe of the vast state of UP some 270 kms from Lucknow. We were met at the railway station by a local UP tourist office staff who greeted us in traditional Indian way with a garland. She then escorted us to the UP tourist office where we met other staff and attended a media conference. The Lucknow office had arranged all these and the conference was successful. We met a university professor who kindly offered to be our guide for our duration of stay on Gorakhpur. He took us to a huge *Khichdi Mela* at Gorakhnath Temple in Gorakhpur. We were informed that this *mela* goes on for one month and thousands of people of all faith attend it daily.

The next morning we travelled with the professor to the village of our neighbour back in Fiji. With the professor's help, we found the village without much difficulty. The ancestral home of this Fiji *girmitya* was stood in middle of a green and yellow field. It was set amongst a few houses which we accessed by a short and narrow lane. The professor informed a man about our visit and in a very short time some 50 people had gathered around us. Chairs and tea was brought out and we sat down. A man dressed in white came out and sat opposite us. He reminded me of Gandhi! Like other members of his extended family, after initial inhibitions, he opened up to us. He told us of the recent visit of his relatives from Canada and shared name of his ancestor who was transported to Fiji as well as names of all the senior members of his relatives in Fiji. All these names were known to me. Apart from the *girmitya* who was transported to Fiji from this village, I had met all of them in my village during my teenage days. It was a moment for me for reflection of my teenage days when our family interacted with the relatives of this family in India. It gave me an immense sense of pleasure and achievement to sit and film among the descendants of our neighbours in Fiji.

Leaving the village after filming I reflected upon how within one generation one of the sons of the *girmitya* who was transported to Fiji had risen up to become a lawyer, mayor of the second city and a

member of Fiji parliament. The girmitya has had a number of children and his descendants were spread all over the world. The relative who visited the family earlier lived in Canada. He had promised to return to the village. Although the Indian family did not want any handouts from the overseas relatives I wondered how much development this family and the village can witness should only a few relatives decide to invest a little bit of their money. After all, the girmitya left the village to earn some money so that he can help his people at some stage. He never returned! His wishes remained unfulfilled. Now his descendants were in the position to do what he could not. At the time of writing this article I was aware that the Canadian relative had unfortunately died without ever returning to the village. The link between the two families are now broken again; maybe temporarily.

The good professor had informed us about a family from where a person was transported to *Maaritch dweep*, Mauritius, and we made our way to this village. Our vehicle winded through a mango field, past a small mandir and stopped on a rather large lawn in front of a few reasonably maintained houses. People appeared on the lawn as soon as our vehicle stopped and soon more than 20 people surrounded us. Women stood at some distance and watched with interest the arrival of visitors in their village. The professor approached one of the elders and he ordered chairs and refreshments to be brought out. The elder related the story of one of his ancestors leaving the village and never returning. Somehow the villages heard that he was taken to *Maaritch* from where he never returned. I was amused how Mauritius had become *Maaritch*, same as the indenture agreement had become *girmitya*! We finished our filming and after a tour of this small village we made our way to Basti and Asha's maternal ancestral village located some 74 kms from Gorakhpur.

We arrived in Asha's ancestral village as the sun was setting in the district of Basti which had supplied the maximum of girmityas to Fiji; some 6000 young Indian men, women and children. Asha's maternal grandfather was transported to Fiji from this village named Diwakarpur, where he had to leave behind his wife for ever. On arriving in the village Asha's relatives recognised me immediately from my previous visit; it took them a bit more time to understand and acknowledge who Asha was. Once the introductions were over and ancestral relationship was firmly established, rest of the two day stay in the village was filled with activities and pleasantries. By this time their neighbour and the village Thakur had appeared and he invited us all to be his guest at the popular Manorama Mahautsav which, he explained, has got the name due to Manorama River and is an annual fair organised during the winter at the Tehsil of Harriya in Basti.

After the usual Indian village sweet tea and snacks we were driven by Daleep Singh to the site of the Manorama Mahautsav. We were met with a huge crowd like which I had never seen ever before. A huge tent was jammed packed thousands of people and more people were arriving as we were escorted by the security personnel towards the front of the tent. It was obvious to us that Sandeep Singh had some status in the community and he was well respected. We were seated in VIP seats and I set up my camera in front of a huge stage. Soon the star performer for the night, Manoj Tiwari was introduced to us all. A young, handsome and very talented singer, Manoj Tiwari thrilled the audience with his imitable brand of Bhojpuri songs for more than 3 hours. He also acknowledged Asha's donation towards the event and showed his knowledge of Fiji and Fiji's girmityas by mentioning that majority of the Fiji girmityas were

from Harriya and surrounding areas. In a few sentences he had informed thousands of the audience present about our presence there as well as about Fiji girmityas. I was pleased to have captured the whole event on my camera, some of which I later shared on my TV programs in Australia as well as the documentary film of this tour. Manoj Tiwari since that wonderful and memorable evening has become an iconic actor and a member of Indian parliament.

We returned to Diwakarpur and spent the night there. We slept on roped bed in a thatched house which reminded me of some of the houses in Fiji during my teenage years. Next morning we had breakfast of *methi saag* and *roti* prepared by Asha on the old style *chulha* which was the popular form of cooking in Fiji some 50 years ago. Then Sandeep took us to meeting he organised for Asha to meet a group of local Thakurs. The Thakurs received Asha well and demonstrated their knowledge of the socio-political situation in Fiji by eloquently speaking about them. They promised help should the occasion arise. As we left the meeting we felt that thousands of miles away from Fiji, the people of Uttar Pradesh were aware of what was going on there. The fact that this was happening when the digital age had not arrived in India made it more surprising. The traditional media like newspaper and radio were powerful to communicate international news to even in India's vast rural population.

In the afternoon Daleep drove us to Balrampur situated some 100km north of Basti. As we left the village after a sad farewell to Asha's relatives, we stopped at a local shop to charge our camera batteries. During this short visit several people gathered and one person informed us that his own relatives were taken away many years ago. He told us that he knew of many other families in the area who had lost family members during the girmity era. Unfortunately we did not have time to listen to everything he had to say to us or to others who wanted to share their stories with us. We had to leave for a press conference that Sandeep had arranged in Balrampur in relation to my search for my own ancestral relatives. As we headed towards Balrampur we felt that there are many people in Basti and rest of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other Indian states who still remember the girmityas even today.

We reached Balrampur in the evening and met some 6-7 local journalists already gathered in a small office with electricity generator annoyingly humming in the background. The journalists asked me some background information about my search and all promised to assist me in my search for my ancestral village and relatives of my ancestors in Tehsil of Utraula in Balrampur. We said good byes and left for the town of Gonda from where we took train back to Lucknow and Delhi.

In 2003 I received an email from one of the journalists who had attended the Balrampur press conference and informed me that my ancestral village and relatives may have been found through a local (a local) doctor in the area. My communication with the journalist indicated that the information he had provided to me could in fact lead to finding my ancestral roots in Uttar Pradesh. I was excited and began planning my visit to India during which I also wanted to make a film on golfing opportunities in India. On my previous visits I had visited a few golf courses in India and as a keen golfer, I was very impressed with the golf courses and other facilities offered on these courses for golfers and visitors. Fortunately the Tourism India Office assisted me to secure permission to film in India and the Government of India Tourist Office also provided us with some in-kind support to film both documentary films. In the

meantime two people from the Indian diaspora had requested me to trace their roots in Karauli, Rajasthan and in Agra, Uttar Pradesh.

After filming for the golf documentary in Delhi, Gurgaon and Jaipur, I made myself to Karauli to search for ancestral village of one of my friends who lived in Fiji then. Earlier I had assisted him to obtain the immigration pass of his ancestor from Karauli. He had visited Karauli a few months later but was not successful in finding his ancestral home. I promised him that I will undertake this search on his behalf. That night I stayed in the palace of Karauli, an experience that I will not ever forget.

Next morning I was introduced to a person called Vijay Singh who had some information about the family that I was searching. He had done some investigation and took me to a family he believed knew about the person who had migrated from the area. This place was a short distance from where Vijay Singh's small shop was. This place was not far from the palace of Karauli, which would have been separated from the surrounding area by a wall. The grandeur of the palace was contrasted with thousands of very small single or 2 to 3 story buildings. Vijay Singh explained to me that these small houses were for the soldiers of the King of Karauli. During hey days of the palace these homes were well maintained. However now this area was much neglected and the structures were generally dilapidated.

The old mother and daughter we spoke with informed us that the person whose ancestral home we were searching had left his home to go to Mathura and never returned. The information they provided convinced me that they were describing the same person that I (was) had in the immigration pass. They also showed me a small plot of vacant land that belonged to the family. A house had existed on it but after all the members of the family had died it had disappeared due to neglect. They invited the relatives in Fiji to return and claim this land but to date no one has done that.

I left the village with the thought that once this area would have boasted of a grand palace served by brave soldiers and others who lived had lived in these small but well maintained structures constructed for them by the palace just outside the palace wall. At that time the whole area would have been a vibrant community and the ancestors of my friend in Fiji would have been proud members of the service community which served the palace. The decay through neglect and departures were very apparent now.

After filming this visit, I travelled to Agra and filmed on a golf course there. After that I took a train to Lucknow. Next morning I set out on a journey to meet the relatives of my own paternal grandmother and grandfather (Aaji and Aaja). On our way to Utraula in Balrampur we travelled through Gonda. During the girmitya period Gonda and Balrampur was one large district from where 2nd largest number of girmityas were transported to Fiji, the first being Basti which lay some 110 km southwest of Gonda. Unfortunately we were not successful in our search in Gonda. We did travel to the village and spoke to several young and old residents of this small Dalit village. However no one could recall the person named in the immigration pass I had on me.

Disappointed, I travelled to Balrampur for a rest in one of the UP government hotels. I was also to meet one of my cousins who would take me to my village Utraula situated some 20 kms east of Balrampur city. Another disappointment awaited me in the hotel. Through my UP government tourist guide I learnt

that my cousin was a Muslim and that he was not coming to the hotel next morning. I was not concerned by the fact that my ancestral relatives in UP were Muslims. My concern was that because my aaji and aaja were Hindus, the people who were to visit next morning in Utraula were not my relatives. My fourth visit to India would be a waste and that I would have to continue my search. I was not going to Utraula next morning and that night I drowned by disappointment with a bottle of local whisky.

However, next morning the guide persuaded me to travel to Utraula and meet the family there. I had travelled so far and another 20 kms would not make much difference. I was to search a family in Bhanpur and Utraula fell in my way to Bhanpur. Hence travelling through Utraula was not a big deal to me.

We arrived in Utraula next morning and our vehicle stopped in a small one street town of Shri Dutt Ganj. As we disembarked from our vehicle and I surveyed the area, an elderly man of 94 years emerged from one of the first houses in this street and slowly walked up to a shoe shop across the road. He immediately reminded me of one of my elders in my village of Natabua in Fiji. We were guided to the shoe shop and we were introduced to the elderly man's youngest son as Naim Rai. He reminded me of my brothers and many of my cousins. Naim introduced the elderly man as Dhoki Rai. We soon found out that Dhoki Rai was my paternal grandmother's cousin; her father's brother's son. Therefore he was supposed to be my uncle and Naim was my second cousin. My earlier reservations about this family being relatives of my grandmother were fast disappearing. However, I was still confused why this family was Muslim and our family in Fiji were Hindus.

By this time a small crowd consisting of the family members of Dhoki Rai and neighbours had surrounded us and followed us around. After having sweet tea and Indian sweets at Dhoki Rai's home, we were escorted to the Galibpur located in a village some 5kms east from the town. We were informed that my grandmother was born in the house in this village and had lived there until she was married as a teenager.

The house was set on approximately 2 acres of land lush with native trees and plantation. We alighted from our vehicle at one fringe of this land and walked along a pathway to the house where my grandmother was born. The first thing Naim pointed to be was a spot outside the house where once a tamarind tree stood; under which my grandmother had spent a lot of time. We were then taken around for a short tour of the old house which was now being renovated to modernise it. We were introduced to the brother who lived in the family house with his own family now. Naim's two other brothers owned shops in the town and lived there with their families. Most of the 50 plus members of this family were present now at the village house, keen to know who I was and why I had come to them.

After introductions we all sat down for a chat and then I was informed by Naim, Dhoki Rai and rest of the family about my ancestral history. It was a long story but the summary of it is that after my grandmother had encountered domestic violence from her husband, she left him and went away with her two young sons. She later met and married my grandfather and lived in nearby Faizabad. After that her first husband, a Raibahadur and a powerful man, threatened the villagers not to associate with the family of my grandmother. When Dhoki Rai and his brother's children grew up to marriage age, no one from the village would marry them. Reluctantly they converted to Islam around 1950s. This story explained how

and why the relatives of my grandmother were Muslims now. There were other stories that matched with the information that I had managed to obtain from my uncle Dhanus Rai in Natabua, Fiji. By the time I left the village I was convinced that finally I had managed to locate my grandmother's ancestral village. Now I headed towards finding the village of my paternal grandfather.

The indenture agreement (girit) pass stated that my paternal grandfather's (aaja) was in the district of Basti. My Dhanus uncle had told me repeatedly that I would never find his village. Even as a 97 year old, on the last stage of his life, my uncle refused to reveal some crucial details about my grandfather. His life was a mystery and would remain so. Despite my uncle's warnings, I decided to travel to Basti to find the village on the girit pass.

On the way to Basti we stopped in Bhanpur which is located some 47km east of Utraula. After travelling for nearly one and half hours we arrived in the town of Bhanpur. While in Suva I had assisted the brother of the co-producer of the documentary to find the girit pass of his paternal grandfather Udit. Udit had first indentured himself to Natal in South Africa. His immigration pass contained the words *Returnee* and *Natal*. That meant that he had returned to India at the end of his indenture term in Natal and then re-indentured himself for Fiji. The question that concerned me as I stood in the area which was supposed to be his home prior to embarking on the long and permanent journey to Fiji was whether this was his ancestral home; the home he and his family lived in prior to his departure to Natal. If this is where his ancestral home was located then the task of finding the home would be possible. On the other hand, if Bhanpur was not his ancestral land and it was simply a stopover for him as he waited to travel to Fiji, then it would be almost impossible to locate his village and home.

We spent some time in this small town and spoke with a few elderly men about Udit and the village on the girit pass. We made little progress and I came to a conclusion that I would not be able to find Udit's village and home in Bhanpur. After the success in Utraula, this result was disappointing. We continued our journey towards Basti.

Basti is located some 26kms southeast of Bhanpur and it took us some 40 minutes to reach the familiar town. The village in my grandfather's pass was located in a village some 10kms from the town. We travelled to the village, negotiating ourselves through narrow lanes among flat and vast field of crops. As we approached the village I remembered the words of my uncle. The size and type of the small houses were clear indication that my grandfather could not have lived in this village. The three grand houses that my grandfather had built in Fiji in the few short years that he had lived there would not have been conceived by someone who had lived in the village that stared at me.

I was disappointed but decided to make another attempt in the Thana listed on his girit pass. The pass also stated his cast as Sonar and I spoke to several sonars in the small town in this Thana. However, none of them could recall anything about my grandfather. I was not surprised by this. Someone back in Fiji had told me some time ago that my grandfather was not Sonar but a Thakur. I was also informed that he had lived in Faizabad before his transportation to Fiji. The mystery surrounding my grandfather ran deep and would remain unsolved forever. It was obvious that my uncle, who was the only person in my family

who could help me to solve this mystery, would not do so. My remaining auntie, my grandparents' youngest child; now some 84 years old, does not remember much about her parents' life in India.

My grandfather's whereabouts in India would remain a mystery. Disappointed once again I set on a journey from Basti to Faizabad, located some 80kms west of Basti. I had been to Faizabad before and regarded the town as the last home of my aaja. It was a beautiful town and the hotel that I stayed in was comfortable with excellent cuisine. The next morning I made my way via NH 27 to Lucknow located some 130kms west; a journey that normally takes some one and half hours drive. After rest I proceeded to Lucknow and then to Agra to undertake my last search for ancestral roots in Agra. The highlight of this tour is contained in this documentary *Milaap: a Royal Discovery*: Link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPg9mqVe5B4&t=1s>

Earlier I had assisted a woman in New Zealand to find the girmitya pass of one of her ancestors who had been transported to Fiji. She had sent me a copy of his pass and I had promised to her that I would try to search for her great grandfather's village somewhere in Agra. I hired a vehicle and travelled to the India Tourism office in Agra. The officers there were very helpful and helped me to find the village written on the girmitya pass. One of the officers travelled with me and guided me to the village. We located one of the oldest residences in the village and approached him for information. We sat under a very large banyan tree and were offered tea and snacks first. By the time we finished our tea and snacks it became obvious that the man could not recall any person from this village ever migrating. Disappointed we prepared to leave the village and head back to Agra.

By that time words had spread that we were searching for a member of the Sheikh clan from this area and several people began to arrive. As we were getting inside our vehicle one of these men told us to go to a nearby village where majority of the residents were from Sheikh Clan. With a glimpse of hope we headed to the Sheikh village and soon our hope turned into elation. The residents recalled the person in the pass migrating and informed us that his relatives still lived in the village. I was escorted through narrow lanes to the home of his descendants. After speaking with them I was convinced that they were descendants of the Fiji girmitya. I took pictures of the descendants, their home and the village and went back to Agra and then to Delhi. I was happy that I was able to find the descendants of the woman in New Zealand and sent her the good news and the pictures. She later informed me that she had visited the village with her family. I was happy. I have never met the woman and her family in New Zealand. It is uniquely satisfying to help strangers.

In my next visit to India couple of years later I fulfilled a promise that I had made to myself during the first and the only India Week in Fiji in 2003 which I attended with two of the India Tourism Sydney officers. This event was held in the capital city Suva over 5 days and Indi Tourism had a stall at the Civic Centre to promote its services. They kindly provided me some space to promote my Discover Indian Roots Project that I funded privately and provided services free of any charge since 2001. Over the 5 days some 1000 people visited my stall and I helped some 65 of them obtain ancestral passes of their ancestors from the National Archives of Fiji. One day a few women from a nearby town arrived at the stall and after having a look at the small exhibition that I had put up, one lady approached me. She

requested me to show on the large map that we had hung there where her ancestors had come to Fiji from. The information that she had was that they were from Malabar Hill. Today Malabar Hill is a part of present day Kerala. I found Malabar Hills on the big map and suggested to the women that most probably their ancestors lived there before they were transported to Fiji. The women stood staring at the map for a while, sad and tears rolled down their cheeks. One of the women said that they would never be able to visit their ancestral land and thanked me for showing on the map the land of their ancestors.

This experience had profound effect on me. Here were a group of poor women who had travelled many miles just to know where their ancestors had lived in India. The memories of their ancestors still lived in them and just an announcement of the local radio had persuaded them to travel to Suva in the hope of finding something more about their ancestors. Right there I decided that I would do one better and make a documentary film that would show the land from where the south Indian girmityas were recruited and transported to Fiji and other girit colonies. That laid the foundation of my 3rd documentary film in the Milaap trilogy: Milaap-the land of South Indian Girmityas; Link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZiVB7nTwgg>

By the end of my tour in Fiji I was provided one girit pass of a Nair family. My research informed me that the Nairs mainly lived in a place called Palakkad in Kerala, formerly Malabar Hills. I decided to trace the root of this girmitya and hence our first destination from Mumbai was Kerala via a stopover in Goa. We arrived in Ernakulam by train and spent a day in the Backwaters of Kerala. Next day we travelled by hired vehicle to Palakkad. The next morning we drove to the beautiful and lush village of Nairs. As usual I spoke with a few elders in the village about the girmitya in the pass but no one could remember anything about him. They had not heard about Fiji and only recalled migration to Ceylon. It became apparent to me that we would not find the home and relatives of the Fiji girmitya. Disappointed we left the village and next day we travelled to Coimbatore on our way to Chennai. We had a little break in Coimbatore and travelled up to Ooty. Situated amidst the Nilgiri hills at an altitude of 2240 meters above sea level Ooty provided us a brief respite from the heat at the bottom of the hill. Next day we boarded a luxury bus and travelled to Chennai located some 500kms east of Coimbatore. It took us some 8 hours overnight journey to reach Chennai, formerly Madras. Our first visit in Chennai was to the port from where girmityas from far flung Kerala, Andhra Pradesh as well as Chennai were transported to Fiji and other colonies via Calcutta. This port also gave name Madras to all the south Indian girmityas in Fiji and perhaps in other colonies. I had researched the main areas from where people of Tamil Nadu were transported to Fiji. This included Chengalpet, North Arcott and Thanjvur some 350 kms south of Chennai. We left out Thanjvur because of its distance from Chennai but visited Chengalpet and North Arcott. I did not have any families to trace in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Next day we travelled up to Vijayawada located some 450kms north of Chennai. One thought that ran through my mind as I travelled in Chengalpet, North Arcott and Vijayawada was why anyone would willingly enslave himself or herself and travel to thousands of miles away to a foreign lands. Even if they had unwittingly done what they did, the next question was why they would not return to the beautiful land once their indenture had ended. What I saw was a very well organised society with places of religion and such like well established in these areas. Thousands of miles away none of these physical and social infrastructures

existed. They were subjected to inhuman treatment and made to live away from their loved ones. Why wouldn't they want to return home?

Vijayawada was a city of unbelievable beauty! Situated on the banks of the historic Krishna River and in the shadows of two peaks through which the river flows, the impressive city is one of the cleanest that we had visited in India. We were sad to leave Vijayawada and travel to Kolkata located some 1200kms north. It took us some 22 hours by train to reach the city from the girmityas transported to Fiji and other colonies. We travelled to the Garden Reach area where the girmityas were barracked in depots for months before being herded on the next available ship to the colonies. From there we travelled west to Patna and then to Delhi.

My last effort to trace an ancestral root in India was on request from a Guyanese descendant of girmityas who now lives in London, UK. He contacted me from London in 2017 after his two previous searches did not bear desirable result for him. Imtiaz Muckdoom was searching for one of his ancestors who was transported to Guyana some 150 years ago from a village called Dargah in Bahraich in UP. The ancestor called Muckdoom was apparently a servant in the dargah in Bahraich. The village also got its name from this dargah. The girmitya went on to establish a grand family in Guyana and his descendants today are listed as one of the leading families in Guyana. It became apparent to me that Imtiaz Muckdoom was very keen to establish his Indian identity and for that to happen he had to find his ancestral village and descendants there.

I travelled with my fellow Indian '*girmitya*' Aslam Bhai and two other colleagues from Lucknow to Bahraich for this search. I believed that I was going to the village of Dargah and dialogue with some of the elders would reveal to me either I will find the ancestral roots or not. When I entered the city of Bahraich my heart began to sink and when I reached the Dargah it dawned to me that my task was extremely difficult. Once the Dargah would have been set in a village; surrounded by vast fields; but today it was set in the middle of a large city, surrounded by thousands of houses. Today the Dargah was a very large entity with hundreds of workers and thousands of daily visitors.

With the help of a local journalist we had a meeting with a senior official of the Dargah. He was very cooperative but could not help us to locate the former servant at the Dargah. A short documentary film MILAAP-THE SEARCH FOR SHAHS OF A DARGAH contains highlights of our visit to the dargah. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZNAaSAXf5c&t=5s>. Our search for the Muckdoom family continues.

The vehicle I was travelling in to the village of Nadiapara had stopped in the city of Juanpur. Milan asked a roadside vendor the way to Nadiapara. Fortunately the vendor knew of Nadiapara and directed us towards it. We travelled on a narrow dust road flanked by green fields with scatterings of small villages for some 5kms. Along the way Milan asked a few people for direction and we finally reached near the village. We stopped at a bus stop which also had a small roadside shop. The vendor pointed out the village of Nadiapara which we could see from the bus stop. We parked our vehicle a short distance away and walked to the village. I walked up the village with mixed feelings. There was a danger that we will not find anyone in the village who would recall the person who was transported to Fiji from here. I

prepared myself for this. On the other hand I was also in a positive frame of mind because, despite a very difficult task which I had undertaken, everything since I left Mumbai had fallen in place. This was a good sign.

Milan found an elderly person in the small but well kept village. It impressed me a lot and reminded me of a film set from Bollywood film like *Lagaan*. The lady did not know of the person herself and asked us to go to home of a person who may be able to help us. We walked to this home and Milan explained to one of them the purpose of our visit. We were informed to wait in the courtyard which also acted as stable for a few cattle and a few chicken also roamed freely around us. A small crowd had gathered around us by the time one of the older members emerged from one of the small buildings. Milan told her the reason for our visit and she immediately mentioned the name of the person on the girmitya pass and that he had migrated to Fiji. She also named the person's brother listed as his next of kin. She also named these two brothers' fathers name listed on the pass.

I heaved a sigh of relief. I knew we were in the right place and at the home of the person listed on the pass. The woman who spoke to us was related to the girmitya and there were a number of people in the group which had surrounded us who were also the descendants of the relatives that he had left behind when he was transported to Fiji. I took telephone number of one of the men of the family and before heading back, took a stroll down to the nearby river; which had given name to this village. It was river Gomti, which also flowed through Lucknow and gave name to Gomti Nagar, an area of Lucknow which I fell in love with during the filming of Pulse Motion Picture's feature film *VJPath*. As we walked back from the river we were asked by a man about our visit. Milan told him and he immediately stated the name of the girmitya and that he had migrated to Fiji many years ago. This further confirmed my belief that we had found the ancestral village of the girmitya and our endeavour was a success.

On the way back I could not stop myself from thinking about all the families in India from where their young men, women, and children were taken away and transported to all over the world. During the last 20 years I have visited only a handful of some 1 million such families. I realised that all the families who I have visited and spoken with still remember the ancestors and are eager to meet their descendants. The desire to reconnect with their descendants exists as much in these families in Indian villages as much as it exists in many of the descendants of the girmityas in the far flung former British and other European colonies; as well as the countries in the west where many of the descendants are now living.

I have been trying to reconnect the descendants of the girmityas with their relatives in India for some 25 years now. Initially travelled to Lucknow and spoke to those officials who had advertised globally that they would assist the girmityas to trace their roots in UP through such programs as Discover Indian Roots and Trace Indian Roots. I soon discovered that I was wasting my time with these people. I produced documentary films and wrote articles on this issue. I spoke at conferences and worked with many people to first obtain the girmitya passes and then trace their roots in India. Both these tasks are very difficult and time consuming. I have had limited success in both. However, as girmitya becomes more popular many more people are coming forward to search for their ancestral roots in India, both in the north and in the south. None of the state or the central government sponsored Trace Indian Roots projects have worked

for the benefit of the descendants of the girmityas neither in the girmitya diaspora nor in the districts and the thousands of the villages of India. These are some of the reasons for their failures: 1. Lack of sufficient resources have been allocated to these projects. 2. There is little continuity of service in these projects. 3. The officers selected to provide services are poorly equipped to do so. 4. The digital infrastructure is very poor. 5. Communication skills of those involved in service provision is extremely poor. The combined result of these is that these projects may have only benefitted those people who were paid money to provide these service and not those for who these services were intended.

We reached our hotel in Varanasi and I settled in the warmth of my hotel room. Milan and I shared much deserved congratulatory drinks as reflected on our journey and the success of it. I sent a message and a few pictures of our visit to the person who had sponsored my visit to his ancestral village. The next morning I bid farewell to Milan and Varanasi and flew back to Bombay.

### **Dr. Satish Rai**



**Dr. Satish Rai is Director, Director-Indian Diaspora Council of Australia Inc. (IDCA.** Dr Satish 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 prestigious Uttar Pradesh Apravasi Bharatiya Ratna Award.