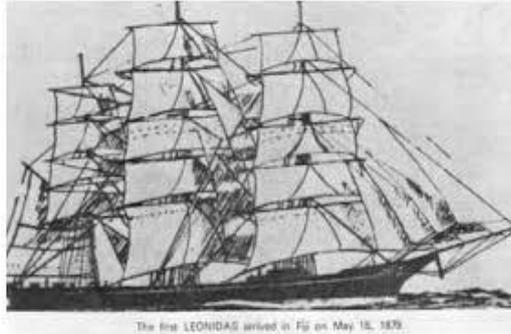


## Dr. Sashi Tharoor supports the view that Girmityas were exiled in the Colonies

- Dr Satish Rai

During my participation in India Week held in Fiji in 2003 I was asked by the late Dr Ahmed Ali to find out why the 60% percent of the indentured Indians transported to Fiji under the indenture system (now commonly known as gimit system from the word agreement), remained in Fiji. Approximately 60,500 young men, women and children were transported to Fiji and approximately 25,000 had returned to India.

That little request from late Dr Ali acted as a catalyst for me to embark on a quest to find out why the remaining Fiji girmityas remained in Fiji, instead of returning to their homes in India as per the indenture agreement (gimit) on which they were made to put their thumb print without having ability to read a word of it because the agreements were written in English and the girmityas had no knowledge of reading or understanding English language.



Two years later I started my professional PhD at Western Sydney University, to research on my thesis that the remaining girmityas did not return to India because they were prevented from doing so. In 2011 the university accepted that the majority of the Fiji girmityas were prevented from returning India by the Colonial Government of Fiji and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia to ensure continued supply of cheap Indian labour in Fiji after the indenture system was eventually abolished. I presented my thesis in written form as well as a documentary drama and the university granted me Doctor of Creative Arts for my efforts in mid-2011.

In 2017, as I was preparing to go to Delhi, India, to attend a conference on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of abolition of Indian indenture system, I happen to watch a video of Dr Sashi Tharoor talking on British TV about his latest book *AN ERA OF DARNNESS THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN INDIA*. This video has since gone viral on the social media, especially among the global Indian community.

Through his office staff I managed to secure a meeting with Dr Sashi Tharoor. The question that I wanted to ask him whether he would write and speak something about the way the British has exploited and mistreated the young Indian men, women and children who were transported to the colonies under the Indian indenture system that had operated in the same era that he had written about in his book *AN ERA OF DARNNESS THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN INDIA*. I had watched him speak eloquently about many other atrocities that British had unleashed on India and the Indians. However I had not seen him speak anything about the 1.2 million girmityas, who were also victims of the British colonialism and atrocities.



I met him at his Delhi office and we had a pleasant discussion over a nice cup of *masala chai*. Dr Tharoor knew of the reason why I was there and he promptly explained to be that he has indeed written about the indentured Indians and he would be glad to speak about them if and when he was invited by me to do so. I apologised to him about my ignorance about him writing about the girmityas and blamed it on the unavailability of his book in Australia. I promised to buy a copy and read it. He understood this and we ended the short meeting cordially.

The next day I bought the book from a little book stall at the Delhi train station just before I boarded a train headed to Lucknow. I searched for the section where Dr Tharoor wrote about the Indian indenture system. Under the heading **FORCED MIGRATION, TRANSPORTATION AND INDENTURED LABOUR** he devoted 5 pages to this issue in a 317 page book. I was a little disappointed that he did not devote more pages to this subject. However, after reading through these



five pages, I was exhilarated that what he had written basically complemented what I had written in my doctoral thesis way back in 2011. Below I reproduce some quotes from Dr Tharoor's book that supports my own thesis in relation to the exile of indentured Indian transportees (girmityas) in Fiji.

First I would quote his views on the transportation of the girmityas from India by the British to its colonies: The percent of men, women and children that had died during the journey is noteworthy. It is tragic that 55 percent of infants had died during the journey that Dr Tharoor mentions: .

*Besides the Straits Settlement and Mauritius, destitute Indians were also shipped as indentured labour to other British colonies around the world, from Guyana and the Caribbean Island to South Africa and Fiji in the Pacific. Some 1.9 to 3.5 million Indians (the number vary in different sources, depending who has counted) moved half way across the globe, most involuntarily, under the colonial project. They played their roles as cogs in the wheels of the imperial machinery, toiling on sugar plantations, building roads and buildings, clearing jungle. Many suffered horribly on the harrowing journeys and some perished en route; others endured terrible privations. Recent work by Professor Clare Anderson has established the extent of horrors: in just one year, 1856-57, and on one route, Kolkata to Trinidad, the percentage of deaths of indentured labour on transportee ships reached appalling levels; 12.3 per cent of all males, 18.5 per cent of all females, 28 per cent of the boys and 36 per cent of the girls perished, as did a tragic 55 per cent of all infants.*



Then Dr Tharoor comes to the core issue of my doctoral thesis; that the girmityas were prevented or, in the least, were not encouraged to return to their homes in India. This is certainly true in case of the Fiji girmityas. In Fiji's case some 40 percent of the girmityas did return to their homes in the early stages of the girmity system that had started in 1879. However, when the Colonial Government of Fiji and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia realised that the girmity system would come to end after the abolition movement started in India, made concerted attempts to prevent the remaining girmityas from returning to India. Dr Tharoor states:

*All those thus transported were cut off from any hope of return to India, or contact with families they had left behind at home. Though many indentured labourers had the right to demand passage home after five years' bonded labour, this was largely theoretical and few, if any, were allowed to exercise such a right. (Clever tweaks in the regulations, such as the right being forfeited if not claimed within six months after expiry of the original contract, or a still and unaffordable fare being charged for the journey, discouraged many as well.*

I have provided several more strategies utilised by the Colonial Government of Fiji and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Australia to prevent the girmityas to return to India. One of them was indeed tweaking in 1906 of indenture agreement rules and regulations. The tweaking made that year may not have been spelled out to the girmityas when they were made to put their thumbprint to the agreements. These tweaking severely restricted the rights to free passages of the girmityas to return home.



The Dr Tharoor also mentions something that was rarely analysed and written by academics and scholars when they wrote about the Indian indenture (girmit) system until a few decades ago.

*In the period of 1519-1939, an estimated 5,300,000 people, whom scholars delicately dub 'unfree migrants', were carried on the British ships, of whom approximately 58 per cent were slaves, mainly from Africa, 36 per cent were indentured labour, mainly from India, and 6 per cent were transported as convicts, both from India and other colonies. If nothing else, this British endeavour, motivated as always by the simple exigencies of the colonial project, transformed the demography of dozen of countries, with consequences that can still be seen today.*

It is my opinion, to discuss the Indian indenture (girmit) system in isolation from the overall British and other European countries' colonial designs, that saw the sun never set on the empire in its hey days, as almost a sin! Any understanding of girmit needs thorough understanding of why and how the African,



Indian, Chinese and convict labour transportation and exploitation was crucial to the economic viabilities of these colonialists; once they had acquired the lands in the Caribbean, Americas, Australia, South Africa and other islands through unparalleled genocides.

However, for this little article, I believe Dr Tharoor's short few pages in his book goes a long way to support my thesis that the majority of girmityas were exiled in the girmit colonies. I have provided sufficient proof of that in Fiji's case. It remains to be seen if the same kind of studies are ever done in the other former girmit colonies.

In Fiji's case, it can be stated that, by preventing the 60% of the girmityas from returning home to India, their recruiters had breached one of the fundamental conditions of the indenture agreement. It remains to be tested in the court of law!



**Dr Satish Rai** is Producer/Director/Writer/Music creator of Raivision Academy of Film, TV & Music, is Director-Indian Diaspora Council of Australia Inc. (IDCA). He was born in the Fiji Islands and is of Indian ancestral background. He migrated to UK in 1980 and worked as a Metropolitan Police officer, anti-racist professional and local government elected councillor. He has been living in Sydney, Australia since 1995. He completed a BA (Hons) degree in Sociology in London, MA degree in Communications and Cultural Studies and Doctor of Creative Arts degree in film production from the University of Western Sydney. He took up writing in 1993. He is a film maker, journalist and a lecturer. He has produced/directed 4 feature films, 400 TV & online TV programs, 7 documentaries. In 2009 he was contracted by Fiji Institute of Technology (FIT) to write a course in Digital Film & TV Production. In 2011 He was contracted by Fiji National University (previously FIT) as a Visiting Lecturer to teach Acting and Screenplay Writing. During this period he also assisted students to produce 5 short films, one of which won the runner-up award at Fiji Kula Film Awards 2012 organised by Film Fiji. As the Director of Raivision Film Academy. He has written, directed and produced weekly TV segments from February 2006 till August 2008. These TV segments, were screened 3 times weekly on TVS. He also trained his TV team in TV presentation and acting. He can assist in all aspects of film production-development, pre-production, production and post-production. He owns his own production & post production equipment