

The Centennial Commemoration of the Indian Indenture (Girmit) System and Beyond – Satish Rai, PhD

On March 20 1917 the abhorrent Indian indenture system, (now known as girmit in many parts of the world) was legally abolished by the Legislative Assembly of the colonial India. The Indian indenture system of human trafficking was preceded by transportation of millions of Irish and the African people to the Americas and other European colonies.

From 1830s some 1.2 million Indians were transported mainly to French Reunion, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, South Africa, Suriname, Fiji, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique. Today the descendants of these girmitiyas form some 12 million strong girmit diaspora or the colonial/sugar diaspora. Some Indians from Gujarat and Punjab later joined the girmitiyas in these colonies as free settlers.

For nearly 100 years the history had almost forgotten the girmit system of human labour transportation as well as the sacrifices, struggles and contributions of the global girmitiyas. Recently a small number of individuals from across the globe have been working hard to bring girmit history to the fore. In 2016, through the efforts of Dr Satish Rai and his colleagues in India (Mr Aslam Khan and Mr Chander Prakash), the Uttar Pradesh government in India included a girmit session in its inaugural Uttar Pradesh Pravasi Divas (UPPD). This session was chaired by Mr Ashook Ramsaran, the then President of Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO). The session was repeated during UPPD 2017. Soon after that Mr Ramsaran revived the Indian Diaspora Council of USA (IDCUSA) and launched a global project for **Centennial Commemoration of the Indian indenture (Girmit) system**. I was appointed the Chairman of Australian project. Since then Indian Diaspora Council of Australia (IDCA) was formed to organise Centennial Commemoration of the Indian indenture (Girmit) system in Sydney, as well as to undertake other girmit related work in Australia.



As a part of the global project, IDCA has organised events for Centennial Commemoration of the Indian indenture (Girmit) system. Sydney events were held on Friday 17th March at the Bowman

Hall (Blacktown) and on Saturday 18th March 2017 at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Center.

Events throughout the Girmit diaspora are being held to mark 100th anniversary of abolition of Indian indenture (Girmit) system in 2017. Events have already been held in Fiji, Australia, Trinidad & Tobago, and two in Delhi, India. Further Global event will be held to mark 100th anniversary of abolition of Indian indenture system in Mauritius, Guyana, India, Holland and at the University of London, UK.

We hope these events and associated publicity and promotion of events will place the girmit history, struggles and legacies on the global map and generate much interest and creative work after the event to preserve the girmit history and legacies for future generations.

The Centennial Commemoration of the Indian indenture (Girmit) system was the starting point to highlight, educate and start a process to address the issues plaguing the Indo-Fijian communities in Australia and beyond. We recognize that Fiji has not taught in the schools or promoted the Fiji Girmit history for the last 100 years. One significant consequence of this deliberate or otherwise neglect is the descendants of the Fiji girmitiyas have little knowledge of girmit and the legacies of the girmitiyas. This has impacted on the descendants of the girmitiyas a negative ways, especially since their flight and fragmented post 1987 and 2000 racist coups.

The first significant impact was loss of their girmit legacy and identity. Until 1987 they believed in Fiji and regarded Fiji as their homes and had Fijian identity. But the coups shattered their identity to the core and many are now lamenting and questioning their Fijian identity while trying to rediscover their identities in Australia or even in India, the homeland of their ancestors.

The second banished descendants of Fiji girmitiyas have little knowledge how their first banished and exiled ancestors succeeded in establishing a stable, cohesive and productive community for them and their children within a short period since the first girmitiyas landed in Fiji on 14th May 1879. The descendants of the Fiji girmitiyas living in NSW and in rest of Australia and in the Fijian diaspora has much to learn from the experiences of their girmitiya ancestors and the honourable legacy they have left behind.

After the successful commemoration of the 100th anniversary of abolition of Indian indenture (Girmit) system, the Indian Diaspora Council of India Inc. (IDCA) is now planning to establish a **Girmit Heritage, Research, Retirement and Cultural Centre** in Australia, preferably in NSW. The Girmit Heritage & Research Centre Projects aims to amend the historical amnesia that surrounds the Fiji and global girmit. The Girmit Heritage & Research Centre Projects wishes to ensure that Girmit, girmitiyas and

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the descendants of the girmitiyas are not consigned to the dustbin of history but become an integral part of the Australian social consciousness, similar to all the Australia historical events and memories.

The proposed Girmit Heritage, Research, Retirement and Cultural Centre wishes to achieve these main aims and objectives:

1. Pay tribute to Fiji and global girmitiyas and recognise their pains, sacrifices and struggles during the indenture period and appreciate the legacy the girmitiyas have left behind for their descendants and all those who are touched by their enduring global legacies.
2. Promote the histories, struggles and legacies of Fiji and global girmitiyas among the present and future generations.
3. Research, preserve and promote the history, culture (including art forms) and languages that the girmitiyas brought to the colonies which were preserved and enriched over the 180 years since the first girmitiyas were transported from India.
4. Provide a space for the descendants of the girmitiyas, researchers, students and members of the public to experience life on a girmit farm. In order to achieve this the following structures/facilities are required:

- Acquire a piece of land on which the Girmit Heritage, Research, Retirement and Cultural Centre will be established. The size of the land will depend upon finance and scale of the Centre.
- Construct a building which will accommodate staff, a girmit museum, a girmit library and a girmit audio-visual studio.
- Construct a girmit *coolie lane* of up to 8 coolie quarters in which the visitors will experience girmit living conditions.
- Construct an outdoor girmit kitchen where the visitors will be able to experience girmit cooking experience and girmit food.
- An open space for 'girmitiyas' to experience social life after work on farms. This will include music and dance once a week on Saturday night or Sunday day time.
- Have a small sugarcane farm for the visitors to experience sugarcane farming.
- A small vegetable farm.
- An area for farm animals, chicken, ducks and so on.
- Construct a Retirement Home
- Construct a Nursing Home
- Construct a Cultural Hall for cultural and social events.
- Have courses and workshops.

- Link the Fiji experience to the international girmit experience

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International and local personalities to pay tributes to Fiji and International Girmitiyas

Friday 17th March at the Bowman Hall (Blacktown)

Harish Prasad Lawyer, Aisha Amjad Community Leader, Biman Prasad MP Fiji Islands, Blacktown Mayor Stephen Ball, Yogesh Punja Fiji High Commissioner

International and local personalities to pay tributes to Fiji and International Girmitiyas

Friday 18th March at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre

Bal Ram (BA LLB) Liverpool Lawyer, Dr Satish Rai Filmmaker, Prof Biman Prasad MP Fiji Islands, Cllr Wendy Waller Liverpool Mayor, Paster Vijay Karan

IDCA has started collaborating with an educational institution to conduct necessary research work and prepare a viable Project Proposal. Consultation with members of the local, national and international communities has also started. Anyone wishing to be a part of this project and IDCA should contact Dr Satish Rai on 0410 524 835 or email: raivisionfilm@gmail.com.