

THE GIRMITIYA AND BRITAIN'S SOLEMN PLEDGE: A VOICE FROM SOUTH AFRICA

Bugsy Singh
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The indentureship of Indians (Girmitiyas) for labour in various colonies of the British empire following the abolition of the slave trade in the early 19th century has been described as a *"crime that should haunt the history of British rule in India for generations to come"*.¹ Unlike Non-Resident Indians of today, Girmitiyas to South Africa were recruited from British controlled Akhand Bharat, from the erstwhile Union Provinces and the Madras Presidency.

For all practical purposes, indentureship was euphemistically neo-slavery. Whilst between 1860 and 1911 a total of 152 184 Indians were indentured to toil in Natal, this was not the first time that Indians were transported to South Africa (SA) to fulfil the imperial designs of white colonizers; largely airbrushed from history is that between 1658 to 1700 the majority of slaves brought to SA by the Dutch, were Indians. The majority of Indian slaves were from Bengal (including Bihar and Orissa), Coromandel Coast and the Malabar Coast (including Goa, Bombay and Surat)².

Table 1

Place of origin	Number	Percent
Africa	875	26.65
India	1195	36.40
Indonesia	1033	31.47
Sri Lanka	102	3.10
Malaya	16	0.49
Mauritius	6	0.18
Other and unidentified	56	1.71
Total	3283	100.00

Source: Frank R. Bradlow and Margaret Cairns, The Early Cape Muslims, page 102 in: Indian slaves in South Africa: A little-known aspect of Indian-South African relations (In: South African History Online: Enugu Sreenivasalu Reddy

For many in the Diaspora of Girmitiyas origin, the hankering for the Motherland, that is Bharat, has been a poignant pursuit memorably articulated by Shri Balram Singh Rai (Guyana's first Home Affairs Minister (18th October, 1959):

"It is important if only for purposes of future guidance that we should have an adequate and objective understanding of the way our people lived, thought and acted since they came or were brought to this land, for what is a people or a nation that has no history or that has lost its history? In this way we can learn of our mistakes in the past and are enabled to avoid similar pitfalls in the future. Again, the past furnishes us with an organic connection with what we are today; it can tell us how, when and why we came to be what we are. The history of our people may also serve as an inspiration to us and a spur to future conduct and activity."

George Orwell, the celebrated writer born in Motihari, Bihar where a considerable number of Girmitiyas have their roots, has cautioned that:

"The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history"

In SA, the well document brutality of indentureship was compounded by the longstanding racism and the subsequent sociopolitical and cultural isolation of SA (infra vide). So appalling were the conditions that rained on the Girmitiyas that Henry Polak, an associate of Gandhi, described the Girmitiyas in SA as the “Helots of the Empire”.

India played a salutary role in the fight against apartheid, being the 1st country to sever trade relations with apartheid SA (in 1946). India spearheaded the United Nations sanctions against SA and subsequently imposed a complete diplomatic, commercial, cultural and sports embargo against SA. Inevitably the sanctions against apartheid SA affected the poor and marginalized; for the majority of Indians, especially the Girmitiyas, the sanctions against SA ensured the continued isolation from their Motherland – effectively becoming the forgotten children of Bharat.

Institutionalized racial discrimination which was central to apartheid, was designed to keep us as aliens in the country of our birth, as inferior citizens, to deny fulfillment of intellectual potential; sanctions ensured the isolation from our cultural moorings, our spirituality, language and religiosity for over 130 years. We attained, arguably, the pitiful status of being the hardest hit in the Diaspora in all metrics of human development. On the Girmitiyas in SA, Kiru Naidoo has written: “..... *This history is savagely depressing .But it also tells of the triumph of the human spirit*”.

In terms of socioeconomic origins, the Indian population in SA has not been homogenous; the Girmitiya saga in SA has often been conflated with the wider elitist Indian population that includes merchant migrants and those who were not indentured. Consistently publications, books and theses have explored various aspects of the wider Indian experience in Natal (province with the largest Indian population in SA); these writings range from the wholly academic rather than humanistic or empathetic, rich in data and demographic mining but wanting in scholarly analysis – thus the genesis of the anti-Indian racism in Natal, as well as the historicity of the Girmitiya struggles and triumph, have gravitated to a subliminal status. More than ever, the words of Chinua Achebe are apposite: “*Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.*”

From the perspective of a 5th generation Girmitiya my sensitivities are alerted to the patronage, stereotyping, subliminal prejudices and condescendence; thus, in respect of the Girmitiya:

“One feature about these merchants stands out prominently. Like most of the Indian merchants of the time, their status, as 'British' Indians, clearly of a different class and status to indentured Indians...” ³

“Meanwhile, we would take the opportunity of pointing out that practically 50 per cent of the insolvencies among the Indian population are those of men who are themselves ex-indentured or the descendants of indentured persons..... Agriculture is the natural standby of all these people, and when they depart from the ancestral custom they will naturally run serious risk of failure.” ⁴

Genesis of anti-Indian racism

The genesis of anti-Indian racism is multi-layered and multifactorial.

In no other colony in the British Empire did challenges (racial and economic competition) arise to the extent as in Natal; this has been attributed to no other colony having a settled White population as well a considerable indigenous population.

Presently, Indians constitute 3% of the South African population; in Guyana, Fiji or Mauritius, the Indian population ranges 35-70% of the total population.

Beyond the demographic profile of mid-19th century Natal, the colonial attitudes towards people of colour with notions that ingenuity, inventiveness and governance by law were the preserve of Europeans. Thus Robert Knox (in *The Races of Men* published in 1850), postulated that:

*"race is everything" and that human character, both national and individual, "is traceable solely to the nature of that race to which the individual or nation belongs".*⁶⁵

As per du Bois⁵, Charles Dilke in *Greater Britain* (1868) was quite prescriptive in his views on race:

"Nature seems to intend the English race of officers to direct and guide the cheap labour of the Eastern races."

An editorial in the Mercury (leading Natal newspaper) in 1870 resonates the White mindset:

"The proper destiny of the Anglo-Saxon in South Africa is to be the guardian, the guide, the controller of the coloured people around him. He is to impart to them his civilisation without raising them to his level".

Clearly the subtle racial arrogance, social discrimination and condescendence that the British held in Bharat, but could not effect by virtue of being a minority there, found traction in Natal. For as long as Indians were a minority, did not pose an economic challenge and contributed to the economic development of Natal, they were tolerated.

The increase in Indian population followed indentured Indians settling in the colony after their 5 year contract, thereby becoming "free" Indians; in 1883, not a single Indian out of the 4 548 who completed their five year contracts was re-indentured for a second term. In addition, large numbers of "passenger" Indians regularly settled in Natal in pursuit of economic opportunities. Effectively, between 1876 and 1886 the Indian population almost tripled⁶; this, together with their increasing prosperity, challenged the privileged status of the whites, prompting a backlash against the so-called "Asiatic menace"⁵.

The Grimitiya who had completed the contract was eligible for the privileges accorded to "free" Indians (in general); these privileges were outlined in "Britain's solemn pledges" as described by Dadabhai Naoroji⁷.

Britain's solemn pledges

The Act of Parliament 1833 (India)

"That no Native of the said territories, nor any natural-born subject of His Majesty resident therein, shall by reason only of his religion, place of birth, descent, or any of them, be disabled from holding any place, office, or employment under the said Company".

and by the Queen's Proclamation of 1858

" We hold ourselves bound to the Natives of our Indian territories by the same obligations of duty which bind us to all our other subjects, and these obligations, by the blessing of Almighty God, we shall faithfully and conscientiously fulfil".

Lord Lytton (the Viceroy), on the assumption of Queen Victoria as Empress of India (1st January, 1877), at the Delhi Assemblage:

"But you, the Natives of India, whatever your race and whatever your creed, have a recognised claim to share largely with your English fellow-subjects, according to your capacity for the task, in the administration of the country you inhabit...."

It is moot whether Girmitiyas who were besieged by their pitiful existence and daily challenges of survival, were empowered or had occasion to benefit from "Britain's solemn pledges". For the Girmitiyas, the protection and preservation of landing documents that had appropriate details (place of origin, family and employer details, colonial number) was imaginably difficult given the poor and insecure living conditions and then enforced re-locations.

Even to date, access to the Colonial number (which confirms origin from British India) remains a monumental challenge.

Contrast this with the burgeoning economic status of the "passenger" Indians who arrived with their British Indian passport, described as a *"passport, proof of national status and travel document issued to British subjects of the British Indian Empire, British subjects from other parts of the British Empire, and the subjects of the British protected states in the Indian subcontinent (ie. the British Protected Persons of the 'princely states')"*

In addition to the prospect of social integration and potential fallouts due to cultural differences, the passenger (Merchant class) rapidly made inroads into business that hitherto was the exclusive preserve of Whites, as well as acquiring properties in White dominated areas. It was the threat this class of urban Indians (rather than the Girmitiyas), that progressed to disapprobation and in time constituted the core of anti-Indian hostility; it was apparent that Indians were not welcome as settlers⁵.

From the early 1880s, letters to newspapers, news reports and editorials critical of Indians became prominent:

"The coolie trades people are getting too big for their shoes", stated a report in the *Mercury*⁸.

By the late 1800's White business interests were clearly under threat, prompting unrest by Whites who complained *'bitterly about their loss of income as a result of the unfair way in which Indians were undermining their income'*.

For Whites, the economic depression at the time was aggravated by the undercutting of their skills and services by Indians which in turn led to further racism aimed at Indians. So extreme were sentiments that White succeeded in preventing Indian Immigrants from landing in Durban.

Against this backdrop, MK Gandhi arrived in Durban in 1893 as a legal counsel serving the material and political interests of merchant, Dada Abdulla. In 1894 Gandhi formed the Natal Indian Congress.

In response to the prevailing anti-Indian sentiments, petitions and legal submissions by merchant Indians largely dealt with issues of property and trade, thus:

*"the licenses for new stores, requests for Indian businessmen to be allowed to remain in certain areas and protests at the hostile treatment of British Indians by the Office of the Protector of Indian Immigrants"*⁹.

There was no discussion on the politics of the Girmitya; petitioning by the Natal or Transvaal Indian Congress in respect of the appalling conditions of the Girmitya were consistently rhetorical and peripheral.

It has been suggested that it was the material interests of merchant Indians led to the politicization of Gandhi! ¹⁰

Political agencies and the Girmitya ^{11, 12}

The narrative that Girmityas did not have any political agency nor recourse to undertake any form of resistance merits debunking:

- many Girmityas were capable of laying a complaint and addressing problems to the Indenture Protector Officer*
- Natal Indian Patriotic Union (NIPU) in 1908 made up mainly of Girmitya colonial born Indians - resolutions of this movement were mainly related to issues of education.
- NIPU was followed by the Colonial Born Indian Association, and the South African Indian Committee

It has been suggested that circa 1907 Gandhi was still serving the wider middle classes, and not indentured labourers or non-Indians. Swan writes: *'By 1904, however, he had begun to develop the humanistic, universalist political philosophy out of which passive resistance grew. But Gandhi's politics lagged behind his ideology'*¹³.

Given the increasing hardships faced by the Girmityas and the progressive organization of the formerly indentured, it is not unsurprising that they were the foot soldiers of the Passive Resistance movement which sustained in South Africa as well becoming central to the India's freedom movement.

ANTI-INDIAN RACISM

The racial hostility generated by thriving Indian business was surpassed by attitudes of white colonists who referred to Indentured Indians as "coolies" and perceived them in mechanistic terms.

The longstanding racial mindset was underscored by an editorial in the Natal Witness ¹⁴:

"The ordinary Coolie ... and his family cannot be admitted into close fellowship and union with us and our families. He is introduced for the same reason as mules might be introduced from Montevideo, oxen from Madagascar or sugar machinery from Glasgow. The object for which he is brought is to supply labour and that alone. He is not one of us; he is in every respect an alien; he only comes to perform a certain amount of work, and to return to India...."

This was an era of violent racism¹⁵

"The dregs of India came here half a century ago to work on the sugar plantations... The coolie is not an inmate of this country, but a usurper and exploiter. Millions of people have recently been shifted to Europe to solve racial problems. Why can we not shift 250,000 coolies?"

Election Manifesto of Dr. J.H. Look: Nationalist Party candidate 1947/8 election manifesto

Anti- Indian racism sustained

The views and pronouncements of DF Malan, leader of the National Party and Prime Minister of South Africa (1948 to 1954) and a champion of apartheid and white nationalism who referred to Indians as an **“alien element in South African society”**, are germane.

'.....the Party regards the Indians as a foreign element, which cannot be assimilated in the South African.... Not being native to the country they cannot expect more preferential treatment than an immigrant community. We accordingly have in mind the repatriation of as many Indians as possible ...With the Indians still in our midst a definite policy of Apartheid should be enforced between them and the Whites, and likewise as far as feasible between them and the indigenous non-white sections.'

Excerpt from Race Relations Policy of the National Party which came to power in 1948

Racism was ever present:

*"The Indians have no right to regard themselves as part of the settled population who belonged to South Africa. Therefore the Indians must be satisfied to remain in South Africa under restriction. In the circumstances, the restrictions are justified."
The Party holds the view that Indians are a foreign and outlandish element which is unassimilable. They can never become part of the country and must therefore be treated as an immigrant community."*

DF Malan: Prime Minister of South Africa (1948-1954): Champion of apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism

Unable to arrest the tide of Indian immigration White public representatives devised greater legal restrictions on Indian settlers, as noted below¹⁶:

- 1891: Act 25 of 1891** - gift of crown land and full citizenship rights as per the Natal Coolie Law of 1859 to indentured Indians withdrawn to discourage the settlement of Indians
- 1895: Act 17 of 1895** imposes a £3 tax on former indentured Indians, who fail to re-indenture or return to India after completion of their labour contracts
- 1896: The Franchise Act No 8 of 1896 disenfranchises Indians**
- 1888** Legislation Indians forced to carry passes or court arrest
- 1903: The Immigration Restriction Act in Natal** restricts immigration to Natal
- 1910: South Africa Act of 1909:** Formal racial segregation, leading to further erosion of the Black majority's political rights
- 1925:** Areas Reservation and Immigration and Registration defines Indians as aliens and Recommends repatriation
- 1922: Land Alienation Ordinance** – gives the Durban Town Council the right to restrict ownership and occupation of land of any race group
- 1927: Nationality and Flag Act** denies Indians the right to become citizens by naturalization
- 1933: Slums Act 1933** - aimed at improving conditions in locations, but actually expropriates Indian property
- 1946: Ghetto Act 1946** - designed to curtail Indian property ownership in White areas in Natal
- 1943: Land Pegging Act** - restrictions on acquisition and occupation of land in Natal
- 1950: The Group Areas Act (No. 41 of 1950)** divided population into racial groups for the purpose of segregating them into distinct residential areas.
- 1952: The Separate Representation of Voters Act, No. 46** removed Coloured and Asian voters from the Common Roll – placed on a communal roll to elect 4 white representatives to

the House of Assembly

The Whiteman's nightmare – the fear of Indian expansionism!

Beyond the racism and fear of erosion of white privileges was the consideration that Indians had a resilience and temperament matched by enterprise that was not encountered by white South Africans in the previous 300 years. This is reflected in the thoughts of General Jan Christian Smuts, Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa from 1919-1924 and 1939-1948¹⁷.

Smuts's thoughts on India's role in the 1940s as evidenced in a letter written to a friend are worth noting:

"South Africa is a little epic of European civilisation on a dark continent.

India is threatening this noble experiment

All along this east coast of Africa from Mombasa to Durban and ultimately to Cape Town they are invading, infiltrating, penetrating in all sorts of devious ways to reverse the role which we have thought our destiny

..... We stand for something which will go and be lost to the world, if India gets control of eastern Africa".

THE INDENTURED INDIAN: RESISTANCE AND DESPERATION IN SOUTH AFRICA ^{18, 19}

Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.

Chinua Achebe

The November 1913 Natal strike

The November 1913 strike by 20 000 workers in coastal Natal has been describes as a *"crucial moment in the emergence of the modern South African Indian working class"*. This was spontaneous strike and unprecedented among Indian workers – yet poorly documented. The police response was brutal; the workers (overwhelmingly Grimitiyas) were shot and killed by police gunfire or beaten senseless. The strike was prompted by:

- employer and state repression preventing labour protest against their conditions of existence
- grinding poverty following the post-war (Anglo-Boer) depression
- Annual tax £3 tax
- 65% of the entire indentured workforce was under 2nd or subsequent terms of contract - mostly on the sugar plantations.

By the end of November the strike had paralysed the Durban and Pietermaritzburg markets, closed down the sugar mills, hotels, restaurants and private residencies. The strike drew public criticisms in India and Britain prompting the Viceroy of India to undertake emergency discussion on the Natal situation; the Viceroy publically criticized the Government of South Africa, requesting a commission of inquiry on which Indian interests would be addressed. The £3 tax was abolished.

The Lobito (Angola) Indians 1907

Background

- With the waning of indenture system, the proportion of free to indentured Indians significantly rose, adding to the number of unemployed; some 28 000 Indians were reported to have been unemployed in 1907.

- Against the backdrop of rising Indian unemployment, white protectionism was effected. The services of thousands of Indians employed by Durban Municipality and Natal Railways were dispensed in favour of whites.
- Natal Government Railway and plantations lowered their wage levels for free Indian labour
- Closure of mines exacerbated the numbers unemployed
- Almost all the unemployed owed the Natal government between £1 and £14 in tax arrears

The unemployed were lured by the project to build the Benguela railway in Angola (April 1907) – from Lobito Bay to Cubal.

- Liberal wages offered
- 2,000 Indian men, women and children sailed from Durban for Lobito Bay
- Angola was noted to be “a waterless and foodless country”
- This turned out to be a tragic experience; nearly one third of workers died (diseases, suicides); many deserted.

The Lobito Indian tragedy can be traced in the first instance to the indentured system and the desperation faced by struggling Indians.

First martyrs of the Satyagraha movement ²⁰

The sacrifices and bravery of the satyagrahis in the Satyagraha movement that evolved in South Africa have been widely documented. Sadly, the first martyrs of the Satyagraha movement have not been documented. Shri (Dr) Enuga Sreenivasulu Reddy provides some detail:

"Five Indians were killed and nine wounded at Blackburn and Hillhead barracks of Natal Estates Ltd., Mount Edgecombe, on November 27, 1913. Those who gave their lives were:

- *Pachiappen Ragavan*
- *Selvan Guruvadu*
- *Soubrayen Gounden*

One more died of injuries in Avoca hospital, but the name was not published.

At the inquest, which was held before the Acting Magistrate of Verulam, the doctor who examined the dead said that the five were shot from the back....."

Not surprisingly, the estate manager who oversaw the episode was exonerated at the inquest. All those killed and injured were GIrmitiya. This episode is one of several that describes the brutalities inflicted on striking and protesting Grimitiyas.

CONTRIBUTIONS BY THE GIRMITIYA IN SOUTH AFRICA²¹

The immense contribution of the Indian people to the economic development of Natal has been consistently recognized. In a leading article, early in 1865, the *Natal Mercury* pointed out that:

"Coolie (sic) immigration after several years experience of it is deemed more essential to our prosperity than ever. It is the vitalizing principle..... Had it not been for coolie (sic) labour, we should certainly not have to say that our export increased from £26,000 in 1863 to £100,000 in 1864 and has prospects of a greater increase than

before it. Had it not been for coolie (sic) labour we should not hear of coffee plantations springing up on all hands and of the prosperity of older ones being sustained through the agency of East Indian men..."

In 1901 the Protector of Indian Immigrants noted that employers realized the indispensability of Indian labour and pointed out that if Indian labour was withdrawn the **"country would at once be simply paralysed"**. Sir Liege Hulett, ex-Prime Minister of Natal Colony and a sugar baron, said (in 1903) Durban was absolutely built by the Indian people^{22, 23}.

Heydenrych has expressed that *"without Indian labour, the Natal railways could hardly have been built and operated"*²⁴

All the contributions made by Girmityas were made on the bedrock of "secret slavery", systematic abuse, human right violation, floggings, rape, malnutrition and suicides; there is solid evidence to suggest overwork (17 or 18 hour day during the overlapping crushing and planting season).

The progeny of the estate owners and similar beneficiaries of Girmitya struggles, suffering and sacrifices continue to thrive today; there has been no atonement, no acknowledgement of the evils committed.

Pariah to Paragon: contribution to Medicine

There have been immeasurable contributions to the transformation and development of the wider society; whilst reflections on this is beyond the scope of this article, I am obliged, given my professional affiliation, to comment on the Girmitya contributions to Medicine in SA.

Pursuit of medical training for Girmitya was hamstrung by the lack of formal schooling (until 1928), access to tertiary education in SA was the preserve of Whites (until 1950s); the opportunity to study abroad was an option for the financially endowed.

For those who did qualify as doctors, rampant racism ensured that there were neither opportunities in the public sector nor so scope for postgraduate training.

It speaks to the spirit of human endeavor, sacrifice and perseverance that despite unimaginable challenges, Girmitya descendants play a pivotal role in the delivery of medical care and training in SA today, an enviable contribution that far exceeds our miniscule population in SA (less than 3%).

In 1951, following the creation of the University of Natal Medical school – the only institute in SA to train students of colour (African, Indian and Coloured), the first surgeon of colour (Dr CN Pillay), first paediatrician of colour (Dr BT Naidoo), first pathologist of colour (Dr S Kallichurun), first cardiologist of colour (Dr Somers) and first Medical Dean (a female, Dr S Kallichurun) of colour in SA, are of Girmitya origin.

Swami Bhavani Dayal Sannyasi

The need for Girmityas to rewrite their history is underscored by airbrushing from standard texts of the remarkable Swami Bhavani Dayal Sannyasi. Born to Girmitya parents, Swami Bhavani Dayal was a much-revered figure in Natal. He fought consistently for Indian rights in SA (as a member of the Natal Indian Congress) as well as in Bharat (as part of the

independence movement), having left SA in 1940. His participation in the independence movement saw him share platforms with the likes of Gandhi, Nehru, Ms Sarjini Naidoo and Dr Rajendra Parsad. He was incarcerated in both countries for his political involvement. Swami Bhavani Dayal was central to the Arya Samaj movement in SA; he also left an imprint in East Africa and Fiji (although he was banned from entering the country by the British). He made a monumental contribution to the Hindi language in SA (and in India). Swamiji was a remarkable man whose standing has increased over time; his contributions merit re-visiting during this transparent time.

CONCLUSION

For the Girmitya in SA, beyond the unparalleled brutality wreaked by the British conspired indentureship in the diaspora, is the global isolation that followed the UN sanctions, the unbridled racism it spawned against people of colour and the other ravages of apartheid. To date there has been no atonement by the British for their imperialist excesses; the legatees and surrogates of British colonialism continue to prosper in SA. Should there be a call for reparation?

My view that is no material compensation can assuage the devastation wreaked by the indenture system; at the very least there should be an unconditional apology from the highest office of the British government and their monarchy together with their support to develop Girmitya museums, archives facilities in the diaspora and in Bharat. The foregoing will resonate the Indentured Labour Route Project (ILRP - approved by UNESCO in 2014)²⁵. The ILRP has the potential to

- link together Girmityas in the diaspora to ascertain common historical challenges and commonalities
- afford Girmitya to articulate their experiences and thoughts.
- highlight the Girmitya history as it is not widely appreciated.
- contribute to Girmitya geneology
- profile Girmitya icons

The endeavours by the current Government in Bharat to recognise the Girmitya, are laudable, a far cry from the stance taken by the Nehruvian polity. Ultimately, the Girmityas were hauled from British “India”, and the British responsibility for this must not go unchecked – as must Britain’s solemn pledge.

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