



## From Girmitiya to Government: Writers of Indian Diaspora in Fiji

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### **Abstract**

*The literature produced by the descendants of Girmitiyas is known as Girmitia Literature. During the post colonial period the British government came to margin whereas the third world countries came to the center on the account of their hard work, homeliness and natural environment. Writers like V.S Naipaul, Satyendra Nandan, M.G Vassanji, Vijay Mishra, Sudesh Mishra K S Manian and so on expressed their anguish through their literature. Gradually, these Girmitiyas came to the government on the basis of their honesty and servitude. The paper aims at highlighting the growth and development of Girmitiya literature, its characteristic features and its repercussions in the 21st century life and literature.*

**Keywords: Girmitiyas; postcolonial; margin; third world**

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Girmitiyas are indentured laborers who were forcefully sent by the British rulers in different parts of the world during the mid-19th century up to early 20th century. These workers went abroad with a mission to change the scenario of islands like Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji, Mauritius, Tobago, Kenya and so on where they suffered to a great extent by the British colonizers but got chance to recite Ramcharit Manas and other religious scriptures. Such laborers also carried the Hindu tool kit such as pataka, guthka, tulsi plants and so on so that they could establish cultural artifact in the adopting nations. The literature produced by the descendants of Girmitiyas is known as Girmitia Literature.

During the post colonial period the British government came to margin whereas the third world countries came to the center on the account of their hard work, homeliness and natural environment. Writers like V.S Naipaul, Satyendra Nandan, M.G Vassanji, Vijay Mishra, Sudesh Mishra, K S Manian and so on expressed their anguish through their literature. Gradually, these Girmitiyas came to the government on the basis of their honesty and servitude. The paper aims at highlighting the growth and development of Girmitiya literature, its characteristic features and its repercussions in the 21st century life and literature.

Indian slaves brought prosperity and Liberation to alien lands. 'Girmitas' the name given to generations of Indians which was "forced" to leave the country in the middle and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to serve as labors in the then British colonies where they eventually settled down – has echoed in the sugarcane fields, from Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad to Natal, for more than a century.

"Agreement" is the term that has been coined into "Girmit", referring to the Agreement to the British Government with the Indian laborers as the length of stay in Fiji and when they would be allowed to go back to India.

Totaram Sanadhya (1876 – 1947) was born in Firozabad Uttar Pradesh. Amongst the people who have written about the life of Fiji's indentured Indian laborers, Totaram ji stands out because he actually experienced indenture and spent a considerable time witnessing its atrocities and trying to improve the troubles of the indentured laborers. After living in Fiji for twenty- one



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years, he returned to India in, 1914, and wrote about his experience-*My Twenty- one years in Fiji Islands ( Hindi )*.

Totaram knew that farming alone would not provide him enough income, so he had decided to become a priest. He educated himself and started working as a priest and very soon had a following in the Rewa area. He was responsible for the first Ram- Leela organized in Navua in 1902. When he earned enough as a free person, he handed over the running of his farm to laborers and toured the estates, trying to help the Indian laborers. He would sit outside the boundary of the estates singing religious songs and when people from the plantation came out to listen him he would stop singing and discuss their problems.

Indo – Fijian writers like Ahmed Ali, Ami Chandra, Brij lal, Sudesh Mishra, Satendra Nandan have written a lot about their experiences of Fiji. They have adapted to the new environments with the changes to their dress, language and culinary habits although they have maintained their distinct culture and physical appearance.

The Indo fijians have fought for equal rights, although with limited success. After a further five years of work as an indentured labourers or as a khula free laborer they were given choice of returning to India at their own expenses or remains in fiji. The great majority opted to stay because they could not afford to return ( under the low pay even in many instances they were denied paid wages) of British Government or were refused to sent back. After the expiry of their girmits many leased small plots of land from fijians and developed their own sugarcane field or cattle farmlets.they developed a new language known as fiji hindi that was formed from different languages and dialect of india.

Totaram Sanadhya was the first girmit who raised his voice for his rights. After completion of his Girmit he started his own farming along with which he also studied astrology .He always helped the Indians in Fiji.He wrote a book with Benarsidas Chautervedi wrote *Mere fiji Dwip me ikkis Varsh*, the first book written on girmit *My 21 Years in the Fiji Island*. The book talks about the contribution of the abolitionist Totaram Sanadhya .Works of Satyendra Nandan who is a Fiji Indian Academic writer and former Politician *Faces in a village: poetry from fiji* 1991, *The wounded sea* 1977, *Line across black writers* 1977, *Fiji\_ paradise in pieces* 2000, *Requiem for a*



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