

## Gandhian Ideology in Satendra Nandan's Fiction

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### ABSTRACT

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Babu, or Mahatma is no longer perceived as a person but a belief now. His views on non-violence, love and care, and the quest for Truth are far reaching than one can imagine. Apart from many virtuous deeds, Gandhi was instrumental in abolishing the Indenture System in India: a system synonymous with *narak* or hell. In South Africa, he fought for the rights of the Indian indentured labourers. His experiences amongst the labourers shaped Gandhi's makings and markings. The end of the Indenture System freed over one million Indian bonded labourers in sixteen different colonies (Cohen 63). For a diasporic writer like Satendra Nandan, a descendant of an indentured labourer in Fiji, Gandhi has a particular room in his heart and writings. No other Indo-Fijian writer has given Gandhi the attention in their works like Nandan. Most of his works have direct references or allusions to Gandhi and his ideology. For this reason, Nandan's view is unique. In this paper, I will discuss two of Gandhi's ideologies that feature prominently in Nandan's works: the search for Truth and the act of reading and writing.

**Key words:** Descendant, *Girmitiya*, Diaspora, Indenture

### INTRODUCTION

The labour shortage propelled the Indenture System when slavery was abolished in 1833. Critics like Hugh Tinker likened Indenture System to a 'new milch cow' or 'a new system of slavery' (Cohen 63-64). Unlike slaves, the indentured labourers were under a contract—an agreement outlining the terms and conditions between a labourer and the administrators of the said colony. Labourers from Japan, China, and mainly from India were transported to destinations such as Mauritius, British Guiana/Guyana, Natal (South Africa), Trinidad, Réunion, Fiji, Guadeloupe, Kenya & Uganda, Jamaica Dutch Guiana/Suriname, Martinique, Seychelles, St Lucia, Grenada, and St Vincent. Over 1.3 million labourers were taken to these countries and states (Clarke 9). Today India is a source of skilled labour ("International migrant stock" 2019) with an estimated 17.5 million Indian diasporas but the initial mass migration of unskilled labourers occurred in the early eighteenth century because of Capitalism, Imperialism, and Colonialism. From the 1830s to 1920s, British, Dutch, and French deployed indentured labourers to their colonies where the climate was harsh and labour scarce.

This paper briefly discusses the arrival of Indians to Fiji under the Indenture System. As a result of their sordid experiences, the labourers formed 'Girmit Ideology' (Mishra *Indo-Fijian Fiction* 171-183) and later a consciousness 'Diasporic Imaginary' (Mishra *The Literature*

*of the Indian Diaspora* 1-21). Satendra Nandan, the foremost Indo-Fijian writer, is an exemplar in Mishra's theory. "Impossible mourning" for home (Mishra 9) and the idea of "homing desire" (Avtar Brah 180) form key concepts in diasporic literature. In this respect Gandhi, for Nandan, becomes the representative of his mother/mythical land—India. As a result, Nandan in his fiction expresses Gandhi's impact on him and the Indians in Fiji. Two of Gandhi's ideologies feature prominently in Nandan's works. They are the search for Truth and the act of reading and writing. Therefore, this paper explores how Nandan captures these ideologies in his fiction.

### Indians in Fiji

The presence of Indians in the Fiji Islands is mainly due to the Indenture System. From 1879 to 1916, British Empire recruited 60 969 indentured labourers for Fiji (Clarke 9). They were a human investment for the new British colony. Waves of modernisation were far from the shores of Fiji, yet the British Empire expected its colonies to generate revenue and administer their resources. Sir Arthur Gordon (the Governor of Fiji then) had to get revenue from a limited commercial development (Gillion *Abstract* ii). In his address to the European planters, Gordon asserted that Fiji as a colony needed "capital investment, cheap and abundant labour, means of communication, justice, education, and revenue" (Lal 69). Gordon negotiated with the Colonial Sugar

Refining Company (CSR), an Australian enterprise, to extend its operations to Fiji. He then secured an “ample and steady supply of cheap and abundant labour” from the “super abundant population of India” (Lal 70). Gordon’s project rested on four pillars: economic development of Fiji, economic advancement of poor Indians, maintenance of order between Fijians and European settlers, and preservation of the Fijian way of life, social structure, and customs (Gillion 11-28).

On 14 May 1879, the first batch of Indian indentured labourers arrived in Fiji on board the *Leonidas* (Mohanty 4). The Agreement, from which they coined the corrupt word *gimit*, and subsequently the *gimitiya* identity, specified the details of their employment, potential repatriation, nature and conditions of employment on the plantations, and remuneration for work (Lal 42). After the initial five-year contract, they had the option to return to India at their own expense or the colony’s expense after another five years of ‘industrial residence’ (Long 162). Some indentured labourers returned after five years, others after ten years, but most stayed in Fiji permanently. Prospect of better opportunities, official discouragement of repatriation, inertia, and the dread of undertaking a long sea voyage again were reasons for staying in Fiji (Lal 42).

### Indo-Fijian literature

Literature in English emanating from the Indian in Fiji is categorised as Indo-Fijian literature. Indo-Fijian literature was first theorised by the Indo-Fijian scholar Vijay Mishra in a seminal essay entitled “Indo-Fijian Fiction and Gimit Ideology” in 1977. In the essay, he argues that Indo-Fijian fiction has to be evaluated against the ideological “base” of the ‘Gimit Ideology’ (171). The Gimit Ideology results from a “consciousness moulded from the experience of some forty years of servitude” during the Indian indenture experience in Fiji. Later in 2007, Mishra revised his thesis by expanding the scope from ‘Gimit Ideology’ to ‘Diasporic Imagination’ in his seminal text *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. In his lecture ‘The Diaspora Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora’, Mishra expounds on his theory by stating, “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (1). He sets the tone, which is clear that the diasporas, any group of diasporic people, are unhappy, and they express their unhappiness in ways unique to them. Therefore, Mishra has set the base with which Indo-Fijian fiction is to be evaluated.

Satendra Nandan is a foremost writer in Fiji. He is credited with publishing the first collection of poems, *Faces in a Village: Poetry from Fiji* (1976), and later a novel *The Wounded Sea* (1991). In his fiction, he relates to India through Indian myths, mythology, and legends. His writings also reflect diasporic angst and *gimit* ideology. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi features prominently in Nandan’s works. His latest collection of essays—*Gandhianjali* (2019), celebrates the 150<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). It is a garland of offerings, in poetry and prose, to the Great Soul from his

ardent admirer. The collection contains selected essays, articles, poems, and meditations on various topics with the underlying theme of Gandhi’s experiences and ethical struggles from South Africa to the South Pacific, across oceans and continents in pursuit of *satyagraha*, sanitation, and saintliness (Gopal).

### Gandhi and gimit

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was instrumental in abolishing the Indenture System—a system synonymous with *naraka* or hell. In South Africa, he represented and fought for the rights of the coolies—a derogatory tag for the Indian indentured labourers. The end of the Indenture System freed over one million Indian bonded labourers in sixteen different colonies (Cohen 63). For the ‘unlettered’ Indians in Fiji, Gandhi persuaded Manilal, a Barrister, for his legal representation and later C. F. Andrews to report on the plights of the *gimitiyas* in Fiji. Through Manilal, many Indians, free and bonded, received a fair trial. C. F. Andrew’s report highlighted the ills of the Indenture System in Fiji, compelling the British administration to adhere to the Agreement guidelines. Eventually, the Indenture System was abolished in 1916. Yet, there is more to Indenture than a mere historical timeframe. It had a far-reaching effect on the lives of those involved in the system. These effects resonate in literature born out of the Indenture System.

The deeds of Gandhi travelled far and wide. Across the seven seas, Satendra Nandan’s father introduced him to Gandhi. In his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Wounded Sea* (1991), Nandan writes how his father presents Gandhi to him in his young days. His father, handing Nandan a discarded newspaper, instructs, “Tek this grat noosepaper and read, boy. Tell me wold noose. What happening in India? Gandhi king now? He grat man: too much reading he done. You read, boy, no look see me” (21). This brief interaction between the father and son brings out two important aspects of the lives of the descendants of *gimitiyas* in Fiji. First, although they were living in Fiji, almost twelve thousand miles away, across *Kala Pani*, on a small island, India was still their mythical world—their home, and secondly, Gandhi was akin to their mythical King—Lord Rama.

### Gandhi and ramrajya

During *gimit*, the *gimitiyas* turned to *Ramcharitramanas* to find solace and sustenance. *Ramcharitramanas*, written by in Awadhi language by Goswami Tulsidas, is a vernacularised version of Valmiki’s iconic *Ramayana* in Sanskrit. Tulsidas, a contemporary of William Shakespeare, gave a religious slant to the iconic text, and soon it gained currency amongst the Hindu subalterns. The *gimitiyas* firmly believed that if Rama (the hero-prince) could bear fourteen long years of exile in a dense forest without the luxuries of civilised life, then their plights were nothing but trivia. On the same note, they saw Gandhi as a messiah in his efforts to abolish *gimit*. He was the ‘hands of God’ who would bring *Ramrajya* for them. *Ramrajya*, in Gandhi’s definition,

meant 'true democracy' where the sovereignty of the people is based on pure moral authority ("Ramrajya—Mind of Mahatma Gandhi"). In this respect, Gandhi was an extension of Lord Rama for Indians.

### **Gandhi- the reader, the writer**

Extensive reading and writing broadened Gandhi's views. The *girmitiyas* in Fiji realised that education would emancipate them from their present predicament of coolie status. The appropriated conversation between the young lad (Nandan-the protagonist) and his father had a much deeper meaning. Nandan took to reading and writing until he receives a pair of black shoes as a prize from his father (*The Wounded Sea* 20-24). Like Cinderella's glass slippers, Nandan's pair of black shoes symbolised further opportunities through education. This segment of the autobiography eventually took the shape of a short story titled "A Pair of Black Shoes". It is a popular short story in an anthology *Roots: A Collection of South Pacific Short Stories for Forms Three and Four* (1981) prescribed in secondary school English curriculum by the Ministry of Education (Fiji Islands). The short story is a comical episode of how Nandan got his first pair of black shoes. Nandan's reading and writing narrations through Commonwealth Literature are given expression in a personal essay titled "An Unfinished Literary Journey". The essay highlights the story of his shoeless school days in an obscure village home without an English book to his education and travels and elevation to Professor Emeritus for his literary and academic endeavours. Nandan, through his reading and writing, became a metaphor for academic success amongst Indian students in Fiji.

In his essay "Mahatma Gandhi: The Reader, The Writer" (2008), Nandan highlights a famous and much-quoted incident when Gandhi visits London for a Round Table Conference. A British journalist questions him on the steps of the Buckingham Palace, "Mr. Gandhi, are you going to see the King Emperor of the greatest Empire dressed as a half-naked fakir?" Gandhi replies, "Don't worry, my friend. The King Emperor will be wearing enough clothes for both of us!" Another journalist asks him what he thought of western civilisation? "It will be a very good idea," replies Gandhi. Nandan highlights these two witty replies to show Gandhi's rich, remarkable, and insightful mind and ability to say the very essence of a situation in a single sentence. The very act of speaking in English, and speaking eloquently and tactfully, thus became the act of a subaltern speaking back to the Empire.

Nandan believes Gandhi nurtured his extraordinary insight and mastery of the English language from his readings. Gandhi was a sincere, creative reader. Reading led to writing, and through his writings, Gandhi discovered himself and the very essence of his ideology—Truth. Gandhi once said, "the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress" (Kapoor). During the 1987 military coup in Fiji, the soldiers kept Nandan, then a cabinet minister, hostage for six days and five nights. In recording a disconcerting event of the hostage crisis in his book of essays *Requiem for a*

*Rainbow* (2001), Nandan recalls when the soldiers decide to shoot and kill the hostage members of parliament (45-47). The armed soldiers in balaclava come to take two government ministers: Krishna Dutt and Joeli Kalou. Coincidentally the two names Krishna and Kalou denote to gods. Krishna is a primary deity in Hinduism, whereas *Kalou* means God in the Fijian language. The crucifixion stopped when the Indo-Fijian hostages began singing Gandhi's favourite bhajan—*Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram*—a Hindu hymn and prayer. The shocked soldiers slinked away when they found the short hymn unending. Nandan usually whips that a pen is mightier than the sword, but on that day, Gandhi's favourite hymn and Rama's name proved its might. For Nandan, Gandhi was present, metaphorically, in his moment of life and death.

The trauma of that ordeal is evident in *The Wounded Sea* (1991) and many of his other works. A cursory glance at the titles of his works: *The Wounded Sea* (1991), *Fiji: Paradise in Pieces* (2000), *Requiem for a Rainbow* (2001), *Beyond Paradise: Rites of Passage* (2010), *Memories of a River* (2014), *Across the Seven Seas* (2017), and *Dispatches from distant Shores* (2017) shows the angst and his state of melancholy. Because of that political crisis, he was forced to leave his beloved country—Fiji. He left his home "with death on his mind" (*The Wounded Sea* 4). In Canberra, he pines to see his family and his home. The inability to attend the funeral of his eldest brother (96), whom he was immensely fond of, and his mother's constant pleading over the telephone, "come before I die. I want to see you" (127), causes immense pain and suffering to him. The only solace to his suffering was writing. Between the lines of a blank page, Nandan created his imaginary world; a world where he gave voice to his pain and suffering. Through writing, the writer re-discovers and heals himself. Thus, a significant thread in Nandan's work is 'Writer as a Healer'. In his essay "A Writer's World: Daffodils and Marigolds", he asserts that writing is healing; writing not only heals a person but a nation. For this reason, Kaur and Goundar, in an essay "The Artist as a Healer: Glimpse of Satendra Nandan's writing as a Healer", qualify Nandan as a writer that healed not only himself but also the nation (480-491).

### **Gandhi- the search for Truth**

The second connection that Nandan associates with Gandhi is Truth. In his essay "Deenbandhu Charlie: Girmity and Gandhi", Nandan writes that the "... girmity story was the noblest epic of India: its unlikely hero is, of course, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi who went to South Africa at the age of 23 and returned to India, after 24 years, as a Mahatma." He says Gandhi's life among the indentured Indians shaped Gandhi's makings and markings. The association with the coolies triggered his search for his version of Truth. Gandhi, in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter, part 2, of his *An Autobiography: The Story of my Experiment in Truth* (141-142), writes about his sudden encounter with a stranger—a coolie named Balasundaram in South Africa. Nandan spins a poem "Gandhi and the Girmitya" as his interpretation of Truth.

As Balasundaram  
Took off his blood-stained scarf from his head  
Gandhi saw more than most;  
His heart's desire was fulfilled  
To serve strangers in strange places.  
He changed his sartorial tastes  
Shaved his hair himself:  
The coolie barrister  
Became a coolie!

Nandan goes on.

Miracles happen when the soul  
Of a coolie  
And a mahatma become one.  
Balasundaram had given him a truth:  
How can men feel honoured  
In the humiliation of their fellow beings?  
It was not a question he asked.  
It was the answer he found  
From the bleeding mouth of a coolie.

The Truth is, no one should feel honoured in the humiliation of their fellow beings. Just like Gandhi, Nandan wrote and tried to find his version of the Truth. Nandan, in *Across the seven Seas* (7-35), gives expression to his version of Truth in his poem "Votualevu Junction".

For me all stories began at my birth,  
When dream flowed in many streams  
The palms grew tall like my brothers:  
Where my cut umbilical cord was buried  
Under the mango tree with fruitful boughs  
That I thought was my piece of earth (132-137)

In conclusion, Nandan views Gandhi "like an ocean for me—a voyage of many discoveries in the currents of our turbulent and treacherous world. He has given me light to see a bit more clearly by his life, work, and writings". With a bit of push from his father to read and write like Gandhi, Nandan broke free from the shackles of the sweet slave crop—sugarcane and the plantation life. As a writer, he searched for his version of Truth. Eventually, Nandan realised his Truth lies in his village; his village is his home, etched permanently in his psyche. Although a diaspora now, he firmly believes that "my piece of earth" can be taken, but his imagination of home belongs only to him. The imagination of his home gives him sustenance and comfort, something no one can take away from him. Through his writing, Nandan has recreated his home in his imagination where he feels most secure.

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