

# STORY OF GIRMIT

## BLOOD, SWEAT & TEARS OF AN INDENTURED FAMILY

Plight, Problems & Progress of  
an Indentured Family



FROM BASTI  
TO BOTINI

GROWING UP  
IN SABETO

FROM FIJI TO  
BRISBANE

FROM 1906  
TO 2013

**The determined, dedicated,  
diligent & devoted discovers  
define their destiny.**

Life and Living of Sarju Mahajan & Gangadei Family



Growing up in  
Fiji

DR RAM LAKHAN PRASAD

**Over a hundred years of colourful history of an immigrant family from Basti in Uttar Pradesh in India to Botini in Fiji and then to Brisbane in Australia.**

**Plight, Problems and Progress of an Indentured Family in Fiji from 1906 to 2013**

# **Blood, Sweat & Tears of an Indentured Family.**

**Dr Ram Lakhan Prasad  
2013**



Sarju Mahajan  
My Grand Father



Gangadei  
My Grand Mother



Bhagauti Prasad  
My Father



Ram Kumari  
My Mother

# **Blood, Sweat & Tears of an Indentured Family.**

**Plight, Problems and  
Progress of an  
Indentured Family in  
Fiji from 1906 to 2013**

**STORY OF GIRMIT**

## Episode One

# Root, Boot and Toot

**The** subtitle of this episode is Root, Boot and Toot because my grand parents came from a village called Basti in Uttar Pradesh of India and this was their root. However, while my grand parents were working on the sugarcane plantations of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company in Fiji as indentured workers from 1906 to 1916 after being uprooted from their root they were treated very badly by the overseers on the farm. My grand parents were beaten, whipped and kicked by the boot of these cruel sirdar.

But their life became better when they received their freedom and established their own farms. Their wagon of family life began to toot with joy and pride.

This is a sad and tragic true story of my grand parents, Sarju Mahajan and Gangadei from 1906 to 1986. It is full of emotive events that go on to show how their blood, toil and sweat went on to make valuable contribution to develop their family life first and then assist the country and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company prosper in Fiji.

In order to get these detailed episodes from them I had to do my share of service to them by showing my love and compassion for them. When I used to read the chapters of the Hindu Epic Ramayan to them every evening they would narrate

their stories of migration from Basti in Uttar Pradesh in India to Botani in Fiji very slowly and gradually after the conclusion of the reading.

In the process of that narration they laughed, cried, got angry and showed intensive remorse. Sometimes while telling their tragic stories they became so emotional that I had to leave them alone to cool themselves.

When slavery was abolished by the revolutionist William Wilberforce from this world then the attention of the large farm owners in the British colonies turned to India. By 1879 the turn of Fiji came to recruit young and healthy vulnerable Indian by deceitful methods and questionable means to ship them to Fiji to work on the farms of the then Colonial Sugar Refining Company.

Fiji is a nation of over 300 islands in the South Pacific Ocean. Fijians, Indians, Europeans, Chinese and others have been living in reasonable harmony for over two centuries. Fiji's climate is tropical with adequate rainforests and pine plantations. Indians do cultivation of sugarcane and there are coconut palms galore. A country of uncertain political and economic future but has to support at least three quarter million people. This country is my motherland and I have a special feeling for the place.

The Fijian Chiefs ceded Fiji to the British Government in 1874 but the natives were not culturally ready to participate in the economic development of the country. So the British Government in conjunction with some multinational enterprises went to other colonies to bring



people who could be manipulated to help them achieve their economic goals.

The Colonial Sugar Refining Company with the help and support of the British Government was willing to exploit the situation and enter the scene of the so-called economic development of the country. The Company hired cunning recruiters (Arkathis) to visit various villages and cities of India to recruit young and healthy Indians who could work on the sugarcane plantations and orchards belonging to them.

They in turn recruited Indian Priests and Village heads to do the initial ground work for them because the people there could trust these men. Thus began the Indenture System for

the Colony of Fiji in 1879 . It is commonly known as Girmit.



Gangadei my grand mother

Gangadei was my grand mother. She was a pretty girl and was as calm as her name sounds. She was born in Sitapur in the district of Basti Uttar Pradesh (North India). She was the last of the four children of the farming family. Very little else is known about her childhood but she was an intelligent and a strong woman.

She was a twelve-year-old girl when she accompanied a group from her

village to go to the annual Ayodhya Festival, a religious gathering of villagers. This festival used to be so crowded with people that once one is lost it would be impossible to locate them easily.

It was in that massive crowd of people that my grand mother got separated from the village group. She felt alone and frantically began searching her group but alas there was no hope. Tired and hungry she decided to sit down in a corner completely disappointed. At that time her condition was like a fish detached from water.

Where could she go? Who would help her? What should she do? She was confused and did not know what to do. She had lost her thinking power altogether in this confusion. 'Into thy hands Lord, I commend my

Spirit.’ Nothing remained in her own hands, everything in His.

A yellow robed pundit of middle age saw my grand mother’s condition and expressed his wish to assist her. Such people were respected in the village and she felt at ease to talk to him. He spoke kindly, “Beti, why are you crying? Have you lost your way? Have you lost your family members? You don’t worry because as a holy man I am here to help you.”

My grand mother felt that this help was god sent and she greeted the pundit with respect and told him her sad story. Punditji realised that my grand mother was in real need for his assistance and this made him very happy. The pundit however, hid his real eager feelings and expressed his concerns and pseudo sadness as if

his own daughter or sister was in trouble needing his assistance.

He pacified my grand mother and expressed his sorrow. May have shed some crocodile tears and said, “Well, whatever was to happen has happened but now you do not have to worry any more. I am here for you. I am calling a rickshaw to take you home.”

Whatever my grand mother longed for, this middle-aged Brahman was prepared to deliver so she fully trusted him and agreed to return home with him. The pundit made a signal to a nearby rickshaw operator who was eagerly waiting for him. They sat in it and left the busy festival ground to a destination unknown.

My grand mother was eager to reach home but instead she arrived at a Coolie Depot and then she realised that this fake pundit was an agent (Arkathi) to recruit workers for the Indenture System. She cursed herself for trusting him but it was too late now. She was a prisoner in this Coolie Depot from where it was impossible to escape. There were various other unfortunate souls sitting and cursing their fates there and were unsure of their future.

The next day all the recruits appeared before the resident magistrate to register themselves as slaves to work in a foreign land. After the registration for girmit they were put on a cargo train bound for the port of Calcutta.

When my grand mother reached the Depot in Calcutta she could not

believe her eyes when she witnessed the dilapidated nature of the place. Her worry and sadness multiplied manifold but she could not do anything else but cry.

The late Sir Henry Cotton in his report to the British Parliament writes this on Girit Recruitment Procedure:

*In too many instances the subordinate recruiting agents resort to criminal means inducing these victims by misrepresentation or by threats to accompany them to a contractor's depot or railway station where they are spirited away before their absence has been noticed by their friends and relatives. The records of the criminal courts teem with instances of fraud, abduction of married women and young persons, wrongful confinement,*

*intimidation and actual violence- in fact a tale of crime and outrage which would arouse a storm of public indignation in any civilized country. In India the facts are left to be recorded without notice by a few officials and missionaries.*

The new recruits suffered great injustice at the hands of the clerks and agents at the depot. Men and women were forced into small rooms like animals. Men and women were compelled and forced to get into pairs and then they were declared wife and husband. Those that did not agree were locked together and the men were instructed to make the women agree. Those who failed to come out as pairs were punished severely.

This pairing that turned into illegitimate marriage gave the agents



publicity that the indenture system was conducted with the consent and willingness of wife and husband. This was far from the truth. In most cases the forced pairing led to social disaster and in some it turned out to be a blessing for the recruits because they could share their sorrows and grief.

It was in this Calcutta Coolie Depot that my grand mother met my grand father. My grandma's case was a sad one. She worried a lot about her future and the forced pairing so she decided to choose my grand father as her husband because he was from the same district (Basti) and he was strong and handsome.

That was the beginning of their family life and the authorities registered their marriage. At least this staying together and the

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