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Girmitiyas and my Discovery of India¹

Clem Seecharan

About 1880, in the ancient town of Ayodhya in the United Provinces of India, a young girl of the Parray clan gave birth to a son. She must have been deeply disgraced, because she was willing to go alone with her baby to a far-off island to which other people of the region were going. That was how the Parray woman came to Trinidad. She wanted her son to be a pundit.

V.S. Naipaul (on his paternal great-grandmother) (1984: 56)

I know very little about my ancestors in India ... All that I shall ever know about my parents before they reached British Guiana [in 1901] is what is stated in the records of the now defunct Immigration Department [Ships' Registers]. They came from Basti in Uttar Pradesh, about sixty miles from Allahabad, Jawaharlal Nehru's birthplace.

Cheddi Jagan (1966: 13)

I grew up with many Indias, a tapestry of images—part fact, part fantasy—that have helped to shape me. I was born in British Guiana in 1950, on the edge of the plantation where several members of my family were taken, as 'bound coolies', from India, between 1875 and 1909. They were, like most of those who went to Fiji, *girmitiyas*: indentured labourers.

1 Originally published as the 'Foreword' to Brij V. Lal (2004), *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*, 2nd ed., Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies.

I was given no idea of the India in which my people originated—no clue as to why they left. I imagined India as an undifferentiated place, vastly bigger than British Guiana, but not as big as England. It was axiomatic in popular lore that the *girmitiyas* were tricked by *arkatis*—the evil recruiters in India—into ‘a new slavery’: they took the place of African slaves in the colony. But we learnt nothing of our ancestral background; nothing beyond the embroidered tales of deception and kidnapping that were the unassailable explanation for their presence in British Guiana. We did not reflect on the emotions, the pain, probably still lingering in the rickety frames of the dwindling *girmitiyas* in our midst, in the late 1950s. We did not explore the terminal break with the ‘motherland’—for most, a one-way journey. That recent India was an area of darkness; we did not try to comprehend it. Indeed, the India of the great Hindu classic, the *Ramayana*, the constructed India in Bombay movies, Gandhian India in revolt against British rule, and free Nehruvian India, had greater resonance for us than eastern Uttar Pradesh (the United Provinces (UP)) that, I would learn much later, was the home of my ancestors. If I had any notion at all of the Indian provenance of my ancestors it was that they were *not* Madrasis (Tamils): darker people whose rituals were alien to ours. We felt superior to them.

In 1966, I learnt from Cheddi Jagan’s book, *The West on Trial*, that his people had come from Basti District, in eastern UP (Jagan 1966: 13–14, 24)²—that had prompted me to ask about the place where our family originated. I learnt nothing; the void remained, and no one seemed perturbed by it. My early years had been spent among several of my great-grandparents, former *girmitiyas*, yet the carnival of images in the boy’s imagination must have considered them strange, companions of the framed Hindu gods and goddesses on our wall who looked over us: pictures that belonged to an India of magic. I must have seen them—these speakers of that funny language of our Hindu rituals—as somewhat mythical, evoking in me something surreal and timeless, as if, long ago, they had wandered too far away from home, got lost in the bush, and found themselves, purely by chance, on a sugar plantation in British Guiana: a long journey over land, among strange peoples. And even when

2 Cheddi was born on 22 March 1918 at Plantation Port Mourant, Corentyne, Berbice. His people were Kurmis. His birth certificate gives his name as ‘Chedda’; just below that is recorded: ‘Illegitimate’. His father was ‘Jagan, Calcutta Immigrant, 88470, *Elbe*, 1901’. His mother was ‘Bachaoni, Calcutta Immigrant, 88316, *Elbe*, 1901’. I am grateful to Professor David Dabydeen for a photocopy of this document.

I was told, as late as 1955, that the last batch of former ‘bound coolies’ was returning to India, by a big boat that was pointed out to me in the newspaper, the boy of five still imagined them retracing those faint steps in the bush, walking for months, possibly years, through places with tigers and elephants and flying chariots.

Such were the labyrinthine fantasies the *girmitiyas* stirred in me! They persisted into my adolescence. They came not from a precocious imagination but out of ‘historical darkness’. We really had no conception of this recent India that was the home of the *girmitiyas*. Inquiry, such as it was, fell for the tale—perpetuated by the *girmitiyas*—that they were all duped into going to British Guiana. Their curiosity ceased. The *arkati*, the infamous recruiter, still casts a long shadow. V.S. Naipaul (born 1932), whose people went to Trinidad as *girmitiyas* from eastern UP, recalls that he, too, was imperturbable about the ‘historical darkness’:

I grew up with two ideas of history, almost two ideas of time. There was history with dates. That kind of history affected people and places abroad ... But Chaguanas, where I was born, in an Indian-style house my [maternal] grandfather [a Brahmin *girmitiya*] had built, had no dates. If I had read in a book that Gandhi had made his first call for civil disobedience in 1919, that date seemed recent. But 1919, in Chaguanas, in the life of the Indian community, was almost unimaginable. It was a time beyond recall, mythical. About our family, the migration of our ancestors, I knew only what I knew or what I was told. Beyond (and sometimes even within) people’s memories was undated time, historical darkness. Out of that darkness (extending to place as well as to time) we had all come. The other where Gandhi and Nehru and the others operated was historical and real. The India from which we had come was impossibly remote, almost as imaginary as the land of the *Ramayana*, our Hindu epic. I lived easily with that darkness, that lack of knowledge. I never thought to inquire further (Naipaul 1984: 58–59).

The ‘India from which we had come’, was, in fact, more imaginary and remote than the land of the *Ramayana*. We, too, were comfortable with that darkness. But, as if to atone for this and the timelessness of the narratives we told ourselves, I became obsessed with time and dates—punctiliousness about time in my daily life: punctuality; and a passion for apprehending chronological time: the sequence of events and their contexts, the rudiments of an historical temper. I would lose patience with my own people for not being able to date things, even their own dates of birth or those of their children. I was also frustrated by the absence

of a chronological sense. This, I suppose, was what gave me the yearning for a sense of history, and is the genesis of my efforts in recent years to teach and write aspects of Indo-Caribbean history.

It started with the historical darkness in my family: not until the mid-1980s was I able to establish the precise place of origin, in India, of most of my family. And it was not until Brij Lal's *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*³ peeled back the shroud, casting unprecedented luminosity on our historical darkness, that this India, which had eluded me whenever I pursued my great-grandparents' antecedents, began to cohere.

My discovery of this book in early 1989, in the library of the Royal Commonwealth Society, five years after its publication by the *Journal of Pacific History*, gave me my first conceptions of nineteenth-century eastern UP. *Girmitiyas* also gave me the context for examining my great-grandparents' attitudes, including their motives for flight. Like an illumination, it unclogged my mind so that I could begin to see the efforts of the 'bound coolies' and their descendants in the Caribbean as an achievement worthy of celebration—though not of triumphalism. *Girmitiyas* is a foundation of my contribution to Indo-Guyanese history. It belongs with Nehru's *The Discovery of India* and C.L.R. James's *Beyond a Boundary*—these had cast a spell on me since the mid-1960s. *Girmitiyas* lit up my intellectual path away from the consuming historical darkness, which had delayed my creative spirit for a long time. I craved a history of our own—'a history with dates'.

Submerged ancestry: Kaila's world

It was my illiterate maternal great-grandmother, Kaila (1889–1956), who sparked something in me. She kindled my curiosity for the antecedents of the *girmitiyas*. When she died I was only six years old, but she still occupies a niche in my memory: a mythical persona almost, in my pantheon of Hindu goddesses, however dimmed by time and decades of unfaltering atheism. I think this idealised image of Kaila is a compound of the adulatory recollections of my extended family, and my own faded snapshots and later embellishments of her. But there were grounds for the construction of this somewhat ethereal persona: her abundant sacrifice for the family that betrayed no selfish motive; the absence

3 All quotes cited from *Girmitiyas* are taken from the original edition, published in 1983.

of petty jealousy—that bedevilling feature of many Hindu joint families; the inexhaustible energy that fed her resolve to make life better for my maternal grandmother, her only child, and her five children. The fact that Kaila never flinched from what she saw as duty to family, until the day she literally dropped collecting firewood in the cemetery, enhanced the persona of unsullied magnanimity. It was a life of total devotion to the building of a new family, in a new place far away from home, for she had journeyed alone to British Guiana as an indentured labourer, in 1909, aged 20. She would never have contact again with anyone in India.

Much of what I remember of Kaila is a blur, but it is a haziness that is of a piece: there is much that is immanent and suggestive in the faded image. It still has the power to evoke in me eclectic visions, to draw me into its shifting meanings and inner complexities—its subtle narratives—while intimating ways of self-reflection that speak to a larger context: the dynamic of our Indian community in colonial Guyana.⁴ I vaguely recall her visits to my grandmother, on Saturday afternoons, walking the six or seven miles from Plantation Rose Hall to Palmyra, and repeating the journey on Sunday afternoons. Palmyra, the village of my birth, was also the village of my maternal grandfather's family, the Sohans. Kaila and her husband, Jagarnath (1888–1958), had bought several plots of land there, as well as cattle, for my grandmother, Ramdularie (1916–1985), after she married my maternal grandfather in 1930, aged 14. But they continued to work and live at Plantation Rose Hall, in the rent-free 'logies' or barracks in the 'nigger yard', some of which were built during slavery—and looked so. Abstemious to the bone, every penny earned was guarded. That was why Kaila walked those miles to and from my grandmother's at weekends, whatever the weather. Yet she was unstinting when it came to her daughter, her grandchildren and me, her first great-grandchild, apparently the apple of her eye. She always brought fruits, sweetmeats, clothes, various things she made, for us.

A black, little woman, she was not quite of the Guyanese landscape: after nearly 50 years, she still looked and dressed as if she were from a foreign place. She belonged to that remote, incomprehensible India that possessed my boyhood. In my imagination she fused with those surreal Hindu images that looked out of the walls of our living room, the gods and goddesses that seemed to hover in midair. They awed me.

4 British Guiana became independent on 26 May 1966 as Guyana.

As I played at being a boss, a white overseer on the sugar plantation, ordering menial toilers about, my strange boyhood gift for wonder would magically transport Kaila to this India of which I knew nothing: the way Hanuman, the monkey god, fetched the mountain of curative herbs, in his hand, in the framed picture on our wall. But there were ordinary, day-to-day images, too. Kaila was as adept at the minutiae of wet-rice culture, as she was adroit in weeding and manuring sugar cane. Even now, nearly 50 years on, I can still place her on the *kharian* or threshing floor, driving our big-horned bullocks in endless cycles, tethered to a pole around which were packed tight bundles of freshly cut rice stalks (*padi*, unhusked rice). I can still see this busy little woman winnowing the *padi*, or helping to fill it into jute bags for the mill, sweeping up every grain with practised frugality. Nothing was wasted: the straw was fed to cows, the husk and broken rice to fowls and ducks, the cow cakes were dried for cooking or manuring the vegetable garden. The draconian thrift of village India had not been squandered in the comparative comfort of village Guyana. Fact and fantasy were inextricably interwoven in my apprehension of Kaila. One thing I did know for sure: she retained a deep affection for the *girmitiyas*, especially the few with whom she had made the crossing.

I remember her being in tears a few times—this stayed with me—and many years after she was gone I asked my grandmother, Ramdularie, the reason for her sadness. She said it had to do with the successive deaths of several of her friends from India, who were passing away month by month by the mid-1950s. They saw themselves as *jahajins*, ship-sisters, to the end. They were like blood relatives, their children forbidden to intermarry. On several occasions she had to upbraid Kaila for being so deeply pained that she would wail inconsolably at the funeral of one of her *jahajins*, imploring her to ‘take’ her soon: she could not wait to join them in the next life. Such was the bond of these *girmitiyas*! It grew stronger as they became fewer in the late 1950s. Brinsley Samaroo has reflected on the making of this bond:

On board ship the castes and regions of India were mixed as in the depots, and the common tasks, assigned with little respect to persons, served as a great leveller. The only separation on board was by gender and marital status ... [r]eplacing the previous ties of caste and region was a new form of bonding which was started in the depots and strengthened on the ship. This bonding became greater on those ships which underwent difficult passages, for example in the churning, swirling waters of the *Pagal Samundar* (Mad Sea) so often encountered off the Cape of Good Hope.

This brotherhood/sisterhood of the boat (*jahaji bhailbahin*) was cemented when the immigrants joined together to resist ill-usage by European seamen. For this reason, the Indians resented being separated into different colony batches when they arrived in the Caribbean (Samaroo 1999–2000: 19).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the enigma of Kaila has accompanied me throughout my life, sustaining curiosity, as if there was something hidden in her life that belongs to me: a kernel of truth that was at the core of my being. I learnt to call this *identity*, an exercise of the imagination that spoke to one's essence, grounded in family as well as a wider context, community: belonging. But that was a mature consideration arrived at after much internal conflict and agony on the meaning of India—many imagined Indias that still find ways of drawing out a strange loyalty. Kaila and my other *girmitya* great-grandparents are its source.

But Kaila's India remained elusive to my curiosity. From time to time my grandmother had tried to coax fragments of that past out of her, hoping to draw something from lapses in her taciturnity. She did not get beyond the exhausted tale that she was deceived into going to Demerara (British Guiana) to 'sift sugar'. Kaila was 20 when she went to the colony; she was 'single' and travelled alone. How credible was her fragment of a story? Was she married in India? Did she have any children? What was her mother like? Did she have a happy childhood? What did they do for a living? Did she miss those she would never see again? Did she dream of returning one day? Why did she leave home? Did she tell anybody that she was going away to work, possibly never to return? Why did she travel alone, unaccompanied by any relatives? How did she find the strength to break completely from her past and establish a foundation for people like myself to acquire ambition and self-belief? Some area of darkness! These questions, if asked at all over the years, were never answered. The gnawing secrets are interred with her. But, for me, the questions would not go away. They were sustained by my liberal education and the emerging historical temperament that was tormented by the historical darkness. That darkness that shrouded this woman, whose quiet consistency of purpose must have lodged in my imagination, fed my intellectual curiosity. It would later endow my pursuit of Indo-Caribbean history and historiography with the aura of a mission. This submerged history, which was Kaila's and mine, had to be written. The problem was how.

Joseph Ruhomon (1894), Peter Ruhomon (1947) and Dwarka Nath (1950), local Indian amateur historians, had made a bold start. However, the *girmitiyas*, as individuals, were silent in these pioneering studies. Even Bechu's fearlessly partisan writings on their behalf, in the late 1890s, had not sought to remedy this, although there were many thousands in British Guiana (Seecharan 1999). Agency was denied the 'bound coolies'. Amidst the supremacy of imperial institutions and definitions and the omnipotence of the colonial bureaucracy, individual lives, as well as the universe of the *girmitiyas*, were rendered voiceless. The intellectual means did not exist for the exploration of Kaila's world, including her inner promptings. After a while, curiosity just dried up. Everything would be subsumed under the resilient *arkati* thesis of deception and kidnapping, which brought closure on the imponderables. But, unlike Naipaul, I could not 'live easily with that darkness'. It grew worse the older I got. My intellectual *raison d'être* was animated by this gaping void in self-knowledge, a strangled sensibility—a fault-line in my identity.

It would be a circuitous route to comprehension of Kaila's world. A few years ago, I reflected on this passion to know:

My family grew rice but they had been cattle people for nearly a century in British Guiana. I took this for granted. It was many years later, in the 1980s, when I became deeply involved in my father's cattle business that I began to explore this family obsession with cattle. I turned to the National Archives in Georgetown [Guyana], to the Ships' Registers of indentured labourers (Seecharan 1997: 22).

This helped me to detect the vague contours of my *girmitiya* ancestors. I quickly ascertained that much of their caste instincts had accompanied them to the Caribbean; it was a major force in shaping their new world. The Ships' Registers had lightened the historical darkness; that elusive India was just peeping through its Himalayan clouds.⁵

5 These Registers are in the National Archives, Georgetown, Guyana. There are 188,917 individual embarkation slips, bound in 358 volumes, with the name of the ship and the year of the voyage embossed on the spine. These slips have the names of the immigrant, their ship's number, any peculiar identification mark, their village of origin, as well as their *tahsil* (sub-district) or district. They also state their place of registration, and the nearest of kin, if any, accompanying them. The plantation to which they were sent is pencilled in.

My first ancestor in the colony was Sohun (Sohan),⁶ my mother's paternal grandfather, who went to British Guiana as a 'bound coolie' in the ship *Rohilla*, which left Calcutta on 11 February 1875. He was 22 years old and came from Doobaree Village, Azamgahr District, in eastern UP. He was indentured to Plantation Rose Hall, the same sugar estate to which Kaila and Jagarnath were taken later, in 1909 and 1908 respectively. When Sohan left the estate, sometime in the late 1880s, he bought some land at Palmyra Village, the place of my birth, on the edge of that sugar plantation. He started to graze cattle on the common pasturage, which abounded before the meteoric rise of rice cultivation during World War I. But Sohan continued to work as head cattle minder on neighbouring Plantation Prospect, an estate owned by a Mr Gill, one of the many Scotsmen in the district. I felt as if I had cracked an ancient code when I discovered in the Ship's Register that Sohan was of Ahir caste, the celebrated cattle rearers of UP and Bihar. I grew up with knowledge of our Ahir caste provenance, but that had engendered incredulity in me, from time to time. I needed official corroboration in order to accept our cattle pedigree as unimpeachable. The need for authentication was aggravated by the absence of any caste rituals that would have anchored the claim.

Many of Sohan's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were also cattle rearers. A few became infamous cattle rustlers. My maternal grandfather, Latchman Sohan (1908–1989), was not unimpeachable. The last of Sohan's 10 children, born when he was 55, Latchman was a spoilt child, pampered by his creole Indian mother, Surat, Sohan's second wife. He turned to heavy rum-drinking early and retained that passion all his life. He was also prone to violence in the home. Outside of the home, Latchman was a warm, magnanimous man, prodigal with his generosity, if a bit of a rogue, something of a folk hero. He was known as Skipper Ding, most called him Skipper, this was done out of affection. That he was a legendary cattle herder—masterful at the lasso—sustained a heroic image long after he had passed his best. The image in the home was less heroic. In the late 1930s, already a father of five, he would deftly escape pressing domestic chores, especially the demanding seasonal tasks of rice-planting and rice-harvesting. Skipper was not overly concerned with the maintenance of his young family, a task stoically assumed by his wife and her parents, Kaila and Jagarnath, over many years.

6 I have relied heavily on two people for information on Sohan, Jagarnath and Kaila: Ramdularie (1916–1985), Palmyra, East Canje, Berbice, interview, May 1982; and Latchman Sohan (1908–1989), Palmyra, interview, December 1985.

Skipper's life was one of perpetual flight. Escape through booze and excess of all sorts; escape to the hinterland of British Guiana, to the inhospitable grasslands of the Rupununi, on the Brazilian border, encountered in Evelyn Waugh's *Ninety-Two Days* (1934) and *A Handful of Dust*, his novel of the same year. For many years in the late 1930s to the early 1940s, Skipper drove cattle on the Rupununi Cattle Trail, the 180 miles from Dadanawa, through Surama and Kurupukari, to Takama, on the Berbice River. Often, after that drive through the rainforest—heat, mosquitoes, sandflies and a million things that bite, itches, sores and dog tiredness—he would abandon himself to a week's whoring in the brothels of Takama, until body and money were spent. He would hitch a ride back to Dadanawa for another drive. The cycle could be repeated several times before he returned home. Something of the Ahir had fused with the spontaneous anarchy of the Brazilian *vaqueiro* (drover) and images of the hard-drinking, brothel-hooked cowboy of the American west. To Skipper, money was a handful of dust. Eventually, he would drink his way home until he was broke. He was known to pull out his gun, threatening to shoot his whole family; wife and children would scatter into the darkness and the bush. The bravado spoke of futility: belated assertiveness in a home that had learnt to do without him. He never fired the gun, except once—when he killed a 'tiger' (possibly a leopard) and made it into the newspaper. He had become a legend.

I was groping towards the diverse forces reshaping us, removed from that India we could not apprehend. Yet, somehow, India still mattered. Throughout the 1960s I came under the spell of one of Sohan's other sons, Kaywal, popularly known as Kilpax (1901–1972), a self-educated man who gave me another kind of India. A reformist Hindu, an Arya Samajist, he devoured several daily newspapers, apart from the writings of Gandhi, Nehru and Swami Vivekananda. A chain smoker, possessed by the World Service of the BBC and All-India Radio, he was glued to his little light green 'Ferguson' radio as it crackled into the night. Next day he would seek me out early to survey world events: Nehru's speech to the Lok Sabha on Pakistan or China; President Johnson and Vietnam; trouble in the Congo; Castro, Sukarno, Nkrumah, Ben Bella, Nasser; and, inevitably, back to Nehru, Gandhi and names that I learnt to associate with India's freedom struggle: Motilal Nehru, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Abdul Kalam Azad, Sarojini Naidu and others. Jawaharlal Nehru, of course, was infallible. Kilpax had lots of time. When I thought we had exhausted the political deliberations of the day, he would deftly throw in a name to conjure with, and start firing

again: 'Krishna Menon! Weak! Too much talk! And now the Chinese have walked into India! Ladakh stolen!'; or 'Jagjivan Ram, a Chamar, and Defence Minister!' I was drawn into his web. Another India, Nehru's, was taking shape in me. Kilpax was giving me his passion for argument and his enchantment with the spoken word, in English. And throughout my apprenticeship, he treated me like his equal, although I always called him *nana*: maternal grandfather.

Skipper's and Kilpax's father, Sohan, this patriarch who died in the mid-1920s, had left a very rich legacy indeed. His youngest daughter's grandson, Len Baichan (born 1946), was a Guyana and West Indies cricketer. He toured India and Pakistan in 1974–75 and Australia in 1975–76, and played in three Test matches. In his first, in Lahore in 1974, he made a century. He did not play a Test in India, but he travelled widely there and brought back lavish tales of the subcontinent, from the Khyber and Kashmir to Karnataka and Kerala, of legendary cricketers and film stars, of great palaces and maharajas, which he shared with me during many spacious hours, over rum, under that big samaan tree in the village. The cascading visions of India battling in me could not dry up. The curiosity, too, would not die. So my journey through the Ships' Registers, in 1985, had become an imperative. It would throw up light, feeding new questions, leaving many unanswered. But it was a journey that had to be made.

I discovered that my father's maternal grandfather, Sewnath (1881–1956),⁷ like Sohan and Jagarnath, was an Ahir. He came from Kharaura Village, Ghazipur District, eastern UP, and embarked from Calcutta on 8 October 1892, aged 11. He went to British Guiana in the *Avon*, accompanied by his sister, Sonbersi, aged 22, and her husband, Raghu, aged 30. Raghu was also an Ahir. It is noteworthy that the Register has them as the parents of Sewnath. That was incorrect; nothing is known of his parents, but they did not go to the colony. The assumption of parenthood by his sister and brother-in-law was a ruse to evade scrutiny of his case: he was a minor and would have needed the approval of his parents to board the ship at Calcutta.

The trio was indentured to Plantation Albion, on the lower Corentyne Coast, about 12 miles from Rose Hall. Young Sewnath soon acquired a formidable reputation on the estate as a shovelman. Sometime during

7 I have relied heavily on Sarran Jagmohan (1920–2005) for information on Sewnath, Etwarie, Harpal, Ramsarran Maharaj and Jagmohan: Palmyra, interview, April 1986; personal communication from Toronto, Canada, dated 21 July 1994, 14 and 16 March 1995.

World War I, he had moved from Albion to Plantation Rose Hall where he continued as a shovelman. His earnings were better than most fieldworkers, and his astounding frugality and gift for spotting a bargain or a niche for profitable investment enabled him to buy several properties at Palmyra and neighbouring Sea Well, at the junction of the East Canje and Corentyne districts. Sewnath, like Sohan and Jagarnath, retained the Ahir's passion for cattle: he bought several head and soon established a subsidiary source of income.

A self-assured, orderly and meticulous man, Sewnath was scrupulous with his time. He often said things in parables, many centred on a theme: time is money. He had little time to spare, and was impatient with those who wasted his time. He managed that time dextrously, combining estate labour with cattle, sheep and poultry rearing, rice farming, the cultivation of fruits and vegetables, and money-lending. The idea of a holiday or a slack period did not sit easily with Sewnath and his wife, Etwarie. On Sundays, whatever the weather, they would work on their vegetable farm at Blendaal, on the west bank of the Canje River, several miles from Palmyra. Only the rapid descent of the solid darkness would stop them: the weary miles home were made in their donkey cart laden with plantains, eddoes, sweet potatoes, cassava, pumpkins, mangoes, sour-sop, sapodilla, and a range of other fruits and vegetables. As their first grandson, Sarran Jagmohan (1920–2005), narrated to me this tale of resilience, industry and utter devotion to the welfare of their eight children, he recalled: 'that donkey cart, with a small lamp dangling from the axle, had enough to fill a market. They grew most of what they ate; and they ate well, although they were very careful with money'. He added that they treated boys and girls with impartiality; some of the produce of their farm was always reserved for their married daughters.

Etwarie, my father's maternal grandmother, was a creole Indian, born in British Guiana around 1883. She was a Muslim; but when she married Sewnath in 1898, she took a Hindu name. She was hardworking, energetic and thrifty. I remember her, in her last years in the late 1950s to early 1960s: a wiry old woman, skeletal. I never saw her sitting still. For many years she was a weeder at Rose Hall, but her reputation as a rice planter was legendary, deemed the fastest and neatest in the area. Both Sewnath and Etwarie were impelled by a passion to uplift their children. They gave one of their properties to their eldest child, Sukhia (1899–1969), my paternal grandmother, and her husband, Jagmohan (1891–1938), whom she married in 1913, aged 14. Their second daughter was married

to Jagmohan's younger brother, Mangal, who owned the best shop in the village in the 1930s. Etwarie died in August 1961, on polling day, having just voted for Cheddi Jagan. It was totally in character that she should have done her duty before moving on; her reliability, resilience and consistency of focus were as unfaltering as Kaila's. Unconsciously, I must have absorbed her habit of according girls the same respect she gave to boys. She could hold her own in any argument and never flinched from plain speaking or firm decisions.

The background of her first son-in-law, Jagmohan, is fascinating. It is enshrined in family lore. The tale is told of a man named Harpal (1846–1934), an Ahir *girmitiya* who had returned to India with his eldest son, Balgobin, in 1888. He had left his wife in British Guiana, having counselled her that if he did not return by a certain *jahaj* (ship), she should feel free to take another man. He did not return by that ship, and his wife, a Brahmin born in the colony, my father's paternal grandmother, soon invited a Brahmin man, another former *girmitiya*, Ramsarran Maharaj, to live with her. In early 1891, unannounced, Harpal (with his son) returned from India and went straight to his home at Warren (East Coast Berbice), as if nothing had happened. There he met the wife he had left behind pregnant by Ramsarran. Harpal had an amicable discussion with him and implored him to return to his home in a neighbouring village. Ramsarran pointed to the problem thrown up by the pregnancy, but Harpal assured him that he could handle that: he would bring the child up as if it were his own. Ramsarran left. This child, Jagmohan, my paternal grandfather, was born on 15 August 1891. He became a cattle herder, fathered 13 children and died prematurely, of pneumonia, on 17 September 1938, aged 47. He and his eldest son, Harold, who also died of pneumonia, were buried on the same day. Jagmohan grew up at No. 7 Village (East Coast Berbice), and worked for many years on Harpal's cattle farm. In his last years he was a cattle herder on an estate, Goldstone Hall, not far from Plantation Rose Hall. Ramsarran Maharaj returned to India for good, around 1898; there is no evidence that he had anything to do with his son Jagmohan's upbringing. The latter, a full Brahmin by birth, had taken to Harpal's Ahir calling, so that when he married my paternal grandmother, Sukhia, Sewnath's eldest daughter, Harpal probably saw that as keeping within the Ahir fold, his mother's Brahmin stock and the Muslim upbringing of Etwarie notwithstanding.

I had gone to the Ships' Registers looking for my *girmitya* ancestors in chronological order, so Jagarnath and Kaila came last on my roster. My mother's maternal grandfather, Jagarnath (1888–1958), went to British Guiana in the ship *Ganges*, which arrived there from Calcutta in late 1908. He was indentured to Rose Hall. He was 20 years old and, like Sohan, also from Azamgahr District in eastern UP; his village was Azampur. He was Ahir, like Sohan, Harpal and Sewnath, my other great-grandfathers. I was not aware how far the Ahir pedigree permeated the family. From time to time people spoke of our Gwalbans Ahir background, but the Registers had established for me that our obsession with cattle was not fortuitous. It had its roots in ancient caste promptings; and our settling on a section of the British Guiana coast, with ample land for grazing, must have rendered the ancient calling irresistible. We would pursue it assiduously for some 120 years, until one by one our numbers dwindled as we fled hapless Guyana for the greener pastures of the Indo-Guyanese diaspora: New York and Toronto primarily.

Kaila's story, however, broke this Ahir monotony. I had not anticipated this. She went to British Guiana in the *Ganges* in September 1909. She came from Bhagwanpur Village, Gonda District, eastern UP, next door to Basti, on the border with Nepal. As noted before, she was 20 years old, and travelled alone—no relatives, man or woman, accompanied her. The Register gave her caste as Pasi. I had never heard of this, so it took me some time to discover that it was a low caste of palm tappers and catchers of wild birds and small game. It quickly dawned on me that her very dark complexion was, indeed, a badge of her low caste status. Pasis were an aboriginal caste, black people, so her name, Kaila, was probably a corruption of 'Kala': black. I learnt that the name Pasi comes from a word meaning 'noose', used in trapping small game. I reflected on this often, and concluded that by escaping her low caste ascription this remarkable woman had, indeed, escaped the noose.

My maternal grandmother had just died when I discovered Kaila's caste background—a very dark woman herself, I have no idea what her reaction would have been. My mother was not very pleased with this belated revelation. She did not belabour the point, but said that I should not make this public. Although I was aware of our Ahir roots, my caste instincts had never cohered; yet I recall a tinge of disappointment on learning of Kaila's low caste. This had surprised me. I must have felt vindicated, having discovered the strength of our Ahir antecedents, for I had become a passionate cattle rearer in my last years in Guyana, in the early 1980s.

I like to think that the belated establishment of the diversity of my roots, Ahir, Brahmin, Muslim, Pasi, however submerged, has made me a broader person, equally proud now to claim a wider legacy. This, I suppose, has made me a better Guyanese and West Indian, more at ease with diversity and hybridity, better able to appreciate the achievements of the people of African descent in the region. It was a journey that had to be made; I had learnt much from it, but it left me with far more questions than when I started.

The curiosity grew thicker with my assembling of the fragments of my great-grandparents' Indian background. But the darkness over the real India that they had left, including their reasons for leaving, was not amenable to speedy dissipation. It was my discovery of Brij Lal's *Girmitiyas* that slowly opened for me sealed doors to the opaque world of the indentured labourers. It provided, at last, windows into Kaila's world that had eluded me since I was a child. This book would be the foundation of my belief that an Indo-Caribbean historiography was possible; and that it would debunk Naipaul's infamous dictum that the history of the 'West Indian futility' could not be written because 'history is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies' (Naipaul 1962: 29).

I was fortified for the journey. This is what I wrote in 1997, reflecting on the place of *Girmitiyas* in the project:

Towards the end of the 1980s I endeavoured to recover the real India of these north Indian 'bound coolies' in British Guiana. A fount of rare illumination presented itself with my encounter of Brij Lal's *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*. Here, in a refreshingly lucid and dispassionate way, the unexamined dogma of deception and kidnapping is scrutinised and largely debunked. Lal had unearthed compelling socio-economic reasons for their leaving ... [and] their role in shaping the temperament of the indentured labourers and their descendants in the sugar colonies. *Girmitiyas* also had a seminal influence on my way of seeing. The resilience of the Indians in Guyana, their thrift and ambition for their family—their achievements—are rendered more intelligible because we now have an authentic overview of real eastern UP and western Bihar, from the latter half of the nineteenth century (Seecharan 1997: xxxiii).

This is a magnificent legacy. How precisely did *Girmitiyas* help me to comprehend Kaila's world?

Discovering *Girmitiyas*: Out of historical darkness

At the beginning of the book, Brij Lal makes it clear that he challenges many of the standard assumptions about the *girmitiyas* and the world whence they came. It is, indeed, a fine scholarly achievement, revolutionary in its execution. He examines all the emigration passes (embarkation slips) of the 45,439 north Indian indentured labourers, who embarked at Calcutta for Fiji between 1879 and 1916. He gave me hope at the start of *Girmitiyas*: '[O]ur discussion has relevance for many other Indian labour importing colonies, particularly the West Indies, which drew their supplies from the north' (Lal 1983: 2). He repeats this at the end:

[M]uch of what has been said ... also applies to those other Indian labour importing islands, in the West Indies especially, which drew their supplies from north India. All the British colonies operated under the same, or very similar, regulations and many of them shared the same facilities in Calcutta. Sometimes the same emigration agent officiated for several colonies simultaneously, and even the sub-depots and recruiters were shared (Lal 1983: 131).

No examination as thorough as this had been undertaken for British Guiana or Trinidad—this is still the case. The story he was telling was also the story of my people; this was the light I had yearned for most of my life. Buoyed by this, I turned to a groundbreaking article by the British social anthropologist Raymond Smith written in the late 1950s on the origins of the *girmitiyas* to British Guiana (Smith 1959). Smith's study was based on a sample of 9,393 emigration passes of north Indians, between 1865 and 1917, but the correspondence between his findings and Lal's is so compelling that any doubt that *Girmitiyas* does not constitute an accurate account of the origins of Indo-Caribbean *girmitiyas* as well is dispelled.

The only major difference between Fiji and British Guiana is the paucity of Madrasis (Tamils primarily) in the latter. Smith estimates that they comprised 4.4 per cent of the migrants to British Guiana. Lal states that they were 6.3 per cent. He is nearer the mark: Madrasis numbered 15,065 of the 238,909 *girmitiyas* taken to British Guiana between 1838 and 1917. In Fiji they were 23.8 per cent of all migrants. However, this disparity is not replicated for north Indian migrants. Smith estimates that 85.6 per cent of the indentured labourers to British Guiana originated in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar: 70.3 per cent in the former, 15.3 per cent

in the latter. Lal states that 86 per cent of north Indian migrants to Fiji originated in this area: 75.5 per cent in UP, 10.5 per cent in Bihar. Both Smith and Lal observe that eastern UP and western Bihar primarily were the sources of these migrants, especially the former.

Nine districts in eastern UP, and a neighbouring district, Shahabad, in western Bihar, contributed 51 per cent of the Indian migrants to British Guiana. It is noteworthy that nine of the 10 principal districts that supplied labourers to the two colonies are identical. In British Guiana the five principal districts of recruitment were Basti, Azamgahr, Ghazipur, Gonda and Fyzabad. In Fiji, Basti, Gonda, Fyzabad and Azamgahr were among the five principal districts that contributed north Indian migrants; the other was Gorakhpur, neighbouring Basti, on the border with Nepal. Three of these districts had special resonance for me: Sohan and Jagarnath were from Azamgahr, Sewnath came from Ghazipur and Kaila originated in Gonda. They were becoming less remote, no longer imaginary. I could now locate them on the map—real places. My exploration of the *girmitiyas* was acquiring intellectual validity.

Brij Lal also establishes that, contrary to popular opinion, an overwhelming majority of the migrants were not from the lowest castes and outcastes. Raymond Smith corroborates this. Lal states that Brahmins and other high castes (Kshatriyas) comprised about 14 per cent in Fiji; middling agricultural and artisan castes were 39 per cent; low castes and outcastes contributed 28 per cent; Muslims were 15 per cent. Smith estimates that Brahmins and other high castes accounted for 13.6 per cent of the migrants to British Guiana; middling agricultural and artisan castes were 38.8 per cent; low castes and outcastes were 31.1 per cent; Muslims 16.3 per cent. Not only was there a remarkably high correspondence in the caste distribution of the two sugar colonies, but, as Lal observes, this also corresponded with the representation of the main castes in UP. The low caste Chamars, the largest single component among *girmitiyas*, contributed 12.9 per cent, 13.4 per cent and 12.4 per cent to British Guiana, Fiji and UP respectively, in 1901. Kshatriya castes constituted 9.2 per cent, 10 per cent and 7 per cent; Ahir 9.7 per cent, 9.2 per cent and 8 per cent; Kurmi 5.6 per cent, 5.1 per cent and 4.1 per cent; Pasi 2.2 per cent, 2.4 per cent and 2.6 per cent; and Muslims 16.3 per cent, 15.1 per cent and 13.5 per cent in British Guiana, Fiji and UP respectively, in 1901. Brahmins, however, were less inclined to go to the colonies as

girmitiyas: they comprised 2.0 per cent and 3.7 per cent of migrants to British Guiana and Fiji respectively, but they accounted for 8 per cent of the population of UP in 1901. Lal summarises his findings:

It is obvious that the evidence calls in question assertions about the predominantly low caste origins of the indentured migrants. Low castes, of course, contributed a large percentage of the total numbers migrating, but the proportion of high and middling castes is noteworthy ... It is clear that for most castes, with the exception of Brahmins, there is a broad correlation between their strength in the United Provinces and their contribution to the emigrating indentured population ... Muslims and Chamars, who constituted the largest component of UP society, also furnished the largest number of migrants. Kshatriyas and Ahirs, too, feature prominently (Lal 1983: 70–71).

Lal also establishes that, contrary to accepted dogmas, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, the impoverished districts of eastern UP and western Bihar were already immersed in a culture of migration: to Assam tea plantations, jute mills and myriad industrial destinations in Bengal, especially Calcutta, even Bombay textile mills. Many people were already on the move when they engaged for indentureship in the sugar colonies. The penetration of their agrarian economies by the British rendered many of the traditional caste skills superfluous; there was immense dislocation. Pressure on this old land in eastern UP was intense: the density of population in 1891 in Fyzabad, Azamgahr and Jaunpur districts, for instance, had reached 702, 790 and 816 per square mile respectively. The problem was exacerbated with the demise of many caste occupations, because virtually every non-agricultural caste was forced upon the land. This was a region of chronic land hunger and destitution for many people from the lowest and middling castes, but some high caste people were not immune from this plight.

In 1911, in UP, only 9.2 per cent of Ahirs were returned as earning a living principally from their traditional caste occupation: 'pastorals, cattle owners, breeders, dealers in milk produce'; 73.6 per cent were listed as cultivators. Among Brahmins, only 7.9 per cent gave 'priesthood' as their principal means of livelihood; 73.6 per cent as well were returned as cultivators. Among Kaila's people, Pasis, a mere 0.5 per cent still pursued their caste job; 63.3 per cent were cultivators; 23.4 per cent field labourers. The low caste Chamars had also virtually abandoned their ancient, despised trade of leather working; 39.1 per cent were returned as cultivators, while 35.9 per cent and 9.6 per cent were field labourers and general labourers respectively. It is significant that Kurmis and Koeris, the premier

cultivators of the eastern districts of UP, indicated little occupational shift: 84.3 per cent and 87.9 per cent respectively were cultivators. But the influx of virtually every caste, seeking subsistence from the land, would have aggravated their land hunger as well as their vulnerability to the notoriously usurious moneylenders (Lal 1983: 72–73).

By the late nineteenth century, Kurmis, Koeris and Ahirs had earned a formidable reputation as cultivators, but the land was still monopolised by the high castes: Brahmins and Kshatriya (Rajputs and Kayasths). In the late 1880s these upper castes owned 79.8 per cent of the land in Basti, 83.2 per cent in Sultanpur and 67 per cent in Azamgahr. Yet Brahmins were not enamoured of agriculture and attributed ignobility to working on the land. In 1901, in Basti, the single largest source of migrants to British Guiana and Fiji, Brahmins comprised 12.6 per cent of the Hindu population and owned 19.3 per cent of the cultivated area. They owned more than any caste, despite being deemed ‘inferior agriculturalists owing to their prejudice against handling a plough’ (Nevill 1907: 76). The incompetence of Brahmins contrasted with the meticulous husbandry of Kurmis, Koeris and Ahirs, who were responsible for 24 per cent of the cultivated land; they were deemed of the ‘greatest importance in the economic condition of the district’ (Nevill 1907: 102–103). Ahirs held 8.2 per cent of the cultivated area, and were considered cultivators ‘of a high order’. However, the crown for agricultural excellence was reserved for Kurmis. Dr Voelcker, an authority on agriculture in eastern UP at the end of the nineteenth century, had praised their ‘minute methods’. He was deeply impressed with the husbandry of the agricultural castes as a whole:

[N]owhere would one find better instances of keeping land scrupulously free of weeds, of ingenuity in device of water-raising appliances, of knowledge of soils and their capabilities, as well as the exact time to sow and to reap, as one would in Indian agriculture, and this not at its best alone, but at its ordinary level. It is wonderful, too, how much is known of rotation, the system of mixed crops, and of fallowing. I ... have never seen a more perfect picture of careful cultivation, worked with hard labour, perseverance and fertility of resource (Voelcker 1893: 11; also cited in Crooke 1972: 30–31).

Yet all these cultivating castes were at the mercy of landlords, hence the necessity for prudence in financial matters, if they were to elude the trapdoor to permanent debt bondage.

In Ghazipur District, the home of my paternal great-grandfather, Sewnath, his caste of Ahirs formed 'the backbone of the cultivating community', and were deemed 'hard-working and successful farmers' (Nevill 1909: 84). Yet they experienced acute land hunger, most being tenants of the Brahmins, Rajputs and Kayasths. In 1906 the upper castes in this district owned 82 per cent of the land; Ahirs owned a mere 2,283 acres although they were responsible for 14.3 per cent of the cultivated area. In the neighbouring district of Azamgahr, the home of my maternal great-grandfathers, Sohan and Jagarnath, Ahirs were also among the best cultivators, but they owned very little land: 7,601 acres or 0.6 per cent in 1879; 10,637 acres or 0.8 per cent in 1906. However, they believed that their ancestors were once the ruling race, holding the same high status as Rajputs and other Kshatriya castes. In view of the contemporary political ascendancy of Ahirs (Yadavs) in UP, it is not far-fetched to suggest that this belief in past supremacy must have been conducive to self-esteem and the sustaining of effort. The achievements of my *girmitiya* ancestors in British Guiana would seem to substantiate that. Their thrift and passion to own land certainly have their roots in the frustrated agricultural initiatives, the stifled skills of Ahirs in eastern UP as cattle rearers and farmers. I am unable to ascertain whether my Ahir great-grandparents' families, in Azamgahr and Ghazipur, had continued to pursue cattle rearing as their principal occupation despite the demise of their traditional calling; but the passion with which they pursued it in British Guiana suggests continuity, not merely the resuscitation of a folk practice. In any case, they would also have combined it with cultivation, as was the pattern with most Ahirs in UP. But their land hunger must have been acute, their indebtedness probably chronic.

As I read the *District Gazetteers* of eastern UP and other sources, animated by the emerging universe to which *Girmitiyas* had led me, I began to grasp the context in which my people's attitudes and skills had been shaped. For instance, the following by E.A.H. Blunt, an authority on eastern UP, on their capacity to pursue several activities simultaneously, in order to combat land hunger and the yawning trap of the moneylender, struck a chord. I readily set Sewnath and his wife, Etwarie, into this milieu. It is true that the latter was born in the colony and was of Muslim stock, but Muslims often manifested, even more than some of the other groups, a passion for thrift, entrepreneurship and ingenuity in performing several

subsidiary occupations simultaneously. I could also appreciate the role of the joint family in the process. I was better able, too, to comprehend why land was at the heart of their endeavour. Blunt had written:

A subsidiary occupation is a matter of great economic importance for it makes, especially amongst agriculturalists, all the difference between poverty and comparative ease ... There are, in fact, many peasants who have other sources of income: dairy work, selling grass or fuel, basket weaving, the making of rope, gur (coarse sugar), and tobacco, the ginning, spinning and weaving of cotton, etc. ... [T]he economic unit amongst the Hindus is not the individual but the joint-family ... [O]ne or more of its members are often in separate employment and earning an income of their own, of which they usually remit a part to the common pool of the family (Blunt 1938: 30–31).

There must have been a consuming fear among small cultivators of the *mahajan* or moneylender: because of land hunger and the smallness of their plots, they were perpetually vulnerable to him. As Lal observes, debt burden in these eastern districts of UP was pervasive and deep-rooted, a perennial nullification of effort and enterprise. I could now better understand the reason for flight from this region to other parts of India and to the sugar colonies. I could see, also, why most of my *girmitiya* great-grandparents harboured such a passion for thrift, driven by that imperative for landownership:

Debt was indeed one of the major problems for the small cultivator. The full extent to which the peasantry was indebted was revealed by an enquiry into the subject in 1868–9 ... [I]n most districts indebtedness was pervasive ... in Lucknow, between 66 and 90 per cent of the cultivators were estimated to be in debt; in Unao and Fyzabad 90 per cent; and in Sitapur between 60 and 80 per cent ... *over three-quarters of the peasantry were shackled with debt* ... Sometimes the debt had descended from father to son, while sometimes it was contracted for a marriage ceremony or to pursue a law suit. In addition ... the peasants also had to borrow for agriculture or related purposes ... *The cycle never ended; the cultivating tenant, one observer noted, 'is born in debt, increases his debt throughout his life and dies more hopelessly in debt than ever'* [emphasis added] (Lal 1983: 83–84).

Lal made me reflect further on the despair that must have claimed my people in late nineteenth century eastern UP, and the will of a few to escape. I could see that indentureship in British Guiana, though initially darkened by its bonded element, was not a static state: within a decade

or so after their arrival, many became small farmers, owning a piece of land and a few head of cattle, in villages neighbouring the plantations. The break with the latter was not terminal: economic and social links were resilient. Released at last, their skills and ambition could grow, even flourish. This was my story, and I could no longer accept doublebilling on the historiography of oppression: to see indentureship as 'a new slavery', If I may borrow Pankaj Mishra's elegant phrase, I could not wallow in 'the tenacious pleasures of victimhood' (Mishra 2017: 27). It is absurd to equate Indian indentureship with African chattel slavery; to do so is to trivialise the unexampled savagery of the latter. Besides, the plantation experience of Indians, however oppressive, was certainly not a journey into despair. This bleak, somewhat political, interpretation—to assuage African fears of perceived Indian economic ascendancy—did not accord with the experience of my family in the colony. Lal had also made me think of my people in the context of the 200 famines in India between 1860 and 1908. I tried to locate Sohan, Harpal, Ramsarran Maharaj, Sewnath, Kaila and Jagarnath in that India where the 'constant and menacing spectre of famine ... stalked the land with increasing frequency and stubbornness' (Lal 1983: 120). This was a land of real slavery for landless people, whose traditional occupations had disappeared. This was probably the fate of the low caste Pasis, Kaila's people, landless labourers, many of whom would have been *sewaks* (bonded slaves). In fact, in 1905, as the *Gonda Gazetteer* recorded (Kaila's home district), many Kori agricultural labourers, possibly slightly higher in status to the aboriginal Pasis, were *sewaks*: 'practically the slaves of their employers' (Nevill 1905: 67). Brij Lal sketches the anatomy of this form of slavery in eastern UP:

Many landless labourers led the lives of bonded slaves. This status began with the taking out of a loan by low caste men such as Chamars and Dusadhs. They then committed themselves and their descendants in perpetuity to the landlord until the loan was repaid. In return the landlord allowed the *sewaks* (bonded slaves) an agreed share of the produce of the field that they cultivated. In most cases, the share was barely sufficient to feed the *sewak* and his family. The landlord therefore provided further supplies, their value being added to the principal loan. The son of the *sewak*, once old enough, shared, and at his death succeeded to, his father's bond. In the meantime, the principal loan was perpetually being increased by the addition of the value of the food supplied by the landlord, and there was little prospect of the debt being repaid (Lal 1983: 87–88).

The poverty of Kaila's people would have made them especially vulnerable to myriad diseases that were rampant, assuming epidemic proportions, in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In her home district, Gonda, cholera was endemic after 1875; violent epidemics were common. Between 1872 and 1881, this disease accounted for 11.5 per cent of the total mortality of her district. There were bad outbreaks in 1873, 1876, 1877, 1878, 1881, 1886 and 1888—10,000 died in the latter year. In 1893, 16,000 died from cholera. Smallpox visitations were also common in Gonda: there were epidemics 'of great intensity' in 1876 and 1880. Famine struck in 1874, 1877 and 1897.

This was the context, Lal argues, in which some people, men and women, in eastern UP and western Bihar, became enmeshed in a culture of migration. By 1900, for instance, migrants from these areas had monopolised the jobs in the jute mills and factories of Bengal. The five principal districts from which they came were Benares, Azamgahr, Ghazipur, Jaunpur and Allahabad. In 1911 a quarter of the UP migrants in Bengal were women; by 1921, at the end of indentureship, a third in Calcutta were women (Lal 1983: 64). Lal explores the phenomenon and concludes that it is incorrect to attribute blame on the *arkatis* for duping vulnerable people into migrating overseas. He contends that although an element of deception was necessarily imbedded in the recruitment process, there were potent economic forces that sustained the culture of migration, internally and externally. He confers 'agency' on the *girmitiyas*, autonomy as actors:

[T]here was great upheaval in rural Indian society in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and this ultimately had its origins in the character of British rule in India. All strata of Indian society, the high castes and the low castes, the landlords and the landless labourers, were exposed to, and affected by, the widespread changes sweeping the Indian countryside. Many adjusted to their declining fortunes and stayed on in the village in the hope that things might improve. Others, from all groups and of differing social gradations, thought differently and left. *The recruiters may have painted rosy pictures of glorious prospects in the colonies, and may, thereby, have attracted many into their net. But there were forces at work in Indian society itself that were cutting the peasants off from the safe moorings of their traditional society. Not only men but women [as individuals] and families also migrated* [emphasis added] (Lal 1983: 89).

Girmtiyas is probably most revolutionary in its treatment of women indentured labourers. This enabled me to reach Kaila's elusive world. Over and over, I could see how these extraordinary women were suffused with the strength of character manifested by Kaila, as well as creole women like Etwarie and Ramdularie. Raymond Smith estimates that 43 women were recruited for every 100 men who went to British Guiana between 1865 and 1917: 82 per cent were between 10 and 30 years old; 52.6 per cent were between 20 and 30. Among men, 85.6 per cent were between 10 and 30. Lal's figures for Fiji corroborate Smith's with regard to the sex ratio as well as the age structure. It is clear that most of these people were very young; their whole lives were ahead of them. What is surprising, however, is the high incidence of women who migrated as individuals, unaccompanied by any relatives. Lal states that while 86.8 per cent of the adult males who went to Fiji were 'single', 63.9 per cent of the adult women were 'single'. Nearly two-thirds of the women were registered as single. I do not know what proportion of the *girmitiya* women to British Guiana were single, but in view of the remarkable correspondence of the statistical evidence from the two colonies, it is reasonable to assume that it was as high as Fiji. Kaila was in this 'single' category, although she was 20 years old when she landed in 1909. The incidence of single women is very surprising indeed. In 1891, in UP, 90 per cent of females were married between 10 and 14; between 15 and 19 only one in 15 was not married (Lal 1983: 103). In British Guiana, my creole-born paternal great-grandmother, Etwarie, was married at 14; my paternal and maternal grandmothers, Sukhia and Ramdularie, too, were married at 14. Lal's explanation of the high incidence of single *girmitiya* women is persuasive.

He rejects the notion that these women were primarily from the lowest castes, that they were mainly whores or women of loose morals. As with men, the women who went to Fiji were drawn from a broad cross-section of castes in UP: 4.1 per cent were Brahmins; 9 per cent Kshatriyas; 31.4 per cent from middling agricultural castes; 31.9 per cent from low and outcastes; 16.8 per cent were Muslims. He also observes that a high percentage of women migrants were registered outside of their home districts: 59 per cent from Basti, 66.5 per cent from Gonda and 'the overwhelming majority' from Azamgahr and Sultanpur (Lal 1983: 108). He contends that this was so not because they were tricked by *arkatis*, but because many had already left home or were driven out of their homes

after the death of their husbands, during recurring epidemics. Indeed, many women were already on the move, going 'east', to Bengal and Assam, seeking a new life:

Migration was not a new or unknown phenomenon for Indian women; thousands had left their homes before they met the recruiters and were shipped to Fiji and other colonies; had moved to other parts of India (Calcutta jute mills, Assam tea gardens, Bihar coalmines, Bombay textile mills) in search of employment, either on their own or in company of their male relatives. The journey to Fiji was part of a larger process of migration (Lal 1985: 57–58).

Although Lal acknowledges that an element of deception permeated the indentureship system, he does not see these women as 'helpless victims', merely 'pawns in the hands of unscrupulous recruiters'. He recognises them as 'actors in their own right'. He gives agency to these women. They were still very young, immersed in a hopeless environment, but with a broader vision of new possibilities spawned by the culture of migration of the late nineteenth century. Exposure to a wider world and anonymity, beyond their villages, expanded their horizons, and endowed the more enterprising with notions of escape from the ancient despair. Lal observes that some young women were in a desperate situation because their husbands had migrated and had obviously decided not to return; others were young widows or young wives marooned in a pitiable existence in the homes of their in-laws. He concludes:

The fact that women were prepared to part with a life of drudgery and unhappiness for the largely unknown would seem to me to suggest that many of them must have been individuals of remarkable independence, enterprise and self-respect. These were certainly the values they nurtured and lived by in the colonies (Lal 1985: 147).

This could easily have been a commentary on Kaila's life in British Guiana, between 1909 and 1956. It led me to William Crooke's contemporary account of the role of women in agriculture in UP at the end of the nineteenth century. I had no doubts now of the pedigree of Kaila and Etwarie—the source of their meticulous cultivating practices, in rice or cane field, their continuity of focus, their balance and sense of proportion, which helped to guide their men-folk and rescue them from the excesses of plantation life. Crooke observed:

Among a large section of the cultivating tribe the women freely assist the men in field labour; in fact, the effectiveness of husbandry may be to a large extent measured by the degree to which this is the case. You will constantly see the wife of the Kurmi or Jat sowing the seed grain as her husband ploughs, weeding or assisting in irrigation by distributing the water from one little patch to another, if she does not take a more active share in the work by helping to empty the well bucket or raising the water lift ... [S]he milks the cow, feeds the calves, picks pottage herbs in the fields, collects firewood or makes the cow-dung into cakes for fuel. She has to grind the wheat or barley, which is the chief food of the household, husk the rice or millet, and do all the cooking, besides taking her share in field work, and scaring the parrots and monkeys from the ripening crops. If she has any leisure she can devote it to ginning cotton or spinning thread ... If she misconducts herself she has to endure hard language and sometimes blows (Crooke 1972: 229–31).

This is also the source of their resilience and initiative, for although women were expected to endure and stoically perform their 'duty' to mothers-in-law, husbands and sons, they were not all compliant. A minority, pushed by the futility, became unlikely rebels. As noted above, because of the recurring epidemics in the late nineteenth century, many girls, married at 11 or 12, were widowed at 13 or 14. These girls became drudges, virtual slaves in the households of their late husbands. Remarriage was impossible; it was a disgrace to return to their parents' homes. They were washed up; there could be no worthy life ahead. They carried the stain of widowhood as if they were the authors of the premature demise of their husbands. Others were girls deserted by husbands, who had fled family debts or other communal exactions. Some were accused of sexual infidelity, which meant disgrace and ostracism in village society. The main difference between the latter half of the nineteenth century and previously was the possibility of escape for an intrepid, microscopic minority.

That explains why nearly two-thirds of the women who went to Guyana and Fiji travelled alone: 'single'. Many of the men, also, reportedly single, were probably in similar circumstances. Men and women had a lot to hide, much of it unimaginably painful. But it was easier for them to learn to forget when they were all in the same boat, to come to believe their constructed narratives that attributed all blame for migration to the *arkatis*, the ignoble recruiters. A collective amnesia was crucial to the building of a new persona and a new life. That was why the India of the *girmitiyas* was quickly claimed by historical darkness. That real India was too problematical for easy narration: it harboured too many secrets,

it was reinvented as mythical, it had gone beyond scrutiny. The mythical India of the great Hindu classic, the *Ramayana*, with several of its named places located in contemporary UP, was constructed as an authentic representation of the motherland. The real eastern UP and western Bihar disappeared from the radar. The India of the *Ramayana* has endured, as I have written elsewhere, because it is a narrative that answered many of the monumental, urgent needs of the *girmitiyas*:

The theme of Lord Rama in exile in the Dandak forest is resonant among Indians in the diaspora. His triumphal return to Ayodhya has a freshness; it offers a long reign of enlightened rule, when harvests were bounteous and ‘mothers wailed not in their anguish for their babes’. It is an evocation of hope and renewal, even of their own triumphal return, however illusory. Essentially, it answered the yearning for a new beginning, reassurance that there was life after despair. It gave more—the Golden Age, a vision of a perfect India that eclipsed the dark, familiar one. That Hanuman, the monkey-faced loyal servant of Lord Rama, could scale and uproot mountains to get curative herbs to save a wounded Lakshman, Rama’s devoted brother, made him the great shaper of possibilities; and his role in the rescue of Sita, the wife of Lord Rama, from the evil Rawan, made him the great defender not merely of chastity, but of *dharma* (Hindu duty) itself (Seecharan 1999–2000: 64–65).

I explain the special resonance of Sita with *girmitiya* women and their descendants thus:

Indian women in the Caribbean empathised with a Sita of human proportions: the machinations of her husband’s co-wife; exile; privations in the forest; kidnapping and imprisonment in Rawan’s Lanka; and as related in the Valmiki version of the *Ramayana*, aspersions cast on her sexual purity, lingering suspicion and further banishment. The pathos is exhausting but the Sita persona spoke to women who were in virtual exile, had severed all links with their families in India, had to endure aspersions cast on their sexual life on the plantations (occasionally ending in murder by jealous partners), while toiling to reshape a life and recreate a family in a distant land. But even beyond the dark shadow of the plantation, this Sita endures among Indo-Caribbean women—a symbol of resilience—not merely a tendentious patriarchal construct of compliance (Seecharan 1999–2000: 65).

This Sita could absorb the guilt, the submerged pain of loss, the trauma of ‘kidnapping’ and ‘exile’; the amnesia so essential to the reinvention of self. This Sita could fill the void of the recent past and allay the fears of the present. Sita has transcended the mythical state—an enduring redemptive force in the lives of most Hindu women.

It belongs to our family lore that among the few things Kaila took to British Guiana in 1909 was a copy of the slim *Hanuman Chalisa*, a celebration of the heroism of Hanuman. She could not have read it; she was illiterate. In my youth I recall seeing this tattered, incense-stained booklet among the family’s religious paraphernalia. No one ever read it; that would have profaned it. It was enough that it spoke of the great shaper of possibilities and the defender of Hindu faith. It celebrated something precious or enduring to the world that my *girmitya* ancestors had made in British Guiana. And the fact that Kaila supposedly brought the booklet from India also endowed it with sacred properties. Indias of the imagination were at the core of this new world.

I could not have arrived at the self-definition I have grown into, in the last three decades, without *Girmityas*. It has helped me to find the centre. But this book has also been at the heart of my work in Indo-Caribbean historiography; and I am proud to claim it as a groundbreaking text of this new chapter in Caribbean historiography.

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