



Of Testimonios and Feeling Communities: Totaram Sanadhya's Account of Indenture

FREDERIK SCHRÖER
schroeer@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

Introduction

Readers! Using my poor intelligence, I have kindly requested this of you. There may be some people who, upon reading this, say: "Go! Why listen to what this Coolie says? If a well-educated man were to talk, we would listen and believe (him)." I submissively apologize to these people and end by saying: Compatriots! Let us move together against this coolie-practice! If we people try however we can, then God will surely help us. (Sanadhya 1972: 152)¹

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The historiography of indentured labour in the British Empire typically charts its course along the colonial networks, relying heavily on the colonial state's documents. There is no denying that the exertion of imperial bio-politics has left us with a sizeable archive of documentation and quantification of the colonial subjects. Emigration and immigration records, court proceedings, or census data are material traces of the empire's exercise of power. We can connect these nodes of information and follow the paths that connect, or entangle, a history of governance from the empire's metropolis in London to its local seats of power, such as Calcutta, and from there further on into the colonial periphery, to its economic satellites like the Fiji Islands.

All of this, however, provides us with little more than a colonial perspective. Even the most attentive reading between the lines, or combing against the grain, of colonial documentation can yield but little information that goes beyond these structures of power and their regimes of knowledge. But what of the colonised, the subjects of imperial power, the individuals and subalterns inside, or below, the regimes? Too often, they appear to us as out of reach, muted by domination, their lack of agency, their illiteracy—indeed as the subalterns that can-



not speak (to us) (Chakravorty Spivak 1988). No organised subaltern bureaucracy has recorded and archived their lives, their stories, their voices.

Scholarship on migration and diaspora has reflected this in many cases. Still today, research into the topic is dominated by structural and systemic approaches (such as Bates 2001; Markovits, Pouchepaddass & Subrahmanyam 2006; Metcalf 2007; Osella & Gardner 2004; Rosenberg 2012). In a related perspective, migration is very often analysed as a sub-system or result of (global) economic mechanisms and legal provisions pertaining thereto (such as Bose 2006; Daniel, Bernstein, & Brass 1992; Hay & Craven 2004; McKeown 2008; Roy 2008; Sarup 2004). On the other hand, research into the social realities of migration typically falls into two categories, either remaining on an abstract (and, again, often structural) social level, or focussing almost entirely on individuals alone (such as Anderson, C. 2013; Breman & Daniel 1992; Carter 1996, 2002; Hundt 2014; Torabully & Carter 2002). So far, only few attempts have been made to arrive at a more comprehensive perspective (such as Brettell & Hollifield 2000; Jain 1993; Mann 2011), yet even fewer cases have attempted to access diasporic communities themselves.

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Thus, all is not lost. Scholars have learned to tap different archives, carefully moving backwards from oral history via family records, diaries, letters, and photographs, to catch and collect glimpses of an alternative past. And there is more, for in some cases, the subalterns did speak, and their records still reach us through time. In the case of Fiji, outstanding work has been done by Brij V. Lal, working extensively with such documents as Sanadhya's texts (Lal & Shineberg 1991; Lal & Yadav 1995) and on the memories of indenture more broadly (Lal 2012; Lal 2013). Work on the Fiji Indian diaspora has turned again and again to Sanadhya, in different and productive ways (Mishra, V. 2015; O'Carroll 2012), but where this paper seeks to go further is in locating the diasporic community through Sanadhya's accounts. To this end, the affective logic of his documents as testimonios will be analysed in order to proceed to an analysis of the diaspora as a feeling community.

Totaram Sanadhya and His Voice

One voice from indenture still audible today is that of Totaram Sanadhya. He was born in 1876 in the village of Hiraungi, near Firozabad, in today's Uttar Pradesh. Through a chain of events, he ended up leaving



Calcutta on 26 February 1883, enlisted for indentured labour in Fiji, where he arrived on 28 May. After serving his indenture, he remained in Fiji and began to engage in community work, increasingly for the cause of the abolishment of indentured labour. When he finally returned to British India in April 1914, together with his wife Ganga Devi, he was already a famous figure. Soon thereafter, he met the Hindi journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi with whom he went on to publish his first book *Fiji Dvip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh* (My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands), the same or following year. It was widely received, translated into various South Asian languages, and became instrumental in the struggle for abolition of what he himself called the coolie-practice. In 1922, his second publication *Bhut Len Ki Katha* (The Story of the Haunted Line) was published in the Hindi journal *Maryada*.² These two documents form the basis of this work.³ The same year, Sanadhya and his wife entered into Gandhi's Sabarmati ashram, where Sanadhya passed away in 1947 (Lal & Yadav 1995: 100-1).

Instead of either using these sources as factual accounts of the experience of indenture⁴ or as stories accessed primarily from the perspective of literary criticism, this article proposes to utilise them in a different way. Vijay Mishra (2015: 551) has recently characterised Sanadhya's texts as testimonios. This term originated in the Latin American context, with the testimonial biography of the Guatemalan aboriginal Rigoberta Menchú Tum as the most famous (and controversial) example (Menchú 1984). Testimonio thus locates Sanadhya's texts in a space between the literary and the oral, as "emotional rather than historical" accounts. In this, Mishra relies on John Beverly, who defines testimonio as

a novel or novella-length narrative, produced in the form of a printed text, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. Its unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience. Because in many cases the direct narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the tape-recording and then the transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, ethnographer, or literary author. (Beverly 2008: 571, emphasis in original)

In Beverly's terms, testimonio is not only a record of memory narrated in the first person, but more significantly a plea or request that demands the solidarity of its audience for the specific "ethical and epistemological demands" (Beverly 2008: 574) it makes. It cannot be



measured against reality, but works through an affective logic that allows for its own intentional truth claims. The testimonio therefore requires us to acknowledge its own (political) agency, instead of casting the subaltern into a position of mute and disabled victimhood.

Seeing Sanadhya's accounts of his life in Fiji as a testimonio allows one to go beyond evaluating it in terms of factual authority and instead (seeing) it as a document of memory. Seeing this only as a rare example of "minor history" (Mishra, S. 2012) would still cast the subject into the role of a subaltern victim. If, however, we grant Sanadhya the freedom to act, appeal, and re-call on his own terms, he can be located in a position of power that dialogues with the colonial system. For his was a liminal position between the silent oppressed and their oppressors, one that took up the colonial state's discursive logic, used it to write against the overpowering state, and to critique it on its own terms.

The Fiji Indian Diaspora as a Feeling Community

If reading Sanadhya's accounts as testimonios allows one to restore agency to his voice but simultaneously shifts it beyond the strict factual, what is the information that can still be gained from it? Indeed, this work argues, it is only these documents that can give us an insight into something the colonial apparatus was never able to document: the diasporic community from the inside.

Using the word "diaspora" has become so common in studies of migration that its analytical value is highly in doubt. Therefore, a definition is necessary before proceeding further. Khachig Tölölyan, founder and editor of the journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, has after much debate resigned that although a strict definition of diaspora would be analytically preferable, its productive ubiquity in scholarship (and beyond) is compelling enough to accept its acquired semantic breadth. Nevertheless, it still can and needs to be distinguished from simple dispersion by four characteristics: Firstly, it is typically produced by catastrophic or traumatic events that compel practices of memory. Secondly, it represents a subset of ethnic communities that gains its specificity by more than just the fact of migration. Thirdly, a key element of its rhetoric is the concept of a homeland. And fourthly, its cohesion needs to be traced beyond biologism in a cultural identity of difference that resists blending with a local population (Tölölyan 2007: 649).



Furthermore, instead of viewing diaspora as a stable entity, it can productively be analysed as a dynamic and contested social formation by focusing on the "diasporic practices" that constitute it. As Rogers Brubaker has argued,

we should think of diaspora not in substantialist terms as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim. We should think of diaspora in the first instance as a category of practice, and only then ask whether, and how, it can fruitfully be used as a category of analysis. As a category of practice, 'diaspora' is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties. It is often a category with a strong normative charge. It does not so much *describe* the world as seek to *remake* it. (Brubaker 2005: 12, emphasis in original)

In this way, Sanadhya's accounts can be viewed as reflecting some of the core diasporic practices that constituted the community of South Asian indentured labourers in Fiji.

These practices reveal themselves in the affective logic, the highly emotional content, of Sanadhya's testimonios. Therefore, this paper proposed to analyse the Fiji Indian diaspora as a "feeling community."⁵ Pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty has, in his rejection of both the (philosophical) representationalists' and relativists' stances⁶, proposed that instead of being a phenomenological, ontological, or any other absolute, 'truth' may simply be understood as an individual's decision on social group affiliation. Accepting or rejecting something as true or false is thus a strategic decision on group belonging that forms a basis of human sociability (Rorty 1998: 52-4). 'Truth' therefore is a socially propounded and normative decision or view, delimiting a border between in-group and out-group, and thus fundamentally a matter of intersubjective agreement (ibid.: 63-4). It is socially constructed by 'educating' individuals on what is held true and false in a given community and remains normative as long as an individual does not rebel, which either results in social expulsion or transformation of the intersubjective agreements.

Emotions, here, are understood as intellectualised expressions of physical or mental affective states—affects being "a class of experience that occur[s] before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and *in-between* subject/object distinctions" (Anderson, B. 2009: 78, emphasis in original; also Mazzarella 2009).



Expressions of emotions can therefore be understood as representing (social, intersubjective) truth claims concerning affective states. An "affective community"⁷ in this sense is a number of people connected not just by mutually affecting each other but more significantly by the community's conformance in the ways it expresses common affects with a shared (multi-medial) vocabulary of "emotions" or "feelings." And not only is the expression socially malleable, but through the change, or harmonisation, in emotional (or emotive) expressions, a subjective change in feeling follows—the way we intellectualise and share feelings has an impact on the way we 'feel' affected.⁸

Mikko Salmela has proposed that the cognitive side of emotions can best be understood via their underlying concerns—'concern' being understood as "a general term to denote desires and aversions as well as attachments, interests, and cares that ground our emotional appraisals and responses" (Salmela 2012: 39). These concerns then can be shared (or not) to varying degrees with a given social group. Grounded in "a history of some common experiences in the context of shared social practices as well as memories thereof" (ibid.: 41), a group in the strong sense is formed by sharing concerns that pertain to the group itself, linking individuals both amongst themselves and to the group (and its concern) as a whole.

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As scholars of the history of emotions have shown, the socially agreed and learned interpretations of emotions then also underlie a community's more complex structures, like its ethical systems (Prinz 2007; Rosenwein 2006). Using the focus on practices explained above, understanding the Fiji Indian diaspora as a feeling community thus allows an access to its constitutive elements and practices through the emotional language of Sanadhya's testimonios. A glance can thereby be cast, through Sanadhya's narration, on the ways of sharing and harmonising emotions socially, and the constructing and sharing of common concerns that united the Fiji Indian diasporic community.

Before analysing the community, however, a detailed view of Sanadhya himself is necessary. For since concerns (and emotions) are socially shared to differing degrees, an individual may easily harbour a great variety thereof. While some concerns and emotions of a given character can be classified as strongly collective or pertaining to one specific community, others may at the same time be highly individual, differently aligned, or even opposed. As the following section will show, Totaram Sanadhya exemplifies this.



Locating Sanadhya: A Liminal Figure

Well, it is the will of God. What will happen will happen. We will see when the ghost comes. He is the ghost of the line and I am the Company's ghost. If I win the contest with him, I will throw him out of the line. I know a thing or two about fighting ghosts. (Lal & Shineberg 1991: 108)

Who was Totaram Sanadhya? If his writings are seen as testimonios, then whose testimonies are they? Through the years, scholarship on Sanadhya has located him in a number of ways, some of them contradictory, and indeed they seem to coexist. His biography and writings do not present an easily identifiable figure of single intent. Instead, their different narratives overlap and blend, forming a moiré pattern that remains liminal, controversial, in-between.

Sanadhya appears as a plurivocal author. Though convened in his narration in the first person singular, his "I"s differ. Closest to "the ground" is the indentured ego that is almost entirely passive, forced to experience the system in all its brutality. Post-indenture, one meets a second ego, living in Fiji but slowly improving his conditions and inquiring into the conditions around him, moving gradually from passivity to activity. Finally, a third ego is the Sanadhya who has returned to British India, active and endowing meaning to his narration, directly addressing the reader in his testimonial plea. And yet, there is a fourth ego, a hidden spectre, the ghost writer Benarsidas Chaturvedi. His is the voice most difficult to trace, though hardly to be underestimated. Both of Sanadhya's texts are products of his cooperation with the journalist, and it cannot be fully known how far the story was changed in the process of writing.

Origins

The story of Sanadhya's *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands* begins long before his journey to the South Pacific. At age eleven, Sanadhya experiences his father Revatiram's passing, leaving the family to descend into poverty. His older brother Ramlal, the reader learns, soon after left home for Calcutta, where he found a meagrely paid job allowing him to send a little money home. Sanadhya himself follows at some point, leaving for Prayag (Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh) on the quest to find work and, as he himself emphatically phrases, "it is from this place that the tale of suffering⁹ of my insignificant life begins" (Sanadhya 1972: 2).



It is not long until the figure of the *arkati* appears. It denotes the recruiters chosen by sub-agents of the government-controlled emigration agents in the few major ports participating in the coolie trade. Though in theory this position was controlled by possession of an official licence, Gillion recounts that "[t]here were, too, many unlicensed men, boys, and women, called *arkatis*, illegally engaged in the business" (Gillion 1962: 31, emphasis in original). In Sanadhya's narration, it is this recruiter who subverts legal procedures and downright forces the unknowing people looking for work into agreeing for indentured labour. For to agree (see "agreement" and "gimit" below) to indentured labour was the officially regulated initiation of a (oral) contract. A district magistrate was, in theory, tasked to read out intelligibly to the prospect indentured labourer the terms and conditions of his service contract. By oral agreement (and, in many cases, additional thumb print), the document would come into force. Sanadhya recounts:

The *arkati* had told us earlier that "when the Sahib asks you something, you say 'yes'. If you say 'no', you will be sued and will spend time in jail." Everyone was taken one by one to the Magistrate. He asked each: "Say, are you willing to go to Fiji?" The Magistrate did not say where Fiji was, what one would work there, and that when one does not work one would be punished. The Magistrate registered (these) 165 people in 20 minutes. (Sanadhya 1972: 5)

Thus, after a forced "yes" and with almost no knowledge of his destination, the author's historical ego has crossed the line of no return. He is taken with the other men and women straight to the emigration depot on the outskirts of Calcutta, where they learn the rudimentary terms of their pay and contract length, and soon after are forced onto the boat headed for Fiji (*ibid.*: 5-8). As has been pointed out, the depot marked an important juncture in the journey of a person headed for indentured labour. It was here that they finally received more concrete information on their future work, and, more importantly, came into contact with the other potential and returning workers (Mann 2015: 228). It is therefore hardly surprising that many then deserted the enterprise, or at least sought to. Likewise, Sanadhya recounts his refusal to enlist:

As the officer was explaining to us, a suspicion arose in my heart. [...] Having thought about this, I said: "I don't want to go to Fiji, I have never worked in agriculture. See my hands, they could never do agricultural work. I won't go to Fiji." When I did not agree in any way, I was locked into a shed. One day and one night I was hungry and thirsty in this shed. Finally, I was forced



to agree to go to Fiji. What was I to do? There was not a single man who would hear of my misery. (Sanadhya 1972: 6-7)

This emphatic account of his first abuse does not only illustrate the dawning realisation on what type of labour one subscribed to in the depots. It also underlines that once workers entered the system of indentured labour recruitment, they inevitably became social outcasts, even if they had not been before. As the author tragically remarks, there was no one there to lend an ear to the plight of those in the depot. The Bengali *bhadralok* of Calcutta, the (urban) middle class modelled on the British bourgeois ideal, certainly remained deaf to the misery of its social "other" being shipped out from the local depots and ports (Mann 2015: 230).

Sanadhya's emigration pass reveals that he registered not as the Brahmin he was born, but as a Thakur (*kshatriya* varna) (Lal, Reeves, & Rai 2006: 371-2). This appears to have been a common practice, due to Brahmins' reputation of being exceptionally troublesome in the medical examinations, sea journey, and housing situation on Fiji, all of which went counter to traditional social boundaries (Gillion 1962: 54). Indeed, the journey by ship is a powerful motif and equally often evoked in scholarship. Typically, it is framed against the background of the social interdictions against traveling abroad by crossing the sea—the *kala pani* (black water)—and the resulting loss of 'caste' or social ostracising. Discussions of whether or not ancient scriptures and their contemporary interpretations allowed or condemned such voyages had already reached their peak point in the late nineteenth century. By the 1920s, transportation revolutions and closer global integration caused sea travel to be a widespread occurrence, especially in the British Empire. As Susmita Arp has shown, the prohibiting point of view was now typically held by (neo-)orthodox nationalists, transposing the discussion of sea voyages to a question of 'Indianness' (Arp 2000: 231-3, 240).

Despite these debates, however, *realpolitik* meant that a large number of people from all strata of society travelled abroad in various prospects of labour (Mann 2015: 230). Subsuming all these under the rather simple middle-class nationalist conception of crossing the *kala pani* equalling social outcasting seems misleading and a gross simplification. In how far the very act of crossing the sea (see the discussion of *jahaji bhai* (ship brotherhood) below) was the decisive factor in pronunciations of loss of *jati* or *varna* (common after return) is difficult to judge. The circumstances of sharing food and only rudimentarily sepa-



rated quarters on board, as well as conditions after passage, equally or more severely ran against conservative prohibitions of contact between social groups, and all spelled impurity from an orthodox point of view. Seen from the side of the indentured labourers, the concept of *kala pani* might be better understood as a phenomenon or force that symbolises the dread of indenture itself. Acts such as the crossing of the ocean then only epitomised the general circumstances of indentured labour (all of which might be included in the semantic network of *kala pani*) that forcefully pushed the individual out of his or her traditional social fabric (cf. Mishra, V. 2015: 548, 560).

Girmitya

In his account of indenture, Sanadhya emphatically uses comparisons to slavery in order to underline the abysmal conditions faced by indentured labourers on Fiji. As he recounts in the moment right after disembarkation:

As soon as our transport arrived there, the police came and surrounded us so that we would not get away. We were treated worse than slaves there. People say that all civilised countries of the world have ended slavery. That seems quite right from the top, but it is actually an absolute delusion. (Sanadhya 1972: 13)

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In light of Sanadhya's (and Chaturvedi's) intention of the abolition of indenture, it is not surprising to encounter the rhetoric of slavery (and its abolition). Indentured labour had virtually from its inception stood under the criticism of being, in the words of Lord John Russel, "a new system of slavery" (cit. in Tinker 1993: xiv). In its abolition movement in the late 1910s, this rhetoric had been picked up again, and was infused with a new force. As Michael Mann (2012: 206-13) has shown, the abolition of slavery entered the rhetoric of the emergent League of Nations as one of 'the' litmus tests for acceptance—and thus by extension a powerful indicator of civilisational 'progress'. Parallel to this, however, runs a second *topos* that seems more rewarding to analyse here, due to its specificity to the situation. It is the concept of *gimit* and the *girmityas*.

Etymologically, *gimit* is typically seen to be a vernacularisation of the English "agreement" (Lal et al. 2006: 122; Mishra, V. 2015: 549). Sanadhya himself explicitly provides this etymology or translation in the first use of the term: "aur yadi *gimit* (Agreement) me kam karte bhi hai" ("and when [they] are working in *gimit* (agreement)") (Sanadhya 1972: 46). However, its actual usage (and therefore analy-



tical value) differs significantly. Instead of signifying a positive agreement, it refers more widely to the actual reality of conditions after contractual agreement. It therefore makes an analytical difference if the sources (or their audience) speak of "indentured labourers" or "girmityas" (girmitya refers to a person under the condition of gimit) (Mishra, S. 2012: 7-8). Sanadhya himself makes use of the term gimit in situations where he either criticises labour and living conditions, or when he contrasts South Asians in Fiji to the native Fijians' situation (Sanadhya 1972: 45-6, 61-2, 106-7). Interestingly, in his calls for the abolition of indenture, he consistently uses the term "kuli-pratha", literally meaning "coolie-practice" (ibid.: 22, 147).

Marina Carter and Khal Torabully (2002) have, in their work on the Indian Ocean, the Pacific, and the Caribbean, proposed the concept of Coolitude (taking its cue from Negritude) to describe the claiming of agency in the creation of a particular identity among descendants of the local indentured labour population. Since at least in Sanadhya's writing there is the specific own actor's concept of gimit that is charged with a complex semantic field characterising the specific identity and experience connected to the practice of indentured labour, this work rather proposes using that term as a more specific concept of analysis.

Pandit

Though Sanadhya's second narration *Bhut Len Ki Katha*¹⁰ was released as a follow-up to his first book—which by that time had already been translated into a host of other vernaculars and been made into a play (Mishra, V. 2015: 552-3)—it apparently never attracted the attention the former did. For one, it is a much shorter document. More importantly, however, its narration differs from Sanadhya's earlier account. After finishing his term of indenture, one encounters a different Sanadhya who begins to transform his living conditions by styling himself as a spiritual authority and only years later begins to work for the good of the community. Through acquiring and memorising a few religious texts and his fellow Fiji Indians' "blind faith" (Lal & Shineberg 1991: 109), he begins setting himself up as a priest:

I planted flowers all around my hut, including tulsi [...] Inside the hut, I kept Vishnu's image in a corner [...] And on a small wooden platform there, I placed all the items I needed for worship [...] To impress the people with my new priestly role, I would take a long time decorating my forehead with tilak marks. [...] In this way, I



became well known and liked by the people. (Lal & Yadav 1995: 103)

Recognition by the community, which went along with him re-acquiring his Brahmin identity (Lal & Shineberg 1991: 109), was not enough for Sanadhya:

However, I secretly wished to be addressed as "pandit" so that my priestly work would flourish. [...] People attain the status of pandit after years of learning, and here I was, a nobody, who had become an instant pandit in Fiji. Everybody said: "Greetings, panditji". [...] Seeing the new pandit and his new ways, people were thrilled. They said: "O brother! This is just like doing *puja* back home". (Lal & Yadav 1995: 103, emphasis in original)

Seeing Sanadhya cast himself in such a different light, it is easily understandable why *Bhut Len Ki Katha* was no popular hit in the politically charged climate in early-1920s British India, soon after the abolition of indenture to Fiji. Even more so, it comes as no surprise that the second testimonio, too, was only a selective reproduction of his narration to Chaturvedi. It was not until 1994 that Brij V. Lal published the remaining material, having been handed down from Chaturvedi to Gillion to Lal, allowing for a more complex picture of Totaram Sandhya. Consequently, therefore, though his position was that of a subaltern with regard to the colonial state, in the community of girmityas in Fiji it was a different one. This, then, also is his liminality—a position neither fully subaltern nor simply elitist or collaborator.

Reformer

Following John Beverly's thesis of the agency of testimonios, these texts must be seen as more than only narratives of subjective experience. They typically have a specific political dimension, seeking to further a transformative project by eliciting alliance instead of only "emphatic liberal guilt or political correctness" (Beverly 2008: 581). Going further, the narrative self and the social group it takes a stand for cannot be fully separated, distinguishing testimonio from autobiography "[T]estimonio is an affirmation of the authority of personal experience, but, unlike autobiography, it cannot affirm a self-identity that is separate from the subaltern group or class situation that it narrates" (Beverly 2008: 572).

Sanadhya as the figure of a reformer—striving for the abolition of indenture and allying himself with Gandhi's project¹¹—thus subsumes



the story of his individual suffering to the larger narrative of the horrors of indenture, in general. Though, as shown above, his personal life in Fiji may appear contradictory, the trajectories of his publications and engagements all draw their vectors from the larger cause he has taken up. Nonetheless, his liminal position also means that one cannot fully discern in how far any one of his statements is tinged by personal opinion or not. One such example is the harsh critique of a personified Indian nation that he offers in *Bhut Len Ki Katha*:

Times have changed, indeed. Bharat, you are no longer the country you once were. Today, Indian mothers and sisters, separated from their parents, husbands and sons, are found in the coolie lines of Fiji. Alas, Bharat, you are old and timid and unable to see even though you have eyes. Your knowledge and wisdom no longer count for anything. You have become heartless. (Lal & Shineberg 1991: 109)

How much of this is motivated by Sanadhya's apprehension of the dismal conditions for women in indenture, and how much of this represents his own sense of being abandoned by his home country? It is interesting to observe with Sudesh Mishra (2012: 10) that this emotional accusation is directed at "Bharat" and not at "India." But while Mishra associates this distinction with that between Bharat's Indians without agency versus the India of the British Raj, this passage can also be seen as a civilisational critique. The Bharat that Sanadhya seems to lash out at is one which has become dormant, timid, unable to care. But its positive attributes like knowledge and wisdom are still there, though they may currently be of no use. This corresponds more generally to the rhetoric of various discourses of South Asian late-colonial civilisational critique, be it Gandhi's (2009: especially chapters 7 and 8), Tagore's (1917), or of others like Bal G. Tilak and Romesh Ch. Majumdar (Bayly 2004), typically positing an ancient Bharat (or "Greater India") now dormant and in need of awaking against the modern India of the British Raj.

Through the various perspectives above, Totaram Sanadhya has been seen as a biographical individual, a girmitya, a pandit, and a reformer. In his narrations, none of these figures can be easily pinned to the positions of the individual, the subaltern, the victim, the benefactor, or the representative. Throughout his testimonios, these fragmentary perspectives of his personality allow the gaze of the reader to proceed further, following Sanadhya's own entangled paths to the community surrounding him.



Locating the Diaspora: The Re-Assembled Community

If we face this question properly and work with justice, then we will be respected in the eyes of the entire civilized world. How will we succeed together in making clear that the coolie-practice should be abolished? If we are ready for this, we must all work together. Hindus, Muslims, and Christians must all say with one voice that the coolie-practice should be abolished. Then this clear and fair request of ours cannot be stopped by anyone. (Sanadhya 1972: 146-7)

After trying to locate Sanadhya, this paper now proceeds to the Fiji Indian diasporic community. Though it may appear common sense today to speak of this community, early scholars such as Gillion were of the opinion that only after the end of indenture in the early 1920s a sense of community could manifest in the Fiji Indian population "In 1920 the Indians in Fiji were hardly yet a community; only a collection of poor, illiterate individuals, plagued by social evils, in great need of leadership, divorced from and distrustful of the government, and subservient to the Europeans" (Gillion 1962: 199). This assumption, however, appears to be baseless in present view, and accounts such as Sanadhya's clarify its counterfactuality.

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As explained above, the community is analysed as feeling community in order to render accessible the specific emotional practices that form the basis of the diasporic community. This pertains to the testimonios' affective logic and function as memory, as well as the intrinsic values and practices reflected in Sanadhya's texts. But what are the fundamental characteristics expected of such a community? Firstly, it is a displaced community, marked by difference to the host country. Therefore, one speaks of the Fiji 'Indian' diaspora.¹² Secondly, the community is marked by its memory of and longing for the homeland, while at the same time its traditions and customs become renegotiated. Thirdly, it is bound together by the shared affects of indenture, and the social ways of mediating and relating this experience in shared emotional practices.

Core Characteristics of the Fiji Indian Diasporic Community

Even before the first contracted labour migrants from British India arrived, the gulf between Fiji's indigenous people and the colony's labour population had been codified by the divisive politics of population control instituted by Sir Arthur Gordon, the colony's first governor (Gillion 1962: 3-4; Lal 1998: 235-6). By prohibiting native



Fijians to work in the plantation economy, a more general forced "preservation" of their traditions, as well as the prevention of foreign (i.e. non-Fijian and non-European) landownership, circumstances were created that instantly forced migrating South Asians firstly into a group and quite soon a community of difference. Sanadhya illustrates with various examples the ways in which conditions differed for native Fijians and Fiji Indians. For the few native Fijians that did work, different rules applied (Sanadhya 1972: 45-8). In a telling situation in *Bhut Len Ki Katha*, when the narrator describes his inability to acquire food due to the restriction of personal freedom under indenture, it is a party of Fijians that represent the other, free to act, unrestrained by indenture:

He told me that I had now become his friend because I had given him some food which had given them enough strength to continue on their journey. He told me not to go off to sleep as they would be back in a couple of hours. [...] Sam returned as promised. There were seven others with him. They brought with them four bundles of sweet potato, yams and other vegetables. (Lal & Shineberg 1991: 112)

It was this divisive colonial population politics that helped create Fiji's history of ethnic difference and struggle. From racially separated schooling to the strict separation and uneven representation of the (constructed) ethnic groups enshrined in the Fijian political system (Lal 1998: 236), the colonial administration systematically created and maintained cultural difference between the girmityas and the native Fijians, policing any transgressing fraternisations (Lal et al. 2006: 373). Even today, the politics of landownership directly influence the Fiji Indians' ability or inability to remain in their new homeland, and political differences are still largely defined by the two halves of Fiji's population (Lal et al. 2006: 376-82).

In addition to the relation to Fiji's native population, the diasporic community's connection to its homeland (Hundt 2014) and the traditions and customs that originated there was equally characterised by difference. Sanadhya narrates the diverse mix of holidays and festivals such as Holi, Muharram, or Christmas (Gillion 1962: 120), celebrated together, crossing social and religious boundaries and forging a shared sense of community (Lal & Yadav 1995: 99). Saturday afternoons, when bazaars would take place in the lines (the girmityas' living quarters, modelled after military lines—i.e. barracks—for better control and easy construction) after weekly food rations had been given out (Lal & Shineberg 1991: 108), and Sundays were the



time when the girmityas socialised or met for prayer and other religious ceremonies (Gillion 1962: 120-1).

Clear indicators of how central the idea of the homeland was to the diasporic community can be seen in colloquial value judgements, such as when members of the community applaud Sanadhya's priestly performance as "This is just like doing puja *back home*" (Lal & Yadav 1995: 103, emphasis added). Even though he describes his ritual performance as new, probably differing significantly from traditional prescription, people's positive impression is expressed by creating a link to tradition in the homeland. Similarly, in a condition of physical agony, Sanadhya dreams of home symbolised powerfully by his mother welcoming him into the ancestral house. This connection is broken, however, when he mentions his stay in Fiji, possibly emphasising the cultural gulf between the diasporic community's cultural and its homeland (Lal & Shineberg 1991: 110-1). This cultural distance between British India (or cultural Bharat, as mentioned above) and Fiji was not only a reality under indenture—Fiji Indians apparently generally had only little contact to their places of origin and did not, as in other example, send home significant amounts of remittances (Gillion 1962: 126)—but also afterwards. Loss of social integration or even outcasting back home meant that the return voyage was either postponed indefinitely, or often resulted in further displacement (ibid.: 192; Mishra, V. 2015: 557). In the words of Sanadhya:

Many women and men, after completing their girit and living another five years [in Fiji], seek to return to their homeland. But they do not return [...]. Our countrymen, invoking the sea-journey, give their brothers who have returned from the islands such troubles, dropping them from their jati. Suffering from that, they return to live in the islands. As for their wealth—which they have saved with difficulty, penny by penny, having gone to live in a [different] country, suffering aggression, with half empty stomachs—some of it is taken by close relatives, and some is thrown away by selfish and unrelenting priests as payment in making atonement. (Sanadhya 1972: 52-3)

Core Emotional Concepts

Sanadhya's testimonios include a number of emotional concepts that are at the core of the feeling community's constitution. They range from 'suffering' (dukh), 'mutual aid' (madad, sahayta) and 'friendship' (mitr, bhai) to feelings of 'religiosity' (dharm) and 'morality' (sil, sadacar). Especially in the complex of 'suffering', but also that of



'morality', the expression of emotions does not only connect the author with the community, but also the reader. In the frequently occurring direct addresses, the author reveals his political agenda to include the audience in a wider community of Fiji Indian indentured labour and therefore induce them to support the goal of the abolition of indenture.

Throughout his narrations, the concept of 'suffering' takes central position in Sanadhya's accounts of indenture. Its frequent occurrence in a range of situations and contexts means that conceptually, 'suffering' is located in a complex semantic net covering various meanings from physical pain to emotional despair, or from loneliness and helplessness to shame and loss of dignity. One gruesome example of physical suffering is related by Sanadhya in the story of the woman Narayani, who two days after losing her son in childbirth was forced to return to work, and upon protesting was physically abused by the plantation overseers:

This poor woman was beaten so badly that her head was damaged, and up until today she remains deranged. [...] Many tortures of this kind are committed there daily. These overseers know plenty of ways to beat the Indians with the kicks of their shoes, and equally plenty ways of breaking their teeth at the root with punches. These people burn clothes, kick away food, and make us suffer arbitrarily. All this is inner suffering; going to court without evidence is useless. (ibid.: 23-4)

A great many of those suffering extreme abuses by their overseers or the structures of the indenture system itself chose to end their lives in Fiji. Of them, Sanadhya narrates:

Many of our brothers there, from fear of hard labour, the overseers' violence, and from fear of jail take a noose and killed themselves. Not many days ago, some Madrasis on a plantation in Navua took a noose and killed themselves for this reason. [...] Even though to enquire into our conditions in each district a coolie-inspector has been appointed by the immigration department, these white inspector-people do not reveal our actual situation. Drinking brandy in the planter's homes, when will these monsieurs be able to stop the suffering of us poor Indians? (ibid.: 20)

The story of another woman, Kunti, narrates the suffering women had to endure at the hands of overseers, trying to protect their chastity. She had been designated to work alone in banana field, "where no witness could see her, and nobody could hear her shouting" (ibid.: 21). Soon, a sardar (a chief) and an overseer approach. As they tried to



gripe her, Kunti wrestled free, ran, and jumped into the nearby river. Had a boy not been there, by chance, with his dinghy, Sanadhya implies, Kunti would have drowned in protecting her chastity (ibid.: 21-2). As Lal mentions, this story gained publicity in colonial India soon after, following its publication in two periodicals, finally only resulting in further harassment of Kunti by immigration officers (Lal 1985: 55).

The list of situations and descriptions of 'suffering' could be extended at great length. Instead, the function it has in the social context needs to be underlined. As a community that is as downtrodden as the *girmityas*, the sharing of 'suffering' creates powerful social bonds. In various situations throughout his narrations, Sanadhya recounts shared expressions of emotions, most often in the form of crying:

Saying this, she begins to cry again. Then some women would come and console her. Unable to bear this heart-rending scene, I turned my head away in another direction and saw a woman washing her tattered clothes on the banks of the river. As I watched, she stopped and began to cry loudly. [...] I was so moved by this that I wept openly. (Lal & Shineberg 1991: 110)

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We can see clearly how the actors in scenes like this form a community by sharing common expressions of emotions. One could even say their emotional community, here expressed primarily through 'grief' or 'suffering', is contagious in the way it ultimately forces Sanadhya to join in the crying, despite his earlier resistance. But the community is created and sustained by more than just shared 'suffering'. This 'suffering' often forms the driving force behind 'mutual aid', ranging from simple acts like the sharing of food (ibid.: 110), to the social endeavours and strive for abolition that Sanadhya relates.

In the acts of helping, but also seemingly quotidian exchanges, we can observe the importance of ties of 'friendship' through their explicit narration. The address as friend (*mitr*) or brother (*bhai*) typically emphasises that social bonds are tied, relations redefined, and networks of aid and support created. But they also occur in cases when mere circumstance forges community. One central example of this is the special case of 'ship brotherhood' (*jahaji bhai*). As Brij V. Lal (2012) has shown in his study on *jahaji bhai*, the social connections formed during the hardships of the sea voyage proved exceptionally long-lasting and, despite colonial policy to divide a ship's load of arrivals onto different plantations throughout the island, could be traced well after the end of indenture (Lal 2012: xvi-xvii, 30).



One last core emotional concept to discuss is that of religiosity, intimately linked to concepts of 'morality'. Sanadhya's testimonios show the importance and centrality of religion or belief in various ways. His lists of texts in circulation and sects active in the Fiji islands give us an overview of the general religious landscape in the colony at that time (Lal & Yadav 1995: 102-9). We learn that some of the influential religious and social organisations of colonial (and post-colonial) India, like the Arya Samaj, Sanatana Dharm, or the Nanaks, established presences in Fiji and engaged in community work. But we also learn that the religious landscape is populated by swindlers and false priests (of whom, we remember, Sanadhya was one for three years): "Those pandits and mawlawis who are living in Fiji, they are firstly not very educated themselves. Also, their aim is just to return to their homes once they swindled money from their innocent brothers. Such selfish men cannot help [our] migrant brothers in Fiji" (Sanadhya 1972: 56).

More than just critiquing the "breakdown of religion" in Fiji, as Gillion phrased it (1962: 125), Sanadhya paints a picture of the reconfiguration of religious traditions, a process typical in diasporic communities. The special selection of texts in circulation, with a large percentage being versions of the epic *Ramayana*, and the (communal) ways they were experienced emphasise that in the Fiji Indian community, where traditional social roles and boundaries had been diluted or shaken, new, hybrid forms of 'religiosity' emerged that were adapted to the needs and circumstances of girit. The story of the banishment of prince Ram, protagonist of the *Ramayana*, and his wanderings through the Indian subcontinent exemplified to the giritiyas a heroism of exile that could offer a deeper meaning to the years of indenture (Lal 1998: 232-3). The fact that Ram had to travel to the island of Lanka (i.e. Sri Lanka, an especially notorious indenture destination) to free his wife abducted by the island's demon-king provided an example of crossing the *kala pani* for a higher purpose. Sanadhya himself titles details of his own experience as "ram kahani" (Sanadhya 1972: 2, 100), literally "Ram-story", illustrating how the epic in popular perception endows meaning and emphasis to personal biographies.

Another related text, the *Ramcharitamanas*, equally enjoyed wide circulation and became a textual source of core moral values of the community. These include the adherence to righteous conduct despite hardships, filial and familial duties, and altruistic welfare of others (Lal & Yadav 1995: 100). In a very personal situation, upon considering his own suicide, Sanadhya himself reflects upon 'morality' and 'cowardice'



(in the teachings of his mother), ultimately leading him to refrain from suicide (Lal & Shineberg 1991: 112). 'Cowardice', 'shame', and the loss of 'dignity' also converge powerfully in the figure of the woman as central to the preservation of a community's tradition and moral order. It is therefore that attacks on women were so often charged morally, underlining their especially precarious position in the social structures of girit (Lal 1998: 230-2).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to use Totaram Sanadhya's accounts of indenture on Fiji in a new way. By paying attention to the documents' affective logic, Sanadhya's complex character, and by analysing the Fiji Indian diasporic community as a feeling community, the diasporic practices and collective emotions/concerns that shaped this community have been rendered visible to a degree. This has allowed the historian's gaze to penetrate further than what the colonial archive allows, lending some voice and visibility to a certain subaltern community. As such, this work has sought to go beyond the either structural/systemic or individual/anecdotal framings most common in scholarship on migration and diaspora.

Both *Fiji Dvip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh* (My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands) and *Bhut Len Ki Katha* (The Story of the Haunted Line) have been shown to be rich in thick description of the hardships of coolie-labour and life in the colony, from the perspective of the giritiyas themselves. By locating the author as a liminal, hybrid, figure in his texts understood as testimonios (including the figure of the ghost writer), and by analysing their emotional logic, a way of accessing these sources more productively but also more respectfully was proposed. Beyond factual validation or invalidation, this has allowed a re-experience of Sanadhya's experience, uncovering his complex agency, and gaining a perspective different from that of the colonial regime.

Throughout his texts, Sanadhya has been traced in several key roles. After his humble beginnings and the tragic loss of his father, Sanadhya as a giritiya soon emerges, suffering directly from the injustices and hardships of the indentured labour system in British India and Fiji. Having served his term, another Sanadhya emerges, this time self-consciously styling himself as religious figure or pandit to improve his personal situation and standing in the Fiji Indian community. Finally, he appears as a reformer working for the abolition of



indentured labour through his testimonios and aligning himself with others, first and foremost with Gandhi. The portraits of these different Sanadhya's have detailed how one person harbours a complex variety of concerns, some of which pertain to and establish a link with a community directly, while others are more indirect, personal, or connecting to other communities.

In a second step, specific circumstances and practices constitutive of the diasporic community of indentured labour in Fiji have been shown. These include the specific contexts of segregation in Fiji, but also the ambiguous relation to the homeland of "India" or "Bharat." The sea voyage into indenture has been discussed with emphasis on the socially complex and contested semantics of the act of crossing the "black waters", and a reading of the concept of "kala pani" from the girmitya perspective has been proposed, paying regard to how representational it is of the indentured labourers' suffering as a factor generating community. 'Suffering' in various physical and mental ways has been discussed, with special attention to the way that emotions are shared and performed in community, strengthening the social bonds and identifications. On the other hand, the complexes of support, 'friendship', and 'brotherhood' have been shown as well as the more abstract practices of community in the contexts of 'religiosity' and ethics.

Thus, this article has attempted to trace specific ways in which Totaram Sanadhya's accounts of indenture show a variation and graduation of collective emotions and concerns that were instrumental in shaping and performing the Fiji Indian community as a feeling community. It has sought to give space to the complex figure(s) of Sanadhya himself, as well as to (his view of) the community, and to how the two met and interacted. As such, it could not have been written from the colonial archive or perspective, in which the subaltern community and its practices, emotions, and concerns remain inaccessible. The article's contribution is therefore to offer a glimpse at the social processes and realities of a diasporic community like the Fijian girmityas. It has not attempted impersonal, factual documentation from a top-down (and thus easily colonial) perspective, but neither has it settled for remaining in the scope of one individual's biography. Instead, through the perspective of Sanadhya's autobiographical accounts, it has accessed the community, moving below the colonial frame, tracing subaltern realities.



Still today, the texts remain. And they remain readable, accessible, their voices still powerful. Less than accounts of 'historical reality', yet much more than that, their unique value as subjective memories tinged with emotion is refracted and multiplied by the analytical perspectives applied to them. Though their initial purpose of the abolition of indenture is long fulfilled, they are still able to reveal much that otherwise might be forgotten, allowing their audience to re-remember Totaram Sanadhya, his experience of indenture, and the community that he was part of.

Endnotes

¹ All translations are, unless otherwise stated, the author's own. Hindi expressions are rendered in simplified transcription for the sake of readability.

² A Hindi-language monthly journal founded in 1910 by the social reformer, educationalist, and politician Madan Mohan Malaviya.

³ *Fiji dvip me mere ikkis varsh* is accessed in its 1972 Firozabad reprint in Hindi, while *bhut len ki katha* could only be accessed in the version edited and translated by Brij V. Lal.

⁴ K. L. Gillion's (1962) early account of indenture on Fiji, long a reference work, seems in several places to draw its information straight from Sanadhya's account.

⁵ Kaplan and Kelly (1994) have proposed "structures of feeling", while Wagner (2012) has coined "feeling diasporic" as an affective effect of the relation between community and homeland. For an analytical definition of the concept from the perspective of the history of emotions, see Pernau (in press) and Salmela (2012).

⁶ The representationalist stance assumes that exact representations of phenomena of the 'outside world' can appear cognitively 'in our heads', therefore at least theoretically enabling cognition to 'truly' reflect reality 'as it is'. On the other hand, the relativist stance maintains that 'truth' lies solely with the individual and can have no real shared or even universal characteristics (cf. Rorty 1998: chs. 1-3).

⁷ Understood here not in the sense of a community united by a friendly affection for each other, as in Leela Gandhi's (2006) insightful book of the same name, but as a community sharing connected by affect(s).

⁸ Margrit Pernau & Imke Rajamani (2016) have convincingly represented this feedback loop in their model of "emotional translations."

⁹ "Tale of suffering" here is a free translation of "dukhk janak ram kahani", literally "suffering-life Ram-story." See section 3 below for a discussion of the significance of Ram.

¹⁰ About the contents of which Brij V. Lal has published two articles (Lal & Shineberg 1991; Lal & Yadav 1995).

¹¹ Gandhi appears at length in the book and in 1922 Sanadhya joined Gandhi in his ashram.

¹² It is, however, necessary to remind oneself with Tölölyan (2007: 649, 652) that shared ethnicity is not enough to qualify a diasporic community.



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