

The theme of Indianness as expressed in Satendra Nandan's the Wounded Sea

Ritambhara

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Satendra Nandan is a notable name in Indo-Fijian writings and also a harbinger of Girit literature to the umbrella of Diaspora writings. He is a third generation Indo-Fijian who was born in a Girit family. The end of slavery in 1834 and the demand of cheap laborers to fulfill the needs of workers in British colonies gave birth to a more refined form of slavery known as the "indentured laborers". India, a country which was overpopulated, with extreme poverty purely divided on the basis of caste system whereby the rich became richer and the poor had nothing to carry with their living became the easy target of the recruiters. It was Nandan's grandfather, who took the rigorous journey through *kala pani* to go to a land which has promised wealth and riches. Like many Indians, he fell trap to the promises of the *arkatis* (recruiters). A land that had promised riches and only good life was turning into 'hell', where people were working each day, half filled stomach, no sleep, and no shelter only with one motive of survival. Nandan has grown up hearing the stories of his ancestor's journey from one land to another and how it has contributed in building up his identity as a presenter to the world the saga of this adventure through his literature.

Nandan has contributed enormously to the literature of Indo-Fijian diaspora where his central focus remains the Indo-Fijians. His literature takes the readers to the journey of his ancestors from India to Fiji. Most of his literature is poetical work which is loaded with the theme of diasporic consciousness. However, the focal point of this paper is *The Wounded Sea*, an autobiographical and the only novel that takes the reader to the journey of the author from being a poor Indo-Fijian son to becoming the member of the parliament and finally being banished from his motherland on account of being threat to national peace and harmony. In this paper we attempt to analyze how although the central theme of novel remains the writer's journey, yet we see the linkage of India, its social, cultural, moral influences in the life of Nandan and how India remains an integral part of

existence of the Indo-Fijians which is reflected in their everyday life.

The Indo-Fijians has contributed enormously in building up present Fiji, but in spite of this, the Indo-Fijians have no social and political rights in Fiji. Their existence in present Fiji is questioned because of the attitude of rejection carried by the indigenous Fijians. One strong factor that has helped the Indo-Fijians adopt an attitude of resilience towards such chaotic environment was the cultural values that they carried with themselves to Fiji. India continues to be an integral part of the Indo-Fijians in present Fiji. Nandan has grown up hearing stories of the mystical land of India through the stories of his grandfather and the epics like *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* later on his visit to India for study purpose strengthen his bond with India. *The Wounded Sea* is pregnant with reflecting the theme of India and how the values of Hinduism remain an integral section in growth of Satendra Nandan. Prof. S.D. Singh remarks on the importance of India in the literature of Indian Diaspora.

The descendents of this (Indian) Diaspora have also inevitably produced great works of literature illustrative of their history and heritage, of their own awareness of their society and its problems, its achievements, its limitations and frustrations. Some of them have turned their attention to India to assess and understand the nature of their relationship with the land of their ancestors. They have probed and explored their own Indian-ness in its uniqueness; its new geo-political and social context; its separation from the forces and factors that changed the face of India in the years following the emigration of their ancestors. (Singh 95)

The glimpse of Indian values and its importance for the Indo-Fijians is reflected in the first chapter of *The Wounded Sea*. The author is visiting Fiji after the death of his brother whose last rites are to be performed. Like the Indians, Indo-Fijians still hold the belief that the soul achieves its salvation only when the last rites are performed in a

typical Hindu way. The minute description of the process gives a visual picture of the process.

My grizzled brother lit the pyre while the local pundit, Birbal shouted several “Oums” in the wind and hurled income-prehensible shloaks into the ocean. And as the sugar-and-ghee smoke blew towards the Fijian huts on the other side of the village I was glad the old man was dead, now being burnt, and his ashes were to be thrown tomorrow into the sea. The Pacific Ocean, part of the Indian Ocean, part of the holy Ganga... it was comforting. (5)

The Indo-Fijians on their arrival to Fiji developed a community feelings amongst the ‘jahajibhais’ and started working together in preserving their identity. Within their solidarity group they performed all the rituals and celebrate all the festivals that connected them to their original homeland. They saw it a matter of great importance to make their children aware of the real identity of the Indo-Fijians and the factors that contributed in their migration to an alien land. Nandan who has been truly attached with his grandfathers writes about the history of indenture of his grandfather.

My father was born in Fiji. His father had come from India- from a little, obscure village called Sultanpur near the TajMahal- under the indenture system. Slavery was abolished – at least on paper – in 1833; a new system had begun in 1834. My grandfather, who never mentioned the Taj Mahal, had signed his girmity- he couldn’t pronounce “agreement”- for ten years with the coolumber, the Australian overseer who called his number every morning as he reported for work. (6)

The sentiments of the Indo-Fijians towards India become clear to Nandan’s audience when he states that his father viewed India in Air India flights. India was that part of the dream which he can only imagine but could not touch and

therefore anything that represented India was dear to him.

To Father, Air India was the idea of India itself. India, for Father was a grain of sand in an oyster: it troubled him, then crystallized into a pearl in his imagination...(11)

One amongst the strongest factor that made the Indo-Fijian resistance to whatever upheavals that came their way was the customs and traditions that accompanied them to the ‘pseudo promised land’. Though many changes took place in the lives of the Indo-Fijian that bifurcate them from the orthodox Hindus like the dismantling of the caste system, inter-caste marriages and many more, yet the Indo-Fijians tried their level best to preserve the rituals and customs of their original homeland. We see the Indo-Fijians practicing all the customs and practices as a Hindu would perform. Nandan’s grandfather is a classic example of this. Nandan grew up seeing his Baba perform all the rituals from the dawn of the day till his sleep. Dressed in his ‘dhoti’ and ‘kurta’, he would carry his lathi and begin his day offering prayers to Mother Nature.

After washing himself and sprinkling water in the four

Directions, he would stand facing the moon, or when the

Moon was not visible the brightest star, and when it was

A moonless and starless night, he would look at the flame

Burning steadily inside the hurricane lamp and chant a few mantras. (13)

Nandan highlights how his Baba thoughts and actions surround around being the perfect Hindu. He considered his cow Lali as a mother; “holy, sacred and milk-giving” (14) and took care of it as a family member. He believed the scriptures that state the role of cow during one’s voyage to heaven. Nandan narrates an incident when his Baba became really upset because he rode the back of Lali:

“Riding a holy cow
Is paap (sin), betu; never do that.
Otherwise when your
Baba to help him swim across the
Baitarini- the river
Dividing narak (hell) and swarg (heaven).
“(15)

These values were the only wealth that held the Girmityas connect with their ancestral land. Fiji became a mini India were although modified, the people still followed every ritual and

practices and concentrated on passing these values to the next generation. Stendra Nandan grew up in such atmosphere where every small occasion was celebrated by performing ‘katha’ and ‘havans’. Though, people hardly understood any of the mantras uttered by the pundits but still he occupied an important position in the Girmity community. Like every child although the main concern of Nandan was the ‘prasad’ consisting of fresh fruits, dry fruits, puri and halwa, the ‘chanaamrit’. Nandan in the book is reminiscent of such celebrations.

Katha, I recalled, was one of the most popular Hindu ceremonies, performed on auspicious occasions. I remembered it being performed when I had passed my first exam, when father had brought his bicycle, his tractor. His cargo lorry... The same ritual must have followed the Purchase of the taxi. (38)

Rituals like Katha, havans was an opportunity for the Indo-Fijians to be reminiscent of their ancestral teachings, therefore, any small occasion became a matter of auspicious occasion for the community. Moreover, the people of the community visited each other on such occasions and songs were sung cherishing it. Nandan writes how Katha became a part of practice for the Girmityas to celebrate their little achievements and also a way of thanksgiving to God.

Katha, I recalled was the most popular Hindu ceremonies, performed on a special occasion. I remembered it being performed when I have passed my first exam, when Father had bought his bicycle, his tractor, his cargo lorry...the same ritual must have followed the purchase of the taxi. It was going to be an interminable affair. (38)

Nandan’s detailed description of the preparation of katha denotes his artistic narrative technique and a minute observant who had a true knowledge about the rituals of Hinduism and how fascinating it appears even as a kid to take part in these rituals.

At dawn, Zhaman would rise; pick up the broom made of bariara saplings, a bucket full of Lali’s fresh cowdung and go into the orchard under the mango tree – the one with red mangoes. There she would sweep the ground, then wet the earth, pouring the bucketful of cowdung to clean a rectangle for the sacred ceremony as the sun shimmered in its morning glory over the hills. As the cowdung dried Zhaman would go to the well, cut a few banana leaves, gather fallen mango twigs,

collect flowers – marigolds, hibiscus, and jasmine- and lay them neatly by the cowdung-painted place. (50)

The Indo-Fijians in their writings has elaborated the role of the epics in the growth of every child from the community. The Indo-Fijians not only cherished and preserved the teachings of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata but considered it text of paramount importance especially in their lives. Writers like Satendra Nandan, Subramani , Brij.V.Lal , Sudesh Mishra has expressed how they had grown up hearing stories about the teaching of these scriptures. In fact they became part of these scriptures by performing ‘Ramlilas’, singing ‘dohas’ and reciting verses. The Indo-Fijians shows great importance to the story of Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The fact that the story of the greatest personalities like Ram, Lakshman, Sita and the Pandavas resembles their life was a strong push factor for the Indo-Fijians to live their lives in an alien land. The people who are worshipped from age immemorial had to undergo the same banishment like the Indo-Fijians. As we all aware that Ram was banished from the kingdom of Ayodhya for a period of fourteen years so an so the Girmityas signed an agreement that demanded the banishment of them from India for a period of five years. Like Ram fought all the evils during his course of banishment, the Indo-Fijians had to face evils mentally, physically and morally during the period of exile. Nandan;s conversation with his Baba highlights the importance of the epics in the lives of the Indo-Fijians.

I never saw Baba read but he had a reservoir of grip-

Ping tales from the Ramayana. His favourite story was of Ram’s exile with Sita, his princess wife...

Why was Ram sent to exile, Baba?

“Because Kekeyi wanted her son to be a king of

Ayodhyay”. Baba paused before reflecting, “Exile, betu, is

common. Valmiki wrote about Ram’s exile, so that we

could bear ours. That’s how I have lived here, chodou!”...

In Ram’s story I saw our Fijian Indian

Lives mirrored. And I began to understand the myths on

Which our civilization was founded. Both their potency and impotence. (16)

The descendants of the Indo-Fijians have witnessed the image of the land of their ancestors through the mythical stories discussed in these epics. Therefore, India for them is the land that cannot be touched but only imagined.

Nandan's association with India is further deepened because he is amongst the first of the Indo-Fijian descendants who have made a visit to the land of his grandfather. After the completion of his secondary education, Nandan was awarded the scholarship to pursue his studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University Delhi. He recalls his journey in his autobiography *Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story*;

Of course when I set sail for India, I had no idea of either my history or India's. It was a leap into my grandparents' world which I had glimpsed only darkly through the myths of the Ramayana enacted in Ramlila...4

The news of Nandan's going back to India spread like a wild fire and people from various villages of Fiji came to visit him and congratulate him. It became a matter of great importance for the Indo-Fijians as a member of the community was making a return to the land which they have long forsaken. Nandan remembers how many of his relatives came from the interior of villages riding the back of horse, cargo lorries and tractors to see him at the airport. It was a moment of great significance for his father. He wept when his son left the Nadi airport. The tears in his eyes may represent the happiness of the father seeing his son's progress on the other hand Nandan also highlights that the tear represents the dilemma of every Indo-Fijian who is doomed to have a life as a foreigner in a foreign country having been rejected, unaccepted eagerly waiting for the day to be identified as one.

Why did he weep? Was it because his own father, at almost my age, had made an earlier journey from India to

Fiji- and never returned? Something as father, he was

now beginning to understand?

or was it because he himself could never make the

journey to his father's village?
(11)

Nandan's account of visit to India and his tenure of four years in India could be found in his book *Beyond Paradise: Rights of Passage* where Nandan elaborately discusses how the India he had imagined through the movies and the epics are very much different from the reality. In fact he notices how the image of India presented through these

mediums actually fails to highlight to the world the problems of real India. The first few days of his stay in India was really a difficult one with no friends, no contacts, unfavorable weather conditions, the crowd that he really started thinking of his return to Fiji. However, later we see Nandan's admiration for true Delhi which is visible in the ruins of the old monuments, the hustle and bustle, the unending work for minimum survival. He goes back to his experience of life in Delhi in a poem *Hope in Delhi*:

Delhi, like death, has many faces.
Still, a city's dying monuments
Speak of life, as in winter
Spring comes back to mind;
New building rise to fall
On bent backs
Of mothers, fathers,
While the children play
In the dust of bricks. (Nandan,

The Lon..187)

The Indo-Fijians attempted to create a mini-India in Fiji and we clearly see they succeeded in doing so through daily practice of rites and rituals, celebration of every festival declared in a Hindu calendar, performance of katha, pujas and havans. But, there is yet another important factor that made the Indo-Fijian identify with their 'matrabhumi' which is the language spoken by them. The Indo-Fijians proudly spoke the language known as 'Fiji-Hindi'; commonly known as the language of Tulsi Das which is a blend of all the languages of Northern India like Awadhi, Maithili, and Bhojpuri. The language of the Indo-Fijians till date remains the same and we see the Indo-Fijians interest in producing literature in Fiji-Hindi. Subramani is a notable name who has written novels purely in Fiji-Hindi. We see the use of Fiji-Hindi, in the works of Satendra Nandan as well. In *The Wounded Sea*, we see the rampant use of Fiji-Hindi words and phrases, that not only adds humor to serious situations but also helps the author project his true identity. For instance we see the characters in Nandan's *The Wounded Sea* greet one another as "Ram Ram Bhai" which represents a unique and a common feature of every Hindu community. Many other words like Oums, khatai, dhal, baigans, lathi, paap, narak, swarg, memsahib, Becharoo, Oum Soaha, munua, choorayal, roti, are few examples from the various adopted words of Hindi and Bhojpuri. The readers are filled with laughter when Nandan uses the phrase "Pundituum thookaum poochum moochum" (37) to describe how Birbal spat in the direction of the wind and the phlegm flew back and hung on the edge of whiskers.

We see Nandan referring a number of Hindi songs that was commonly sung by the Indo-Fijians. As we see that the Indian cinema played a major role in the entertainment of the Indo-Fijians. It was through the cinemas they connected with the 'lost land'. We see Jaddu, a village folk humming the song

Dil deke dekho

Dil deke dekho (56)

When he forgets the second part of the song, he sings another song with the same tune

Ek ghar banaunga

Tere ghar ke samne... (56)

Along with the epics, the Indian cinema had a great impact on the lives of the Indo-Fijians. In fact Nirupa Roy became the idol of beauty and every girl became to be compared in her context. According to Vijay Mishra

This Cinema projects a homogeneous India which is very much like the Fiji Indian fragments in that it is not fractured

by linguistic, religious, or caste divisions. The duplicities,

the illusions of Bombay Cinema, reconstruct, for the Fiji

Indians, a naïve confirmation precisely of their own

historical memory: Sita actress Nirupa Roy, the 'Filmi song'

ek ghar banaunga, tere ghar ke samne. (quoted in Jani 111)

India would remain an integral part of Nandan's life both as an academician and an individual because it is the place where he met the love of his life Jyoti. However, we see that after the banishment of Nandan from Fiji, he chose to migrate to Australia, instead of returning to India despite having an option because of the first cause that India will always remain the mythical land which could be only visited for pilgrimage purpose but cannot be accepted as a permanent home. Secondly the fact that after the death of his father and grandfather he could not establish any connection and also choosing a Western country offered better job and work opportunities compared to India. Satendra Nandan sums up his visit to India three times by stating:

I went to India three times and travelled everywhere from Kashmir to Madras. I mostly wanted to see the country and that is why I went. But I also went to my ancestral village near Madras. It was difficult to find my relatives because there are so many Acharis there. We were

all goldsmiths in the past. The problem in the village was that everyone wanted to be my relative because they thought they could benefit from me.

In *The Wounded Sea*, Nandan excels in projecting the typicality present in every Indian society. He projects the values and believes of a traditional Hindu family and how the members of the community become a whole joint family having their own peculiarities and differences but at the end identifying themselves as one. This beauty is reflected in every rites and rituals, every festivals or religious celebrations. Syd Harrex remarks in this context:

The narrator also celebrates the nourishing and enriching influences of Indian tradition, the joint family culture, the villagers' intimate relationship with the rural world and the beauties of nature, and the power of human love, goodness, compassion and kindness. (192)

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