

## Girmitya and the Political Economy of a ‘Taste of Sweetness’ in Colonial India

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### Abstract

There are many literature which much provide information of the lives of the Girmitya i.e. the people and their descendants whom the British brought between 1879 and 1916 from colonial India to work as indentured labourers on the sugarcane plantations of Fiji and many more islands. The Britishers became much more about significance and importance of ‘a taste of sweetness’ in everyday life of human being. So, the colonial government had carried Indian food-style to glob on cost of repressive rules and exploitative behavior of the state’s machinery. In course of time, Girmitya identified as a symbol of a taste of sweetness on alien land after losing everything in own native land. The colonial government expanded its political economy of sugar production and market from colonial India to island countries like Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Surinam and so on. Since then, sugar emerged as the largest agro-based industry in India and Fiji. Sugar has a major influence on the country’s water, food, and energy security. In this paper, we use a comparative approach to assess interconnected water-food-energy and market challenges, with a specific focus on the political economy of the sugar industry in India and Fiji. Connecting the discourse of a taste of sweetness and Girmitya in terms of producers, consumers, and policy makers, the text shows that the modern sugar habit took shape in the shadow of a growing empire. The paper also look on status of Indian sugar farmers and Sugar growers in Fiji as well as organizational structures, governance and trends of sugar industry in India and Fiji.

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### Introduction

#### Understanding Girmitya and Political Economy of Labour Force

Girmitya (indentured labor) refers to a system of labor in which workers were contracted to work for a specified period of time, typically five to ten years, in exchange for passage to a new country, food, and accommodation. The people and their descendants whom the colonial government brought from India to work in the sugarcane plantation of Fiji (Mohseen 2022) <sup>[3]</sup>. The system was prevalent in colonial India during the 19th and early 20th centuries when millions of Indians were sent to work in plantations and mines in colonies such as Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa, and the Caribbean. The genesis of the indentured labour system started between 1826 and 1910 (Lal 2004) <sup>[5]</sup> and it is

estimated that total number of 4, 62,801 Indian and non-Indian indentured workers reached on the shores of Mauritius (Peerthum 2017) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Political economy encircled two important paradigms i.e. liberal and Marxists (Rudolph and Rudolph (1987) <sup>[7]</sup>. Liberal pluralist construed the state and its actions in terms of successive equilibriums that followed from the play of organized interests. On the other hand, Marxists construed the state and its actions in terms of struggle among classes formed and motivated by the mode and relations of production. The state was the agent of a ruling class or of a hegemonic class coalition. In the both paradigms depicted a reflexive state who nature and actions mirrored equilibriums of either organized interests or classes. Therefore, the political economy of colonial India was largely based on optimum exploitation of

available raw materials and cheap labour forces to spread hegemonic power across world. The political economy of colonial India was largely shaped by the British Empire's quest for raw materials and cheap labor to fuel industrialization in the UK. The indentured labor system was one of the strategies used by the British to acquire a steady supply of labor for their colonies. The system had profound economic, social, and political consequences for India and the colonies where Indian labor was employed.

The British Empire's demand for labor was fueled by the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. The sugar plantations in the British colonies in the Caribbean, for example, were heavily reliant on slave labor, and the abolition of slavery<sup>1</sup> threatened the profitability of the plantations. The British government turned to India, which was then under British colonial rule, as a source of cheap labor. The British colonial government in India established a system of indentured labor recruitment that was operated by private agents known as "sirdars" or "arkatis." The agents would travel to different parts of India to recruit workers, often using deception and coercion to convince people to sign up. The workers were often illiterate and had little understanding of the terms of the contract they were signing.

Chand argued that workers once recruited, they were transported to the colonies in ships that were often overcrowded and unsanitary. Many workers died during the journey due to diseases and poor living conditions. Upon arrival at their destination, the workers were subject to harsh working conditions and brutal treatment by their employers.

The system of indentured labor had profound economic consequences for India. The labor shortage caused by the recruitment of millions of workers for the colonies led to a rise in wages in India, which increased the cost of production for Indian manufacturers. This made it difficult for Indian manufacturers to compete with British imports, leading to the decline of traditional Indian industries such as textiles and handicrafts. The indentured labor system also had significant social and political consequences. The recruitment of laborers often disrupted rural communities and led to the separation of families. Many workers were subjected to racial discrimination and segregation in the colonies where they were employed, which further contributed to social and political tensions.

### Political Economy of a 'Taste of Sweetness'

Genealogy of sugarcane in India goes date back to during the Gupta Dynasty, around 350 AD. It is evidence in the ancient (4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) treatises such as Kautilya's Arthashastra that refined sugar was already being produced in India. Originally, people chewed sugarcane raw to extract its sweetness and that is a taste of sweetness to laid the foundation of a larger sugarcane cultivation in areas of market and economy. Although India had manufactured and used gur or jaggery and various forms of sugar from time immemorial, the large-scale industrial production of refined white sugar can be dated to the end of the nineteenth century. Developed due to colonial imperatives, in its early years, the fate of the Indian sugar industry was tied to the vagaries of far-flung tropical territories colonised by European powers- Brazil by the Portuguese, the Caribbean islands by the British and Java by the Dutch<sup>2</sup> etc. Finally, the British had extensively exploited the trained-cheap Indian labors of sugarcane plantation and sent in the different islands nations to explore a taste of sweetness among the people who were unknown about sweetness. Thus, the political economy of

sugar industry had provided a big opportunity of the colonial government to exploit market economy and expand empire.

### Sugar Industry in India and Fiji

India and Fiji are two countries that have immense significance of sugarcane industry. In India, sugar industry is an important agro-based industry that impacts rural livelihood of about 50 million sugarcane farmers and around 5 lakh workers directly employed in sugar mills. Employment is also generated in various ancillary activities relating to transport, trade servicing of machinery and supply of agriculture inputs. India is the second largest producer of sugar in the world after Brazil and is also the largest consumer (Survey of India 2015). However, the sugar industry in Fiji formally began in 1882, and by 1883, the cultivation of sugarcane in the country had displaced copra as the chief export crop (Dean 2022) <sup>[3]</sup>. The production of sugarcane eventually became the backbone of the country, and by the mid-1970s, Fiji was exporting raw sugar to the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) (at that time, the European Economic Community). For more than a century since the industry's inception, sugar remained the economic strength of the Fijian economy and the country's development (Dean 2022) <sup>[3]</sup>. However, beginning 1980s, the industry started to experience many difficulties.

However, there are some differences between the two sugar producer countries. In production point of view, production, India is the world largest producer of sugarcane, with an annual production of around 350 million tonnes. In contrast, Fiji produces around 2 million tonnes of sugarcane annually. India has a much larger land area dedicated to sugarcane cultivation than Fiji. In India, sugarcane is grown on around 5 million hectares of land, while in Fiji, it is grown on around 20,000 hectares. Both countries have modern sugar mills for processing sugarcane into sugar and other by-products. However, Indian mills are generally larger and more advanced than those in Fiji. India exports a significant amount of sugar to other countries, while Fiji's sugar exports are mainly to Australia and New Zealand. According to the latest available data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), India is the world largest producer of sugarcane, with a production of 376.9 million tonnes in 2019. Fiji, on the other hand, produced 1.8 million tonnes of sugarcane in 2019. Both countries provide government support to their sugarcane industries through subsidies and other incentives. However, the level of support provided by the Indian government is generally higher than that provided by the Fijian government. Labor force: The sugarcane industry in both countries relies heavily on manual labor for planting and harvesting crops. However, in India, there is a large pool of cheap labor available for this work, while in Fiji, labor shortages are common.

In conclusion, the system of indentured labor played a significant role in the political economy of colonial India. It was a strategy used by the British Empire to acquire cheap labor for their colonies and had profound economic, social, and political consequences for India and the colonies where Indian labor was employed. The legacy of the indentured labor system is still felt today in the descendants of those who were subjected to the system's exploitative practices. India and Fiji have significant sugarcane industries, there are some notable differences between them in terms of production levels, land area dedicated to cultivation, processing capabilities, export markets, government support levels and labor force availability.

## Conclusion

The system of indentured labor played a significant role in the political economy of colonial India. It was a strategy used by the British Empire to acquire cheap labor for their colonies and had profound economic, social, and political consequences for India and the colonies where Indian labor was employed. The legacy of the indentured labor system is still felt today in the descendants of those who were subjected to the system's exploitative practices. India and Fiji have significant sugarcane industries, there are some notable differences between them in terms of production levels, land area dedicated to cultivation, processing capabilities, export markets, government support levels and labor force availability. The taste of sugarcane its sweetness is omnipresent in India and the world. At present, India is the largest consumer and second largest producer in the world. In the changing time and space, the taste of sweetness and form of sugarcane industries has also changed in terms of production of ethanol. Ethanol is emerging as a renewable biofuels that is being felt to meets the needs of the present without compromising the need of the future generations. Thus, 'a taste of sweetness' created a large extent to the sugarcane industry that has been a major part of political economy in India, Fiji and the world till date.

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