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Ramayana and Ideological Falsification in Raymond Pillai and Satendra Nandan's Works

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Abstract

This paper examines Girmit Ideology and its articulation through the Ramayana in the works of Raymond Pillai and Satendra Nandan, using Vijay Mishra's concept of Ideological Falsification. It argues that the mythologised ideal of the Ramayana provided Indo-Fijians with psychological sustenance during indenture while simultaneously generating a distorted reading of socio-political reality. A close reading of two pioneer Indo-Fijian writers, Raymond Pillai and Satendra Nandan, selected works reveals the collapse of the millennial quest for prosperity. Pillai reconfigures the notion of Laxmi to signify emotional fulfilment rather than wealth, exposing the limits of Girmit Ideology. In contrast, Nandan's works inscribe his grandfather as an embodiment of Girmit resilience, foregrounding faith, memory, and cultural continuity. While acknowledging the failure of Ramrajya, Nandan affirms the sustaining power of belief in the diasporic condition. The paper concludes that both writers exemplify Mishra's notion that literature becomes significant through the interrogation of Ideological Falsification. It also

proves that Indo-Fijian writing is a critical site of exploration where inherited mythologies are both challenged and reinterpreted in light of lived experience.

Keywords: Girmit Ideology, Ideological Falsification, diaspora, Indo-Fijian Literature

1.0. Introduction

Girmit Ideology, theorised by Fijian scholar Vijay Mishra, is predominantly driven by a Hindu ideology rooted in Rama's banishment and return in the epic *Ramayana*. Mishra first theorised this theory in a seminal essay titled *Indo-Fijian Fiction: Towards an Interpretation,* published in 1977. Later, he published that essay as *Indo-Fijian Fiction and Girmit Ideology* for the 1979 anthology *Indo-Fijian Experience*. In the essay, he argues that Indo-Fijian fiction has to be evaluated against the ideological "base" of the *Girmit Ideology* (171). He further adds that *Girmit Ideology* results from a "consciousness moulded from the experience of some forty years of servitude" (171) during the Indian indenture experience in Fiji. Mishra believes that the historical experience took root in the minds of Indian labourers during their indenture in Fiji.

According to Robin Cohen, author of the seminal text in diaspora studies, *Global Diasporas* (2008), Indian indentured labourers in Fiji strongly objected to attempts to separate the three main Indian ethnic/religious groups: Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim. The objection elicits a deep sense of connection to India as a nation. Any segregation would feed destructive communalist sentiments in India itself. The Sikhs, in some quarters, preferred to maintain their distinctiveness, rooted in their distinct history of Sikh settlement abroad, resulting from colonial employment as soldiers, police officers, or free farmers. Alliance and an intimate bond with Punjab, or a move towards an independent state of Khalistan, contributed to such a stance. The Muslims and Hindus were more united at the beginning, given the arbitrary conditions imposed on them. Secondly, Hindus dominated the indentured population, whereas Muslims rarely constituted more than 15 per cent of the indentured workers (Cohen 2008, 65). The Sikhs, with different colonial experiences, Muslims as a minority, and the Hindus as the dominant community each responded to the Girmit experience according to their own self-interest. According to Parekh Bhikhu, three features- the reconstitution of family life, their religious conviction in general, and more specifically, the adoption of the *Ramayana* as 'the essential text

of the Hindu diaspora '-helped the Hindus to create a distinctive diasporic consciousness (qtd. in Cohen 65).

After Girmit, those who remained in Fiji stayed with their families. By the end of their contracts, the colonial administration encouraged families in India to re-enlist for further indenture. From the onset, Sir Arthur Gordon (the first Governor of Fiji, 1875-1880) "expected three quarters of the immigrants" to remain in Fiji. Similarly, Lord Salisbury of the India Office in London suggested that the Indian migration to Fiji should "develop into permanent colonisation through elimination of return passage" (Gillion 1962, 16-22). Others who had 'depot marriage' or formed new liaisons in Fiji, like prominent historian Brij Lal's grandfather, remained to avoid a backlash in their villages in India or to enjoy the new social status in Fiji. Lal writes about his grandfather in his novel *Mr Tulsi's Store* (2013). Assembled arguments aside, either way, family life was reconstructed. Domestic life further strengthened community bonds and a "period of cultural revival" through religious specialists' visits from India (Mohanty 2017, 4).

Adopting the *Ramayana* as their key religious text fulfilled the trilogy. Bhikhu reasons that the *Ramayana's* central theme of exile, suffering, struggle, and eventual return resonated with the trajectory of crossing the *Kalapani,* the sufferings and struggles of plantation life, and the assumed desire to return to their home in India. Second, the *Ramayana*, being didactic and straightforward, clearly distinguishes between good and evil, which became a useful simplification in the harsh world of the plantation. Third, the *Ramayana* echoed the virtues and values every Hindu envisaged of a king, but the ascribed family and gender roles attracted more attention. Finally, the texts could transcend casteism by accentuating the virtues of the lower castes. The religious and cultural revival gave stable grounding and sustenance to rebuild their traditional way of life. The interconnectedness of family life, religious sustenance, and cultural revival forged a distinctive diasporic consciousness.

In Fiji, the *girmitiyas* turned to the *Ramcharitmanas* to find solace and sustenance. The *Ramcharitmanas,* written in the Awadhi language by Goswami Tulsidas, is a vernacularised version of Valmiki's iconic *Ramayana* in Sanskrit. The Rama Story resonated with their plights. The *girmitiyas* firmly believed that if Rama, the hero-prince and the protagonist, could endure fourteen long years of exile/banishment in a dense forest without the luxuries of civilised life, then their plights were nothing but trivia. Rama, upon his return to his kingdom in Ayodhya, also

established *Ramrajya*. *Ramrajya* refers to the ideal form of governance based on moral, social, and cosmic ideals. On the same note, they saw Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the Indian freedom fighter, as a messiah in his efforts to abolish the Indenture System. He was the 'hands of God' who would bring *Ramrajya* for them. *Ramrajya,* in Gandhi's definition, meant 'true democracy' where the sovereignty of the people is based on pure moral authority ("Ramrajya-Mind of Mahatma Gandhi"). In this respect, Gandhi was an extension of Lord Rama for Indians in Fiji. Although a predominantly Hindu ideology, the idea of *Ramrajya* struck a chord with Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians alike, based on equality and morality. Colonial rebuttal and describing the plights of the Indians on matters of *izzat* (dignity and honour) as the "Indian problem" and giving a politically motivated twist united Indians of different religious backgrounds (Naidu 2017, 16). In fact, the struggle for equality solidified their diasporic consciousness.

The essential configuration of *Girmit Ideology* evolved primarily out of a conscious misreading of Indian mythology. Rama, who established *Ramrajya* through his exile and return, became a salient feature and a silent mode of resistance. Eventually, the idea of *Ramrajya* was articulated and encoded simultaneously in India in its struggle for freedom from British rule. *Girmitiyas* not only rooted for India's freedom from British rule but also expected an extension of *Ramrajya* in Fiji. What started as a latent conviction to survive the Girmit, believing that *Ramrajya* would eventually be realized, in retrospect, blinded the Fiji Indians to the immediate realities of life in Fiji and prevented them from forging a lasting relationship with the people already living there. This affected not only the *girmitiyas* but also their descendants. Mishra highlights that conscious misreading of India gave Indo-Fijians a "false sense of security, a false reading of politics and an insularity which could then be exploited by others. It gave them an inferiority complex, because a practical enactment of that consciousness was not possible" (Mishra 1979, 243). However, the idea of *Girmit Ideology* might seem falsified; the theory provides a critical premise to read the emerging literature. It also gave the writers grounds for intellectual debate.

To justify the relationship between *Girmit Ideology* and creative writing, Mishra offers a reading of Indo-Fijian literature through this ideological matrix. He argues that literature becomes literary not when genius offers an artistic wholeness, a self-contained poem or novel to which one can give the title "great", or which can be hierarchically placed within some prior

canon of literary enterprise, but when literature begins to see an ideological falsification (Mishra 1979, 243). Basically, ideological falsification occurs when a writer reflects a false ideology. The writer distorts, falsifies, and maintains the ideology. Also, the writer displays no attempt at literary mediation or intervention. Moreover, Mishra states that "fiction cannot include unmediated ideas that simply reflect ideology, undecoded beliefs and systems. Ideology cannot replace the literary text" (Mishra 1979, 245).

This paper engages the above assertion in relation to two Indo-Fijian writers, Raymond Pillai and Satendra Nandan.

2.0. Literary Analysis

2.1. Raymond Pillai's Laxmi

Raymond Pillai is one of Fiji's pioneering writers. He wrote and published fiction in English in the early 1960s, when writing in English by Fijians was at the formative stage. Educated in Fiji and Australia, with an academic career at the University of the South Pacific, Pillai joined a group of emergent writers who rode on the postcolonial wagon and attempted to 'write back' to the British Empire. He established himself as a poet, a short-story writer, and a playwright. Within the Fijian literary context, he is best known for his contributions to the short story genre.

Pillai brings to light the struggles of ordinary Indo-Fijians living on the margins of Fijian society in his short story *Laxmi* (69-76), which appears in his collection, *The Celebration* (1980). It is about Raju and Laxmi, a poverty-stricken Indo-Fijian couple. The plot opens with a description of the Deepawali celebration, the festival of lights, and the traditional Indian new year. On Deepawali, Hindus pray to the deity Laxmi, the goddess of fortune and giver of wealth and prosperity. However, Raju exhibits a marked indifference toward this festival, suggesting disengagement from its cultural and symbolic significance. He sees only the "futility of it all" (Pillai 1980, 69). He has religiously "lit his little lamps and dutifully sung his hymns" (Pillai 1980, 69). To him, Deepawali has "waxed and waned" and "Laxmi always passed him by" (Pillai 1980,69). At this point, Raju questions his purpose in life. He sees the "powerful forces of society were ranged against him, repulsing his hopes" (Pillai 1980, 69-70). Although intelligent and capable, Raju feels helpless when he says, "In another place, another time, he might have prospered. But in the here and now, he was trapped inextricably" (Pillai 1980, 70). His situation

reflects the current situation of Indo-Fijians. Capable and meritorious, they are denied fair selection into the workforce and scholarships.

The story is set in 1960 in Suva, a modern capitalist city of Fiji, an island nation in the midst of the Pacific Ocean, where colonialism is rife. The Europeans are still the "boss", like Mr Barlow, who occupy the upper class of the society, and Raju is akin to an indentured labourer or the cattle class. In the name of a home, Raju lives in "a single room, the middle one in a row of three" with his wife Laxmi (Pillai 1980, 70). Next to his room is "a whore on one side of him and a harridan on the other" (Pillai 1980, 71). His home and the surroundings embarrass Raju, but he cannot afford anything better. This place is "the squalid collection of tenements" and a "scrap-heap for failures" (Pillai 1980, 71). It is a decaying community, "dank-smelling … stench of garbage … broken septic tank" (Pillai 1980, 71). This is the image of shanty towns on the fringes of Suva city and other towns alike. The state has not improved; in fact, more shanty towns have mushroomed in recent years. More Indo-Fijians, whose land leases had expired and who could not acquire secured land titles, squatted in shanty towns, as they had no other way! In many ways, the occupants of these shanty towns live a life full of poverty similar to Raju and Laxmi. The settlers of these informal settlements often experience a level of economic hardship comparable to that faced by Raju and Laxmi. The dismal state of the couple is amplified when they do not have "enough rice and sharp" (Pillai 1980, 72) on the day of Deepawali, a day that denotes abundance and prosperity.

Raju's sole hope is his wife, Laxmi, who provides meaning and purpose to his life. Pillai's Laxmi is an antithesis of the goddess Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth. Ironically, she is trapped in the decrepitude and wretchedness of a shanty town of Suva. Even in abject poverty, Laxmi offers Amma, her mother, the modest supply of grains in her kitchen. Despite their tribulations, Laxmi maintains her moral rectitude, like Sita in the *Ramayana*, unlike Raju, who, in a fury, slaps her and shoves her onto the bed. Raju is swift to regret his actions; Laxmi reciprocates with forgiveness. Amidst the gaiety of the outside world, the couple make love, for love "lit up the darkest tribulations" (Pillai 1980, 73).

This short story by Pillai emphasises the sublime elements within the epic *Ramayana*. Goddess Laxmi is the wife of Vishnu, the supreme Godhead. Together, they take various forms and incarnations. Rama and Sita in the *Ramayana* are incarnations of Vishnu and Laxmi. When Rama is exiled, Sita accompanies him and suffers the banishment. In the *Aranya-kanda* of the

Ramayana, Raavana, the antagonist, in the guise of an ascetic, begs for alms in front of Sita's hut, and Sita is compelled to cross *Laxman-Rekha*, the threshold. As a result, Ravana abducts Sita. Once Rama realises Sita's absence, Rama launches a search for his wife.

Here, Pillai is drawing a parallel to this episode in the *Ramayana*. Raju is searching for wealth; therefore, he is searching for Laxmi. To achieve his millennial dream, he works for Mr Barlow, suffering like Sisyphus in his quest. His laborious work never ends, even on the day when the rest of the Indo-Fijians are celebrating their major festival. In the epic *Ramayana*, Rama wins back Sita, but Indo-Fijians are still searching for Laxmi/wealth in modern times. There is a reversal of events now. In the *Ramayana*, Sita/Laxmi crossed the threshold and was taken to another island, Lanka. Girmitiyas, on the other hand, travelled from India to the Fiji Islands in search of wealth/Laxmi. Ever since then, they have worked to attain their millennial dream. They are yet to realise that their wealth/Laxmi resides in their home, similar to Raju's case, where Laxmi has taken the form of love instead of wealth. Those who search for material wealth will continue to labour like Sisyphus, but those who realise love will find her at home.

Pillai reinforces Mishra's notion of the "failed millennial quest" (Mishra 1979, 171-183) through this short story. Yet it is also a reminder that Laxmi has many incarnations. As much as she is the goddess of wealth, she is also a goddess of good fortune. Raju is fortunate to marry Laxmi, a woman whom he loves. In India, it would be almost impossible for him to marry Laxmi because Raju is a *chamaar*, a man of a lower caste or dalit. But across the *Kalapani*, Raju marries Laxmi. Isn't that fortunate enough? Laxmi did not pass by him; Laxmi was always at home, beside him; only he could not recognise her. In comparison, Raju's life is much better than that of his neighbours. To conclude, Pillai offers a double-bind view of the Indo-Fijian reality through Laxmi. Indo-Fijians, like Raju, are a reminder of the 'failed millennial quest', but they have been fortunate in many other ways. Compared to the unemployed and those who live in the squatter settlements of Suva, Raju and Laxmi's predicament is much better.

2.2 Nandan's Baba: The Spirit of Indenture

Indenture is over; Girmit remains a reality. The experiences of Girmit left a lasting imprint on the *girmitiyas*. Not all survived the Girmit. Many committed suicide because they could not bear the harsh treatments and conditions. It required resolve and endurance to live it. Satendra Nandan inscribes his grandfather as an embodiment of Girmit resilience in his fictions.

Nandan is a stalwart writer from Fiji. Born in 1939 in Nadi, Nandan is a poet, fiction writer, critic, and politician. Nandan is the most prolific Indo-Fijian writer till now. In many of his poems and his novel, Nandan portrays his grandfather as a symbol of endurance. His grandfather's spiritual strength embodies the spirit of indenture. In his poem, "My Father's Son" (3-7), he highlights both the physical hardships endured and their emotional fortitude in his collection of poems, *Faces in the Village* (1976). The resilient girmitiyas are now "toothless, faceless, nameless" (Nandan, Line 67, 3) whose "heads grown grey, /hearts grown old/ a hundred years scribbled/ in a hundred wrinkles" (Nandan, Lines 73-76, 3). The poet questions the old man's sacrifice, for the poet sees only "death and decay" (Nandan, Line 93, 4). Nandan questions the outcome of the sacrifice because he sees it has become futile. Did the old man achieve his millennial quest? From the poet's eye, the old man survived the Girmit ordeal but failed in his millennial quest! Nandan captures the failure in another poem, "in the shadow of a mountain" (7). The old man lives with "shattered dreams, cracked memories" that constantly "create chaos in the mind" (Nandan, Lines 35-36, 7). After all the struggles, his grandfather is "an old ancient man/ silent and alone/ like an owl in the rain" (Nandan, Lines 20-22, 6). These poignant lines reinforce Mishra's notion of the 'failed millennial quest' but validate the 'spirit of indenture'. In the face of death and decay, the old man lives another day.

What kept the old man alive? It is the faith that keeps him alive during Girmit and beyond. Ironically, this is revealed by the old man's ghost! In the poem "The Ghost," the old man rises like a phoenix and speaks:

with the faith I lived,
I fashioned a new world
with bits from the old. (Nandan, Lines 17-19, 11)

As a Hindu, the old man's faith hinges on Rama's banishment. If Rama survived the fourteen-year exile, he convinces himself that he could survive five years. That was his faith. His faith was rooted in Hinduism, especially the story of Rama in the *Ramayana*. With that "faith," the old man lived on, sourcing inspiration from the old world (India) and making a living in the new world (Fiji). Nandan's use of Hindu mythology and cultural references in his fiction shows the inclination of the girmitiyas towards religion to survive Girmit. By invoking hero figures from the *Ramayana*, Nandan connects the experiences of the *girmitiyas* to a broader narrative of struggle and survival. In doing so, he emphasises their spiritual strength. Like the heroes of

Hindu mythology, such as Rama, they were steadfast and endured even in the face of immense adversity.

In an article "Some reflections on the Hindu diaspora" (1994), Parekh Bhikhu outlines three features: the reconstitution of family life, their religious conviction, and the adoption of the *Ramayana* as "the essential text of the Hindu diaspora," that helped the Hindus create a distinctive diasporic consciousness (qtd. in Cohen, 65). Nandan brings out this connection of Baba to India in *The Wounded Sea* (1991). Even though Baba spends most of his life in Fiji, almost twelve thousand miles from India, he never let go of his Indianness. He conducts his ceremonies religiously. One such act he performed daily was the recital of "a few couplets from the Ramayana", wearing "dhoti" (Nandan, 7), a traditional Indian wear for men. Baba "had developed his own rhythm of life, like a transplanted tree among the native shrubs. His moods, it seemed, were controlled by distant memories as the tides are by the moon" (Nandan, 7).

Nandan's grandfather was deeply religious. Religion and culture provide sustenance to an otherwise grim existence. The daily engagement with his rituals is evident in *The Wounded Sea*. Baba carries strong religious convictions and practices them daily. The source of these convictions is the *Ramayana*. Nandan's Baba had a "reservoir of gripping tales from the *Ramayana*" (Nandan, 16). However, he does not follow his faith blindly but questions certain aspects of the epic. For example, in an episode of *Ramayana*, Laxmana mutilates Supnekha's nose. Baba strongly denounces Laxmana's action. For him, Ravana, the antagonist in the epic, is more honourable in defending his sister's insult. He does not support Ravana in entirety, but he tries to make Nandan "understand why Ravan had abducted Sita … Wouldn't you do that, *chodou*, if your sister's nose was chopped off?" (Nandan, 16). The argument is compelling. Baba's reasoning is beyond the duality of good and bad. While he pities Supnekha, he reserves his fury for Kekeyi, Rama's stepmother, because she "wanted her own son to be king of Ayodhya. Exile, *betu*, is common. Valmiki wrote about Rama's exile, so that we could bear ours. That's how I have lived here, *chodou*!" (Nandan, 16). Kekeyi is akin to Sanadhya's *arakati.* The *arakatis* fooled many poor and illiterate Indians into indenture. Baba draws a parallel to Rama and *girmitiyas* here. Exile becomes a common denominator, except that Rama returns to Ayodhya, but Baba and many other *girmitiyas* remain in eternal exile.

Ramayana and *Ramcharitmanas* influenced Hindus during Girmit. Bhikhu relates that the central theme of exile, struggles, and eventual return resonates with the *girmitiya* trajectory of

crossing the *Kalapani*, struggles of plantation life, and the assumed desire to return to India, their home in India. Unfortunately, the resolution of the epic contradicts the girmitiya story. Most of the girmitiyas never returned home. Nor did they ever enjoy *Ramarajya*.

Ramrajya refers to Lord Rama's ideal kingdom or rule, as depicted in the *Ramayana* and the *Ramcharitmanas.* It represents a utopian vision of governance marked by righteousness, justice, and moral integrity. After his return, Rama ruled Ayodhya with fairness and compassion, ensuring the welfare of all his subjects, regardless of their social or economic status. Ayodhya was characterised by peace, prosperity, and happiness. No poverty, crime, or injustice flourished under Rama's governance. In theory, *Ramrajya* symbolises the perfect balance of *Dharma* (righteousness) and *Artha* (material well-being). With perfect balance and a selfless ruler, an ideal society evolved. Rama's concept was invoked in modern political discourse by Mahatma Gandhi. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Bapu, or Mahatma, envisaged a replica of *Ramrajya* in India after independence.

Gandhi's idea of *Ramrajya* reached Fiji. For the *girmitiyas*, Gandhi was god-sent, a Mahatma because he vehemently campaigned to abolish the Indenture System. In this respect, Gandhi became the representative of their homeland, India. He was seen as the 'hands of God' or Rama-like, who would deliver *Ramrajya* to them. *Ramrajya,* in Gandhi's definition, meant 'true democracy' where the sovereignty of the people is based on pure moral authority ("Ramrajya-Mind of Mahatma Gandhi"). In this respect, Gandhi is an extension of Lord Rama's ideals. This led to Gandhi's idolisation (Kumar 2021). The *girmitiyas* became active players in the epic *Ramayana*. They related their indenture to Rama's exile. In the Rama story, he returns to his home, Ayodhya, after his exile and brings *Ramrajya* to his kingdom. The *girmitiyas* also thought of a homecoming and *Ramrajya*. Others thought of Fiji as a 'home away from home' or 'Little India.' Little did they know that the end of indenture was not the end of Girmit or the beginning of *Ramrajya*. Approximately 60% of the *girmitiyas* did not return to their home in India, nor did Fiji ever become a homely enough place. Neither *Ramrajya* was achieved in India nor in Fiji. The utopian vision of *Ramrajya* remained in the ambit of the epic only. The fate of the *girmitiyas* in Fiji, therefore, reveals the oversimplification and falsification of religious texts.

3.0 Conclusion

This paper has argued that Girmit Ideology, grounded in a mythologised reading of the Ramayana and the utopian ideal of *Ramrajya*, functioned both as a source of psychological

sustenance and as a framework of ideological distortion for Indo-Fijians. Drawing on Vijay Mishra's concept of ideological falsification, the analysis demonstrates how inherited religious narratives, while enabling survival under indenture, also produced a "false consciousness" that obscured material realities and deferred critical engagement with the socio-political conditions in Fiji. Through Raymond Pillai's *Laxmi*, the paper has shown how the symbolic economy of the Ramayana is destabilised. The failure of the millennial quest for wealth and prosperity exposes the limits of Girmit Ideology, as material deprivation and marginalisation undermine its promises. Yet, Pillai suggests that fulfilment resides not in mythic projections but in lived human connections.

In contrast, Satendra Nandan's works foreground the enduring 'spirit of indenture'. By inscribing his grandfather as an embodiment of resilience, Nandan acknowledges the collapse of the promised *Ramrajya* while affirming the sustaining power of faith, memory, and cultural continuity within the diasporic condition. Taken together, these writers illustrate that Indo-Fijian literature does not merely reproduce ideological structures but actively interrogates and mediates them. The tension between belief and lived reality becomes a productive site of literary engagement.

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