Abstract:
This article considers how the experiences of South Asian indentured laborers in Fiji links the Pacific labor migrations of the late 19th and early 20th century to larger global movements of workers. In doing so, it offers one avenue through which to incorporate the Pacific into the study of world history.

Keywords: South Asia, Indentured Labor, Fiji, Pacific Islanders, Plantations
Short Title: *Girmit Connections to Global Networks*

Girmit Connections to Global Networks: South Asians and the Pacific Labor Trade

Recent efforts by Matt Matsuda as well as David Armitage and Alison Bashford have attempted to center the Pacific within a world-historical context.[1] These are both welcome endeavors since there remains a distinct lack of consideration in world history for a region that makes up one-third of the planet's surface. This omission of the Pacific by many world historians has a downstream effect, as it results in teachers being ill-equipped in terms of accessible ways to incorporate the Pacific into their world history classrooms. Consequently, it is not only necessary to incorporate the Pacific into world history in order to add more diverse experiences into world-historical narratives, but to do so in ways that enable teachers to build lessons or draw examples from for use in classroom settings. The migrations of contract laborers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provide one avenue through which to connect the movements of Pacific peoples to a larger global network.

As one of many boundary-crossing processes, migrations enable historians to approach the past in ways that complicate national and colonial narratives. Scholars such as Patrick Manning, Michael Fisher, and dozens of others have argued for the value of migrations as a useful tool for pursuing the study of world history in a way that traces the movement of people

[1] Matt K. Matsuda, *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012); *Pacific Histories: Ocean, Land, People*, edited by David Armitage and Alison Bashford (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

and their transnational experiences across borders without disregarding the importance of those borders.[2] When it comes to contract labor during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, David Northrup's *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism* is particularly valuable as an accessible summary that considers the movements of Africans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders across the globe.[3] In doing so, Northrup's summary is a good example of how to incorporate the Pacific into a larger global study by including the migrations of Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian workers into the Pacific, as well as the movement of Pacific Islanders throughout the region. But while the numbers and flow of laborers is important, what can really drive classroom discussion are the individual experiences of workers themselves.

To that end, this discussion offers a broad summary of the South Asian labor migrations to the Pacific and of the Pacific Islander labor migrations in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and focuses on two individuals whose experiences reveal many of the hardships labor migrants faced during this time period. Through a brief consideration of Totaram Sanadhya from Firozabad in South Asia and Kawasulia from Adagege on Malaita in the Solomon Islands, this article offers examples for the classroom through which to compare and contrast notable South Asian and Pacific Islander labor experiences. Although the focus here is on using South Asian migrations to link Pacific Islander laborers to larger global networks, the experiences of Chinese, Japanese, and other laborers who toiled under contracts on Pacific plantations could all be used to link to wider migrations. This article considers South Asian migrations because the two groups shared Fiji as a major site of plantation labor.

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[2] See, for example, Patrick Manning, *Migration in World History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012); Michael H. Fisher, *Migration: A World History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014); Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[3] David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, South Asian workers were recruited into indentured labor throughout the imperial territories. These imperial routes that accompanied British colonization built on centuries-old trading networks that had been developed throughout the Indian Ocean basin and across much of Afro Eurasia. Consequently, studies of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century labor migrations have linked South Asia to not only the rest of the Indian Ocean basin, but to South Africa, South America, the Caribbean, and, occasionally, the Pacific.[4] In doing so, such considerations offer a connection through which to link a regional Pacific labor trade to wider global labor migrations. By comparing the experiences of both South Asians and Pacific Islanders as contract laborers in the Pacific, it is possible to directly include Oceania in larger classroom discussions of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century labor migrations.

Although it was not the first or only place that South Asians settled in the Pacific, by far the most common site for migration of South Asians to the Pacific was Viti Levu, the main island of Fiji (New Zealand and Australia were the others). These main labor migrations began in the 1879, when Arthur Gordon, the governor of Fiji, paternalistically confined Fijians to work under their chiefs in what he understood to be a traditional fashion and while also limiting Fijian interactions with foreigners. Drawing from his experience as governor of both Trinidad (1866-1870) and Mauritius (1871-1874), Gordon worked with the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company to establish Fiji as a plantation-based economy operated by indentured laborers. To that end, Gordon expanded the contract labor system of formal written agreements, or "*girmits*" in South Asia to include Fiji.

[4] Among the most influential of these large-scale studies is Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: Export of Indian Labour Overseas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

These *girmits* were written in English and either Hindi and Urdu (in northern India), or Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam (in the south) and outlined the working conditions in terms of pay, accommodation, and treatment. For those who signed on to work in Fiji, the work was categorized as "cultivation and manufacture of agricultural products," with a 9 hour/day workweek and 5 more hours of labor on Saturdays (Sundays and holidays were off). The majority of indentured laborers who moved to Fiji came from northern India, specifically the eastern districts of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh (Basti, Gonda, Faizabad, Azamgarh, Bahraich and others), and totaled approximately 45,000 people. Beginning in 1903, they were joined by roughly 15,000 more laborers emigrated from the southern districts of Vizagapatnam, Arcot, Chittoor, Trichnipoly, Chingleput, and Kistna.[5] Although these totals are a small fraction of the more than 1.3 million South Asians who went abroad as indentured laborers during the time period, they follow a similar pattern in terms of points of departure over the course of the indenture system.[6] Those who migrated as laborers were mostly peasants who had been disconnected from the land by famine, drought, and ongoing shift to private land-ownership and rising rents. Often, *girmitiyas* (those who signed agreements) were tricked into such contracts, but the fact that roughly 30% later refused to leave home indicates at least some agency in the face of unscrupulous recruiters, or *arkatis*. For those who did leave India, it was a variety of rural social classes and castes, mostly men, but about 25-30% women and children, and all had been dispossessed by the economic changes.

Following a medical exam and vaccinations, these *girmitiyas* then sailed across the ocean for three months in what were usually cramped, unsanitary, and generally awful conditions

[5] Brij V. Lal, "*Girmit*, History, Memory," in *Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience*, edited by Brij V. Lal (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004), 7.
[6] Those bound for Fiji represented roughly 12% of the total 361,000 laborers to leave the United Provinces between 1881 and 1911. Pradipta Chaudhury, "Labour Migration from the United Provinces, 1881-1911," in *Studies in History* 8, no. 1 (1992), 14; Tinker, *New System of Slavery*, 52-59.

before arriving in Fiji. According to the contracts, men were paid at a rate of 1 shilling per day while women earned nine pence. After working in Fiji for five years, indentured laborers could then return to India at their own expense, or if they stayed 10 years, the government would pay for their return.[7] For most South Asians, the experience fulfilling the *girmit* was one of hardship.

What has occupied numerous scholars, such as Brij Lal and many others, is the discrepancy "between what was promised and the practice on the ground, between the rhetoric and the reality of contractual obligation."[8] Upon arriving in Fiji, the indentured laborers were assigned to different plantations. The pattern of distribution was usually to separate people from the same town so as to avoid possible uprisings, but keep families together. The first settlements were in Rewa and Navua in southeastern Viti Levu, and Ba and Rakiraki on the northwestern part of the island, but settlements spread along with the growth of the sugar cane fields. In the humid southeast, workers contracted diseases such as hookworm, dysentery, diarrhea, and anemic fever, but the plantation conditions throughout the island were miserable.[9]

The pay rates stipulated in the *girmit* were constantly chipped away by various fines and fees to keep the workers in debt. It was not until 1908, nearly thirty years after the first arrival of South Asian workers, that laborers would receive their full contractual wages regularly. The housing accommodations were deplorable and while both workers and employers agreed to the contract, only the workers would be punished criminally for breaking it. The result was a community of overworked and ill-treated laborers with little legal protections and recourses in the face of abuse. For women *girmitiyas*, it was doubly bad as they were also oppressed and abused by their fellow migrant workers in addition to European colonial officials and plantation

[7] Lal, "*Girmit*, History, Memory," 6.
[8] Lal, "*Girmit*, History, Memory," 6.
[9] Lal, "*Girmit*, History, Memory," 11.

owners.[10] As a result of unfair pay practices, very few *girmitiyas* had the money to pay for a return to India, which forced them to stay another five years as free laborers in "industrial residence" in order for the colonial government to sponsor the return voyage. After ten years however, many South Asians had developed roots in Fiji and opted to stay permanently. Eventually, the largest settlements of Indo-Fijians would emerge in western Viti Levu where more than 75% of the population would work in sugar and rice cultivation. The free migrants who arrived after 1904 tended to be Sikhs from the Punjab who also worked in the agricultural fields, or Gujaratis who worked more urban jobs.[11] As a result of colonial policies, these Indian communities grew separately from the Fijian communities.

The experiences of Totaram Sanadhya, a *girmitaya* who published an account of his time in Fiji, illustrate many of these aspects. Born in Firozabad outside of Agra in 1876, Sanadhya was duped into signing a *girmit* and whisked away to Fiji where he arrived in 1893 as an indentured laborer. During his five-year contract, Sanadhya endured backbreaking labor in the fields, lived in a dilapidated housing line with other laborers, and was forced to use his salary to purchase weekly rations and pay fines. By the time his contract ended, Sanadhya was in debt and could not return home to India. As a result, he was forced to spend at least another five years working as a free man in Fiji until the British colonial government would sponsor his return. Sanadhya ended up staying for a total of sixteen years past his contract and during this time he continued to farm and pursued a variety of other endeavors. Among his pursuits, Sanadhya enhanced his own religious knowledge and eventually built a position for himself as a

[10] Doug Munro, "In the Wake of the *Leonidas*: Reflections on Indo-Fijian Indenture Historiography," *Journal of Pacific Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005), 104.
[11] Lal, "*Girmit*, History, Memory," 22.

local Hindu *pandit* and advocated on behalf of his fellow Fiji Indians.[12] When he returned to India in 1914, Sanadhya published an account of his hardships in Fiji and pushed for an end of the indentured labor system. These efforts by Sanadhya to abolish the indenture system further link the experiences of those in Fiji to a wider movement that was spearheaded by Mohandas Gandhi and his colleagues.[13] Additionally, Sanadhya continued to work on behalf of emigrants who returned home and assisted them in re-establishing lives back in India.[14]

The accounts of Totaram Sanadhya provide personal insight into a system where it was possible for laborers from the countryside to be tricked into servitude across the seas by underhanded recruiters or *arkatis*.[15] While deception was certainly involved in some cases such as Sanadhya's, to apply such narratives across all of the South Asians who migrated abroad denies agency and individuality by framing the indenture experience in Fiji as that of "disposable cogs in the heartless wheel of a profit-driven plantation system."[16] In reality, while there was immense suffering, violence, and pain in the *girmit* experience, Brij Lal notes that it is possible to acknowledge hardship along with agency as evidenced even in the accounts of Sanadhya. Furthermore, since the plantation experience and hierarchy varied over time and place, to deny *girmitiyas* agency by painting them as helpless victims "does them and their legacy a grave injustice."[17] While the plantation experiences in Fiji were not the only ones for South Asians in the Pacific, they were by far the most common, as the numbers of Gujaratis and Punjabis who

[12] Totaram Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and the Story of the Haunted Line*, edited and translated by John Dunham Kelly and Uttra Kumari Singh (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1991).
[13] According to Mrinalini Sinah, this publication by Totaram Sanadhya played a critical role in the inauguration of mass politics toward abolition of indenture in India since it was the only published account of indentured labor by a laborer during the time period when the system was still in effect. Mrinalini Sinah, "Totaram Sanadhya's *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh*: A History of Empire and Nation in a Minor Key," in *Ten books that Shaped the British Empire*, edited by Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 170-172.
[14] Ibid., 186.
[15] Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*, 33-35.
[16] Lal, "*Girmit*, History, Memory," 4.
[17] Lal, "*Girmit*, History, Memory," 5.

traveled to New Zealand and Australia were far less, and did not include a written indenture agreement.[18]

This brief summary of the experiences of South Asians who migrated to the Pacific and worked as indentured laborers between 1874 and 1916 highlights the issues of coercion and agency, community formation, remuneration, repatriation, and hardships of labor in a far-off land. But South Asians were not the only groups of people to work under contracts during the late-nineteenth century, and Fiji was one of many destinations of contract laborers in the Pacific. Consequently, islander laborers wrestled with many of these same issues as they migrated through and pursued opportunities in a regional labor network.

Beginning in the late-eighteenth century, Pacific Islanders increasingly shipped out on Euroamerican ships in search of new opportunities and by the 1840s, were heavily involved in goldmining in North America and whaling fleets that traversed the Pacific.[19] By the end of the 1840s though, such migrations of Pacific Islanders in search of work and adventure shifted to plantation destinations. Between 1863 and 1914, there were over 100,000 islanders traveling to Queensland, Fiji, Samoa, Hawai‘i, and New Caledonia from the islands of the New Hebrides (present-day Vanuatu), the Solomon Islands, the Gilbert Islands (in present-day Kiribati), New Guinea, the Loyalty Islands, the Banks Islands, the Torres Islands, and other nearby island groups.[20]

These Pacific labor migrations can be split into roughly three main phases. The first phase ran from 1847 to 1860 with islanders from the southern New Hebrides and the Loyalty

[18] Jacqueline Leckie, “The Southernmost Indian Diaspora: From Gujarat to Aotearoa,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 21: 1 (1998), 165.
[19] For discussion of Pacific Islanders traveling abroad see David Chappell, *Double Ghosts: Oceanian Voyagers on Euroamerican Ships* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).
[20] Peter Corris, *Passage, Port, and Plantation: A History of Solomon Islands Labour Migrations, 1870-1914* (Melbourne University Press, 1973), 1.

Islands off the coast of New Caledonia migrating to Fiji, New Caledonia, and Queensland. For the most part, these were contracted, voluntary migrations where islanders were motivated by local tensions, the ability to gain material wealth, or the possibility to enhance social status. The conditions on these early plantations, while not as brutal as they'd later become, were enough to discourage many islanders from re-upping their contracts or recommending the work to friends and family without increased benefits.

The second phase from 1860-1880 then shifted to the northern New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands, where recruits began demanding better contracts after word of the hardships endured on the plantations spread, and in order to compete in local exchange networks with their trading partners to the south. This time period was also characterized by increased violence on the part of both recruiters and islanders. Such violence included the introduction of 'blackbirding' where unsuspecting islanders were abducted and brought to Queensland, or Peru in the case over 3600 Gilbertese, Niueans, Tongarevans (from the Cook Islands), and Rapanui.[21] In other instances, the crew of the *Young Australian* murdered three Solomon Islanders in 1865, while in 1871, the *Carl* kidnapped 161 islanders and later killed or wounded 70 people who fought back against their captors. This increased violence in the labor trade led to increased regulation on the part of the British Government in 1872, with the passage of the Pacific Islander Protection Bill. The legislation gave teeth to the 1868 Polynesian Labourers Act, requiring recruiters to be licensed, outlawed the coercion that had been running rampant, and assigned gunboats to patrol for any recruiting ships not in compliance. Though it was focused primarily on Queensland, it was amended in 1874 to include Fiji which provided the impetus for Indian labor there, although plenty of Gilbertese were still recruited to work in Fiji.

[21] For discussion of these slaving raids, see H. E. Maude, *Slavers in Paradise: The Peruvian Slave Trade in Polynesia, 1862-1864* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1981).

The third phase lasted from 1880 until 1911 as the newly established Western Pacific High Commission began regulating the labor trade in 1877. Once these reforms took effect, the focus of recruiting shifted entirely to the Solomon Islands for both Queensland and Fiji plantations. In the Hawaiian Islands, plantation owners began recruiting Gilbertese between 1877 and 1887 offered double the pay available in either Fiji or Queensland.[22] This led to roughly 2400 Gilbertese working on Hawaiian plantations, before their numbers were eclipsed by the import of Japanese laborers. There was also considerable difference in the experiences of Pacific Islanders. In New Caledonia, New Hebridean migrants tended to work as domestic servants or as watchmen, while in Fiji, Hawai'i, or Samoa, workers tended to be involved in the agricultural sector growing one or two crops (usually sugar, cotton, or copra). In Queensland however, there was mining, ranching, sugar, and wheat industries, and the unfree labor required to entice white investors in the sugar sector led to especially terrible working conditions.

Like the experiences for South Asians, the plantation work itself was filled with discrimination and violence, but the three-year contracts enabled Pacific Islanders to return home sooner than was even an option for their *girmitiya* counterparts. Laborers who signed contracts were both attracted to the idea of new places, but also driven from their homes due to internal pressures and colonial encroachment. Upon returning home, some parlayed their experience into enhanced local power and became powerful middle-men in negotiating with recruiters on behalf of others.

One example of a Pacific Islander who utilized this labor trade to enhance his own standing was Kwaisulia from northern Malaita in the Solomon Islands. Born in the 1850s, Kwaisulia was connected to a local chiefly family, but he himself had no formal status. As a

[22] Judith Bennett, "Immigration, 'Blackbirding', Labour Recruiting? The Hawaiian Experience, 1877-1887," in *Journal of Pacific History* 11, no. 1 (1976), 17.

result of his position, Kwaisulia opted to work on a plantation in Queensland beginning in 1875. Following the completion of a three-year contract, he then signed on for another term and over his six-year tenure working in Australia, Kwaisulia acquired not only the compensation detailed in his contract, but also language skills and knowledge of European practices.[23] Upon returning to the Solomon Islands, Kwaisulia then utilized his own experience to establish himself as an intermediary who assisted in labor recruiting and gained further access to trade goods and weapons, which then led to the expansion of his own personal authority.[24] For Kwaisulia, the labor trade in the Pacific presented an opportunity to enhance his own status in ways that would not have been otherwise available to a man of his position.[25]

Without denying the individual circumstances and abilities of both Kwaisulia and Totaram Sanadhya, their experiences illustrate nuance within the motivations, issues, and hardships that characterized contract labor in the Pacific. In my own classrooms, students have been quick to note many of the differences between the two cases, but see overarching connections between how Sanadhya and Kwaisulia dealt with the transnational world of contract labor. By using the experiences of Sanadhya and Kwaisulia as examples of how people negotiated and resisted broader colonial policies, it helps to humanize the workers who are so often reduced to faceless numbers in textbooks. While the mortality rate was slightly higher among South Asian workers in the region, nearly all the workers who signed or were coerced into contracts encountered a harsh workplace that awaited them abroad.[26] Within the

[23] Roger Keesing, "Kwaisulia as Culture Hero," in *History and Tradition in Melanesian Anthropology*, edited by James G. Carrier (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 174-175.
[24] Keesing, "Kwaisulia as Culture Hero," 176.
[25] Some accounts stretch the scope of Kwaisulia's power all the way to Queensland, where he was said to have intervened on behalf of island laborers accused of crimes. Corris, *Passage, Port, and Plantation,* 63.
[26] In all, the mortality rate for South Asians in this labor migration networks were slightly higher than for Pacific Islanders at 4/1000 to 3.6/1000. According to Ralph Shlomowitz, this is attributed mostly to the fact that islanders who survived their first contract occasionally signed up for second and third labor agreements as seasoned veterans

increasingly capitalist world of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it is essential to not lose sight of the hardships faced by those who did the actual work.

While the numbers of 100,000 Pacific Islanders and 60,000 South Asians who made up the labor network in the Pacific pale in comparison to the more than two million indentured labor migrants globally during this time period, the experiences do not. In such a harsh world of plantation work, with hundreds of deaths in Queensland and Fiji, and many others in Hawai‘i, Samoa, and New Caledonia, the physical and mental strain that accompanied these contracts linked the people of the Pacific to those of other regions who traversed transnational boundaries and utilized networks of travel to increase their own opportunities. In that way, the South Asian migrations to the Pacific, can help link the region to larger discussions of world history, and offer comparisons for considering the nature of plantation work.

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in order to acquire more wealth or prestige. Ralph Shlomowitz, “Mortality and the Pacific Labour Trade,” *Journal of Pacific History* 22, no. 1 (1987), 41.

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