

*International Conference of ODI on
'A Century of Abolition of Indentureship of Indian Diasporas: Historic Struggles of
Girmitiyas and Contemporary Engagement Options for India'
20-21, March 2018 at New Delhi*

Concept Note

The sun never sets on Indian Diasporas. Bulk of this Diasporas from India went during the 19th and early 20th century as indentured workers. Different colonial powers were competing to recruit and to get a larger number of these workers. Indian indentured workers were the most competent and experienced workers for the agricultural works like cane cutting and rubber, tea and coffee plantations etc. They called themselves as *Girmitiya*- a distortion of word "agreement" in Bhojpuri. They were recruited to replace the slave workers once the slavery was abolished. As indentured cane cutters and plantation workers, the European, Sumatran, Malays, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans had failed as indentured workers in the initial attempts. Different colonial powers entered into an agreement with Britain to get a share of recruitment of Indian Indentured workers. In spite of their high demands, since they were recruited to replace the slave workers, the condition in which they were kept, the way they were treated, exploited and harassed were no better than slaves. The subjugated colonized conditions and oppressive socio-economic situations in India at that point of time were also bad. These oppressive conditions in India did not help in discontinuing the recruitment of indentured workers despite the news of their ill treatment and exploitation reaching India. The growing national sentiment and the political consciousness under Indian National Congress (INC) started highlighting their issues. INC leaders were petitioning the colonial government and slowly started agitating on their mistreatment. Simultaneously, indentured workers in different colonies where they were taken to also started protesting and agitating against their exploitation and harassment. Many of them returned back to India. Their protests, trials and tribulations in different colonies and their growing opposition to indentured system demanded better and more humane treatment of indentured workers. Subsequently they demanded complete abolition of this humiliating and exploitative system. There are good number of literatures on these struggles in host countries as well as in India. However, it's narrative depicts Indian workers only as helpless, poverty stricken Indians being taken to new places for a better economic opportunity. There is a missing perspective to look at these indentured workers as highly sought after, skilled professionals recruited to sustain and propel the backbone of the colonial economy which was plantation. The narrative of struggles of Indian indentured workers and the protest and agitations of Indian nationalist formations against continuation of this system need a relook.

What enabled the Indentured Indians to grow out of this oppressive condition was their cultural and civilizational strength, in combination with their skill and respect for agricultural works. Over the last five generations, these struggles and their hard works, enabled them to rise in the socio-economic and political ladder of their respective societies. While growing in these areas, they also contributed enormously to the

countries of their adoption. Their contributions are again inadequately studied academic subject.

The engagement of India with Indian overseas after Indian independence and under cold war period, had gone dormant under Nehruvian socialism. The cultural religious links remained largely confined to non-government organisations like Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. The Indian state links with Indian diaspora were revived and got boosted with the advent of globalization and nationalist government in India led by Bharatiya Janata Party. By this time Indian diasporas had also surfaced as economically and professionally affluent section of global society. The initial U turn of Indian Diaspora policy aiming to proactively link Diasporas, under Bharatiya Janata Party government, was in the context of economic crisis which India was facing. Such a initial context led to a skewed policy for economic connect with resourceful and dollar rich Indian Diasporas. They were not indentured Diasporas but a recent professionals and skilled Migrants to the West and North America. The advent of a strong majority BJP government under Narendra Modi has corrected this distortion by replacing yearly PBD to bi monthly PBD every alternate year which focuses and systematically dialogues with indentured Diaspora of India also. India has gradually realized that Girmitiya diaspora gives India the depth and spread of global connect. It realizes that Indian indentured workers despite a century of abolition of Indentureship has been able to retain its Indian civilizational identity, the cultural and diplomatic connect of India with fourth and fifth generation of Indian indenture diaspora needs to be forcefully augmented

To mark the closing of a yearlong celebration of the abolition of indentureship and to reemphasize the need for cultural connect with Girmitiya Diasporas, it is proposed to organize an international conference on '*A Century of Abolition of Indentureship of Indian Diaspora: Historic Struggles of Girmitiyas and Contemporary Engagement Options for India*' on the 20 to 21st of March 2018, New Delhi. With this background the proposed conference would focus on, though not confined to, the following sub-themes:

1. Indenture System and Indian Diasporas
2. Indian Indentured Diasporas: Their Exploitation and Struggles
3. Indian Indentured Diasporas: Movements for its Abolition in Different Parts of the World.
4. Indian Indentured Diasporas: The New Face and Achievements of Girmitiya.
5. Indian Diaspora Engagement policy: Historical Perspective and Role of India in Abolition of Indentureship
6. Indian Girmitiya Diaspora: Contemporary Indian Government Policies and Options for Cultural Connect.