Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire

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Published by Duke University Press

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Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons.

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Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh (My Twenty-One Years in Fiji), a slim Hindi-language book by Totaram Sanadhya (1876–1948), is not a major publication. Published in November 1914 by an obscure Hindi-language press in Firozabad in Agra district, in the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh (U.P.), the book did for a time enjoy some success. By 1916, for example, it was already in its third edition, and it had also been published in four Gujarati translations, two Bengali, one Marathi, and one Urdu. The vibrant Indian-language press as well as some of the Indian-owned English-language newspapers in India reported favorably on the book. Sanadhya’s “shudra pustak” (humble book), as he put it, even managed to garner a brief mention in the corridors of power at the India Office and the Colonial Office in London. Yet the fact that until 1991 the book was not published in an English-language translation—an acid test for any claim to empire-wide significance—is a reminder of its parochial reputation. The “minor” status of the book, however, is in itself deserving of attention: it illuminates an important, albeit inassimilable, moment—an interregnum between the Age of Empires and the Age of Nations—in the political history of the twentieth century.
The book appeared approximately midway into a political campaign in India to end the notorious system that deployed Indian indentured labor overseas. The British government, ever since the abolition of Atlantic slavery, had been drawn into coordinating an elaborate system of recruitment and transportation of labor from India to colonial plantations overseas, replacing emancipated Africans with indentured Indians, in order to safeguard a continued supply of cheap labor. The system, from its inception, was beleaguered by criticisms and was subject throughout its existence to various reforms to check some of its grossest abuses. On the eve of World War I, however, the working of the entire system had come under serious attack in a concerted campaign in India for the abolition of indentured emigration. Sanadhya’s firsthand account of the indentured system in Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh was a salvo in the anti-indenture movement or what has been called the “second abolition,” following the abolition of Atlantic slavery.

The abolition of indenture, with the stopping of recruitment in 1917 and the commutation of the last indenture contracts in Fiji in 1920, was a significant break in the typical pattern of reforms in the British Empire: it was spurred by Indian political agitation and was the product of a shift in Indian, and not British, public opinion. The fate of the system, indeed, was decided in “dependent India, and not in metropolitan Britain.” The British government and the British public, despite the belated and weak-kneed interventions of the once redoubtable Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protections Society in London, were slow to join in the abolitionist fervor; hence this time the British Empire was robbed of the moral redemption it had once claimed on the basis of Britain’s leading role in the abolition of Atlantic slavery.

Anti-indenture sentiment in India was initially a by-product of M. K. Gandhi’s various campaigns in South Africa, most notably by the 1913 strike of indentured workers in Natal, but it soon became the subject of a political mobilization of its own. Just as South Africa had dominated discussions in India about the general condition of Indians overseas, Fiji—the last of the British colonies to still remain substantially dependent on the export of Indian labor—featured prominently in the debate about indenture in particular. This shift, moreover, was not just geographical: it entailed also the widening, and deepening, of what had hitherto constituted Indian public opinion.

The abolition movement may have started out as a “sentimental” affair, and for colonial officials this always remained the essence of the movement,
which they saw as reflecting nothing more than the desire of Indian politicians to redeem national “honor” from the stigma of racial inferiority. But the movement evolved quickly, albeit unevenly, into a much broader popular movement centered squarely on the plight of exploited workers themselves. Beneath the radar of high-profile political speeches, conferences, and resolutions against indenture was a simmering popular movement that was capturing small towns and villages across northern India, especially in the western districts of Bihar and in the U.P., which by the early twentieth century had become the primary catchment area for overseas recruits under indenture. Sanadhya’s “minor” publication stands as a testimony to this important, but unevenly digested, dimension of the movement.

*Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh* was not the first book in India to publicize widely the condition of indentured workers overseas, nor was it the book whose presumably incontrovertible revelations laid to rest the possibility of the system’s continuation. These honors belong, arguably, to the English-language texts penned by three lieutenants of Gandhi: *The Indians of South Africa: Helots within the Empire and How They Are Treated* (1909), by Henry S. L. Polak, and *Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji* (1916), by Reverend Charles F. Andrews and W. W. Pearson.6 The importance of *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh* lies elsewhere: in bringing into focus the expansive contours of the first—predating the more famous Gandhian campaigns by a few years—village-based mass movement in India on an all-India issue. And at stake in its minor status, then, is precisely the meaning of this inaugural moment of mass politics.

Sanadhya’s combined personal and collective record of the life of indentured and time-expired (ex-indentured) workers from India in Fiji—what we might today call a testimonio—written in simple and idiomatic Hindi is especially suited to reveal the historic role of this abolition movement. The immediacy and urgency of the many personal stories in *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh* notwithstanding, the book did more than simply add firsthand testimony of indenture to the public debate. Even before Sanadhya’s book, individual stories of indentured workers had already entered into the public discussion of indenture. Polak’s 1909 book, even though its primary aim was to publicize Gandhi’s South African campaign, had alerted the Indian public to the injustice of the system with heartrending individual stories of indentured workers. By 1912, when the Indian politician G. K. Gokhale moved the first resolution for the abolition of indenture in the Legislative Council in India, the speeches in support of the resolution testified that
the Indian political class had become sufficiently educated on the particular problems arising out of the indentured system. This was a far cry from just a few years before, when vague sentimental expressions about indenture were still the norm. The anti-indenture cause, even before Sanadhya’s publication, had begun to move out of the shadow of Gandhi’s South African campaigns, and the general problem of racial discrimination faced by Indians in the Dominions or the colonies of “white” settlement, to focus squarely on the issues arising out of the operation of the indentured system itself.

Many of the general contours of the anti-indenture arguments in Sanadhya’s book, moreover, would have been familiar in the proabolition circles in India: the seduction (bahakana) of ill-informed villagers by the unscrupulous practices of the unlicensed recruiters or arkatis; the breakdown of the social customs and prejudices, including the religious practices, of the recruits in the emigration depots and on the long ocean voyages to the colonies; the exploitation as well as the atrocities and injustices experienced by the workers (kasht) on the plantations; the inadequate facilities for medical care and education of Indians in the colonies; and the alarmingly high murder and suicide rates among the indentured population, especially in Fiji. Even the theme for which the book became most noted—the sexual abuse of women, which according to Sanadhya was inherent in the working of the system itself—was anticipated in the few sensational reports from Fiji (for at least one of which Sanadhya was responsible) that were published in proabolition Hindi-language papers, for example the Bharat Mitra of Calcutta. This theme, which brought country-wide public meetings of women to join the national debate on indenture, became the special burden of that other indefatigable anti-indenture activist: Charles Freer Andrews. Its fullest articulation, albeit with more of a patriarchal bias (arising out of his overwhelming concern with sexual immorality), was found in Andrews’s writings, which followed and expanded on Sanadhya’s lead. More, perhaps, than adding any new content to the anti-indenture argument, therefore, Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh is notable simply for what it was: a printed book about the indenture experience told from the perspective of one who had served his time under indenture. In the canon of Indian abolitionist literature, indeed, Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh stands out: it was the first and only book about indenture authored by a person who had himself served under indenture to be published during the lifetime of the system itself.

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Even though analogies to the abolition of Atlantic slavery abounded in the anti-indenture movement, including the formation of several Anti-Indenture Emigration Leagues and Indentured Coolie Protection Societies, the genre of the “slave narrative” does not seem to have translated in contemporary discussions of *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh*. The idea for Sanadhya’s book was born almost by serendipity. It had its origins in Firozabad at the Hindi Pustakalaya (library), one of a growing number of public libraries in small towns and villages across India, established by the Bharati Bhavan, an institution associated with the nineteenth-century Hindu reformist-nationalist organization the Arya Samaj. On 15 June 1914, the Bhavan manager at the library, Lala Chiranji Lal Jain, introduced Sanadhya, freshly returned from Fiji to his village, Hirangai, near Firozabad, to an as-yet-unknown government schoolteacher and aspiring journalist, Benarsidas Chaturvedi. Having read Sanadhya’s writings in some of the leading Hindi newspapers of the time, such as the *Bharat Mitra* of Calcutta and the *Sri Venkateshwara Samachar* of Bombay, Chaturvedi recommended that Sanadhya publish his experiences in a printed book. When Sanadhya, uncertain of his literary skills, demurred, Chaturvedi volunteered to be his amanuensis for what became *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh*. This was the start of a close collaboration between the two on the concerns of Indians overseas, first with Andrews at Shantiniketan in Bengal and then with Gandhi at his ashram in Sabarmati, Gujarat.

Although Sanadhya apparently spoke, according to an acquaintance who spent time with him at that ashram, in a “theth dehati Hindi” or very rustic Hindi, his authorship of a book written in a more standard modern Hindi seems to have gone largely unremarked in the Indian press. The first three editions of *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh*, which were published during Sanadhya’s lifetime, carried only his name as the author. In the fourth edition of the book, published in 1973, Chaturvedi was listed as the publisher of the book and as the author of a new introduction and preface that told the story of their collaboration. He insisted that Sanadhya had had “nin-yanve feesdi shey” (99 percent share) in the writing of the book and that his own contribution consisted chiefly in arranging sections of the book and in “dressing up the language.” His reason for remaining anonymous, he explained, was because at the time he had a job as a teacher at a government school that might have been jeopardized through his association with the book.
Nonetheless, as if responding to the public’s curiosity about Sanadhya, the second edition of the book of 1915 did include an interesting note about the author from the publisher, identified in the text simply as “a member of Bharati Bhavan,” though one Madhuri Prasad of the Bharati Bhavan was listed as the official publisher of the book.  

The note assured readers that Sanadhya was neither, as some seemed to believe, nothing but a “coolie,” nor some great man. He was, the publisher insisted, just an “aam admi” (common man), who could read and write in Hindi; was a student of the Fijian language; and had a little broken English. In a nod to his collaboration with Chaturvedi, perhaps, the note added that Sanadhya needed to rely on the help of others for Hindi–English translations. The publisher’s note went on to acknowledge this “common man” as a “great patriot” and detailed his work for the anti-indenture cause both in Fiji and, since his return, in India. Only the Special Branch of the Police of the Government of the U.P. in 1915 seemed to give much attention to the existence of Sanadhya’s possible collaborator.  

The existence of a collaborator, and the possible identity of such a person, had the U.P. government stumped, but these questions were apparently of less concern to the audience for Sanadhya’s book.  

The extant editions of the book bear a few traces of the Sanadhya-Chaturvedi collaboration. Consider the following example. The book occasionally uses the term girmit, a neologism made popular by indentured workers from Bihar and the U.P. to refer to the English word “agreement,” referring to the contract to which workers supposedly gave their informed consent before embarking for work in the colonies. Likewise, the term girmitiya (or “people of the girmit”)—what one scholar has identified as an early example of a critical self-appellation adopted by a subordinated and stigmatized people—appears a few times in Sanadhya’s text.  

The Indian audience of Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh might have been expected to respond to the neologisms girmit and girmitiya—especially popular in Fiji—in much the same manner, perhaps, as did Gandhi when he first encountered the terms in Natal: as merely a “corrupt form of the English word ‘agreement.’” More often, therefore, the text uses the more standard terms shartname (contract) and shartbandhe mazdoor (bonded/bound workers). By the
same token, Fiji Hindi, a lingua franca for the Indians on the islands that was made up largely of Awadhi and Bhojpuri, representing the regions in northern India whence the majority of the Indians came, and interspersed with borrowings from several South Indian languages as well as from English and Fijian, does not otherwise seem to have left a mark on the text. Sanadhya’s influence on the language of the text was most evident, perhaps, in the book’s eschewal of the hated term “coolie” as a supposedly neutral descriptor for indentured workers.

Sanadhya’s book pointed to the interjection of new concerns and, even more, of new voices in the national debate about indenture: that is, a growing recognition of the aam admi, or the “common person,” as it were, as both the subjects and the objects of the movement. The entire genre of working-class autobiographies and memoirs that scholars are discovering from the 1920s and 1930s in India, in a sense, might be considered the heirs of Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh. When the Gandhian socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan visited the Firozabad Bharati Bhavan in 1963, he wrote in the visitor’s book that he was grateful to the institution for publishing Sanadhya’s book, which had a major impact on him as a young student in Bihar. Indeed, the Firozabad Bharati Bhavan had the honor of providing the abolition movement in India with a text that was, perhaps, the closest thing to the “slave narratives” made famous during the movement for the abolition of Atlantic slavery.

The novelty of Sanadhya’s book—a printed book by an ex–indentured worker—was a product of the “democratization of print” in late colonial India. Sanadhya, an impoverished Brahmin by caste, although listed in his emigration pass as of the Thakur (a Kshatriya) caste (a deceit resorted to commonly because recruiters were expressly discouraged from recruiting Brahmins, who were considered allegedly unfit for the rigors of agricultural work on the plantations), was no stranger to the world of print. Before leaving for Fiji as an indentured laborer at the age of seventeen, he had received a limited education in Hindi at the Hiraungi Patshala (village school), which would not have been unusual, especially after Charles Wood’s Education Dispatch of 1854, which had redirected the attention of the Government of India toward primary and secondary education in the “vernacular” languages. For the most part, however, Sanadhya was self-taught in Fiji. While still under indenture, for example, he had worked out a mutually profitable arrangement with a European shopkeeper on the plantation for exporting books from India that were in demand among the Indians of Fiji.
These were mainly religious and other popular romances that were mass produced, at least since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, for an expanding market by large Indian-owned Hindi presses such as the Nawal Kishore Press in Lucknow and the Sri Venkateshwar Press in Bombay. These books, though available only in limited numbers of copies on the various plantations in the islands, were rented out to readers—one book, according to Sanadhya, rented for 2 rupees with an initial deposit of 10 rupees—and were typically part of a collective or shared reading experience: books were read aloud at public gatherings on both ordinary and special occasions. Sanadhya’s self-study in Fiji helped in his transformation into a “pundit” (learned man), a sobriquet associated with him ever afterward. Yet in Fiji Sanadhya would have had no precedent for considering the printed book a suitable vehicle for narrating the lives of ordinary indentured laborers or as a medium that could be used by a person with his limited literary skills.

Indian newspapers, which covered “any printed, including cyclostyled, periodical work containing public news, or comment on public news,” and which were available in Fiji, were a different matter. The readers and listeners—for newspapers too were read aloud to people who could not read—of Indian newspapers in Fiji kept abreast of the raging public debates over indenture. Gandhi’s campaigns in South Africa, duly covered in the Indian press, especially caught the imagination of Indians in Fiji. Indians from different parts of the islands raised funds for the South African struggle, collecting a total of 40 pounds (600 rupees) to send to Gandhi. Sanadhya’s own first appearance in print under his own name was probably in Gandhi’s paper in South Africa, the Indian Opinion (1904). The paper published a letter from Sanadhya on behalf of the recently formed (1911) British Indian Association of Fiji requesting Gandhi to send an Indian barrister to Fiji who would fight for justice for the indentured workers. Sanadhya’s call in the Indian Opinion was answered by Manilal Maganlal Doctor, a Gujarati barrister like Gandhi, who on Gandhi’s advice had set up his practice in Mauritius in 1907 to provide legal aid to the Indians on the plantations. Manilal (who changed his name to Doctor Manilal sometime after his arrival in Fiji in 1912) had followed Gandhi’s lead, starting a trilingual newspaper in English, Hindi, and French, published from Port Louis in Mauritius, called the Hindusthani (1909), which he used to publicize his own anti-indenture activism. In Fiji, Manilal started in 1913 what was perhaps Fiji’s first Hindi paper, a cyclostyled sheet that became a precursor for the
English-language *Indian Settler*, which he launched in 1917.\textsuperscript{21} Such precedents would likely have influenced Sanadhya, who in his own apotheosis as anti-indenture activist and publicist was quick to make use of newspapers to publicize stories of, by, and for indentured workers.

The Calcutta-based *Bharat Mitra* offered an early example. The paper, with a circulation of four thousand and a distribution that extended beyond Calcutta, was one of the more popular Indian papers in Fiji because of, as Sanadhya recalled, its consistent coverage of the situation of Indians in Fiji. The paper had close connections to the Marwari Association of Calcutta, which had been active since 1912 in the anti-indenture cause, rescuing and providing assistance to recruits lured into the emigration depots in Calcutta before embarkation for the plantations overseas.\textsuperscript{22} Between October and November 1913, the paper began publishing a series of sworn statements from emigrants returned from several places, including Fiji, Trinidad, and British Guiana, that provided personal testimonies of men and women tricked into indentured service. The *Bharat Mitra* had also published accounts by Ram Narain Sharma, an Indian barrister from Georgetown, British Guiana, about the legal difficulties of indentured workers there.\textsuperscript{23} The paper was thus an obvious choice for Sanadhya and Ram Manoharanand Saraswati, an Arya Samaj activist who had recently arrived in Fiji, for publicizing the situation of Indians in Fiji. These two, as subsequent investigations by the Fiji government suggested, were probably responsible for the famous letter, purportedly written by Kunti, identified as a low-caste Chamar woman originally from Gorakhpur district in the U.P., that was published in the 8 May 1913 issue of the *Bharat Mitra*.\textsuperscript{24} The letter helped publicize in India the story of the attempted sexual assault on Kunti by a white overseer on a plantation in Nadewa, Fiji.

When Sanadhya left Fiji in 1914, with the avowed aim of taking his struggle to the small towns and villages in India, he was exposed to the connections that existed between Hindi newspapers and the Hindi book industry. The spread of vernacular education combined with the Hindi-language movement—a movement for the promotion of the Devnagiri or Nagri script as the common script for the majority of the Indian languages and consequently of Hindi written in the Nagri script as the *rashtra bhasha* (national language)—had produced a vibrant Hindi print culture in India.\textsuperscript{25} Ambikaprasad Vajpeyi, the coeditor of the *Bharat Mitra*, a paper that was unusual among Indian-language newspapers in paying its editors a steady salary and employing its own stable of reporters, gave Sanadhya access to
the Hindi press, including some of the leading papers other than his own, to publicize his stories. By contrast, the world of the Firozabad Bharati Bhavan in the U.P. was more circumscribed and provincial. However, it had access to the numerous small printing presses in the province that had become the heartland of the Hindi movement. These presses, whose proliferation owed much to the introduction of cheap lithographic technology, depended for their survival on diversification, including the printing of newspapers, forms, leaflets, posters, and cheap printed books in Hindi and Urdu, as well as contracting out for occasional job work. The Hindi print-world in the U.P. was thus primed to provide the abolition movement with a cheap printed book about the conditions of indenture in Fiji.

Sanadhya's book was created when he on Chaturvedi's invitation spent fifteen days in Chaturvedi's house telling him his stories from Fiji while Chaturvedi wrote them all down and produced a handwritten manuscript that was longer than the published text of Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh. The book was published by the Firozabad Bharati Bhavan as the second work in its Bharati Granth Mala Series (Bharati Book Series). It was printed at Kunvar Hanuvant Singh Raghuvansa's Rajput Anglo-Oriental Press, a printing press in nearby Agra, an urban center with a long history of printing presses. This press, which was associated with the Kshatriya Upkarni Maha Sabha (Society for the Welfare of Kshatriyas), counted among its members several large landowners (zamindars), as well as maharajas, from all across India. It published books in English, Hindi, and Urdu, as well as two Hindi newspapers: the bimonthly Rajput (circulation eighteen hundred) and the monthly Swadesh Bandhwa (five hundred).

Even though often there was not a distinction between the publisher and the printer, in the case of Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh this distinction, presumably because the Firozabad Bharati Bhavan did not have a press of its own, was especially useful. Chaturvedi, anticipating a government search for the manuscript at the premises of the Bharati Bhavan, instructed one of the workers at the Bhavan to take the original manuscript to Hanuvant Singh at the press for safekeeping, probably in the belief that the press, with its connections to a class of socially prominent Indians, would be protected from official harassment. By the terms of the new Press Act of 1910, enacted in the wake of the upsurge of anticolonial revolutionary activism provoked by the government’s unpopular decision to partition Bengal in 1905, the local governments were empowered to proscribe objectionable printed material without having to go through the courts. The U.P. government, however,
found nothing that was either seditious or obscene in Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh and did not proscribe the book, a point that was widely used in the Indian-language press to argue that even the government could not come up with anything to controvert Sanadhya’s revelations.30

The Firozabad Bharati Bhavan had one thousand copies of the book printed in 1914, a fairly impressive print run for a noneducational and non-religious title, and priced it at 6 annas each.31 All the copies of the book were presumably sold within the year: even the U.P. government by the end of the year was unable to procure a second copy of the book. There is, to the best of my knowledge, no extant copy of this first edition of the book in any of the major libraries around the world. In October 1915, the Bharati Bhavan published a second edition of Sanadhya’s book, at the price of 1 rupee, and, relieved from the fear of official harassment, had it printed this time at an even more obscure press, the Onkar Press in Allahabad. The second edition, with a print run of two thousand copies, appeared under a slightly revised title, Fiji Dweep Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh (My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands), which was the title used in all subsequent editions of the book, since they all came to rely on this edition.32 The second edition presumably differed from the first only in the slight change in the title and in the additions of a note from the publisher and a brief preface by Sanadhya.

Sanadhya’s preface foregrounds the cooperation in the Indian-language media on abolition that catapulted a Hindi-language book to all-India attention. Sanadhya lists by name several Indian-language newspapers across the country that helped in more ways than just publicizing the book. The staff of several newspapers, as in the case of Shri Sitakant, the chief editor of the Marathi-language paper Lokmitra (Khanapur, Belgaum), volunteered to translate Sanadhya’s book into other Indian languages; even more, they also helped the book financially. Sanadhya thanks them for enabling him to distribute four hundred free copies of his book at the annual meetings of the Indian National Congress in Madras and of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan (Hindi Literature Conference) at Lucknow and, more important, at the Maha Kumbh Mela (fair) in Haridwar in 1915. This particular fair, held every twelve years, and which that year was also attended by Gandhi, himself newly returned from South Africa, inevitably drew the attention of the government, not just because of the enormous crowds that gathered at the fairs but also because the fairs, ever since the early advent of print in India, had been popular for the distribution of printed propaganda.33 Because of its presence at the Kumbh Mela, Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh, unlike the case
of its earlier, more routine examination conducted by the U.P. government, which was entrusted with the task of examining all the books published in the province under the Press and Registration of Books Act XXV of 1867, now drew the attention of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Government of India in Delhi. The CID inquiry into the book, however, managed to slip through the cracks in the exchanges between the two governments, an indication, perhaps, that *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh* did not quite rise to a level to engage the full attention of the authorities.

*Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh* largely fell below the radar of concerted official scrutiny, and after its initial honeymoon it received only intermittent mention even in those English-language papers most noted for their consistent attention to the anti-indenture cause. However, as testimony to a movement whose existence did not depend only on the English-reading public, the book continued to have a vibrant presence in the Indian-language press, especially in the U.P. A third edition—the last edition before the final legal vestiges of indenture were abolished in 1920—was published in 1916 by the Pratap Pustakalay (Pratap Book Publishing Company) of Kanpur, which published the popular Hindi weekly the *Pratap* (1913). The founder-editor and principal writer of *Pratap*, Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi, and the “keeper of the press,” Shivnarain Misra, were widely respected both by the public (as evidenced by the fact that the circulation of *Pratap* jumped from the inaugural five hundred in 1913 to six thousand by 1916) and, more grudgingly, by the government monitors.

With the new Pratap edition, Sanadhya’s book entered the circles of the more explicitly antigovernment politics associated with the Home Rule Leagues and the revolutionaries spawned by the antipartition movement of 1905. While copyright laws, introduced in India in 1847, operated more in the breach, with piracy and unlicensed reprints of popular books not uncommon, Sanadhya was probably himself involved in the Pratap Pustakalaya edition of his book. Vidyarthi and his paper were early converts to the abolition cause, publishing articles and letters against the system, including a controversial article by Sanadhya in its 16 August 1915 issue. The article, in a reprise of the story of Kunti published in the *Bharat Mitra*, was this time about a Muslim woman, Bachi, the wife of a man named Mohammed Beg in Fiji, who had sent Sanadhya a written declaration accusing Mr. Stafford, of the Vunisei plantation in Rewa, of raping her. The publisher’s note in the third edition, moreover, acknowledged the earlier editions by the Firozabad Bharati Bhan and explained that the decision had been made to produce a new edition.
because, beyond lip service, the government had done nothing as yet to actually abolish the conditions of which the book had written. The Pratap edition, with a print run of two thousand and the backing of a completely committed publisher, was meant to keep up the pressure of public opinion for abolition.

This edition was the twenty-first book to be published in the Pratap Granth Mala (Pratap Book Series), a series of works that the company’s editors considered most important. Some of the other books in Hindi published in the series reflected the eclectic political bent of the series: they included Gandhi’s account of his jail experiences in South Africa, a history of the Indian National Congress, an account of the movement for Swarajya (self-rule) in India, a book on Irish Home Rule and another on the question of the national ("mother-tongue") language in Ireland, a book on secret political societies in Russia, a collection of German spy stories, and a world history of battles. The “Granth Mala” was apparently a relatively recent innovation of the Pratap Press, which relied on a membership system whereby members paid an entry fee of 2 rupees and became entitled to receive new titles in the series, as well as any of the earlier titles, at a discounted rate. While members could choose any book they wished to buy from the previous titles, they were not given this option with the new titles in the series, which were shipped to them after a week’s notification. This arrangement probably provided some stability for a press that was constantly financially strapped and survived through the sheer determination of Vidyarthi and of a loyal following of readers and of fellow newspaper editors.

The Pratap Press, after Sanadhya’s book, went on to publish several compilations of material in Hindi against indenture, and Vidyarthi subsequently became an important champion of the cause of peasants and workers. He opened the columns of his paper to writings on and from striking mill workers in Kanpur; was a critic of the forced labor system in the Kumaun region of the U.P.; and was an early supporter of the cultivators on the indigo plantations in Champaran, Bihar. His engagement with Sanadhya’s book, indeed, came at the start of a self-conscious effort on his part, and on that of his press, to reflect and represent a more expansive understanding of what hitherto had constituted the Indian public: a sadharan samaj (ordinary public). Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh as the product of, and catalyst for, this expanded world of print in India thus appeared sufficiently ordinary to warrant little commentary on the novelty of its intervention.

The desire to reach an expanded public meant that Sanadhya’s book necessarily spilled over the boundaries of a discrete printed text. The book was
part of an assemblage that included both written and spoken words, as well as direct action aimed at paralyzing the indenture system. It included, in addition to a legal strategy aimed at rescuing potential recruits from the emigration depots with help from junior Indian officials in the courts and in the police, a campaign of direct propaganda among the people. Sanadhya, as the Agra representative of the Anti-Indenture League of Calcutta, an organization affiliated with the Marwari Association of Calcutta, was part of a network of ambulating village activists in north India who gave public talks and distributed leaflets against indenture in market centers in small towns and villages, as well as on railway carriages that carried potential recruits to the emigration depots in Calcutta. Sanadhya’s debut as a public speaker in India was in the more august circumstances of the annual session of the Indian National Congress in Madras in December 1914, which he attended as a delegate of the Indians in Fiji, who had paid his expenses to get there. Extending the five minutes initially allotted him to speak from the Congress platform to a full half hour, Sanadhya tried to interest a public that was distracted by other political priorities and largely content with the rumors of official sympathy for abolition. Henceforth Sanadhya concentrated his energies, and used his personal finances, to prevent recruitment for indenture at its source. He spent twelve days at the Maha Kumbh Mela, where apart from distributing his book, he gave talks and distributed leaflets warning people about the actual conditions of indenture. The Abhyudaya Press of Allahabad, which published the popular Hindi weekly Abhyudaya, published Sanadhya’s speeches in 1915 in the form of a tract appropriately titled Kuli-Pratha (The Coolie [Indentured] System).

The work of Sanadhya, and other itinerant activists, through talks and leaflets, was making a sufficient impact for the colonial officer in charge of recruitment in Benares, A. Marsden, to lodge a formal complaint to the Colonial Office about the difficulties created for his recruiters in filling their quota for colonial recruitment. A translation of a sample leaflet in Hindi found in Muzaffarpur in Bihar, under the name of a Puroshottam Das, and with twenty thousand copies printed at the Narayan Press of Muzaffarpur, reads as follows:

**ESCAPE FROM DECEIVERS**

Escape from the Depot People
Beware! Beware! Beware!
*It is not service. It is woe.*

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Do not fall into their snare.
They will ruin you
You will weep your life along
Instead of rupees, rubbish will fall (on you).

They are taking you across the sea! To Mauritius, to Demerara,
to Fiji, to Jamaica, to Trinidad, to Honduras.

They are not islands; they are hell

The leaflet concluded by requesting “anyone who wishes, [to] ask for this
notice free of charge.” Another leaflet, after the common references to in-
denture as gulami or slavery and to the colonies as jails, ended by invit-
ing people who wished to learn more about the evils of indenture to read
Sanadhya’s book on Fiji.45 The similarities in the texts of leaflets found in
several places across the recruiting districts suggest some degree of coordi-
nation, perhaps by the Anti-Indenture League of Calcutta with its branches
in Agra, Allahabad, and several other towns across northern India.

The leaflets—with the names, duly noted by law, of their publishers and
of the presses where they were printed, which included small printing presses
in places such as Muzaffarpur in Bihar and Allahabad in the U.P., as well as
the better-known Arya Samaj presses in Delhi—seemed almost to taunt the
government to take action. But the Government of India, which was largely
sympathetic to the anti-indenture movement, was content to leave Mars-
den and the Colonial Office to initiate any legal proceedings. The danger for
Marsden in prosecuting the anti-indenture activists was that it would make
recruitment more difficult at a time when recruits were already becoming
difficult to find. The activities of only some of the village-level activists mer-
ited the government’s attention; for example, the Arya Samajist Satya Dev,
who had returned from the United States and who operated in the districts
of Patna, Darbhanga, and Muzaffarpur in Bihar and was suspected by the U.P.
government, because of his U.S. education, as the possible collaborator on
Sanadhya’s book. The Government of Bihar and Orissa warned the district
magistrates and the superintendents of police in the province against this
“dangerous agitator,” inasmuch as his proselytizing against indenture some-
times spilled over into direct criticism of the government. He walked through
villages giving public talks that, according to one police report, drew atten-
tion to the “sorry condition of black races all over the world.”46

Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh also inspired several creative literary endeav-
ors. Sanadhya, who is credited with having organized Fiji’s first Ramlila (a
popular performance of the life of Lord Ram drawn from the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*), recognized the potential of the Ramlila for popularizing his book in India. He volunteered to put up a public performance, based on his book, at the annual Ramlila in Agra in 1915. Even though Sanadhya was not ready in time, the idea for converting the book into a play apparently took hold. Lakshman Singh, the husband of the Hindi littérateur Subhadra Kumari Chauhan and an accomplished Hindi writer in his own right, wrote a play, *Kuli-Pratha arthat Biswi Shatabdi Gulami* (The Indentured System: A Twentieth-Century Slavery), based loosely on Kunti’s story from *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh*.

The Pratap Press published the play in 1916. The play, with its overtly antigovernment stand, was proscribed by the U.P government, which also forfeited, and raised the amount of, the deposit demanded from the press. The Pratap Relief Fund, subscribed to by readers and by other Indian newspapers, managed to rescue the press financially. The play itself went on to acquire further notoriety when a group of young revolutionaries from Mainpuri in the U.P. decided, in an act of defiance, to sell publications proscribed by the U.P. government at the 1917 annual session of the Indian National Congress in Delhi. The U.P. government responded swiftly by seizing all the publications and issued a warrant for the arrest of these young men, at least some of whom managed to escape into hiding. In the trial that followed, which came to be known as the Mainpuri Conspiracy Case of 1918, the play was produced as evidence in the charges against the defendants in absentia.

The outpouring of creative writing around *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh*, and around the cause of abolition more generally, took its cue from the earlier South African campaigns of Gandhi that had generated several plays and poems in India about Gandhi’s unusual weapon, satyagraha. Likewise, the abolition movement, and Sanadhya’s book in particular, inspired several popular poems in the Indian-language press, most notably one by Maithili Sharan Gupta, the *rashtra kavi* (national poet), whose poem *Kisan* (Peasant), published in 1916, is supposed to have drawn its inspiration from Sanadhya’s book. The popular literary responses generated by the abolition movement also harked back to earlier oral genres: that is, to the numerous rural folk songs and stories against the hardships of indenture that circulated in the villages of eastern India and on the plantations wherever indentured workers worked overseas.

Ultimately, however, as befitting a relatively minor publication, the traces of *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh*’s influence are, at best, oblique.
Andrews-Pearson report on Fiji—the most important of the anti-indenture texts that finally rendered any public defense of the indenture system politically unviable—owed both its genesis and its form in some sense to Sanadhya’s prior text. Andrews was already convinced after his visit to Gandhi in South Africa in 1914 of the need for an independent, nonofficial inquiry into indenture. Sanadhya’s book, which demanded just such an inquiry in the wake of his disillusionment with the official commission of inquiry that had visited Fiji in 1913, provided the excuse. On the publication of Sanadhya’s book, Andrews immediately wrote to the Bharati Bhavan for a copy, enclosing 6 annas for the book and 1 anna for postage.54 His poem “The Indentured Coolie,” in which he claimed that he saw Christ in the figure of the indentured worker and which he wrote at about the time he was reading Sanadhya’s book, was very likely a reference to Sanadhya.55 As Andrews prepared to participate in the independent, nonofficial inquiry that was now cosponsored by the Anti-Indenture Emigration League of Calcutta and the Imperial Indian Citizenship Association of Bombay, he had an English translation of Sanadhya’s book made for his personal use to take with him to the inquiry in Fiji.56 On 14 February 1916, if the report of the Special Branch of the U.P. Police is to be believed, Andrews met Sanadhya in Delhi on his return.57 In Fiji, in no small part because he had been introduced to the network of anti-indenture activists in India, including Sanadhya, Andrews was able to convince the planters, whose support was necessary for abolition, of the nature of the movement in India.58 The movement, he informed them, went far beyond the usual political class active in anticolonial agitation and constituted a genuinely popular mobilization that reflected a widespread and implacable revulsion against the system.

Even when the public agitation in India against indenture had entered into the public lore of colonial officials, however, Sanadhya and his book were soon enough forgotten. Take the following example.59 In 1924 Sanadhya wrote to the Fiji government in response to an exposé by Chaturvedi in the Hindi paper Aj (Benares) on the continuing problems confronting Indians in Fiji. The Indian expert of the Fiji government, J. S. Neill, was able to identify both Chaturvedi and Aj as abettors of political agitation in India, but, only ten years after the publication of Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh, he had never heard of Sanadhya.

Likewise, the book’s expanded understanding of the public only indirectly marked the advent of the new era of mass politics in India associated with the emergence of Gandhi as an all-India leader. The anti-indenture
movement was the vehicle that allowed Gandhi to make the transition from South African leader to leader of the nationalist movement in India. Abolition was the only political cause Gandhi embraced on his arrival in India during the period when he had promised to take a hiatus from politics so as to acquaint himself with the conditions in India. Gandhi’s involvement, closely associated with the cause in the minds of the public, was the link that connected the political leadership in India more closely to the popular village-level abolition movement.

By early 1917, when the government had still not taken any concrete steps toward abolition, Gandhi at a public meeting gave the government an ultimatum. If indenture was not abolished by 31 May 1917, he threatened to launch his first all-India satyagraha. Drawing on a ready army of anti-indenture activists, he proposed directly interfering with the “coolie ships” to prevent them from leaving the ports of India. The Government of India, by hastily stopping indenture through the special Defense of India Regulations, on the pretext of safeguarding wartime recruitment, managed to postpone its first confrontation with Gandhian satyagraha. But in bypassing abolition through the legislative initiatives of Indian politicians, the government also tacitly gave the victory for abolition to a realm of extra-constitutional, mass-based politics. This popular politics, which predated Gandhi, was of course that with which he would henceforth be identified. Sanadhya’s book, albeit only indirectly, was at the threshold of these momentous developments that would eventually shake the entire British Empire to its foundations.

Sanadhya’s book—always just below, and in angular relationship to, the major current, whether in the canon of abolitionist literature or in the genealogy of mass-based politics—reveals the most about this inaugural moment of mass politics. To give the abolition of indenture recognition via new legislation, the Government of India eventually, in cooperation with Indian politicians, produced the controversial Indian Emigration Act of 1922. This act prohibited not only indentured labor but all emigration for unskilled labor overseas, with the exception of a few places. In the name of protecting workers from abuses in the colonies, the act curtailed the mobility of labor. Through asserting control over emigration, in a reversal of the Dominion colonies’ control over immigration, Indian politicians began to delineate the proper boundaries of national concern in limited territorial terms. Indians overseas were now slowly excluded from this new territorial-national imagination as a separate, and secondary, class of their own as

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“overseas Indians.” *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh* is a casualty of precisely this shrinking of political horizons in the aftermath of abolition.

Sanadhya’s book—because of, and not despite, the fact that it is minor—demonstrates the ideological nature of what has been considered “major” about Indian abolition. The book was part of a political assemblage that includes other writings of the time, some published and others unpublished, as well as Sanadhya’s continued work on behalf of returned emigrants from the colonies, who often found themselves unwelcome on their return. His book represents, as such, an alternative vision of a postemancipation polity. The cause of ex-indentured workers, as he recognized in a foreword to a compilation of Hindi materials on Indians overseas, depended on maintaining porous boundaries between India and the colonies that were not unlike the subcontinent’s connections to Southeast Asia in the ancient past. The book belongs to a moment—and a movement—whose critiques of empire and demands for redistributive justice in the name of a *sarva-sadharan janta* (ordinary public) did not lead necessarily, and certainly not automatically, to the territorial form of the nation-state. Sanadhya’s humble book—a detritus of the abolition movement—is a stubborn reminder of what is occluded from the incorporation of abolition in a supposedly continuous and progressive unfolding of the transition from empire to nation.

**NOTES**


4. Here I use “minor” in the sense of Sudesh Misra, who draws on Deleuze, to refer not to something that is forgotten or neglected, but to something that is not—and cannot be—integrated into the major narrative. In other words, a minor history functions something like the footnote or the endnote in a text: its presence cannot be entirely ignored but, nevertheless, it does not quite make it into the main text. See Sudesh Misra, “Girmit as Minor History,” *Australian Humanities Review* 52 (May


23. Revenue, Emigration, File no. 3E-6, Proceedings, nos. 5–7, Nov. 1915, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata (WBA); Commerce and Industry, Emigration, Dec. 1915, nos. 43–54, pt. A, NAI.


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32. Statement of Books, during the Quarter Ending December 1915, U.P. Archives.


43. Statement of Books, during the Quarter Ending March 1915, U.P. Archives.


53. Misra, “Girmit as Minor History.”

54. Andrews to Sir, n.d., Benarsidas Chaturvedi Papers, 1/B-387, NAI.


58. Commerce and Industry, Emigration, May 1916, no. 6, pt. A, NAI.


60. Ray, “Abolition.”


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