

OPED_May 8, 2025



Truth, Trauma, and the Power of Remembering: Fiji's Path to Healing

By Marcus Brand, *Chairperson, Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Commission (FTRC)*

This week, as the Fiji Truth and Reconciliation Commission (FTRC) begins laying the groundwork for its trauma-informed processes, the timing is deeply symbolic. As we are departing for Labasa to participate in this year's Girmitya Day commemorations, which honoured the arrival of the first indentured labourers from India in 1879, Fiji finds itself once again in a moment of reckoning — not just with history, but with the emotional and psychological toll it continues to exact across generations.

Girmitya Day is a solemn reminder of a painful chapter in Fiji's past: the story of over 60,000 men, women, and children brought to Fiji under colonial rule, many of whom endured unimaginable hardship, exploitation, and dislocation. The legacy of that system still lives in the bones and bloodlines of Fiji's people, shaping identity, relationships, and national narratives. Yet for decades, silence has shrouded much of that experience.

The work of the FTRC is aiming to break that silence.

In a recent meeting with partners including UNICEF and community mental health professionals, the Commission emphasised a core tenet of its mission: that healing must be trauma-informed. This means more than simply acknowledging harm — it means creating processes that are grounded in empathy, care, and safety. It means making space for survivors to speak their truth without being retraumatised, and for communities to listen, reflect, and grow.

The Commission's work on trauma services and counseling referrals is now led by Elizabeth Krishna, who has worked in reconciliation since the 1987 coups. She observed that the work is not only about uncovering facts but restoring trust and validating lived experiences. The inclusion of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services in the Commission's plan is a landmark step in recognising that reconciliation is as much about emotional recovery as it is about historical accuracy.

This is especially important in a country like Fiji, where intergenerational trauma has often been unspoken yet deeply felt. Whether the pain stems from indenture, dislocation, colonial violence, political upheaval, or social exclusion, the scars are passed down not only through memory but through silence. Truth-telling — and the safe, supported space to do so — is the beginning of healing. Not just for individuals, but for the nation.

The importance of historical documentation in this process cannot be overstated. Without honest records, without survivor testimony, without naming what happened and how, we cannot move forward. Girmitya Day serves as a poignant example: it has taken generations for that chapter of history to be acknowledged nationally. But with recognition has come an opportunity — for pride, for mourning, for understanding.

The FTRC should be afforded the same space and respect. Its trauma-informed approach sets a new standard for how Fiji, as a society, confronts its past: not with denial or defensiveness, but with courage and compassion.

The work ahead will not be easy. But as Ms Krishna noted, we must “enter the process with an open mind.” Reconciliation is not a destination; it is a practice. It asks us to listen deeply, to honour truth, and to hold each other with care.

As Fiji remembers its Girmitya forebears and embarks on this critical truth-telling journey, we are reminded that healing begins with acknowledgment — and that healing, like history, belongs to all of us.

Note: The Commission is encouraging members of the public to contact us in relation to any of the above. We look forward to hearing from you. Reach us by phone, email, or through our Facebook page, where a contact form is also available.

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