Chalo Jahaji

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on a journey through indenture in fiji

Brij V Lal

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For

Ben, My Brother

1949-1992

A lamp whose light was steady

Some *Leonidas* Girmitiyas

Badloo
Jeeboad
Rosulbux
Golabee
Jugnee
Suckhia
Kaleedeen
Boodhaie
Perbothee
Kulpee
Besson
Salarbux
Kurreem
Lalta
Serutton
Bipath
Tohull
Jaitoo
Gendia
Sakunti
Lagonee
Genda
Gockul
Tulla
Jhinul
Fakeerbux
Gunga
Sookhia

Shamlaul
Bahadoor
Aleemoolah
Tiluck Sing
Biptee
Surujbalee
Gheesa
Chagun
Churail
Madaree
Hossani
Phuljharia
Changur
Beni Sing
Pooraie
Dullia
Nand Paul
Durga
Dial
Moheshdutt
Rogonauth
Jugrup
Siri
Sitaba
Sakina
Maharania
Maikoo
Sitaul

Jookhoo
Mattadeen
Nickamul
Gajadhar
Asgar
Ulfat
Mungaree
Seeombar
Chultoa
Phoolbosea
Jumni
Rookmonia
Gooljari
Sookdaie
Debkurron
Gungadin
Sewbaluck
Surujballee
Maria
Sugia
Rajmolah
Anganu
Ramtohul
Soomeria
Mottee
Bhole
Bhimma
Kesri

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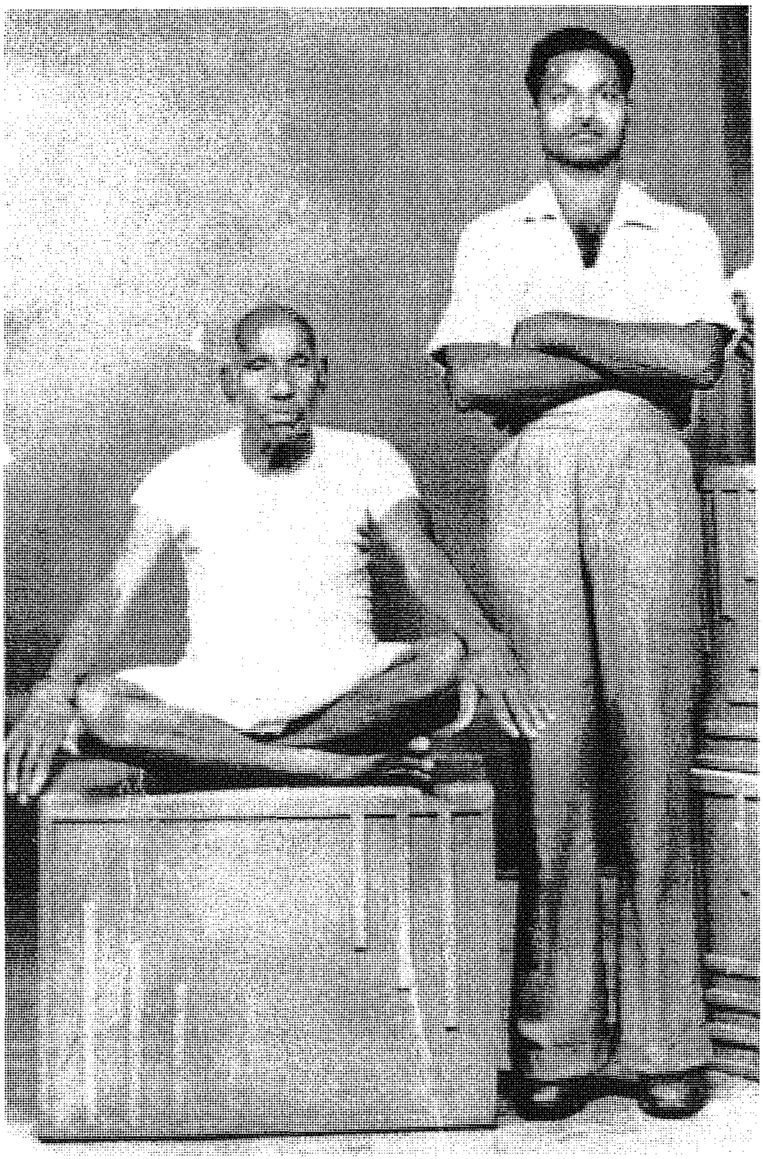


A girmitiya and his Fiji-born son, worlds apart in social outlook and sartorial code. The father's rigid posture suggests unease in a modern context. Girmitiyas came to Fiji under the agreement—girmit—of indenture.

Girmit Connections

Brinsley Samaroo

Indians of the indentured diaspora have a remarkable lot in common. Meeting as 'foreign' students in India, the girmitiya descendants from Guyana, Mauritius, Fiji and Natal immediately develop a close bonding because of their use of common words, similarity of names, culinary preferences and transported texts. In similar manner, when Brij Lal visited Trinidad in 1998, both his physical as well as his spiritual being enabled him to blend immediately with his Bhojpuri brethren in Chinidad Tapu. His book, *Chalo Jahaji*, focusses ostensibly on the girmit experience in Fiji. It seeks to tell the story of 60,000 Indians who were indentured there between 1879 and 1916. But *Chalo Jahaji* is a good deal more than that. In many ways, it is the story of 1.3 million Indians who were sent to many lands to the East and West of India. Indians were regarded as precious parts of a body trade and could be sent anywhere. Brij Lal's *aja* (grandfather) and Totaram Sanadhya, two of the principal characters in the narrative, understood initially that they were destined for the Caribbean; instead they ended up in Fiji. Governor Arthur Gordon, having successfully overseen the settlement of indentured Indians in Trinidad, introduced them to Fiji. The causes of the departure from the same place in Oudh or Madras were identical and the earthly experience of narak, hell, is as Caribbean or South African as it is Fijian. At the same time, the Fijian Indian experience, like that of the other jahajis, is an amazing saga of the indomitable will of thousands of women, children and men to succeed against all manner of physical, legal and moral dilemmas. In the process, these diasporic Indians have developed a spirit of resilience and inventiveness which now mark them as being different from their continental cousins. Indeed, in the same way that these overseas Indians continue to be inspired by Bharat's spiritual development, they now have lessons for the ancestral place in religious tolerance and in dealing with a culturally different western world. These are the larger diasporic themes which this comprehensive book covers. It is milestone in subaltern studies, a biographical journey penned by a living relic of the indentured experience and a scholar whose thoroughly interdisciplinary approach is a good example for the anthropologist, the sociologist or the economist who wish to see the proper integration of their disciplines in a major historical work.

Director, Institute of Caribbean Studies
University of West Indies, Trinidad.
14 January, 2000

A young Indo-Fijian woman dressed in traditional costume and jewellery. Racial prejudice and male power often combined to put a 'veil of dishonour' around the face of girmitiya women.

Beginnings and Endings

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
T.S. Eliot 'East Coker'

This book is a selection of my essays on the Indian indenture (girmit) experience in Fiji. I have brought them together because there is a demand for them in the rapidly growing Indo-Fijian diaspora in North America, Australia and New Zealand, and among an expanding fraternity of Indian diaspora scholars scattered around the globe. I have been amazed to find the different and complex ways—through songs, music, ceremonies and oral narratives—in which diasporic people retrieve and re-present their remembered pasts and the ways in which they transmit them to the next generation. The past, fractured and reconfigured, survives with a force and tenacity that will gladden the heart of every scholar. If this book contributes a little to cultural rejuvenation in the Indo-Fijian diaspora, and to the ongoing conversation about the nature and meaning of the indenture experience globally, I shall be more than satisfied.

The essays reproduced here substantially in the form in which they first appeared, were written in different moods at different times for different audiences, but they have an intellectual coherence, thematic unity and chronology of their own. They show that at one level or another, the girmitiyas were caught between the demands and pulls of two worlds, one which they had left but not completely escaped, and one which they had entered but not fully embraced. They had left one home and, at least emotionally, not found another in their own lifetime. They lived and died in an acute state of tension and ambivalence. They were a people caught in-between, neither here nor there, or else everywhere all at once. These essays will, I hope, help us understand why, by extending and deepening our knowledge of the formative years of the Indian presence in Fiji, exploring the local byways and alleys of an experience glossed over in other investigations.

The girmitiyas are gone now, but their imprint is etched indelibly on the landscape of their adopted homes. They were, in fact, a part of a remarkable episode in modern history, units in a grand but ultimately flawed experiment in labour service dubbed by its critics as another form of slavery. Whether indenture was slavery or not is a question that will be debated long after we ourselves are gone; but there can be little argument that it was a harsh, brutalizing experience. The girmitiyas called it 'narak' which means hell, an experience which robbed them of 'izzat', honour, which denied them 'insaf', justice. The words are theirs, not mine.

Little was known but much assumed about the social and cultural background of the immigrants. 'Coolies' all, they were assumed to be children of the lesser gods, men and women of low status and few means, down trodden or down on their luck, for whom the colonies offered brighter prospects of a better future. Even sympathetic friends denied them agency. Their employers and the colonial government used negative images to remind the girmitiyas and their descendants of their proper place in the colonial hierarchy, while their friends used them as ammunition for their own political causes.

Girmitiyas came late to the attention of historians and other writers, almost a century after the beginning of indentured emigration. Always, in one form or another, they were seen and analyzed as a problem. To the missionaries, their religion was a problem to be resolved through conversion, a project undertaken to various degrees and to various levels of success in the different colonies. To the friends of India around the turn of the century, the girmitiyas and their plight were a blot on the face of India struggling to find its rightful place in the international community of nations. At the time of Indian independence, overseas Indians were seen as a problem in imperial relations. Still later, they were viewed as a problem in plural societies, to be solved through expulsion or political repression or enforced assimilation.

But things have been changing in recent years. Scholars, many descendants of the girmitiyas themselves, are moving away from the morally charged indenture-as-slavery paradigm to looking at the lived human experience of indenture, exploring the complex and varied ways in which the girmitiyas negotiated their way in the new environment, the way they lived, worked, felt and thought about their predicaments, fashioned new relationships based on a remembered past and the new realities they encountered, resisted and accommodated themselves to the demands of the plantation regime. The reading of indenture experience is complicated —problematized—by new approaches and perspectives. One significant development in recent years has been the gendering of indenture history, removing the veil of dishonour which has hidden the sorrows and accomplishments of women as individuals in their own right, as victims of sexism and racism on the plantation frontier. Another development of note has been the acknowledgment of the vital role of culture, both as a tool of survival as well as an instrument of resistance. I would be happy to see my work represented in this volume as a part of this new research trend.

This book also represents a closure of sorts, ending a journey I began more than two decades ago. In 1977, I went to The Australian National University to do a doctoral dissertation in history on the social origins of Fiji's indentured migrants. The topic came to me naturally. I was born and grew up on a small sugarcane farm in rural Vanua Levu. My grandfather was a girmitiya who had come to Fiji at the turn of this century. Every so often other girmitiyas in the locality would come home, smoke huqqa and reminisce about their salad days in India or about their experiences and (mis)adventures in Fiji. These re-unions were deeply moving moments. The girmitiyas spoke a language none of us understood, and their dress — kurta and dhoti and pagri, a shawl wrapped around their closely cropped heads— set them apart. They seemed a strange group to a little boy, alien, incongruous, indifferent to their surroundings, hankering for a life they could never reconstruct though they never gave up trying. My curiosity about them grew with time.

So it was natural that for my dissertation topic, I chose to solve a mystery of my childhood. The research took me to India for a year, to the archives and libraries and to the villages and towns from where the migrants had come. I have tried to relate some of that experience in the second chapter. It was a hard but also a rewarding year for me. The thesis got written and my first book presented a summary of the results. Then, teaching commitments and changing circumstances led me to more contemporary political topics. Still, while at the University of Hawaii in the mid-1980s, I managed to continue my investigation into the social and cultural history of indenture, from which came papers on the experience of women on the plantations, death and suicide, and resistance and accommodation. Political turbulence in Fiji from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s drew me back into contemporary debates, including an appointment to the Constitution Review Commission, which forced me to suspend the research I was once again beginning to enjoy. But with the completion of the constitution review work, I returned to the subject, this time in the lively company of bright honours students, some of whose work is represented in this volume. Their genuine interest and enthusiasm encouraged me. For this they have my heartfelt thanks.

Every journey, however bountiful and exhilarating, must end somewhere, and as far as the history of the Indian indenture experience in Fiji is concerned, mine ends with this book. I realize now as I look back that, the number of pages notwithstanding, I have only just scratched the surface of what is simply a vast, inexhaustible field. There is just so much more to do—on the experience of the South Indian girmitiyas, for example, which deserves a book length study of its own, or the hopes and expectations of minority cultural and religious groups on the plantations, the pressures and demands on those who administered the system, health and ill-health, violence. Old evidence viewed with fresh eyes and probed with new questions will yield new results and provoke further research. It will be interesting to find out how the Fijian experience compares and contrasts with the experience of other places which used Indian indentured labour. The story of indenture is full of drama and tragedy, raising issues which will find resonance in other places and historical contexts. How does a subaltern group, powerless and isolated, cope with the demands and expectations of the dominant group? How and in what ways does an immigrant community, illiterate and leaderless, cut off from its source and cooped up in a hostile environment, reconstitute itself from the surviving fragments of culture and memory? Questions and more questions, but now for others to pursue.

I would not have been able to embark upon this journey, let alone complete it, without the love and support and encouragement of so many people along the way. They are too numerous to thank individually, but some debts must be acknowledged. First, my parents. Both were children of girmitiyas, simple rural folk, uncomplicated and unlettered, though late in life my mother had managed to pick up enough rudimentary Devanagri script to get through a grade one reader. My father never did, always affixing his thumb print to official documents. They were members of an improving generation, but were by no means well to do. Nevertheless, they invested whatever they could save in the education of their children. There was no future on the farm for all the six boys, we were told, and that provided an added incentive for us to do well at school. We did.

As the first one in the extended family to go to university, I was expected to choose a socially worthy, financially lucrative profession such as medicine or the law. Doctors and lawyers were the holders of real status in the community, and always in demand. The pressure came not so much from my parents as from relatives and members of the village who wanted to have their 'own' doctor or lawyer as a collective symbol of progress and achievement. They were disappointed when I chose the arts, but I said that my arts degree was just a stepping stone to an eventual legal career. My parents said nothing. They stood by me as others made derisory remarks about the uselessness of the subjects I was doing at university, about how only no-hopers did history. My mother died before I began my academic career, but my father lived long enough to see some of the fruits of my work, of which, I think, he was proud, although he never spoke to me about it. Nonetheless, one of his most beloved possessions was a copy of my first book, *Girmitiyas,* which has a picture of his parents in it. He kept it alongside important family papers in a green tin box underneath his bed. I have been told that he was flipping through the book, looking at the picture of his parents, and crying a few days before he died. Children can never repay the debt they owe to their parents, so I will not try. All that I can do is to pass on to our own children the precepts they imparted to us, to live with your head held high, with honour and self-respect. And my mother's home-grown wisdom that no matter how thin she made it, roti—Indian leavened bread—always had two sides.

I also want to thank my teachers who not only taught well but also inspired us to look beyond the village horizon. They detected and nurtured a talent that we did not know we had. I recall with particular fondness Mr

Subramani Gounden, the rotund and bald head master of the Tabia Sanatan Dharam Primary School in the late 1960s. A tough disciplinarian who did not hesitate to apply the tamarind 'chapki'—thin branch—to our tiny bottoms when we were caught stealing mango or guava from the school compound, he worked hard to ensure that we passed the dreaded Entrance Examination with marks good enough to secure a scholarship for secondary education. Regular night classes, extra lessons on weekends, loads of homework: we virtually camped in the school for three months before the finals. We all passed, and passed well, thanks to Mr Gounden. He is gone now, but not forgotten.

In secondary school, we had a brilliant array of freshly graduated teachers, not much older than us, and full of enthusiasm and energy. Three stand out for me. The first was Krishna Datt, our history teacher, slowly balding, thickly bearded, and handsome. He introduced us to the great events of modern world history—the unification of Italy and Germany, the causes of the First World War, the emergence of Asian nationalism, to Garibaldi, Bismark, Mao and Gandhi. He read to us passages from the books of Denis Mack Smith, the great historian of Italy, the English historian of India Percival Spear, and the contemporary historian Geoffrey Barraclough. He introduced us to student politics by organizing a Students' Council. But my most enduring memory of him is of the day he arrived in class with a large placard around his neck bearing the opening words of the *Communist Manifesto*. Krishna, now big and Santa Claus-like, is a Labour member of parliament.

Vijay Mishra, presently a professor of English in Canada, introduced us to the pleasures of English literature. With a fluent command of the language, a well tended goatee beard and flamboyant clothes, he cut a striking figure. He started a class library of classics which each of us had to read and talk about during the 'morning talk' period everyday. We read, while still in grade eleven, novels by Patrick White, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Charles Dickens, D.H. Lawrence, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, Graham Greene, William Golding, and many others. With Vijay we began to cherish the pleasures of the imagination. When he left, Subramani, now professor of English at the University of the South Pacific, took over. He was more reserved, reflective and moody, but no less effective as a teacher. To Vijay's list he added Joseph Conrad, whose *Lord Jim* he dissected for us with great brilliance. My most enduring memory of him, though, is of the day he played for us in class a gramophone record of T.S. Eliot reading his 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. The words of that poem still ring in my memory.

By the time I finished high school, I knew I was hooked on the humanities. At the University of the South Pacific, recently opened and keen to impress its seriousness as a place of higher learning, I encountered teachers who nourished our intellectual appetite. Ron Crocombe, lively and energetic, made history come alive with his intimate, anecdotal knowledge of Pacific people and events. Ahmed Ali introduced us to the experience of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized. Walter Johnson, the great American historian, taught the history of the civil rights movement with stirring passion. But my best history teacher, without doubt, was June Cook, a middle-aged, chain-smoking English woman. A Cambridge graduate, she had worked at the United Nations before coming to the Pacific. She taught us the history of European expansion and of the Spanish empire. Why the latter, I have no idea. She read her lectures, word by word, perfectly balanced sentences, perfectly timed, with great authority and clarity. She did not compromise her standards. I somehow felt that she was talking to us the same way she would have talked to students in England or the United States. She expected us to raise our standards. We did. June detected a talent for history in me, and urged me to leave the Pacific—it was too small, too much on the margins, too poorly documented, I was destined for bigger things—and specialize in European or Asian history at a good English or American university. For a while, I toyed with the idea of studying European fascism in the inter-war period, and even corresponded with Marjorie Jacobs of the University of Sydney! June's personal interest in my future and the belief that I could amount to something pushed me on. I have never met anyone quite like her. And she was the one who persuaded me—insisted actually—that I give up the idea of law as a career. Thank you June, wherever you are.

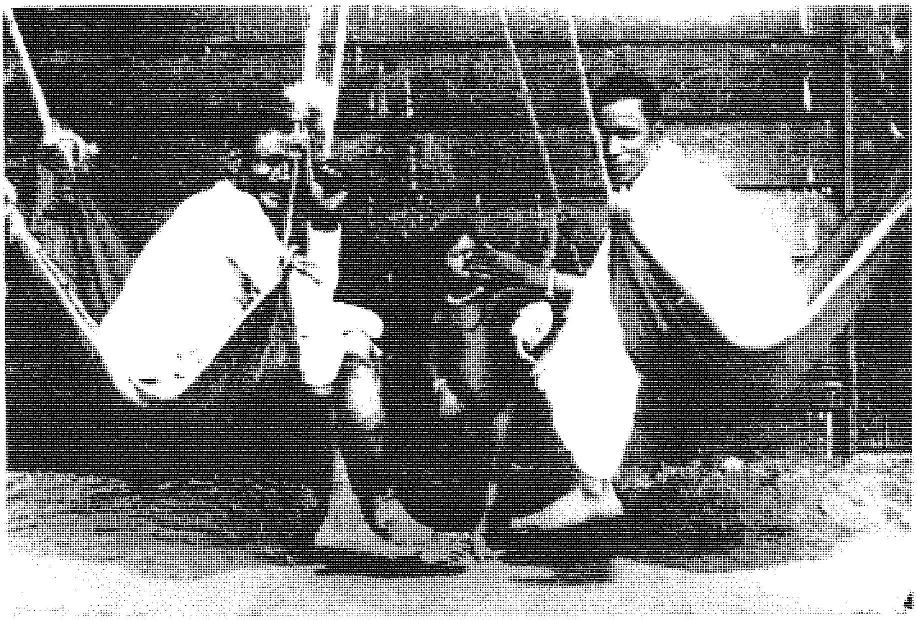
All these people in their own way provided inspiration, guidance and encouragement. I learnt from their example that teaching was a noble profession, that a life devoted to reading and writing was not a life wasted, that making a difference was somehow more satisfying than making a quick buck. For this and much more, I am more grateful than I will ever be able to express. Closer to home, Padma has been my companion, supporter, critic and encourager from the very beginning. Without her, there would have been no journey to undertake. I need say no more. But I want to dedicate this book to Ben, my brother, who died unnaturally young. He was among the kindest, gentlest, most generous human beings I have ever known. He was gifted, wise beyond his years; and he knew the meaning of pain. He sacrificed so much of his own so that we—not only his younger siblings but also nieces and nephews and other children from poor homes in the village and the community at large—could complete our education. To him, alas, my debt will never be repaid except in the memory of the heart.

To the people who have assisted me in the production of this volume, I offer my sincere thanks. They include Jude Shanahan, the resident artist and word processing expert in the Division of Pacific and Asian History in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University, to whom I am grateful for many things, but on this occasion especially for designing the cover and preparing the volume for publication. Carol Taylor helped with the technical production of the manuscript. William Copeland at the Fiji Museum reproduced the historical photographs. Kate Vusoniwailala, Director of the Fiji Museum, encouraged me to complete this project which, she said, would contribute to the Museum's plans to reach out to the Indo-Fijian community whose history and heritage she is keen to give more focused representation than in the past. I applaud her vision and wish her success. Doug Munro has been a helpful and constructive critic over the years. He encouraged me to put my essays together. I am grateful to him for that as well as for his own words in the book. I also acknowledge Aubrey Parke's interest in the making of this book. Aubrey was District Commissioner Northern in the late 1960s when I was completing the last years of my primary education. He has read my words with care and understanding and a critical eye. His affection for this Labasa kisan's boy is warmly appreciated. Vinaka Vakalevu, Dhanyabad, Thank you.

* * *

A final word about the title of this book. An exact translation is impossible, so I have translated 'chalo' as 'let's go', and 'jahaji' (from jahaj—ship) as 'my ship mates'. It could just as easily have been translated as 'let's move on/leave, my fellow travellers/friends'. Whatever the words, the sense is of a shared, open-ended physical journey to some distant place, across the seas, over the horizon. Some Indo-Fijians were barely able to suppress an embarrassed laugh when I told them the title of the volume still in preparation. They reacted as if they had been reminded of some vaguely mirthful misadventure of long ago. 'Jahaji' is a word of a bygone era, and'chalo' is colloquial, rough, rustic equivalent of the standard Hindi 'chalen' or 'chaliye'. Their reaction is symptomatic of the general Indo-Fijian ambivalence about their past. They have moved on in the world, made something of themselves; they do not want to know, or be reminded of, the sorry circumstances of their forebears and the long distance that the community has travelled since girmit ended nearly a century ago. For them, the past is past. There is no need for literary or intellectual engagement with it. There is no consciousness of history in the community and, sadder still, no urgency to know about it—sad because Indo-Fijians place so much store by education which has made them what they are. I hope this volume will contribute in a small way toward reversing this trend. By showing that girmit is a site of inspirational, not embarrassing, history. That history matters. That, as Francis Bacon said so long ago, 'the best prophet of the future is the past'.

Brij V. Lal, Canberra.



Outside the lines, two men sitting in a sack *jhalua* (hammock). A single room housed three single men, or a family. Line was what the girmitiyas called the congested plantation barracks where they lived.

chapter 1

Of Journeys and Transformations:
Brij V. Lal and the Study of Girmit

Doug Munro

> *Leaving aside the questions of exploitation, racism, and the institutional aspects of indenture, I think that the indenture experience is a very important, formative and defining period in the history of overseas Indian communities ... because that is the site of the initial social transformation. It is fundamental.*
>
> Brij V. Lal

Brij Lal is best known among Pacific historians for his writings on the contemporary history of Fiji and as a member of the three-man Fiji Constitution Review Commission, whose report forms the basis of that country's recently promulgated constitution. His books on the subject include an analysis of the Fiji coups, a political history of twentieth century

Fiji, a biography of the great Fiji Indian leader A.D. Patel and an account of constitutionalism in post-coup Fiji.[1] The other major strand in Lal's repertoire, for which he is perhaps less well known in the Pacific but for which he enjoys a substantial reputation internationally, is the Indo-Fijian indenture experience. It is a magnificent subject. Between 1836 and 1916, over 1.3 million indentured Indians travelled to places as far apart as Natal and Trinidad; this diaspora constitutes the largest segment of a trade in indentured labourers that stemmed from the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834.[2] Fiji was caught up in this process and received 60,945 individuals between 1879 and 1916 (as against some 27,000 imported Pacific Islanders).[3] It is well to put these figures into perspective. The preponderance of Indian labourers in Fiji reflects the numerical dominance of Indian indentured labour world-wide. Conversely, the fact that Indians to Fiji constituted such a small proportion of the overall Indian total reflects the extent to which the Pacific generally was a small and insignificant segment of the global trade in indentured labourers.[4] Nevertheless, those 60,945 Indians to Fiji are an appreciable total and worthy of study in their own right.

Lal has contributed significantly to this field. In the twenty-one years from 1978, when he published his first paper, he has written or edited four books and published no fewer than 16 articles and chapters on the subject. This constitutes an appreciable corpus of scholarly work and at the time was a consuming interest. But one's life moves on and Lal wishes to draw down the curtain on this particular interest. Nevertheless, it has been the stepping stone to a highly successful career in university and public life. He has been the recipient of numerous academic and civic honours. There was the award of a 25th Anniversary of Fiji Independence Medal in recognition of his 'distinguished contribution to education in Fiji'; his election as Fellow of the Australian Humanities Academy in 1996; the appointment to the Fiji Constitution Review Commission that same year; and two years later the award of Officer of the Order of Fiji and promotion to full Professor in the Institute of Advanced Studies at The Australian National University. More recently, Anthony Low, the distinguished historian of South Asia, has dedicated his latest book to his former graduate students (or his 'Sepoys', as he calls them) and names Lal as a member of the 3rd (Canberra) Regiment along with Imran Ali, Stephen Henningham, Andrew Major and Dipesh Chakrabarty.[5] To do all this before the age of fifty is no mean achievement, but it is especially so for the grandson of a girmitiya (indentured labourer) who grew up on the ten acre family farm at Tabia village, on the fringes of the Labasa sugar district of Fiji, where the only interesting reading material and about the only contact with the outside world were week-old copies of the *Fiji Times* and *Shanti Dut.*

* * *

Brij Lal and I first met in 1979, as graduate students, in the Records Room of the then Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History at the Australian National University (ANU). His PhD on the origins and social background of the Fiji Indians involved a computerised analysis and the use of folklore in addition to conventional historical sources. I was told in somewhat awed tones that he was single-mindedly eating his way inch by inch through the microfilm version of the 45,000 or so Emigration Passes of the north Indian indentured workers to Fiji. He was, in the estimation of fellow students, more than usually capable and industrious. He almost lived in the National Library of Australia at this time and I hardly saw anything of him.

This was not a particularly happy time in the life of the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History at ANU. Such was the students' disenchantment that they organised their own seminar series, from which staff were excluded. I say 'they' because I was one of them only in the sense that I happened to be living in Canberra; I was enrolled at Macquarie University in Sydney. But I attended those fortnightly seminars on Thursday afternoons and generally enjoyed the intellectual companionship of people as diverse as Penny Gregory, Judy Bennett, Geoff Cummins, Kilifoti Etuati (from the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History), Greg Fry (from the Department of Political Science in The Faculties), Trish Mercer (from the Department of History in The Faculties) and John Nation (from the Department of Social and Political Change). I gave a seminar presentation, and then came the day when Lal gave a delivery on his own work. He spoke off the cuff with fluency, ease and authority that concealed effort, explaining what he was doing and what he hoped to achieve. He was in the early stages of an academic journey—the study of the Fiji Indians. It has been a continuing voyage but the ship is now at port. Lal does not intend to write much more on the indenture experience. To change the metaphor (and Lal is an avid cricket fan), he has had a fine innings. But now is the time to declare and hence the occasion to put together a selection of his essays on the origins and plantation experience of the girmitiyas.

* * *

Lal likes to use the term 'journeys and transformations' to denote phases of one's life and experiences, and how these necessarily inform and often define one's academic work. At one level it seems only natural and proper that the grandson of a girmitiya, who was fascinated by surviving girmitiyas who swapped yarns each evening under a mango tree, should write about that group. As a child, Lal was very close to his grandfather, who told him about his life in India, the reasons for coming to Fiji and what happened after that. So there were early indications that Lal had a sense of the past. In practice, however, it was not so easy for the village kid to go to university, much less to become a professional historian. The limited mental horizons and a general lack of opportunity were the main impediments. But there was a certain will to beat the odds. Lal came from an improving rural farming family that was intent on upward social and economic mobility—although hardly for the older generation given that Lal's parents were unlettered. But their children were another matter: 'always in the back of their minds', Lal told me, 'was the memory of indenture— the poverty, the petty humiliations—and my parents did not want to see their children go through a similar experience'.[6] Thrift and education were seen as the means to breaking a cycle of not-very-genteel quasi-poverty, especially when there was no hope that the land could provide a future for all six boys. Then there was his older brother Ben, about whose untimely death he has written here, who gladly made the necessary personal sacrifices for his younger siblings. Lal was also lucky in his teachers at Labasa Secondary School, to whom he acknowledges an enormous debt in expanding his mental horizons by introducing him to good literature and giving him a solid grounding for his future academic work.

The award of a Canadian Third Country Scholarship enabled him to enrol at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in 1971. His initial plan was to become a high school English teacher, but a mandatory course in transformational grammar deterred him from pursuing his 'romantic interest in the novels of the Bronte sisters, [so] he switched to history, a decision he has not often regretted'.[7] The changeover to history seemed to suit him and as a final year undergraduate he won the Te Rangi Hiroa Award for the best essay in Pacific history by a USP student for that year. The award of a Graduate Fellowship took Lal to the University of British Columbia where he studied modern Chinese history but wrote a Masters thesis on Sikhs in Vancouver[8] and won the John and Annie Southcott Memorial Prize for the outstanding graduating student in history.

Returning to USP in 1976 as a junior lecturer in History/Politics, Lal realised that he wanted to be an academic and to enjoy a life of the mind, as they say. He had already started to publish,[9] but an academic career required further postgraduate work so he applied for a Research Scholarship at the ANU. There is an untold story of his getting placed at ANU and finding a suitable dissertation topic. His initial intention was to work on a topic of a demographic nature. He sent a copy of his Masters thesis and an accompanying letter of inquiry to the only scholar he knew of at ANU, the demographer Charles Price, who had just published a book on racial exclusion.[10] Price considered that Lal's lack of mathematics precluded work in demography, so he forwarded the letter and thesis to Wang Gungwu, the Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies. The paperwork then did the rounds and landed on the table of Robin Jeffery, the head of the South Asian section (and now Professor of Politics at La Trobe University). The ANU seems to have been in something of a quandary. Here was an able student from the region who clearly had to be given a scholarship. But in what section should he be placed and who would be the supervisor? The Vice-Chancellor, Anthony Low, thought it important to bring Lal to Canberra, but could not take full responsibility for Lal's supervision because he already had four PhD students (his 'Sepoys'). Another ANU academic to enter the picture was Ken Gillion, the historian of Indo-Fijian indenture,[11] who was about to go to Fiji for further research. Lal by that time had been offered a scholarship and was busily assessing the Emigration Passes in National Archives of Fiji. Impressed by Lal's industriousness, Gillion reported back accordingly. In the event, Lal was placed in Robin Jeffreys' South Asian section, Anthony Low was officially his supervisor, and Ken Gillion took charge of Lal's everyday mentoring.

The strong and abiding friendship that developed between Gillion and Lal was initially rather tense, partly a function of Gillion's introverted yet demanding nature being confronted with the strong-willed impatience of his newest student. A mismatch of anxiety on Lal's part and expectation on Gillion's also threw their disparate personalities into sharp relief and created for a while an abrasive effect. The problem centred on the choice of a PhD topic. Having done his Masters on the Sikhs in Vancouver, Lal was set to do a comparable study on Fiji but found it not to his liking. As he tells it:

> I came [to ANU] and started working on the Sikhs. After a month I was bored with the subject. The records were sketchy and the topic just didn't interest me. There was a lot of private anguish. I told Ken that I wanted to work on the history of indenture. At first he was very unencouraging because he said the topic was done, and there was little new that I would contribute. There was also the sense that I was encroaching on his turf, and

> Ahmed Ali was working on his [oral histories] book at that time.[12] There was a feeling that I would just be deconstructing, instead of contributing new knowledge. I said I would work on something else. And then—I don't know how it happened—I said, 'I'll look at the background of these people. You've looked at their experience in Fiji'. All of a sudden, for some strange reason, he became interested.[13]

It is not hard to see why Gillion was so keen to support a full-scale study of the origins Indo-Fijians: he knew that it was a viable topic, having himself written a journal article on the subject a full two decades earlier.[14] The choice of topic made sense in another respect: Lal's eventual study of Indian *emigration* to Fiji would nicely complement his de facto supervisor's monograph-length work on the indenture experience of those same *immigrants*.

That is not to say that Lal was going to emerge in the Gillion mould. Their temperaments were too different for that ever to happen. So were their respective views of the historian's task. Whereas Gillion, as Lal sees it, was concerned 'to maintain "balance".... so [that] everyone gets their share of his attention',[15] Lal himself needs a sense of involvement and attachment before he can warm to a subject; and certainly, as he later explained, his dissertation provided some of those satisfactions:

> ...it was a project in which the heart and the head came together. I was writing about my own people, about myself really. So there was a sense of immediacy, emotional attachment. I had the language, I had the contacts. I was making a discovery that had a direct social and personal interest. I have since discovered—no doubt my early exposure to great literature played a part here—that I am not very good at things abstract, remote. A subject has to appeal to me emotionally, has to have some personal relevance for me to be intellectually engaged with it.[16]

In 1980, after three years' 'ordeal by thesis', Lal submitted a two volume PhD dissertation on the origins of the Fijian Indians; a much-reduced version was published in 1983 under the title *Girmitiyas*, and dedicated to Ken Gillion.[17] It is largely an analysis of the 45,439 Emigration Passes of the north Indians who embarked at Calcutta for Fiji. His dissertation and book can, without too much hindsight, be seen as a logical intellectual outcome of his upbringing, his education and his need for attachment to a subject. As a small boy in Tabia village, he listened to his grandfather telling stories about India and why he came to Fiji. His PhD candidature, in days when fieldwork was still required and possible, enabled him to make a pilgrimage to his ancestral land. Like those 45,439 North Indians who crossed the *kala pani* (dark waters) for Fiji, so did Lal but from the opposite direction. He got a huge culture shock: the oppressiveness of India with its poverty and malfunctionings assailed his senses and it took time to come to terms with the strangeness and frequent unpleasantness of it all. The highlight was to visit his grandfather's village in Bahraich. His grandfather, who died in 1962, was forever talking about the return home, and Lal discovered that the people of Bahraich had kept a place and a plot of land for him until a few years before his death (see 'Return to Bahraich' in this volume). In December 1998, Lal revisited Bahraich, this time with his own family, but only to find that many people he had met during his first trip were gone. 'I have difficulty establishing rapport with the younger generation', he writes in an essay here ('Sunrise on the Ganga'). 'I am a stranger among them'. A journey is complete. He will not return again to his grandfather's village.

* * *

Such were the family and academic influences on Lal's work on the origins of the Fiji Indians. What about his methods and conclusions? As he said of his dissertation:

> Its purpose is to delineate the background of the indentured emigrants in India. Our central concern is to understand who the emigrants were, what social and economic strata and regions of the subcontinent they came from, the reasons for their emigration, the processes of recruitment and registration; in short, the structural dynamics of indentured labour emigration from India. These questions have, by and large, occupied the periphery of most studies of Indian indenture; yet it is certain that without a fuller understanding of them, any objective appraisal of the indenture system cannot be made.[18]

That appraisal was made on the basis of a computer analysis. The raw data collected from the Emigration Passes were entered onto code sheets and fed into a computer.

One purpose of Lal's study was to test what a reviewer of his eventual book described as 'The distinctly hostile stereotype of indentured Indians belonging to the dregs of Indian society, driven by unremitting poverty to the comparatively affluent circumstances of Fijian plantations, there to prove basely ungrateful to their employers-cum-benefactors by demanding quite unreasonable economic and political concessions'.[19] To the contrary, the girmitiyas were scarcely a sampling of untouchables from the streets of

Calcutta. Lal demonstrated conclusively that just under 22 per cent came from the lower classes. To sum up, the emigrants were of varied social origins drawn from a wide cross-section of rural society and representing, to varying degrees, most castes. These conclusions, which are outlined in the early chapters to this volume, emerge from Lal's computerized analysis of the Emigration Passes.

Other conclusions, however, did not and could not emerge from the Emigration Passes but are based on archival research and fieldwork. On these bases, Lal took issue with another 'conventional stereotype of Indians being the world's greatest 'landlubbers', an immobile race immutably fixed in a rigidly stratified social system, observing eternal rules of *dharma* (duty) and *karma* (fate)'.[20] Rather, emigration to Fiji and elsewhere was an extension of an existing movement of wage labourers to the Calcutta jute mills, the Assam tea gardens, the Bihar coal mines, the Bombay textile mills. Worker mobility stemmed from a variety of 'push' factors that stemmed from the extent of rural poverty and dislocation, especially when famine stalked the land. In examining the recruiting process, Lal concluded that enlistment was sometimes based on deception and fraud but that its extent had been exaggerated. So the context is one of social mobility and the pervasive themes are agency, participation and choice by the subjects themselves.

One test of an author's interpretation is its durability. Another is its reception among workers in the same vineyard. In downplaying the coercive and deceptive role of the *arkatis*, Lal has run into criticism from Marina Carter, who found that many emigrants 'were often either unaware of their real destination or unable to reach the colony of their choice'.[21] But the bulk of discussion inclines in the opposite direction. In 1997, Clem Seecharan, the historian of Indians in British Guiana, wrote that Lal's *Girmitiyas* was '[a] rare fount of illumination':

> Here, in a freshingly lucid and dispassionate way, the unexamined dogma of deception and kidnapping is scrutinised and largely debunked. Lal has unearthed compelling socio-economic reasons for their leaving, and one feels coaxed into adopting these, to see their role in shaping the temperament of the indentured labourers and their descendants in the sugar colonies.[22]

* * *

Lal's use of computer analysis is perhaps the best known feature of his earlier work. But it is not something that impels his unqualified admiration.

As he said in his dissertation,

> my enthusiasm for the value of computerised data is tempered by my awareness of its limitations. We now know a great deal about who emigrated, when and from where—but very little about why all this happened. In other words, quantification has helped us to answer the 'how' (structural) questions of history, but not the 'why' (causal) questions. To understand the latter, we have had to turn to conventional published and unpublished sources as well as to oral and impressionistic evidence.[23]

This 'oral and impressionistic evidence' was the use of folk songs, which appear throughout *Girmitiyas*. The idea to utilise such material and to see how Indian emigration was represented in folk culture came from Wang Gungwu, one of Lal's PhD supervisors who himself was working at the time on Chinese emigration.[24] The results might now seem somewhat superficial and insufficiently integrated into Lal's broader discussion, but this aspect of *Girmitiyas* was done just as it was becoming academically respectable and finding a place within mainstream discourse.[25]

It is worth digressing to say that historians of the Pacific Islands labour trade have been notably innovative, methodologically adventurous and receptive to techniques that will add to the more conventional documentary sources, or enable them to handle the conventional sources more effectively. Peter Corris started the trend in the late 1960s when he engaged in fieldwork in Queensland, Fiji and the Solomon Islands, and interviewed surviving participants in the Solomon Islands labour trade.[26] The following decade, Judith Bennett, likewise gathered oral testimony in the Solomon Islands and, among other things, produced the best account of plantation life thus far in Pacific Islands historiography.[27] Clive Moore also made extensive use of oral testimony and innovatively intermeshed it with the documentary evidence. For example, from the documents he identified by name some 3,800 of the 9,000 Malaitans who enlisted for Queensland plantations. During fieldwork, oral information was collated on 132 of these recruits, whose personal details corroborated the existing interpretation of recruiting. Nearly all recruited willingly. Moore's research technique also modified previously held conclusions. It was previously thought that Malaitan recruits up until 1884 were predominantly salt-water people, and mostly bush people thereafter. Rather than this shift being a sharp break, however, Moore's research technique revealed that it was a 'gradual transition'. The oral testimony from Malaita also resulted in a major revision on the motives for enlisting. Once thought to have been an individual matter, it was frequently a corporate decision with kin groups deciding who should go and who should stay.[28]

A closer approach to Lal's is that of Patricia Mercer who, in addition to conventional archival and oral research, deploys the specialised techniques of historical demography in her study of Pacific Islander settlement in North Queensland. In Mercer's words, historical demography involves the

> reconstruction of the demographic features of a community through aggregation of individual and life histories built up from nominal sources: i.e. those in which an individual is named. These sources extend well beyond the usual library and archival material to encompass a wealth of local records—church, school, [sugar] mill, hospital and cemetery—held in the region itself and the oral testimony of present day Islanders.... This methodology offers a window on social history through the linkages which can be made between the individual and wider economic, social and cultural patterns: mobility economic and physical, occupation, educational performance, religious membership, family and community relationships support structures, social unity and divisions.[29]

Most recently, Dorothy Shineberg's study of the labour trade in Pacific Islanders to New Caledonia also displays a fine sense of how to surmount the limitations of the documentary sources. Her initial problem was simply knowing the size and scale of this migration when the registers of arrivals, if they ever existed, had been lost.

> It was [she said] necessary to reconstruct the basic data, adding the numbers of arrivals and departures from reports in the shipping columns of local newspapers over the whole period, scanning the acts of the *état civil* (Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths) for foreign Oceanians whose origins, estimated age, (less often) registration number, and (rarely) date of arrival and ship might be given. This arduous process had to be completed before I could establish the volume and time frame of the trade and begin the normal process of research and interpretation.[30]

This is the closest that any Pacific historian has come to the sort of computer analysis in which Lal engaged.[31] As Shineberg explains, her quantification resulted in an upward revision of the numbers involved to at least 14,000—a figure, says Shineberg, that is 'so much higher than previous estimates that this in itself makes a difference to one's thinking about the subject'.[32]

As this statement implies, quantification is not an end in itself but a useful and often indispensable means to putting flesh on historical characters or to help understand trends and situations. Lal would agree.

His acknowledgement that computerised analysis provides partial answers is endorsed by Marina Carter, who notes that such data with respect to the family 'deal[s] only with migrants at their point of entry into colonial societies'. What happens after that can, on data of this sort, only be discussed 'at a purely speculative level'.[33]

Lal's disenchantment with quantification was also a matter of preference and calling. He is the first to admit that the number-crunching was boring and intellectually unsatisfying. A certain excitement surrounded the initial preparations of designing a programme to manipulate his data with the assistance of Robert Mailladert, a statistician, who helped him work this out. Lal then designed a standardised sheet and devised the codes for all the variables from the Emigration Passes. There was one sheet for each Emigration Pass. The codes were memorised and once he got used to it, it took about a minute and a half to complete each sheet. It was concentrated and exhausting work that took five months of full time daily work, and the novelty soon wore off. In one sense, he says, the time and effort was worthwhile because:

> It provided me with trends that no one knew about—family migration, women and children and so on: this is what happened and it is very important. People moving about from village to village, internal migration, women moving about, what age. So it was very detailed, important information.[34]

But does the effort ultimately justify the results? Gillion insisted that Lal go through each and every Emigration Pass relating to north India. He brushed aside Lal's suggestion that sampling would be sufficient, insisting that each person was important.

> In hindsight [says Lal] I think that 45,000 was unnecessary. Comprehensive, yes, but you don't want to overdo it. I could have attained the same results—not perhaps with the same degree of authority—with a sample.[35]

Lal essentially felt dissatisfied because the data from the Emigration Passes did not enable him to reach the answer to the important questions of 'why': he could not, by such means, reach the heart of the indenture experience. Some temperaments, moreover, find such work akin to watching paint drying on a wall. It is not to everyone's taste and Lal was only too glad, when the time came, to make his great escape from the world of quantification.

At the end of 1980, Lal returned to a teaching position at the University of the South Pacific (USP) and embarked on the documentary and humanistic research with which he was more comfortable. His research time was now divided between the political history of Fiji and the girmitiya experience in Fiji. At the same time as he was analysing the 1982 Fiji election,[36] he was busily extending his earlier work: he sent a condensed version of his dissertation to the publisher;[37] he wrote a conference paper on the circulation and migration of Indian indentured labour for the 1983 Pacific Science Congress (published for the first time in this volume); and he published a paper on the voyage of the *Leonidas*, the vessel which brought the first Indian indentured labourers to Fiji, in 1879. Some years earlier, Lal had written a beautifully crafted paper on the wreck of the *Syria* in 1884, which cost the lives of 56 would-be Indian immigrants. Both are republished in this volume.

Nonetheless, by the early 1980s, Lal was finding USP, and Fiji generally, too restrictive. He realised, as his complacent colleagues could not, the 'intellectual shallowness of [that particular] university environment'. There were, moreover, too many distractions. As one of the few local academics with a doctorate, he was in high demand to speak at high school graduations and to address various community gatherings. He felt that he was doing little serious scholarship and that too much of his time was being spent on activities that would be 'ultimately meaningless'. He had to get out and prove himself in a 'more demanding intellectual environment', and he had to 'make the move before it was too late'. When USP declined Lal's request for a year's leave of absence to teach at the University of Hawaii, he took the plunge. He packed his bags and books, and accompanied by his wife and a young daughter, took up a track-tenure Assistant Professorship at Hawaii. Oblivious to the pun, he described the move, in August 1983, as 'burn[ing] my bridges in Fiji'.[38] Less than three years after returning to his homeland he was on the move again—much like the north Indian peasants about whom he wrote.

There is no doubt that Lal made the right decision: he was able to achieve goals in Hawaii that would have been out of reach in Fiji. It is not pushing the analogy too far to say that his situation resembles that of the great Russian ballet dancer Rudolph Nureyev, who defected to the West. As (some) Russians are prepared to admit: 'What Nureyev did in the west, he could never have done here'.[39] And Lal made the most of his opportunities in Honolulu. He loved teaching the 'World Civilizations' course, and continued to teach it when no longer obliged to, as director of the program. He supervised numerous graduate students, something hardly possible at USP even now. He was influential in the thriving local scholarly publishing scene, serving on several editorial boards. He was appointed founding editor of *The Contemporary Pacific*, which quickly became the premier regional journal in the social sciences and won the 1990 Association of American Publishers Best New Journal Award in Business, Social Sciences and Humanities. (This is one of the few things that you'll ever hear him brag about.) And his own writing and publishing blossomed as he hoped they would.

Again, he divided his research time between the recent political history of Fiji and the Indian indenture experience in Fiji. But the balance of the equation was beginning to change as Lal increasingly became absorbed with the study of contemporary politics in Fiji. This understandably intensified after the Fiji coups of 1987. Nevertheless, in his early years in Hawaii he was still mainly concerned with the indenture experience of the Fiji Indians, and he published a series of important papers. Having dealt with the girmitiyas' origins and social backgrounds, he now followed them on to the plantations.

I once asked Lal to make a statement on the nature of indenture and plantation life, and he said:

> Leaving aside the questions of exploitation, racism, and the institutional aspects of indenture, I think that the indenture experience is a very important, formative and defining period in the history of overseas Indian communities, particularly in the Caribbean, Mauritius, South Africa and Fiji, because that is the site of the initial social transformation. It is fundamental. When the Old World meets the New, then old ways of doing things, old values and institutions start to change. We begin to confront the reality of a completely different social order when former ways of doing things, the world view, seem to lose their relevance. The caste system breaks down, and along with that a host of other social conventions and practices. Everyone is a 'coolie', huddled together on the estate lines in cramped quarters. In that sense, everyone is equal in the denial of their individual humanity. The indenture experience was a great leveller of hierarchy and status. I see the indenture process as the death of one world and the beginning of another. The details vary from colony to colony, but the process is the same everywhere.[40]

Lal is less dispassionate when it comes to recounting the actual working and private lives of the girmitiyas. It is a grim tale, as he tells it, with few redeeming features. In a general essay (not republished in this volume), Lal paints a depressing portrait of exploitation and ill-treatment that involved over-tasking, the complicity of *sirdars* (Indian foremen), the instability of family life, suicides, lack of protection by the legal system, government indifference, non- or partial-payment of wages, ill-health and high mortality. At one point Lal writes:

> Low wages led or at least contributed to a number of other problems such as poor or inadequate food, which, in turn, caused sickness. Ill health led to absence from work, a problem that had become acute by the 1890s. Absence meant loss of wages and prosecution in a court of law. The vicious cycle was thus complete.[41]

At first sight this emphasis on harshness and injustice might seem quite out of character with Lal's earlier work, on the girmitiyas' origins. Influenced by the dominant line of thought with the Canberra-school of Pacific historians, Lal had accorded the emigrants a large measure of agency in their decision to go abroad.[42] In other words, his work is 'revisionist' in the sense that he rejected a victims-model and, instead, endowed the Indian immigrants with a measure of free-will and credited them with having made a rational choice to go to Fiji—qualified of course by the restraints of their personal and economic circumstances. Given all the 'push' factors, they had taken a sensible option, *in the circumstances*. But now, in his discussion of plantation life, he is adopting an unambiguously 'counter-revisionist' position where oppression, harshness and exploitation loom large.[43] There is no necessary contradiction between seemingly divergent conclusions. The decision to emigrate and conditions on the plantations are separate issues (although if large numbers of girmitiyas genuinely expected 'quick and easy fortune' in Fiji, as Lal suggests,[44] then the element of deception at the time of recruitment may have been larger than he acknowledges). And Lal is not the first historian to be revisionist in certain respects and counter-revisionist in others. In similar fashion, Kay Saunders found that the recruitment of Melanesians to Queensland was largely a voluntary affair but their treatment on the plantations was harsh and exploitative.[45]

Whatever his conclusions, Lal's mode of writing is characteristic in its argumentativeness. I am using the term in its positive connotation—he has a point of view; he argues his case resolutely; his arguments stick close to the evidence (and he has the capacity for sustained research); he often draws unambiguously moral conclusions, for history, in his view, is an idealistic activity. Lal once said, with respect to writing the contemporary history of Fiji, that his approach was one of '[c]ritical attachment rather than cool detachment'.[46] Or as he said on another occasion, '[f]or me history provides a tool and a method to understand the contemporary world'.[47] Those same impulses inform and channel his work on Indian indenture in Fiji. The heart and the head have to come together, otherwise the exercise is pointless.

Soon after arriving in Hawaii, Lal published a trio of revisionary (not revisionist!) articles (all are republished in this volume) that breathed life into the study of indenture in Fiji. They are case studies in the sense that each deals with a particular aspect of indenture, be it worker resistance, the position of women or the reasons for suicide. The essay on resistance was something of an anti-climax. Taking his cue from Eugene Genovese's observation about the paucity of slave rebellions in the United States, Lal set out the reasons for non-resistance by girmitiyas in terms of acquiescence against overwhelming odds.[48] Their strategy for survival, in other words, was outward compliance, that is 'non-resistance'. After all, as David McCreery points out, '[o]ppressed peoples have no obligation to act in ways academics find dramatic and exciting, but rather to survive and endure and to ensure the survival of their families and communities in the face of what threaten to be literally overwhelming pressures'.[49]

These are hardly politically correct sentiments. It is well known that resistance by indentured workers was largely covert and small-scale (so-called 'day to day resistance'), stopping well short of organised, collective dissent. This situation of scaled-down options was a function of employers holding a big edge in the power relationship.[50] This, according to Lal, was extreme on sugar plantations in Fiji. It takes little imagination to realise how an argument along these lines would have gone down had it been applied, in the late-1960s/early-1970s, to American slaves. The particular context was the Black Power movement when black separatism and nationalism were at their height. In that touchy, politicised setting, there was great resentment should white historians find any deficiencies in American slaves or their descendants. Even to say they were hapless victims and were damaged as a result was 'ideologically untenable'. The politics of grievance was driving the debate *and* the conclusions.[51] In a less politically charged setting, Lal's conclusion that non-resistance/accommodation could be a positive strategy for survival now simply pushed the debate in new directions. It put questions of resistance and accommodation, and the boundaries and relationships between the two, onto the research agenda and resulted in—if I may say—an important collection of essays on which we collaborated as editors. It turned out that Lal's notion of non-resistance was anything but far fetched, as the chapter on Gilbertese labourers in Samoa demonstrated. The Gilbertese were not shrinking violets. They were not easily cowed. But on German plantations in Samoa during the 1870s and 1880s, they buckled under a reign of near-terror and, like their Indian counterparts in Fiji, discovered that non-resistance was their only viable option.[52] Not surprisingly, there is little room for individual or group agency in Lal's discussion of non-resistance. The watchword is survival.

The theme of survival likewise pervades Lal's study of women labourers. Another of Lal's revisionary essays of the mid-1980s, it examines the private and working lives of Indian women and gives credence to the assertion that gendered history can be remarkably ungendered, so to speak. It has recently been said that 'many women have written major works on political or diplomatic history in which there is nothing at all that might betray the fact that they are female except the name on the cover...'.[53] Conversely, there are histories about women whose male authorship is only identifiable by his name on the title page. Lal is a case in point. He writes with profound sympathy for and understanding of the plight of women girmitiyas. The essay is entitled 'Kunti's Cry', in remembrance of a young woman's misfortune. Kunti rejected the sexual advances of her European overseer and jumped into a nearby river to escape his unwanted intentions. She was saved from drowning but she was deeply traumatised by the ordeal. Kunti became a *cause celêbre*, around whom revolved highly publicised attempts to stop the emigration of Indian women for overseas indentured service, to the accompaniment of a sustained government cover-up. In Lal's account, Kunti's story becomes Kunti's metaphorical cry of anguish for the lot of her female compatriots, who took the brunt of the blame for the multifarious ills of plantation life. Just as Edward Thompson sought to rescue 'the poor [nineteenth century English] stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" handloom weaver, the "utopian" artisan ... from the enormous condescension of posterity',[54] so has Lal attempted to rescue the poor Indian woman labourer from the enormous sanctimony of posterity.

He not only sets out the women's broader working experience, which was exacting in itself.[55] He is concerned to refute the wider implications and consequences of their allegedly immoral character. The women made up less than 30 per cent of the adult plantation workforce and their supposed licentiousness and infidelity produced such a degree of sexual jealousy that the males were frequently driven to commit suicide or else to murder the women. Prostitution, moreover, was rampant and the level of infant mortality appalling, and again the women were held responsible.[56] Lal does not see it that way at all: he places the responsibility squarely on the plantation system, which eroded family life, or on the males, some of whom were not backward in prostituting the wives and daughters. In Lal's words, '[t]he focus of the supposed immoral character of the women conveniently detracted attention from those conditions on the plantations that promoted sexual jealousy and the murders'. The high infant mortality rate was a function not of bad mothering but of the unsanitary conditions that prevail on the plantations. Indenture was 'indeed a harsh experience'. The theme of survival again emerges because, despite a mix of 'achievement and wreckage', most of the women somehow survived through 'sheer determination', and that is to be applauded. But, reminds Lal, '[i]t is too often ... forgotten that the benefits and hardships of indentured were not distributed equitably...' and women bore the brunt of the hardships. Kunti's cry of was thus 'a protest against the veil of dishonour that Indian women wore, or rather were made to wear, during their indenture on Fiji plantations'. Again, Lal provides a victims-model in which damage and survival are key elements.

This article came under attack from the ubiquitous but wayward Tom Brass who claimed that Lal's 'positive theorization of "survival"entailed a negation of the women's oppression and exploitation'.[57] It is difficult to see how such a comment can be sustained when the gist of Lal's argument has consistently been the harshness of the plantation system as it operated in Fiji, and not least in this particular article where he paints an unrelentingly grim picture of plantation life and labour. He repeated the charge in his latest book on indenture—a collection of documents—reminding his readers that the indenture experience 'in the main was a story of great hardship and suffering, and many were broken and left by the wayside'.[58] There is nothing inconsistent or untoward in celebrating the survivors and their capacity for survival against the odds. Lal is not, as Brass seems to be saying, letting the indenture system off the hook. To survive at such high cost is hardly an undiluted triumph. Much less does it entail a denial of suffering.

The early article that Lal himself most likes is the one on suicide. It is the most difficult to discuss, not surprisingly, because it is seldom possible to discover the real intention behind such an act and, to varying degrees, suicide is a taboo subject in most cultures. Nor it is surprising that Lal's evidence is sparse and fragile—a comment here, an aside there, an expression of prejudice or concern elsewhere. That said, 333 Indians committed suicide in Fiji during the indenture period, almost all of whom were indentured labourers. Given that there were almost 61,000 girmitiyas, this may sound insignificant; but it was high by comparison with the free population, with the north Indian population, and with indentured populations elsewhere. The vast majority of the suicides were by males, and the finger was pointed at the alleged infidelity of the women labourers. This was the prevailing contemporary explanation and Lal admits that he found the sexual jealousy argument persuasive until he conducted detailed documentary research into the question. While he admits that sexual jealousy was a contributing factor, not least because there were so many more men than women, he again finds that the plantation system was the real culprit, this time because it led directly to the social and cultural disruption that created the conditions for suicide. His argument is more subtle and nuanced than this bald outline would suggest. But, in the last resort, suicide was 'both a cry of despair and an act of protest directed ultimately at the principles and ethics of the indenture system itself'.

On a topic so controversial and slippery, there is bound to be room for discussion. The sociologist Shaista Shameem offers the quite contrary view that it was not the erosion of 'integrative institutions' such as family and kinship that caused the suicides of men (and the murders of women), but because women 'challenge[d] the[se] "integrative institutions" on the plantations and the men's place in them'. It is an interesting speculation, but no more than a speculation: Shameem provides not a shred of hard empirical evidence to support her assertion, either in the source quoted or elsewhere.[59]

Lal's work will prosper in the company of genuine discussion and debate. There is room for alternative lines of enquiry, especially those informed by more comparative perspectives. There were, for example, proportionally far fewer suicides among Melanesian indentured labourers in Queensland where the gender imbalance was far more severe (about 8 per cent of Melanesian labourers were females against about 28 per cent in Fiji). What does this suggest? It is also worth paying greater attention to the fact the vast majority of suicides occurred within the first six months of indenture when the trauma and despair of social dislocation were most keenly felt. Another matter for detailed enquiry is the role of religion and especially its role as an integrative institution. 'The Story of the Haunted Line' by Totaram Sanadhya (published in this volume) tells how a strong religious faith sustained him through terrible moments in the early months, and probably prevented him from taking his own life. And there is something else to consider: Lal's specialised articles on the indenture experience are still generalist in nature—delineating the broad trends of a particular theme or topic but seldom engaging in the fine-grained details of individual lives or situations. There is obvious scope to build upon his work in the manner, for example, of John Kelly's micro-study of capital punishment.[60]

These challenges and urgings provide one of the rationales for publishing the present volume. Lal and I somewhat deplore the lack of a developed historical consciousness in Fiji. It is as though anything before the 1987 coups is ancient history, to be ignored and despised as an irrelevance. Few descendants of the girmitiyas have an informed knowledge of the indenture experience, and this is altogether wrong. We hope that the retrieval of these essays in readily accessible form will contribute to a better knowledge of a crucial aspect of Fiji's history. And what better time than now, when Lal has signalled his intention to write no more about the indenture experience, apart perhaps from reflections of a more personal nature. Just as he drew the veil of dishonour from the indentured women, he now brings down the curtain on this particular journey in his life. He will no longer, metaphorically speaking, follow in the steps of his late grandfather. His own girmit is complete.

Endnotes

[1] A listing of Lal's books is appended at the end of this book.

[2] David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1920* (Cambridge, 1995), 156-62; Stanley Engerman, 'Servants to Slaves to Servants: contract labour and European expansion', in P.C. Emmer (ed.), *Colonialism and Migration: indentured labor before and after slavery* (Dordrecht, 1986), 272-74

[3] Jeff Siegal, 'Origins of Pacific Islands Labourers in Fiji', *Journal of Pacific History* (hereafter *JPH*), 20:1/2 (1985), 46.

[4] For historiographic overviews of the Pacific Islands labour trade, and the place of Fiji Indians within it, see Clive Moore, 'Labour, Indenture and Historiography in the Pacific', in Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Pacific Island History: journeys and transformations* (Canberra, 1992), 129-48; Doug Munro, 'The Pacific Islands Labour Trade: approaches, methodologies, debates', *Slavery & Abolition*, 14:2 (1993), 87-108.

[5] Anthony Low, *Britain and Indian Nationalism: the imprint of ambiguity, 1929-1942* (Cambridge 1997), viii. Ali is a professor of business management in Pakistan, Henningham is deputy Australian high commissioner in Papua New Guinea, Major taught history at the University of Singapore until recently, and Chakrabarty teaches at the University of Chicago.

[6] Doug Munro, 'Interview with Brij V. Lal: historian of indenture and of contemporary Fiji', *Itinerario: European journal of overseas history*, 21:1 (1997), 16.

[7] Lal (ed.), *Journeys and Transformations*, 245.

[8] Brij V. Lal, 'East Indians in British Columbia, 1904-1974: an historical study in growth and integration', MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1976. Publications to emerge from this research are 'Political Movement in the Early East Indian Community in Canada', *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 2 (1981), 61-87; and 'Canada: the tide of the turbans', in Ron Crocombe (ed.), *Pacific Indians: profiles from 20 Pacific countries* (Suva 1982), 130-43.

[9] Brij V. Lal, 'Exhaustion and Persistence: aspects of rural Indian society in Fiji', *Quarterly Review of Historical Studies* (Calcutta), 17:2 (1977-78), 69-79.

[10] Charles A. Price, *The Great White Walls Are Built: restrictive immigration to North America and Australasia, 1836-1888* (Canberra, 1974).

[11] K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: a history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne, 1962; reprinted 1973).

[12] Ahmed Ali (ed.), *Girmit: the indenture experience in Fiji* (Suva , 1979).

[13] Taped conversation, Canberra, 13 December 1998.

[14] K.L. Gillion, 'The Sources of Indian Emigration to Fiji', *Population Studies*, 10:2 (1956), 139-57.

[15] Munro, 'Interview with Brij V. Lal', 19. Another historian of overseas Indians, Hugh Tinker, also maintained that Gillion was concerned with 'balance', but with slightly derogatory connotations. In Tinker's assessment of *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 'Dr. Gillion is perhaps a little too concerned to be "balanced", and sometimes holds back from the most searching probe into the sordid, being also influenced by traditional British colonial history. He gets closer to the Indians than does Dr. Cumpston [in her book *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834-1854* (London, 1953)]'. See Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the export of Indian labour overseas, 1830-1920* (London 1974), 407. In Lal's view, Gillion tried to be fair to everyone—but not all groups and individuals are worthy of equal

attention. My experience of Gillion leads me to suggest that he certainly cared about moral and political issues but was not given to expressing himself in emotional language, despite being highly critical of plantation conditions in Fiji (Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 103-29). Measured terminology does not necessarily equate with lack of passion.

[16] Munro, 'Interview with Brij V. Lal', 18. For a somewhat similar statement, see Peter H. Wood, '"The Dream Deferred": black freedom struggles on the eve of white independence', in Gary Y. Okihiro (ed.), *In Resistance: studies in African, Caribbean and Afro-African history* (Amherst,1986), 166.

[17] Brij V. Lal, 'Leaves of the Banyan Tree: origins and background of Fiji's North Indian migrants, 1879-1916', 2 vols., PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1980; Lal, *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983). The book has long been out of print. It was to have been reissued by a London publisher, which unfortunately went bankrupt.

[18] Lal, 'Leaves of the Banyan Tree', I: 21-22.

[19] W.T. Roy, review of *Girmitiyas*, in *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 30:2 (1984), 292.

[20] Brij V. Lal, 'Fiji *Girmitiyas*: the background to banishment', in Vijay Mishra (ed.), *Rama's Banishment: a centenary tribute to the Fiji Indians, 1879-1979* (Auckland , 1979), 14.

[21] Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture: experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London/New York, 1996), 45.

[22] Clem Seecharan, *'Tigers in the Stars': the anatomy of Indian achievement in British Guiana, 1919-29* (London/Bassingstoke 1997), xxiii. See also Surendra Bhana, *Indentured Indian emigrants to Natal, 1860-1902: a study based on ships' lists* (New Delhi 1991), xi., another computer-based analysis which is modelled on the *Girmitiyas*.

[23] Lal, 'Leaves of the Banyan Tree', 28.

[24] Anthony Reid (ed), *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the Chinese* by Wang Gungwu (Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981).

[25] There was already some discussion of the use of songs and folklore in West Indian historiography. For example Ved Prakash Vatuk, 'Protest Songs of East Indians in British Guiana', *Journal of American Folklore*, 78 (1964). The pathbreaking work is Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford 1977). Another profoundly influential book on the use of folklore is Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: a South Carolina slave community* (Urbana/Chicago, 1984).

[26] Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: a history of Solomon Islands labour migration, 1870-1914* (Melbourne, 1973), esp. 4-5, 151-54.

[27] Judith A. Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons: a history of a Pacific archipelago, 1800-1970* (Honolulu, 1987), 167-91; Bennett, 'Personal Work Histories of Solomon Islands Plantation Laborers—methodology and evidence', *Pacific Studies*, 5:1 (1982), 34-56.

[28] Clive Moore, *Kanaka: a History of Melanesian Mackay* (Boroko/Port Moresby, 1985) esp. 50-51, 81-89.

[29] Patricia Mercer, *White Australia Defied: Pacific Islander settlement in North Queensland* (Townsville, 1995), xv. Manifestos by the practitioners of historical demography include E.A. Wrigley, 'Population, Family and Household', in

Martin Ballard (ed.), *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History* (Melbourne, 1971), 93-104; Wrigley, 'The Prospects for Population History', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12 (1981), 207-26; Kenneth A. Lockridge, 'Historical Demography', in Charles F. Delzell (ed.), *The Future of History: essays in the Vanderbilt University Centennial Symposium* (Nashville, 1977), 53-64. A more neutral description is Richard E. Beringer, *Historical Analysis: contemporary approaches to Clio's craft* (New York, 1978), 235-53. My own somewhat skeptical remarks on the possibilities of historical demography are in 'Indenture, Deportation, Survival: recent books on Australian South Sea Islanders', *Journal of Social History*, 31:4 (1998), 937-38.

30. Dorothy Shineberg, '"The New Hebridean is everywhere": the Oceanian labor trade to New Caledonia', *Pacific Studies*, 18:2 (1995), 2. The eventual book was published as *The People Trade: Pacific Island Laborers and New Caledonia, 1865-1930* (Honolulu, 1999).

31. One should also note the work of Ralph Shlomowitz, a Chicago-trained economist, whose studies of the structure of indentured labour markets and on worker mortality have a solid statistical basis. Shlomowitz's work on mortality has been gathered in his collection of essays, *Mortality and Migration in the Modern World* (Aldershot, 1996). Shlomowitz's background is sketched by Doug Munro, 'Debate on the Queensland Labour Trade' [symposium], *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 18 (1994-95), 105-09.

32. Dorothy Shineberg, '"Noumea no good, Noumea no pay": "New Hebridean" indentured labour in New Caledonia, 1865-1925', *JPH*, 26:2 (1991), 187.

33. Carter, *Voices from Indenture*, 142.

34. Taped conversation, 13 December 1998.

35. Taped conversation, 13 December 1998.

36. Brij V. Lal, 'The Fiji General Election of 1982: the tidal wave that never came', *JPH*, 18:1/2 (1983), 134-57.

37. *Girmitiya* is a drastically condensed version of the original dissertation. It contains none of the statistical tables in volume 2, and the historiographic and methodological chapters in volume 1 have likewise been omitted. See his 'Indian Indenture Historiography: A Note on Problems, Sources and Methods', in *Pacific Studies*, 6:2, 33-50.

38. Brij V. Lal, 'From Across the Horizon: reflections on a sojourn in Hawai'i', *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 20 (1996), 225-27.

39. Peter Watson, *Nureyev: a biography* (London, 1994), 455.

40. Munro, 'Interview with Brij V. Lal', 21.

41. Brij V. Lal, 'Labouring Men and Nothing More: some problems of Indian indenture in Fiji', in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920* (London/Canberra, 1984), 137.

42. Lal acknowledges that Peter Corris's *Passage, Port and Plantation*, an unambiguously revisionist text, was '[t]he book on Pacific history that most impressed me initially'. Munro, 'Interview with Brij V. Lal', 18-19.

43. The revisionist/counter-revisionist positions and debates are discussed in Clive Moore, 'Revising the Revisionists: the historiography of immigrant Melanesians to Australia', *Pacific Studies*, 15:2 (1992), 61-86; Doug Munro, 'The Labor Trade in Melanesians to Queensland: an historiographic essay', *Journal of Social History*, 28:3 (1995), 609-27.

[44] Lal, 'Labouring Men and Nothing More', 147.

[45] Kay Saunders, *The Origins and Bases of Unfree Labour in Queensland, 1824-1916* (Brisbane, 1982).

[46] Brij V. Lal, *Broken Waves: a history of the Fiji Islands in the twentieth century* (Honolulu, 1992), xvii.

[47] Munro, 'Interview with Brij V. Lal', 22.

[48] Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave revolts in the modern world* (Baton Rouge, 1979), 7.

[49] David McCreery, 'Hegemony and Repression in Rural Guatemala, 1871-1940', *Peasant Studies*, 17:3 (1990), 157.

[50] The paradigmatic statement is James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven/London, 1993).

[51] See August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black History and the Historical Profession, 1915-1980* (Urbana/London, 1986), 277-98; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: the 'objectivity question' and the American historical profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 472-91. For an example closer to home, see Clive Moore, 'Decolonising the History of Australia's South Sea Islanders: politics and curriculum materials', in Donald Denoon (ed.), *Emerging from Empire?: decolonisation in the Pacific* (Canberra, 1997), 194-203.

[52] Doug Munro and Stewart Firth, 'Samoan Plantations: the Gilbertese laborers' experience, 1867-1896', in Brij V. Lal, Doug Munro and Edward D. Beechert (eds), *Plantation Workers: resistance and accommodation* (Honolulu, 1993), 101-27.

[53] Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, 1997), 217.

[54] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 12.

[55] Such was the extent of overtasking that girmitiyas—men as well as women—did not routinely received their full wage until as late as 1908. Wadan Lal Narsey, 'Monopoly Capitalism, White Racism and Super-profits in Fiji', *Journal of Pacific Studies*, 5 (1979), 86; Ralph Shlomowitz, 'The Fiji Labor Trade in Comparative Perspective, 1864-1914', *Pacific Studies*, 9:3 (1986), 140.

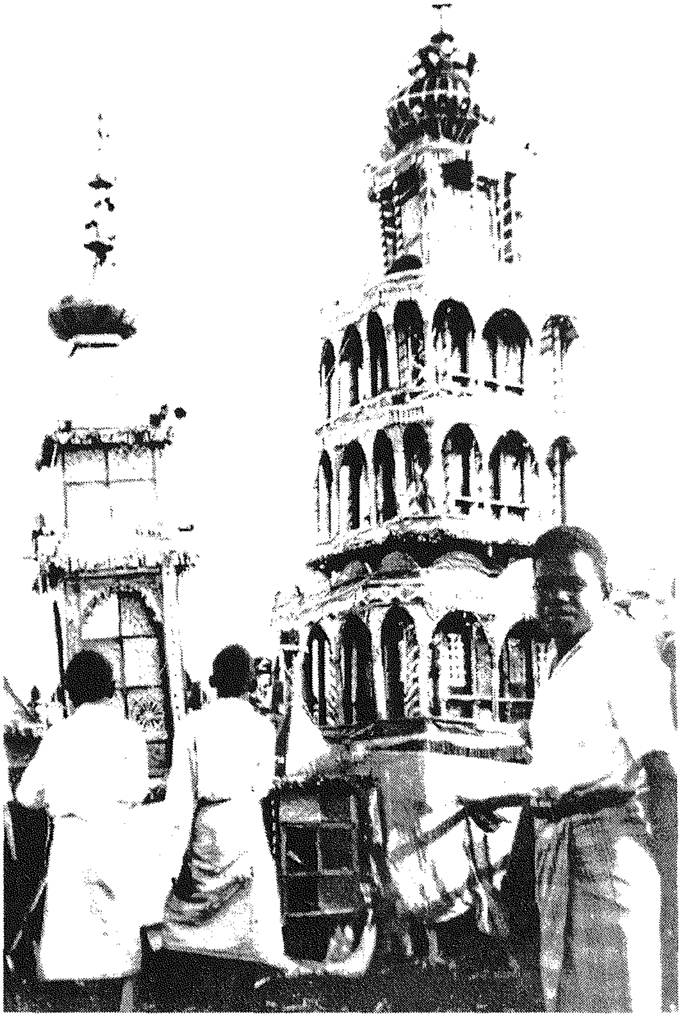
[56] The questions of infant mortality and fertility are also dealt with by Ralph Shlomowitz, 'Infant Mortality and Fiji's Indian Migrants, 1879-1919', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 23:3 (1996), 289-302; Shlomowitz, 'Fertility and Fiji's Indian Migrants, 1879-1919', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 24:2 (1988), 205-12 (both republished in Shlomowitz, *Mortality and Migration in the Modern World*).

[57] Tom Brass, 'Some Observations on Unfree Labour, Capital Restructuring, and Deproletarianisation', in Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Free and Unfree Labour: the debate continues* (Bern, 1997), 64.

[58] Brij V. Lal (ed.), *Crossing the Kala Pani: a documentary history of Indian indenture in Fiji* Canberra/Suva, 1998), 2.

[59] Shaista Shameem, 'Girmitiya Women in Fiji: work, resistance and survival', in Clive Moore, Jacqueline Leckie and Doug Munro (eds), *Labour in the South Pacific* (Townsville, 1990), 153; 'Sugar and Spice: wealth accumulation and the labour of Indian women in Fiji, 1879-1930', D.Phil thesis, University of Waikato (Hamilton, 1990), 227.

[60] J.D. Kelly, 'Fiji Indians and the Law, 1912', in John Dunham Kelly and Uttra Kumari Singh (eds), *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and The Story of the Haunted Line* (Suva, 1991), 154-219.



Celebrating Tazia or Moharrum, a Shia festival commemorating the death of Prophet Mohammed's grandsons Hasan and Hussein. The tinsel structure represents a tomb. Both Muslims and Hindus celebrated Tazia.

chapter 2

Return to Bahraich

Our deeds travel with us from afar. What we have been makes us what we are.
Indian saying

My grandfather was a girmitiya. I have vivid memories of him. He was a tall, handsomely built man, with a massive handlebar moustache and a perpetual week's growth of white beard, a thinning close-cropped head of hair, deep-set (almost) blind eyes fixed perpetually on something in the distance, clad in white flowing cotton kurta and dhoti, with a well rolled homemade *suluka* in one hand and a walking stick in the other. Over eighty, although he reckoned he was nearly a hundred before he died on 8 May 1962, he was a creature of habit. He would be up at the first light of dawn, just as he had done under indenture, do his ablutions in the fields by the river, rinse his toothless mouth with salt water, bathe at the well, offer a prayer and a ceremonial *lota* of water sprinkled with *tulsi* leaves to the sun, the eternal source of energy, have a *piala* of sweet red tea and retire to his stringed bed under the huge mandarin tree behind the *belo.*

In the afternoon once a month or so, a few other girmitiyas, all grizzled, dhoti-clad men of similar age, would gather at our house, smoke huqqa—I am now certain it was ganja—and talk vaguely about their evanescent past in a strange language no one else understood. Once in a while on some ceremonial occasion when the entire village got together—for Satyanarayan Puja, Ramayan Recital, Bhagvada Katha, Ram Naumi, Shiva Ratri—people would plead with the girmitiyas to sing *bhajan* as only they knew how. On these occasions, Aja would take the lead; he was an accomplished *bhajania* as well as a *sarangi* and *khajhadi* player. We would be seated on the *paal* against the wall, mesmerised as Aja and his fellow *mulkis*, compatriots —Jwala, Madho, Butru, Dhanessar, Nanka—sang their haunting Kabir *bhajans* about love and loss and grief (*Koi thagwa nagariya lootal ho*), about the longing of the soul for freedom from the entanglements of *maya* (*Rehna nahin des virana hai*), about the ultimate pointlessness of life without faith (*Sumiran bina gota khao ge*), working themselves into a trance as the evening wore on.

There was something strange, something incongruous about these people. Now in their mellow twilight, they seemed to be shipwrecked by fate in a place they did not, perhaps could not, fully embrace, and they could not return to a place they so dearly loved. They were a people caught in-between the tensions of culture and history, resisting assimilation into the ways of their adopted homeland by re-enacting archaic customs from a remembered past. Aja, for instance, never shaved himself, but waited every Sunday for another girmitiya, a *hajam*, barber, (Chinnaiya by name) who lived across the river in the adjacent village of Laqere, to shave him and collect his customary remuneration in kind, usually some rice and mung dhall. Every year after the family Satyanarayan Puja, he would donate a calf to the family Brahman priest in the prayerful hope that his children and grandchildren would be able to cross the dreaded Baitarini river from this world into the next by holding on to the tail of the animal. On some particularly auspicious occasion, such as the birth of a grandchild, he would hold a huge *bhandara* to which all our far-flung relatives and immediate neighbours would be invited. And for thirteen days during the month of *Pitara Pakh*, when the graves gave up their dead and the souls of all the recently departed family members returned to roam the earth, he would fast and pray and make ritual offering of food on banana or taro leaves at a specially prepared prayer mound under the mango tree. These and other customs, with which I grew up, have now vanished almost beyond recall.

Aja had come to Fiji in 1908 as an indentured labourer on a five year agreement to work on CSR sugar cane plantations. He was entitled to return to India at his own expense at the end of five years or at government expense after a further ten years of 'industrial residence' in the colony. Aja had hoped to return, one day, never expecting or wanting to leave his homeland permanently. He continued to correspond with his relatives back in Bahraich until the 1950s, and occasionally sent whatever little money the family could save. But that day of decision never came. Our family was always in financial difficulty. Aja had married a woman from another caste, and knew the dishonour this would bring him and his people back in India. He had a family of his own to raise, rent to pay for the ten acre native lease. And so time passed and memories of home faded, and, in the course of time, an intended temporary sojourn was transformed into permanent displacement.

My grandfather was one of sixty thousand men, women and children, who had come to Fiji between 1879, when indentured migration to the colony began, and 1916 when all indentured emigration ceased. Fiji's migrants themselves were a part of one million Indian indentured migrants who had crossed the *kala pani*, the dark dreaded waters, to the 'king sugar' colonies in the Indian and Atlantic oceans. Some were enticed by the tall tales told by unscrupulous *arkatis* (recruiters) of easy fortune awaiting them in Mirich Dvip (Mauritius) or Chini Tapu (Trinidad) or Demerara (Guyana), or Fiji, sometimes called the Ramnik Dvip, the colourful islands or islands in paradise. But most were simple folk, down on their luck, seeking temporary respite from some personal difficulties. Perhaps the crops had failed or cattle had died in a drought, perhaps the zamindar was threatening them with eviction for arrears of rent or the village mahajan was demanding his dues. Perhaps some were members of the '*Huqqa Pani Band*' brigade, escaping social ostracism for some breach of caste protocol. No doubt some were in trouble with the law, and some were young unattached souls in search of adventure. They all knew that they were going to some place they had never heard of before, but they would be back one day, long before their absence was noticed in the village.

Aja came from Bahraich, a poor district in an impoverished region of northeastern India, the principal supplier of indentured labour to the colonies after the 1870s, taking over from Bihar. From then on, it was such districts as Basti, Gonda, Azamgarh, Sultanpur, Faizabad, names synonymous with destitution and despair even now, which supplied the bulk of the migrants. Today, people comment harshly on the extreme poverty and backwardness of the eastern districts, and on the lethargic, perennially unenterprising attitude of its inhabitants, India's real 'wretched of the earth'. Given this widespread perception, it surprises most people to learn that hundreds of thousands of people from this region upped and left for the colonies last century, showing courage, enterprise and determination, which those remaining behind are alleged to be lacking. Within India itself, the region furnished millions of workers to the Calcutta jute mills, the Assam tea gardens, the Bihar coal mines, and the Bombay textile mills.

Bahraich was not a major contributor of indentured migrants to Fiji. Of the colony's forty five thousand North Indian indentured migrants, only seven hundred and fifty came from the district. But in many respects, it was a typical eastern UP district: predominantly Hindu, poor, illiterate, agricultural, its population dominated by such cultivating castes as Ahir, Kurmi, Kori, Kahar, Lodh, Murao as well as Brahman and Rajput peasants. Shaped like an isosceles triangle, with an area of 2647 square miles, almost exactly the size of Vanua Levu, Fiji's second largest island where Aja eventually settled, but with a population of over one million, Bahraich, like most of Oudh, was a *taluqdari* (feudal) district; four landlords owned more than half the total area. Half of the land was cultivated by tenants at will, and half by those who paid their dues in kind. The district is littered with lakes and *jhils* (swamps) and thus vulnerable to malarial fever; cholera, officials often noted ruefully, was 'never absent from the district'. A lot of the district was under forest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but there were also large groves of mangoes—mahua, shisham. I knew from the stories that Aja used to tell that the district was full of animals—leopards, tigers, wolves, wild hogs, antelope. He described them lovingly as if they were members of his own extended family.

The Emigration Pass, that indentured visa card-cum-passport, lists Aja's age at the time of migration as 26 which was about the average age of the emigrating population. As a young unmarried man, he had been out and about, looking for a job. 1907-1908 was a particularly bad year even for a district no stranger to misfortune. Bahraich was stricken with a drought, its misery worsened by a succession of bad harvests. Aja had wondered off to the local thana looking for something to do, and there heard about wonderful opportunities in a *tapu*, an island. Would he like to go there just for a few years and see what it was like? Aja agreed, whereupon he was taken to Fyzabad for registration on 13 January 1908. Soon afterwards, along with other recruits, he did his *chalan* (journey) to Calcutta. At Daryaganj, the Depot Surgeon, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Indian Medical Services, certified that 'we have examined and passed the above-named man as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging'. On 25 January, Fiji's Emigration Agent in Calcutta, W. J. Bolton, certified that Aja 'has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of Fiji as willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to him all matters concerning his engagement and duties'. That being so, Aja was certified to proceed 'as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to Fiji' on 18 February 1908.

Aja had been recruited for Demerara, I remember him telling us, which is not surprising. Often, one agent recruited for a number of colonies. But when he reached Calcutta, Aja was told that the Demerara quota had been filled. And so he was transferred to the Fiji Depot. I don't know whether he actually understood the terms and conditions of his engagement. Some of those who had accompanied him from upcountry balked when the reality of a long voyage to a distant place dawned on them, and some bolted from the barracks. But Aja stayed put. He had eaten the arkati's salt, he said, and he would honour his word. He was not a *namak haram*, an ingrate. Honour, *izzat*, weighed heavily with Aja. Five years would pass like five minutes. Didn't Lord Rama spend fourteen years in exile? He emphasised the point by quoting some disjointed lines from the *Ramayana: 'Chaudah baras Ram ban basi...'* He boarded his ship with resolve but not without apprehension. *SS Sangola* was his ship's name. The immigrant ships have magical names, some derived from classical mythology, such as *Leonidas, Pericles, Syria,* while others were named after great rivers such as *Ganges, Indus, Sutlej, Elbe, Danube, Rhine, Clyde, Avon,* all of them especially fitted to carry human cargo over long distances. 'Floating caravan of barbarian tourists' someone called these ships, while some girmitiyas remembered them as floating funeral processions: *chalta firta, jeeta jagata janaza*.

The confined spaces of overcrowded cabins confounded a people who had never seen the sea before. Inevitably, the ship became the site of a massive social disruption. All the old rituals and ceremonial observances of village India began to crumble in that crucible. No one could be certain about the true caste of the *bhandaries* (cooks). They all ate together in a *pangat*, seated single file, drank water from the same container, shared and cleaned the same toilet, and took turns sweeping, hosing, cleaning the deck. The voyage was a great leveller of hierarchy and status: the immigrants were coolies all in the eyes of the sahibs. Some protested, and others tried to cheat their way through or bypass the normal channels, but to no avail. Aja used to tell a story about a man of high caste who stole some onions and potatoes to cook by himself to avoid pollution. He was caught. Making an example of him, the Surgeon Superintendent paraded him on the deck in front of all the other passengers, his mouth stuffed with a raw potato. How Aja used to laugh telling this story. He also recalled another incident when people were having their evening meal on a particularly stormy night. Suddenly, the ship heaved and food spilled all over the place. That ended all the pretense of observing commensal restrictions.

But amidst all the disruption and dislocation, new relationships were being formed, none more important than the bond of *jahajibhai*, ship mates, a bond which neither time nor circumstance would be able to erase. It became the foundation of a new enduring and intimate familial relationship. It was for good reason that the colonial authorities dispersed the *jahajibhais* among plantations scattered around the country. But somehow, the *jahajis* kept in touch with each other long after indenture had ended, and walked long distances on foot for reunions and reminiscences. I recall these meetings as deeply emotional occasions. The *jahajis* treated each other like blood kin, with all the obligations and responsibilities that such a relationship entailed. The bonds disappeared with the girmitiyas.

Aja served his indenture at Tuatua in Labasa, opened to sugar cane plantations in the early 1890s by the CSR which erected a cane crushing mill there in 1894. Indenture was generally a hard, brutalising, disorienting experience, but indenture in Labasa was pure *narak*, hell. The girmitiyas there were more vulnerable because they were on another island, remote, isolated: out of sight, out of official mind. Government supervision and inspection of plantations, provided for in legislation, were ineffectual in practice; overtasking, violence and abuse broke many. Aja served the first few years of his girmit as a field labourer, but his plantation, he said, was lucky in its *kulambar*, overseer, an experienced and humane man, who took a paternalistic interest in those under his charge. Some of them were like that. When things went out of control, the girmitiyas went straight to the *burra sahib*, the chief manager, who could always be counted on to put things right. Aja was also lucky to come to Fiji when the worst days of indenture were over, days of death, disease, heartbreaking infant mortality rates, excessive overtasking. But fortunately for him, Aja did not remain a field labourer for long. He was good with horses, it was discovered; he had been a champion horse racer in his youth. And so he was transferred to the CSR stables, and served the rest of his girmit looking after draught as well as racing horses. On 18 May 1913, exactly five years after arriving in Fiji, he became a free man, master of his own destiny. He left the Tuatua plantation and leased a ten acre plot of land in Tabia just on the outskirts of the cane growing area. It was here that he settled, and raised his family. It was here that he died in 1962.

A lot of history is concealed autobiography, the distinguished Australian historian KS Inglis has written, more so in my case than most. Growing up in a rural farming community in a remote part of Labasa, I saw the relics and legacies of indenture all around me. My parents, like so many of their generation, had grown up in the shadow of indenture and bore the mental and emotional scars of girmit: the isolation, the poverty, the unending struggle to make ends meet, a sense of helplessness and vulnerability to forces beyond their control, the controlling power the Colonial Sugar Refining Company had over the lives of the cane growers. Being his ears and eyes, I was very close to Aja. (I was sleeping beside him in his bed when he died very early that May morning). From early on, I was intrigued by his stories and reminiscences, and by the sight of his compatriots, all funny old men wearing funny dress, speaking a funny language. Who were these people and how in the world did they end up in Fiji, thousands of miles away from India? Why had they come, and why had they stayed behind? There was no written history about them, just hazy memories, a collage of conflicting testimonies about a past that seemed remote and irrelevant. I wanted to re-visit that vanishing past.

That opportunity came when I embarked on my doctoral research at the Australian National University in 1977. A careful reading of the written records disproved the pervasive myths about the girmitiyas. These were not the 'flotsam and jetsam' of humanity, 'riff raffs' picked up from the streets of Calcutta but a cross section of uprooted rural peasantry on the move in search of better opportunities somewhere, anywhere. Fortunately, post-graduate training in those days required field work, which for me meant a year in India visiting the regions from where the girmitiyas had come, getting a sense of the place, collecting written and oral accounts of migration. I was excited about returning to Aja's homeland, a journey he himself had intended but was unable to make. I was determined to make the pilgrimage to Bahraich, for his sake as well as my own.

By the time I finally reached Bahraich late in 1978, I had been in India long enough to be acclimatised to its many idiosyncrasies that assault one's senses: the crowds, the noise, the stench in the alleys , the urban squalor, the rush of grotesquely deformed beggars, the taxi drivers driving at night without their headlights on to save the battery, the corrupt office wallahs used to having their palms greased, the craze for things 'phoren'. It is Naipaulian jitters, you might say, but for me, too, on first contact India is an area of darkness. Soon, though, one gets de-sensitised. I am amazed at my newly acquired ability to look past unpleasant reality. Beggars are ignored, certain byways avoided, peons paid to do the basic chores, buying grocery or fetching cinema and rail tickets. I think nothing of eating greasy *dhaba*, roadside, food from sooty restaurants or drinking sweet syrupy tea in mud cups. To deal with the intrusive Indian obsession with status and hierarchy, to avoid irritating interrogation about my 'good name' and background, I simply assume different names and identities at different places. If all else fails, I say I am from the South. That, I quickly discovered much to my relief, was a real conversation stopper in the North.

But there is another side to India that grows gradually and imperceptively on you. Its influence is overwhelming and humbling as you begin to realise that behind all that heat and dust and noise, there is so much life and history, reflected in the ruins that litter the landscape. In the graveyards of Indian history lie buried the dreams and aspirations of once powerful empires. India has survived countless invasions over centuries and yet managed to keep its soul intact. There are times when, surrounded by so much history and the depth and richness of Indian culture, I experience a vague sense of loss, of being somehow incomplete. The sheer variety of sounds and colours of various festivals, the shape of the landscape, people at home in multiple (but to me incomprehensible) languages is astonishing to someone born on a tiny island in a shallow, uprooted immigrant culture.

I recognise the broad contours of Indian culture, its art, music, literature; I have grown up with the songs of Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, K L Saigal, CH Atma, Hemant Kumar, Mukesh, Manna Dey: their music still fills my house. And which Indo-Fijian boy of my generation did not secretly aspire to be like those popular screen heroes Dev Anand or Rajendra Kumar, Balraj Sahni or Dilip Kumar? I have read Premchand's *Godan*, Gift of a Cow, in Hindi and moved to tears by Hori's plight, and I know in my heart that Phaneshwar Singh Renu's unheralded *Maila Anchal*, Soiled Borders, will one day be recognised as one of this century's great novels. But I know that my India is the India of yesteryear, frozen at a particular moment in time (my childhood); I like the *idea*, not the *reality* of India. Contemporary India, with its politics of caste and communalism, the hijacking of Hinduism in the cause of fundamentalist political causes, the destruction of places of worship in the name of cultural renaissance, has no meaning for me. My grandfather's country is not mine. Curiously, it is in India that I discover the depth of my Fijian roots, the influence of an oceanic culture on my being: a deep commitment to egalitarianism, a certain impatience with protocol and ritual, a zest for living here and now, humility and tolerance, and compassionate concern for fellow human beings as kindred travellers in the same canoe of life.

Bahraich is at the back of beyond. No one in Delhi has heard of it. When I tell people about it, they recognise it patronisingly as a backward part of the most backward region of the most backward state of India, and express puzzlement at my interest in the place. Even in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, Bahraich is a vague name associated with one of those wretched, caste-ridden places in the east that gives the state, and India, such a bad name. There are times when hearing all this, I am tempted to abandon my quest, but to have come this far and not go on would be a mistake. I pore over the maps and plan my journey. From Lucknow, I will head east, through Sultanpur, Fyzabad, Basti and Gonda before reaching Bahraich. I will pass through the heartland of the area that supplied the bulk of Fiji's indentured migrants.

I leave Lucknow on the 6th of March, 1978. The bus is scheduled to leave at 6 and I am advised to be at the depot at least half an hour early. Obviously, the ticket I have already purchased is a licence to hunt for a seat on the bus, nothing more. I leave my apartment at five. The depot is dark, more like an abandoned warehouse, without a soul in sight. Half an hour later a few people arrive, and I learn that in the colder months buses usually leave late. We depart at 7:30. But as soon as we are out of the depot, and out of sight of the police and the public transport authorities, the driver stops to have a leisurely breakfast, while we sit cramped inside. I would encounter this irritating habit over and over again in the next few weeks. I feel like shouting, but that won't help. '*Bas aise chalta hai*', an old man sitting next to me said, 'that's the way it is around here'.

The bus is crowded with dirty dishevelled passengers, dusty and sprayed with paan spit. The aisle is clogged with luggage, with little bundled-up children sitting on them. People cough, clear their throats and shoot well aimed missiles of spit through the open window, nudge you in the rib to make room for yet one more passenger in an already overflowing vehicle. Men don't hesitate to ask the driver to stop the bus to answer the call of nature. They get out, turn their back towards the passengers, open their fly or lift their dhoti and let go, in full view of women and children. There is no comment, no embarrassment; everyone does it, even I, after a while. Better that than the discomfort of a full bladder on a long, bumpy road. Women generally remain seated inside; perhaps they have stronger bladders. We pass through beautiful, rich country of sugar cane, millet, maize, wheat, barley, arhar and sarso fields yellow in season; vast, well watered alluvial plains, flat, the flatness broken by groves of mango trees, rivers, bodies bent weeding, the ubiquitous cows, and clusters of mud houses hovering on the horizon. It's very much like travelling through the Canadian prairies, the same monotony and vastness of space, but without the ever present wheat silos. The road is tarsealed, but apart from that, I suspect, nothing much has changed in these parts since Aja's time.

We reach Bahraich late in the afternoon. The town is surprisingly modern, with up-to-date radio sets and cooking utensils neatly displayed in the shop windows, and much cleaner than any of the other eastern districts I have passed through. It exudes an unexpected air of prosperity. I am anxious to make preparations for my trip to Aja's village the next day. I know that Bahraich is divided into four *thanas,* police or administrative divisions, and Payagpur is one of them. That's reassuring but whether the village—Pahalwara—still exists, I do not know. Early in the evening, I venture out into the main street to find out. I could not believe my luck when I discovered that my rickshaw driver came from Pahalwara! I hired him on the spot as my guide, and arranged a taxi for an early expedition to the village next morning. That night, I slept fitfully, anxious about my impending visit to Aja's village.

We left town by taxi around ten the next day. Payagpur was about 30 kilometres away. The taxi sped along the narrow tarsealed road snaking through a vast plain of green-golden wheat fields, overtaking bullock carts full of mud bricks. It was a beautiful view, this place of Aja's childhood, but my mind was elsewhere. I felt all the anxiety of a nervous student about to sit a major examination. I got off at the junction of the thana of Payagpur and took a rickshaw to Pahalwara a kilometre away. The road led to a well maintained brick house. I mistook it for the village *mandir,* temple. It was in fact the village school teacher's house, who also happened to be the village pandit. A dozen or so people were having a lunch to celebrate a *moodan,* head shaving, ceremony for a new-born.

As I approached the compound, a man came out to meet me, and after brief conversation, asked me to wait while he went back into the house. I had given him a letter from the Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh outlining the purpose of my visit. Presently, I was joined by two men, one of them with a gun slung around his shoulder. They sat on each side of me on a stringed bed under a mango tree. I said nothing as they gave me hostile, fear-inducing sidelong glances. Later, I discovered the reason for their strange behaviour. A few weeks back, a landlord in a neighbouring village had been beheaded by some radicals of the Marxist revolutionary Naxalite movement, and it was thought that I—a young, educated person with horn-rimmed glasses and a well-tended goatee beard, looking the archetype of a Bengali student activist—might be a Naxalite agent, or a government informer, a source of potential trouble.

A little while later, a man in this 30s came out and shook my hand. He apologised for the inconvenience caused by the delay, and invited me into the house for a meal. I opted for a glass of water instead and started walking with him towards the village, now accompanied by a dozen or so curious, cheerful, barely clad children running along the narrow, foul-smelling meandering path full of fresh cow dung and wheat straws. Word had gone ahead of a stranger coming to the village. By the time I arrived, the *maidan,* village centre, was packed, small children perched on their father's shoulders. They all looked the same to me, dressed alike in dhoti and cotton kurta, with close-cropped hair and dirty turbans, *pagri,* wrapped around their heads. A vanished world resurfaced, for the scene reminded me of Aja and his friends back in Labasa. But the *girmitiyas* had changed, adapted and moved on; people here seemed stranded in time. Deeply furrowed foreheads, cracked feet and calloused hands told the predictable story of hardship and struggle.

I felt deeply moved to be among them. Who knows, had fate not willed otherwise, I might have been there, standing in the crowd, a dhoti-clad, prematurely aged withered son of the soil. But that thought also filled me with horror. Later I was to learn that this village was far more prosperous than many others in these parts; it had a school of its own and good infrastructure; many of its residents worked in the town; some had made a big name for themselves in the state. But all that made little impression on me; my reference point, formed by other experiences, was different. All eyes were on me, and I was stumped for words, surrounded by people talking a strange language.

I spoke about my grandfather who had migrated and become a *tapuha* a long time ago, and never returned although he used to write home occasionally. One of the names my father had mentioned to me was that of Chotu, my grandfather's brother's son, and I wondered whether he or any of his children were still alive. Yes, there was a man by that name, people replied, but he and his eldest son, Halka, had gone on a *barat,* a marriage party, to another village and would return later in the day. There was commotion in the crowd after I finished speaking. Village elders came forward and embraced me, shook my hands with both of theirs as a mark of respect and affection and asked me to sit on the *charpai,* a wooden plank, under the tamarind tree in the centre of the maidan. I was given a piala of sarbat and the inevitable cup of syrupy tea as we talked about Fiji, where it was, how big, what it looked like, what it was like to fly in an aeroplane.

About half an hour later, there was another commotion in the crowd as people made way for a very ancient woman heading towards me, a hunchback with dishevelled white-yellowing hair and deep set eyes, walking with the assistance of a stick. My story had been relayed to her after she had enquired about all the fuss in the maidan. She remembered hearing about Aja from the village folk, she told me and everyone present, and how the *Jajman*, the village head, had asked him to return to resume his rightful place in the community. He was needed back in the village; he would not have to pay any penalty for leaving without telling anyone. She pointed to a small mud-thatch hut in the distance which, she said, was on a small piece of land once reserved for Aja. She also told me about another member of the family who had gone to Bengal when she was very young, and returned after about twenty years. He had died a pauper. His two Bengali wives had returned to Calcutta, and nothing was heard from them again. Bengali women, I recalled, were feared (and avoided) in Fiji as mythical daughters of the sacrifice-demanding goddess Kali, who dabbled in magic and witchcraft, *jadu tona*.

I was offered lunch, which I initially refused because I had amoebic dysentery and had to be careful about food. People protested: it was customary to welcome a long lost family member with home cooked meal. I then realised that refusal could be interpreted as rejection, and a great personal embarrassment to 'my family'. A playful, sharp-witted woman, whom I assumed to be in a joking relationship with me, perhaps a 'sister-in-law', threatened to rob me of my watch if I refused to sample her cooking. '*Ka samjhat ho hamka*', she said, 'Don't underestimate me'. Thus pressured, I fiddle with the food—rice and soupy bean-and-potato curry—as the whole village watched.

Late in the afternoon, Chotu and Halka returned, but somehow, they had already been told about me. Chotu approached me with tears in his eyes, and began to sob uncontrollably as he embraced me. We held on to each other for what seemed a very long time. He introduced me to Halka. Like his father, he was a short man, brisk and agile; he gave me the impression of being the pillar of the family. It was Halka's wife who had joked about taking my watch earlier. I was taken around the maidan and introduced to all the members of the extended family, including my various aunts and nieces, and playful sisters-in-law with surprisingly well-formed features and flirtatious eyes, as well the various village elders.

Chotu kaka remembered receiving letters from Aja, telling the family how he was an old man now and spending his time with his grandchildren. He would not—perhaps could not— return, and asked his share in land to be distributed among the remaining brothers. But after the late 1950s, and especially after Aja's death, all contact was lost. Until now. *'Tum ka dekh ke hamar dil gad gad hoi gawa'*, he said through his emotion-charged voice, 'My heart is full to the brim to see you'. I enquired about his family. His granddaughter was getting married, or rather betrothed. She would have been no more than thirteen or fourteen years old. I contributed one hundred rupees towards the cost of the ceremony. The custom of child marriage surprised me, and when I raised the topic with a Bahraich professor later, he remarked on how things had actually improved in that regard in recent times. He could remember the time when children were married even before they were born. And not so long ago, they were betrothed at the age of two or three, carried to the ceremony on their father's shoulders.

Chotu kaka and other village elders asked me, and all our family, to return to India to live in Bahraich so that we could all be together again. Things were improving gradually and there would be room for all of us. I could easily find employment as a teacher at the village school. Such touching innocence. I promised to return before leaving India, but didn't have the heart to tell them that their India was an alien country to me, and that the break was for good. Chotu kaka and Halka and other family members walked me to the junction of the highway. They were such a spontaneously warm and affectionate people, happy and grateful that I had come all the way from such a faraway place to make contact. Chotu kaka embraced me, his voice cracking with emotion. Halka gave me a double hug on each shoulder, and then made the gesture of touching my feet as a mark of respect. A surge of emotion came over me and I lost my composure momentarily. Then it was time to leave.

I got into the waiting taxi, physically exhausted and emotionally drained, and headed towards the town in the galloping darkness. I was glad I had made the pilgrimage, not only for myself but also for my father and my grandfather as well. The trip solved many puzzles of my childhood and renewed my acquaintance with a vanished world. The strange cacophony of sounds I heard the girmitiyas speak as a child are still spoken in these parts today: the *'awa-gawa'* of Bahraich, the *'aiba-jaiba'* of Gonda, the *'aibo-jaibo'* of Basti, and the *'ailee-gailee'* of Ballia, Azamgargh and Ghazipur. The *lehanga* dance that men dressed up as women performed on some festive occasion, such as marriage, is still danced here. The ballads of *Allaha Khand*, about brothers fighting heroically for the hand of the women they want to marry, and sung to the accompaniment of *Nagara*, has disappeared in Fiji, though it was very popular with the girmitiyas; but it still is sung in parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The same with the game of *kabaddi,* which I vaguely remember some folks playing in inter-village competitions.

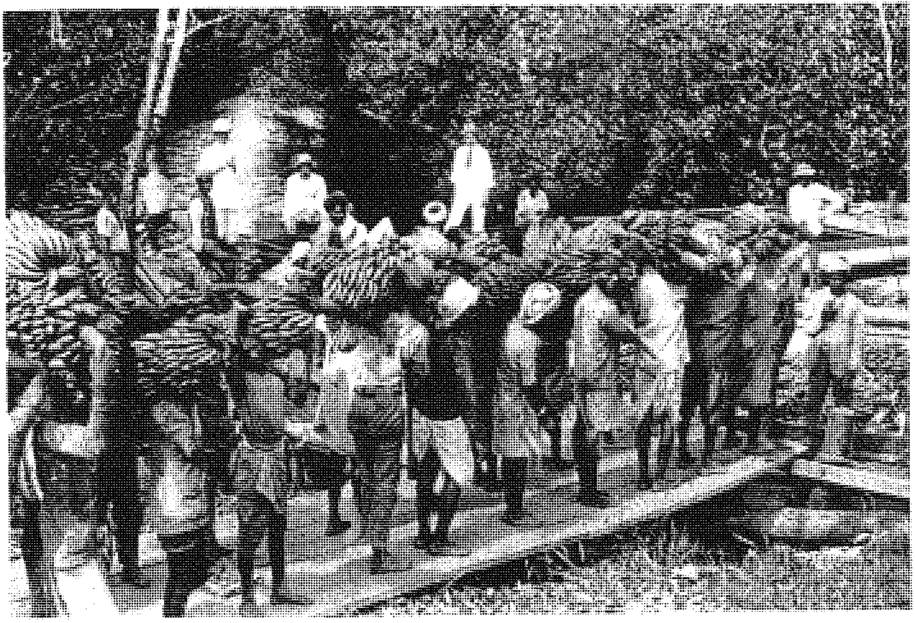
As I travelled through the impoverished regions of Uttar Pradesh, I gained renewed respect for those hundreds of thousands of men and women, ordinary people from all walks of life, who took fate in their own hands, shouldered their little bundles and marched off to the far-flung corners of the globe in search of a better life for themselves and their children. The amazing resilience and fortitude and tenacity of these people to endure so much hardship and deprivation and yet keep their dignity and integrity intact. I understood better the spirit of the girmitiyas and why and how they were able to survive, indeed triumph over, the brutalising ordeals of indenture. Aja had lived life in the raw, at the edge, without the comforting safety net of an extended family and community in a remote country to which he had come accidentally. But he was not embittered by the rough hand fate had dealt him. Instead, he met the challenge of starting life afresh with courage and determination, laying a more secure foundation for his children and grandchildren. That is his greatest and most enduring legacy.

The *nouveau riche* of New Delhi and the nattering nabobs of Lucknow are quick to consign the *bhaiyas,* their poor country cousins from the east, to the unlovely fringes of civilised society as a people with no enterprise, no industry, nothing, an embarrassment and a national disgrace. How sadly and cruelly mistaken they are. These are the same people whose girmitiya cousins in the colonies were able to break the oppressive shackles of caste and communalism and through their sweat and blood lay the foundations of many a new nation in the Third World. Their children and grandchildren are ornaments to their chosen professions: Sir Seeosagar Ramgoolam, Cheddi Jagan, Sridath Ramphal, Rohan Kanhai, VS Naipaul. There was nothing inherently defective about the *girmitiyas* just as there is nothing inherently wrong with the *bhaiyas* of eastern Uttar Pradesh. It is the system and the values they engendered which condemned the people to a life of permanent subservience, that were at fault. Unfortunately, both are still with us today.

Glossary

Suluka:	a rough cigarette with tobacco wrapped in a pandanus strip.
Lota:	brass pot.
Tulsi:	basil leaves regarded as sacred by Hindus.
Piala:	enamel cup
Belo:	guest or reception house. The word is peculiar to Labasa.
Sarangi:	Indian violin.

Khajhadi:	a small drum held in one hand and played with the other.
Paal:	rough mat of stitched jute sacks.
Bhandara:	large ceremonial feast.
Huqqa Pani Band:	signifies social ostracism when a man is not allowed to smoke the common pipe and draw water from the communal well.
Girmit:	from the Agreement that brought the indentured labourers to Fiji.
Kulambar:	overseer, from 'Call Number' which the overseers asked the girmitiyas to do every morning.
Awa-gawa, aibo-jaibo, aiba-jaiba, ailee-gailee:	all regional variations on the standard Hindi aya-gaya (come and gone).
Lehanga:	common dress worn by village women in India.
Nagara:	a large drum played with sticks.



Girmitiyas at work, carrying bunches of banana in Wainunu, Bua. Most, however, were employed on cane plantations. Overseers and Fijians watch the procession. Overseers were called 'Kulambar' by the girmitiyas, after the 'call your number' order barked by them at the crack of every dawn.

chapter 3

The Odyssey of Indenture

No one who understands the historian's craft would plead seriously that all groups should receive equal time. We know more about some groups than others not only because of the predilection of historians or the nature of their sources but frequently because we should know more about some groups of individuals in terms of their importance and their effects upon others. The problem is that historians have tended to spend too much of their time in the company of the 'movers and shakers' and too little in the universe of the mass of mankind.'

Lawrence W. Levine

'Indians are ubiquitous', wrote the Calcutta newspaper *The Statesman* on 5 August 1980. According to it, there were then only five countries in the world where Indians 'have not yet chosen to stay': Cape Verde Islands, Guinea Bissau, North Korea, Mauritania and Romania. Today, according to one recent estimate, 8.6 million people of South Asian origin live outside the subcontinent, in the United Kingdom and Europe (1.48 million), Africa

(1.39 million), Southeast Asia (1.86 million), the Middle East (1.32 million), Caribbean and Latin America (958,000), North America (729,000), and the Pacific (954,000).[2]

The creation of this diaspora is a remarkable phenomenon. The resurgence of interest in overseas Indian communities, especially since the 1970s,[3] has perhaps been inspired by the intensification of the great debate over the nature of slavery in the United States, the precarious political position of Indians in a number of former British colonies, and the increasing visibility of overseas Indians in the international labour and capital markets. Descendants of Indian indentured migrants constitute an important part of the mosaic of overseas Indian communities. This paper reviews some of the major aspects of their experience. Its principal focus is Fiji, but much of what is said about the Indo-Fijians experience is generally applicable to Indian communities in other parts of the world, especially in the Caribbean.

Indian indentured emigration was started in the 19th century to meet the shortage of labour supply caused by the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. Colonial governments in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Pacific turned to India after other sources of cheap labour supply had failed or were insufficient. Mauritius in 1834 was the first colony to import Indian indentured labour, followed by British Guiana in 1838, Trinidad and Jamaica in 1845, small West Indian colonies such as St. Kitts, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Grenada in the 1850s, Natal in 1860, Surinam in 1873 and Fiji in 1879. During the eighty two years of indentured emigration, over one million Indians were introduced into these colonies. Larger numbers of contract labourers were also imported into Malaya, Sri Lanka and Burma but under a slightly different contract.[4]

The indentured migrants left home on a contract whose precise terms varied between the colonies and over time. But all stipulated the nature and conditions of employment on the plantations, remuneration for work, and an optional free return passage to India after a specified period, usually ten years, of 'industrial residence' in the colonies. Most of the migrants had probably intended their excursion out of India as a brief sojourn, a temporary expedient to cope with some personal misfortune or economic hardship; it seems unlikely that many consciously opted for a permanent break with their homeland. Quite a few did return: by 1870, 21 per cent of the indentured migrants had returned, and in the decade after 1910, one returned for every two who had migrated to the colonies[5]. However, the majority, enticed by the prospect of better opportunities in the colonies, official discouragement of repatriation, inertia and the dread of undertaking a long sea voyage again, settled permanently in the colonies. The life and struggle of these labourers and their descendants have bequeathed a legacy whose resolution still remains elusive.

The odyssey of these 'floating caravans of barbarian tourists',[6] as someone once remarked uncharitably, has spawned a rich corpus of scholarly literature on all major overseas Indian communities, accompanied by a refreshing shift in perspective from seeing the overseas Indian communities as a problem in Indian and Imperial politics to a detailed examination of the actual nature of the experience of the indentured labourers in the colonies, including questions of resistance, accommodation and adaptation, and formation of new identities. Many themes have been emphasised, and a range of ideological and moral postures adopted, which is not surprising given that indenture was itself a complex institution riddled with contradictions.

Two distinct lines of interpretation can be discerned. On the one hand are those who have stressed the deception, drudgery and dehumanisation that the indenture system entailed and have labelled it a new system of slavery. For Hugh Tinker, there was one factor, and one only, in which the indentured migrants enjoyed an advantage over the slaves: indenture was temporary institution while slavery was lifelong bondage. For Tinker what mattered most 'in the balance of benefit and affliction was the Indians had exchanged a society and a living community (though unequal and degrading to many, tiresome and tedious to most) for a lifeless system, in which human values always mattered less than the drive for production, for exploitation'.[7] At the other end of the spectrum are those who take a more sanguine view of the indenture experience, emphasising the freedom that emigration and settlement in the colonies provided to the migrants from the social and economic hardships of their own society. Thus for I.M. Cumpston, indenture 'meant care in sickness, free medical attendance, free hospital accommodation, rations in some cases, sanitary dwellings, a guaranteed minimum daily wage, and general supervision by government officials'.[8]

Whether indenture was slavery or not is ultimately an unresolvable question, a matter of perspective. The tension between agency and structure will remain. Nonetheless, even those who reject Tinker's 'new system of slavery thesis' agree that indenture was a degrading, dehumanising experience that scarred those who endured its hardships.[9] Instead of re-visiting that tired debate, I explore here the way in which the indentured labourers themselves experienced the system, or, to use Kusha Haraksingh's words, 'to discover in an overall sense what made the community tick'.[10] Several scholars have examined how the workers resisted oppression, or, if the circumstances dictated, accommodated themselves to the realities of plantation life.[11] Others have examined the experience of women and how they coped with the sexism and racism in the colonies.[12]

This essay builds upon these efforts and seeks to understand the ways in which the indenture experience led to the creation of a new kind of society in overseas Indian communities. The importance of indenture as a crucible which forged a new, distinctive identity is widely acknowledged.[13] At the risk of gross generalisation, it can be said that the progenies of the indentured Indians differed significantly from their forbearers in terms of thought patterns, world view and values. They were more individualistic and pragmatic, more self-oriented, more egalitarian, more alone, sometimes extravagantly proud of their ancestral culture and heritage but not enslaved by its rituals and cultural protocols. Whether in the Caribbean or Fiji, the post-indenture Indians, at least of the first generation, were curious, incongruous figures in the new environment, torn between two worlds, one which they had left but to which they could not return; the other which they adopted but which they could not, or were not allowed to, integrate themselves into. The tension between the two, the sense of transience, alienation and uprootedness and general ambivalence animated their existence. They were a people caught in-between.

I explore here the sources of that tension to understand aspects of the overseas Indian identity and the transformation of the cultural baggage of the immigrants in the new environment. Fragmentation and reconstitution lay at the heart of the matter. The ways in which the old culture fragmented and then was reconstituted from the various bits and pieces which survived the ordeal of indenture varied from place to place, depending on the policies and structures of the host societies, the chronology of migration, the size and social composition of the migrant population, the geography and the patterns of settlement, the physical and cultural distance of those places from India, and the frequency of the contact with it. Nonetheless, for all the differences of detail, fragmentation and reconstitution occurred everywhere. The Fiji story will, therefore, echo in other overseas Indian communities. The patterns varied but the process remained the same.

Origins and Background

The bulk of the Indian indentured migrants to Fiji and the Caribbean, and to a lesser extent Natal and Mauritius, came from the Indo-Gangetic plains of North India, initially from the districts of Bihar and then from the depressed eastern regions of Uttar Pradesh (UP). From the 1880s to the end of indentured emigration in 1916, Uttar Pradesh provided eighty per cent of the migrants and Bihar and Bengal thirteen per cent, the rest coming from Madhya Pradesh, the Punjab and elsewhere.[14] The migrants came from a world caught in ferment. The effects of British revenue settlements took their toll on the rural population, as did the destruction of the indigenous handicraft industries, subdivision of land holdings caused by growth of population and family dissension, hardships caused by droughts, floods and famines and the consequent poverty and increasing indebtedness among the peasants.[15] The old order was changing.

One manifestation of the rural upheaval in the Indo-Gangetic plains was the increased rate of internal migration there, now accentuated by availability of accessible transportation and the possibility of jobs in the labour intensive enterprises in eastern India, such as the tea plantations in Assam, jute mills in Calcutta, and collieries in Bihar.[16] By the turn of the century, according to census commissioner E.A. H. Blunt, 'there is not a single family in the Benares Division which has not at least one member in the Provinces of Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa'.[17] In Sultanpur, where migration had been adopted as a strategy for 'restoring fallen fortunes or of easing off a redundant population', the migrants remitted RS 1,627,700 between October 1894 and September 1897.[18] In Azamgarh, the annual remittance in the 1890s was around Rs 13 lakh,[19] and in Ghazipur, an official commented on the 'remarkable amounts remitted to the district through the agency of the post-office. The importance of all this can hardly be exaggerated'.[20] By the twentieth century, 'it is these remittances from emigrants which make it possible for the rural population...to make both ends meet in spite of the large size of their families and their uneconomic holdings'.[21]

Indian indentured recruits came from this uprooted, fragmented mass of humanity on the move. In the case of Fiji (1879-1916), most of the migrants had already left their villages before being recruited. Most were registered not in large cities such as Benares, Agra, Lucknow or Delhi—these accounted for about a quarter of Fiji's registration—but in towns and urban centres neighbouring their villages. The Emigration Act (1882) forbade registration outside the districts of origin unless the officials were satisfied that the recruits had left their homes voluntarily. This was done partly to check abuses. No doubt there was some evasion of the regulations, with 'recruiters running about from district to district picking up a few men here and a few men there and eventually taking them to be registered in some other districts'.[22] The role of deception and fraudulence has been emphasised by many observers[23], but its importance in the recruitment process should be kept in its proper perspective.

Much has been assumed about the recruits themselves, much of it unflattering. 'Flotsam and jetsam of humanity', 'riff raff picked up from the streets of Calcutta', 'dregs of Indian society' are only some of the epithets used to describe them. G.A. Grierson wrote in 1882: 'I have been assured by every native from whom I have enquired, and by most Europeans, that only the lowest castes emigrate, and that nothing will ever induce men of higher class of life to leave India'.[24] This provided the colonial state the 'proof' it needed to remind the Indians in Fiji and elsewhere of their proper place in the colonial social hierarchy, a 'part of the ideological underpinning of European dominance'.[25] Equally importantly, it also blunted sensitivity to the abuses in the system.

The truth, however, is more complicated. The migrants came from all strata of rural North Indian society. Of the indentured emigrating population between the 1880s and the end of emigration in 1916, Brahmans and allied high castes comprised 12 per cent, agriculturalists 37 per cent, artisans 6 per cent, lower castes 33 per cent, and Muslims 12 per cent.[26] The contribution of the various groups roughly approximated their numerical strength in rural UP society. It was thus a slice of rural North India that was transported to the colonies. The bulk of the migrants were agriculturalists and labourers. About 80 per cent of all the emigrants were Hindus, 15 per cent Muslims and the rest Tribal, Christians, Sikhs and others. For the most part, the migrants belonged to what Milton Singer has called the 'little tradition', 'unlettered without benefit of specialised teachers and institutions'.[27] Nonetheless, there were sufficient members of the 'great tradition' in the emigrating population who had the appropriate cultural training and tools to preserve and transmit their cultural values and heritage to others.

Indian emigration rules required a fixed ratio of women to men among the emigrants. Although shaky in the beginning, after the 1870s, the ratio was fixed at 40 women to 100 men. Reaction in the colonies varied. Some preferred single men for economic reasons, while others welcomed the women as potential reproducers of local labour. Recruiters often complained of the difficulty in recruiting single young women, but in the end, the ratio was met. Of the 13,696 Indian indentured women who departed for Fiji from Calcutta, 3,659 (26.7 per cent of all females) came as members of families, the majority (68.6 per cent) accompanying their husbands and the rest with their children or with their husbands and children.[28] In Mauritius, too, large numbers of women came as members of families.[29] The significance of this and the contribution women made to the reconstitution of overseas Indian identity will be discussed later.

The process of disintegration that had pushed the recruits out of their villages continued in the depots where the migrants were housed, questioned by officials about their motives for migrating, and inspected for their aptitude and fitness for physical work in the colonies. Between 15-20 per cent of the migrants were rejected between the time of recruitment up country and the time of embarkation.[30] Fragmentation accelerated on the ship voyage across the *kala pani*, the dark dreaded seas, which could take up to three months, a traumatic experience indeed for a land-locked people who had never seen the sea before. The quarters were crowded, and the provisions for the separation of the sexes not always observed. Not surprisingly, customary, culturally sanctioned space between different castes and food taboos broke down. Enforced interaction rather than separation became the norm. And everyone, irrespective of social status, took turns cleaning decks, pumping water and cooking. The voyage provided the first inkling of what lay ahead. As K.L. Gillion has written, 'Most of their caste scruples gone, without their traditional leaders and elders and generally without kin, they were resigned to the future and very vulnerable'.[31]

But there was another development amidst all the deracination. The shared ordeal of the long ship voyage forged a new identity and fostered a new kind of relationship among the emigrants. The men travelling on the same ship, coolies all, became *jahajibhais*, ship mates, a fraternal relationship that provided an important basis of social interaction, economic cooperation and emotional support among the migrants in the immediate post-indenture period.[32] The bonds of caste and kinship shaken in the depots and on the voyage were being replaced by other wider social bonds based on social and personal needs and a shared sense of servitude.

The Plantation Experience

The agreement which the indentured migrants entered into in India outlined the terms and conditions of their employment in the colonies. The terms offered to Fiji's indentured migrants were typical.[33] Indenture would begin on the day the migrants arrived in the colony and would involve work relating to cultivation and manufacture of produce on plantations. A working week would consist of nine hours a day every day except Sundays and designated holidays. Adult males would be paid 'not less' than one shilling per day and women nine pennies, an adult being someone over the age of fifteen. The workers could be employed on either time work, (an option not favoured by the employers) or task work, a task being defined as the amount of work 'an ordinary able-bodied' adult male could accomplish in six hours of steady work; a woman's task was three quarters of a male's task. Among other provisions, the workers were to receive rations at a government-prescribed scale from their employers for the first six months, with children receiving half rations free, suitable rent-free dwellings 'kept in good repair by their employers', and free hospital accommodation, medical attendance, and medicines during their period of service. An Agent General of Immigration was appointed and granted wide ranging powers to enquire into complaints the employers and the workers laid against each other, inspect plantations and ensure the observance of the regulations. Medical inspectors in the districts were empowered to 'enter upon any plantation and inspect the state of health of the immigrants thereon and the conditions of the dwellings and hospital and rations and the general sanitation of such plantations'.[34] Plantation managers were required to keep full employment records of those in their charge.

On paper, the terms appeared not only adequate but attractive: medical care, regular wages, proper diet, adequate housing, government supervision. In practice, though, things turned out to be different. To start with, the indenture legislation was important as much for what it omitted as for what it said, and the burden of indenture historiography has been to point out some of the disparities between the promises and the practices of indenture. The migrants did not know, for example, that they had no voice in the choice of their employers. Nor could they change their employers or voluntarily buy out their contracted period of service. Nor, again, could they move about freely without the consent of their employers, while the latter could transfer them from plantation to plantation at their will. They knew how much they could earn but nothing about the cost of living in the colonies nor the conditions of work. They did not know that the legislation which looked impressive on paper was ineffectual in practice or compromised by vested planter interests. In short, they did not know that indenture was 'in essence a model of interlocking incarceration'.[35]

Let me illustrate the above criticisms by focusing on a few issues common to most colonies. Take the task system, for instance. William Seed, Fiji's first Agent General of Immigration, suggested that the task system suited 'the master and the servant much better'.[36] In theory yes, in practice no. One difficulty was defining a task. On paper, as mentioned, it was that amount of work which an average, able-bodied worker could accomplish in six hours of steady work. But the definition and allotment of tasks in the field were left to the overseer who was 'to all intents and purposes the sole judge of the fair limits of task work'.[37] Frequently, tasks were set on the basis of what a few handpicked men could do. Tasks could be increased if the worker accomplished it before time; it could even be changed while the work was still in progress. Then there were cases of overseers using the amount of work done on other plantations as the measure for their own allotment without allowing for variations in terrain, soil type, ground conditions or the number of times the ground had been worked over. On the larger plantations, when the production target fell, overseers competed to see 'who can get the maximum amount of work done for minimum amount of pay'. [38]

In Fiji in the 1880s and 1890s, workers could complete only two thirds of the tasks set, but got little or no credit for the amount of work accomplished. When informed of the illegal pay-cutting, J.B. Thurston, the governor, expressed surprise but added that 'there is certainly some force in the argument advanced for following this course'.[39] What the arguments were, he did not elaborate. The Attorney General observed that: 'It may be stated as a general legal proposition that if a person engages to perform a given task or a piece of work for a given wage and fails to perform such a task, he forfeits all claim to the wage: for the performance of the task is the condition precedent to the payment of the wage'.[40] That view seems reasonable enough on paper, except that it did not address the larger question: why was it that the overwhelming majority of the labourers were unable to complete their allotted task? The labourers could, of course, take their masters to court but as Immigration sub-agent John Foster remarked, 'the weight of opinion is found on the side of the skilled evidence the employer can bring forward in his favour as against the evidence of an ignorant coolie. The court has to decide on evidence, not on the private opinion of the presiding judge.'[41]

The labourers suffered similar difficulties over the minimum statutory wage. The indenture agreement entitled men to one shilling per day and women nine pennies. The Colonial Sugar Refining Company, the major employer of Indian labour in Fiji, argued that the reason why labourers were not able to receive the promised wage was that they were lazy and ineffective. To this charge, Henry Anson, the Agent General of Immigration in 1887, replied: 'Granted that the Indians are bad, lazy and inferior as a class to those in other colonies, one would even then expect that more than eight per cent would manage during a year to attain over the minimum statutory wage at field work'.[42] The grim picture continued. In 1891, A.C. Stewart, Fiji's Emigration Agent in Calcutta, complained that 'the wages seem to me to be altogether too low, so low that I do not see how the majority of the people can thrive'.[43] The situation continued to deteriorate. In 1897, for example, 79 per cent of the male immigrants earned only eight pennies per working day and 63 per cent of women five pennies. The pattern was repeated in other colonies as well. Low wages caused other problems such as poor or inadequate diet which caused sickness which caused absenteeism which led to further loss of wages, fines and extension of indenture. The vicious cycle was thus complete.[44]

The indenture legislation entitled the labourers to institute proceedings against their employers. Between 1890 and 1897, the indentured labourers in Fiji laid 251 complaints against their employers for breaches of the labour ordinance, the principal charges being for assault and battery and non-payment of wages-and only one!-for overtasking; but they managed to get only 86 convictions.[45] The principal reason for the paucity of charges was not indifference or lethargy, but the 'uncertainty of relief', coupled with fear, threats of retribution, ignorance of the law and inexperience in conducting their cases, and after all the risks that had been taken, the poor rate of conviction of the employers. Between 1897 and 1912, 402 charges were laid against the European overseers: only 29 per cent were convicted.

Even those convicted often escaped with light punishment. Sometimes the overseers defiantly reimbursed their sirdar, Indian foremen, for the fines inflicted on them by the courts. In Labasa in 1899, a sirdar whose beatings had reduced a woman to a 'mass of bruises' was retained by the manager of the plantation, despite protest by immigration officials, on the grounds that it was the sirdar's first offence and that 'the constant change of sirdar at Nagigi is not calculated to benefit the labourer'.[46] In contrast, the employers were remarkably successful in having their labourers convicted for various breaches of the labour ordinances, such as non-performance of tasks, unlawful absence, desertion, damaging property, and, quite simply, for 'want of ordinary diligence'. Between 1885 and 1906, 43,614 such charges were laid, and 82 per cent of those charged were convicted.[47] In Surinam between 1873 and 1916, only 10 per cent of the employers charged under the labour laws were convicted, whereas the conviction rate for the labourers was 71.4 per cent.[48]

Resistance and Accommodation

How did the indentured labourers respond to their predicament? There is broad agreement in the literature that when the opportunity presented itself and the moment seemed right, labourers engaged in active resistance through strikes, petitions to the colonial government, and violence against overseers. But such instances were surprisingly few. When strikes did occur, as Maureen Swan has written of Natal, they 'were short-lived, rarely transcended the accommodation units or work gangs into which plantation workforces were sub-divided, and were generally concerned with specific abuses of the contract',[49] or, as in the case of Guyana, when the prospects of success looked good.[50] Part of the reason was the authoritarian nature of the social relations of production of the plantation system itself, which, in Eric Wolf's words, is 'an instrument of force, wielded to create and maintain a class-structure of workers and owners, connected hierarchically by a staff-line of overseers and managers'.[51] The planters, moreover, had a powerful ally in government. As North-Coombs has argued in the case of Mauritius, the colonial state was predisposed to favour planters because the sugar industry was the 'chief prop of public finances and its continued prosperity was the *sine qua non* of good government'.[52]

The diverse social and cultural composition of the indentured work force did not help. In the case of Fiji, the migrants came from over three hundred different castes and districts, spoke a variety of dialects, if not languages, and varied in their motivations for migrating. These difficulties were compounded by the indenture legislation which restricted the opportunity for collaboration amongst the migrants. In Fiji, for instance, it was a criminal offence, punishable by fine and imprisonment, for more than five workers employed on the same plantation to go together to lay complaints against their employers without obtaining a formal leave from them.[53] Yet, the planters could freely transfer labourers from one plantation to another not only for reasons of economy but also 'because it is desirable to break up a gang of men who have caused or are likely to cause serious disturbance of the peace'.[54] Together with transfers, the rapid turnover of the labour force contributed its share to the problem of developing solidarity among workers. As S.J. Reddi has written of Mauritius, 'experience acquired by one group in wresting some concessions was lost as they dispersed to take employment elsewhere',[55] or set up on their own.

The labourers suffered from the further disadvantage of little or no formal education in English which limited their ability to articulate their grievances to the colonial officialdom and the plantation management. The new kind of Indian leadership that emerged on the plantation revolved around the 'sirdar', Indian foreman, thus compounding their problem. A sirdar, chosen for his ability to enforce the plantation's edict—or for 'their bullying capabilities' as Thurston put it[56]—was spared the ordeal of hard field labour, got better pay and, above all, the ear of his master. The position also brought him the opportunity of accumulating a little wealth on the side.[57] On some plantations, the sirdar were allowed to run stores, and it requires little imagination to see 'how pressure can be put on an immigrant by the sirdar to compel him to deal at his store'.[58] It is little wonder that sirdar (called drivers elsewhere) were such hated (and feared) men on the plantations.

But while fear, coercion and poor communication impeded collective action, some immigrants may have actually favoured a system that had given them a measure of security and certainty, among them the untouchables, the tenants-at-will, the landless labourers, for all of whom strenuous labour was not a novelty but had been a permanent condition of life in India. At least in Fiji, their individuality was recognised and effort rewarded for achievement rather than birth. One indentured labourer told anthropologist Adrian Mayer in the 1950s that the time of indenture was better than the present. Now, 'I have cane land, bullocks and a home. Yet, every night I am awake, listening to see if someone is not trying to burn my cane, or steal my animals. In indenture lines we slept well, we did not worry.'[59] The comforting certainty of servitude. For others, indenture provided the opportunity to subvert the Brahminical socio-religious order. Untouchable Bhagvana, a sirdar, told Totaram Sanadhya in the early 1900s how he had endured beatings and abuses of his landlords in India, but now things were different. 'Now, for the next five years, these people under me can't even squeak. Every dog has its day. What happened to me I still remember vividly, and won't forget for the rest of my life'.[60]

The absence or relative paucity of active forms of resistance did not mean that the labourers were docile. They simply chose other means of resistance. Eugene Genovese's observation is apt: 'If a people, over a protracted period, finds the odds against insurrection not merely long but virtually uncertain, then it will choose not to try. To some extent this reaction represents decreasing self-confidence and increasing fear, but it also represents a conscious effort to develop an alternative strategy for survival'.[61] The alternative strategies adopted by the labourers were many, including 'malingering, 'wilful' indolence, outright refusal to work, constant requests for leave of absence, desertion, and 'unlawful' (short term) absence from work'.[62] One common strategy employed by labourers in most colonies was desertion. Immigration officials themselves saw desertion as a deliberate act of defiance. Desertion was a breach of labour ordinance, so it was a route of last resort. Often it was premeditated. Wrote the Immigration Inspector at Ba (Fiji) in 1900: 'The intention of desertion has usually been avowed beforehand, at the time of making the complaint in the most stubborn and determined manner...it was planned and systematised protest against assault [by overseers and sirdar]'.[63] Desertion was not simply a protest against the material aspects of the plantation system. In Mauritius, argues S.J. Reddi, it was also 'a rejection of the inhuman aspects of estate life which were not amenable for reform through the existing legal system'.[64] For some, suicide provided a way out,[65] but most others bode their time and waited for freedom at the end of indenture.

Clearly, indenture was a grim experience, made all the more so by the prevailing official attitude that the experience was beneficial to the workers who were used to toiling from 'sunrise to sunset and ask as their rations only a few ounces of rice'.[66] The officials were 'confident that the advantage to the ordinary labourer of a term of indenture in the colonies have only to be better known to be fully appreciated'.[67] The indentured labourers disagreed. The Fiji Indians called it 'narak', which means hell. For indenture violated many of the values and subverted the social and cultural practices and institutions the indentured emigrants had brought with them, among its most notable victims being the caste system.[68] Social taboos regarding food, diet, social space, rituals of purity and impurity, prayer and worship could not be maintained on the voyage and on the plantations. And paucity of women necessitated marriages across caste lines. The process of disintegration was gradual, and a certain consciousness of caste status survived indenture. But everywhere it lost the importance it had in India as a determinant of social behaviour and as the principle of social organisation. The planters and the colonial officialdom emphasised the material benefits of indenture while in their criticism Indians focused on the moral degradation that it fostered. It was the latter which won the day in the anti-indenture crusade.

Reconstitution

Nonetheless, for all the hardships the indenture system engendered, the impression of unrelieved suffering, impotence and helplessness on the part of the labourers would be inaccurate. For just as important as the disruptions indenture created were the continuities it preserved in the migrants' cultural patterns. There was continuity, argues Leo Despres, in the case of Guyana, 'not only because the indentures had certain rights, but also because the immigration and labour laws which defined those rights served to confine the new immigrants to ethnic ghettos. As new indentures arrived in one wave after another for almost three-quarters of a century, they were mixed with those who came earlier. This served to reinforce traditional habits and customs and contributed to a continuity in cultural patterning'.[69] That process, it should be noted, occurred in altered circumstances. The bits and pieces which survived migration and indenture were knitted into a new pattern to suit the requirements of the new environment. The new artefact reflected the values of its makers: individualism, egalitarianism, initiative, self-reliance, and impatience with archaic cultural protocols and social practices. These values formed an integral part of the Fiji Indian moral order.

Women played a critical role in the reconstitution of overseas Indian society. Their portrayal in the official and even scholarly literature is a sorry one. It was—and still is—widely believed that the indentured women were recruited through fraudulent means, they were mostly women of 'loose character',generally single, broken creatures, 'sent to the recruiting stations to fill the quotas authorised by the colonial office'.[70] C.F. Andrews, writing in 1916, likened Indian women 'to a rudderless vessel with its mast broken drifting onto the rocks; or like a canoe being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand. She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so'.[71] Not surprisingly, then, Indian women were held responsible for most of the major social and moral problems. The very high rate of suicide among Fiji's indentured migrants, for instance, was blamed on the Indian women's supposedly immoral conduct. The view was the women ruthlessly exploited their 'scarcity value' by using marriages as expedient financial transactions, marrying men, obtaining jewellery and money in the process, and then discarding them for some other lucrative financial prospect, leaving the dejected man to end his life.[72] The women were even blamed for the abnormally high infant mortality rates in the 1890s. The colonial officials thought them devoid of maternal instincts.[73]

The veil of dishonour foisted on indentured women has been lifted by recent research.[74] Women came from a similar social background to men and for similar reasons. Male suicides had other causes than female infidelity: the violence of indenture, the relentless, unremitting, pace of plantation work, unsuccessful attempts by men to restore the Indian patriarchal family system, cultural and social prejudices among the migrants—proportionately more South Indians committed suicide than North Indians—and the realisation among some that the intended temporary sojourn was to become permanent displacement. As for want of maternal instincts among Indian indentured women, Dr Hirsche, the Chief Medical Officer of Fiji, wrote that those who made this allegation 'allow[ed] their zeal to render their judgement obscure in these matters'. Of course, some women might have been negligent, he conceded, but the 'maternal instinct in the coolie is as well developed as it is in any other race'.[75] In truth, not maternal negligence but the appalling sanitary conditions on the plantations, inadequate supply of clean water, the absence of nursery facilities in the lines, and the requirements of daily field labour for women with infants, lay at the root of the problem.[76]

Women emerged from indenture as productive workers in their own right, enjoying or negotiating a measure of independence perhaps unimaginable back home. They were veterans of back-breaking labour in the cane fields who performed (or were required to perform) a range of services beyond the normal call of duty; their refusal to comply may have contributed to male suicides. Jo Beall has written of Natal: 'When not in the fields themselves, or during their breaks, they were required by their partners or the men to whom they were somehow indebted, to take them food in the fields or at the mill. In the evening they prepared daily meal and provided sexual services. Women in their capacity as reproducers of labour power, therefore, were subjected to extreme forms of oppression and subordination as well as being exploited'.[77] They raised families in often inhospitable circumstances, and played a critical role in facilitating 'the transmission and practice of folk religion and of tradition-based sanctions'[78] in the new communities. In Guyana, writes Jeremy Poynting, women were 'the main preservers of Indian domestic culture', which was, he argues 'initially the principal means whereby Indians maintained their identity'.[79] The presence of Indian women in the colonies was important in another way. It discouraged relationships between Indian men and non-Indian women.

Equally important in the maintenance of overseas Indian cultural identity was the role of religion. From very early on, the migrants seemed determined to preserve their religion to provide support and solidarity among themselves. In the words of Roy Glassgow, 'The Indians' emphasis upon the value and worth-whileness of his culture was really a mode of expression of his desire to be treated on terms of equality within the Guyanese universe'.[80] In Fiji by the 1890s, most Indian settlements had the basic texts of popular Hinduism.[81] These included *Satyanarayan ki Katha* (a collection of five stories from the Reva chapter of the *Skanda Purana*); *Sukh Sagar* (a discourse on the different incarnations of Vishnu); popular versions of the *Bhagavada Gita; Danlila* (a devotional verse in praise of Lord Krishna); and, perhaps most significant of all, Tulsidas' *Ramcharitamanas*, the story of Lord Rama in some 10,000 lines of verse in the Avadhi dialect of Hindi familiar to most of the North Indian migrants. Rama's story struck a particular chord with the Fiji Indians. Rama was exiled for fourteen years for no fault of his own, but he did return; good ultimately did triumph over evil. His story gave them hope and consolation: one day, their ordeal, too, would come to an end.

Other texts circulating in the Indian community ranged from simple instructional texts on astrology (*Shigrabodh*) and witchcraft or how to cast spell on others (*Indrajal*) and manuals on the proper mantras to be chanted when carrying out ablutions (*Rampatal*), to ballads, folk songs (*Allaha Khand*) enchanting tales of ghosts and goblins (*Baital Pachisi*) and poems and stories of romance and heroism and adventure (*Salinga Sadabraj* and *Indra Sabha*) which provided relief from the distress of the work place. These books were not read individually—there were just a handful of copies available and literate people were few in number anyway—but recited at social gatherings in the evenings, at weekends, on holidays and at festive occasions such as marriages. Festivals such as *Ramlila,* stage presentations of Lord Rama's life, the joyous Spring festival of *Holi* (or *Phagwa*), and *Tazia,*[82] the Shia festival commemorating the death of Prophet Mohammed's martyred grandsons Hassan and Hussein, also fostered a sense of community. By the early years of this century, formal Hindu organisations, such as the Sanatan Dharma (eternal religion) and the Arya Samaj were established which continued in a more systematic way the task of religious, cultural and educational instruction of the Indian community. They were joined in the 1920s by Muslim, South Indian, Gujarati and Sikh organizations.[83]

Interestingly, most Fiji Indians—and Indians in other colonies as well—did not initially embrace Christianity. This was not for lack of trying on the part of particularly the Fijian Methodist Church which, through Hannah Dudley and J.W. Burton, did valuable social and charity work among the Fiji Indians in the early years of this century. Burton's exposure of some of the worst evils of indenture in his *Fiji of Today*[84] provided valuable ammunition in the anti-indenture campaign in India. Yet, Christianity failed to impress the Indians. Pride in their own culture was one factor. In Mauritius, writes Seetanund Peerthum, religion was used to resist the dehumanising influence of the new environment. 'The red flag of Mahavira on the top of a bamboo pole in front of their hut helped them resist the icons of proselytism. The katahs of *Ramacharitamanas* and the *Puranas* stood them in good stead. They succeeded in preserving their identity'.[85] Kusha Haraksingh writes about the unease that Indians felt about 'Christian designs on the faith of their ancestors, a mood which clearly indicated that while others were welcome to their own beliefs, they themselves expected to be shown a similar courtesy'.[86]

The Indians' experience of the Europeans in the colonies was another factor. 'You call them true Christians', Totaram Sanadhya asked Burton of the European employees of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company in Fiji. 'How can that be when these people treat their workers like animals and skin them alive? Their cruelty knows no bounds. They pay them a pittance. Look at the atrocities they commit against our women. And yet in a court of law they take the oath on the Bible and deny their evil deeds. Does baptism wash away all their evil deeds?'[87] At the same time, Indians viewed their own religion as superior to the others. On the question of baptism, for instance, which Sanadhya debates with Burton, he says that 'there is no need for baptism as long as one follows the right path and serves mankind. This is true religion. All this has been preached by our sages long before Christianity'.

By the time the missions began to take an interest in the Indian community, the Indians had already started to reconstitute fragments of their ancestral culture and fashion a new moral universe, helped after the turn of the century by visiting religious figures from India. The reformist-minded Arya Samaj was formed in Samabula in 1902, while the more orthodox Sanatan Dharam had numerous *mandalis* throughout the areas of Indian settlement. Besides providing religious instruction, they started their own schools to educate generations of Indian children when the colonial government was indifferent to their educational needs. While they followed a colonial curriculum, these schools also imparted cultural and language instruction that deepened the Indians' attachment to their ancestral civilisation. So colonial indifference, and the Indians' marked lack for enthusiasm for Christian schools in the early years, helped to produce a distinctively 'Indian' education for the children.

Once they had served their indenture, the Indians were left to their own devices. Some experimented with other occupations, but limited opportunities, family obligations, kinship ties and lack of education and marketable skills, forced most to depend on agriculture.[88] The government created special settlements for time-expired immigrants, but Indians settled wherever they could find land. Scattered homesteads on individually leased parcels of land were the pattern in Fiji. Expediency and contingency and tolerance born of need or circumstance, rather than status or prestige, determined relations among the settlers. They cooperated on projects requiring reciprocal exchange of labour such as building and maintaining temples and roads, planting and harvesting crops.[89] And they devised or recreated their own mechanisms for regulating behaviour or enforcing conformance to the norms of the society they were establishing. To this end, they resurrected the traditional village-based *panchayat* system to resolve communal disputes. The *panchayats* declined in influence as the Indians were integrated into the administrative and legal apparatus of the colony.[90] Obviously, life in the post-indenture period was difficult, but as Roy Glassgow has remarked of Guyana, and this would apply elsewhere as well, 'the emergence of an independent peasantry, perhaps more than anything else, has made it possible for East Indians to preserve much of their traditional culture'.[91]

The self-absorption which such a development engendered was encouraged by other factors. Cultural prejudice was one. Whether in the Caribbean, Africa or the Pacific, the Indian migrants and the indigenous communities they encountered found little common ground. Indeed, muted hostility and contempt characterised relations between them. The Fiji Indians called the indigenous Fijians 'jungalis', meaning bushman, while the Fijians, for their part, found little admirable in the Indians, beasts of burden cooped up on European estates and leading a servile existence.[92] In Guyana, the blacks saw the Indians as unfortunate victims of oppression and worked well only as long as they were 'convinced that they enjoyed a superior position to the East Indian'.[93] In Trinidad, Indians 'strenuously objected' to intermarriage with blacks'.[94] And in Jamaica, the Indians called the blacks 'kafari' meaning an infidel.[95]

The cultural gulf that separated the two groups was compounded by a colonial policy which had the effect of keeping the groups apart. Its effectiveness varied from colony to colony, but it existed everywhere. In Fiji, ethnic separation was sanctioned by law. The first colonial governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, devised a system of native administration, based on the principle of indirect rule, that effectively insulated the Fijian people from the mainstream of colonial life and restricted the opportunity for meaningful cultural borrowing and adaptation. The Fijians lived in their subsistence villages, and Indians in their scattered settlements; even those few Indians who had been accepted by the Fijians as 'one of their own' were evicted from the villages. Separate schools were established for Fijian, European and Indian children, a pattern that continued until the middle of this century, when community committee schools emerged. In politics, too, racial separation was the norm as the three groups elected (or nominated) their own (ethnic) representatives in the Legislative Council from racially-segregated rolls. Inevitably, such a system discouraged the development of common perceptions and a non-communal consciousness in the populace. The gulf between the communities that resulted from culture, language, and religion was exacerbated by government practice.[96] And so both choice as well as necessity forced the Indians in Fiji and elsewhere to fashion their identity from the fragments of their remembered past in the new surroundings in which they found themselves.

This essay has attempted to delineate aspects of both the history as well as the historiography of Indian indentured labourers, their social background, journey from India, their life and work on the plantations, and how they coped with the new world they encountered. I have suggested that the indentured labourers themselves lived in a crisis, caught between the demands of two worlds, one which they had left and to which they could not return and the other where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than they had expected or wanted. The ironic thing is that a century later, that tension between alienation and attachment still animates the lives of many overseas Indians. They adopt many postures and make gestures to things western and eastern but, as Vijay Mishra has observed, 'when these momentary infatuations are over, [they] come face to face with the void again, with a sense of emptiness compounded by helplessness'.[97] It is of this identity crisis that the Fiji Indian writer Subramani has written: 'Everything, history and custom, had prepared me for this impasse. There is no alternative life: a hundred years of history on these islands has resulted in wilderness and distress'.[98] Brinsley Samaroo of Trinidad echoes a similar view: 'The Westindian East Indians will be neither Westindian nor East Indian until they first of all come to terms with themselves; and this process certainly involves an understanding of their Indian connection'.[99] The legacy of indenture will need to be confronted.

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Endnotes

1. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness. Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977), ix.

2. Colin Clarke, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec, 'Introduction: themes in the study of the South Asian diaspora', in their edited volume, *South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity* (Cambridge, 1990), 2. These figures should be taken as a guide, not exact numerical description of the overseas South Asian population.

3. As seen in a series of books published under the editorship of I.J. Bahadur Singh of the India International Centre, New Delhi, on Indians in the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and on overseas Indian communities more generally.

4. There is a vast literature on the South Asian diaspora in Southeast Asia. The most accessible introduction is S. Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (London). The latest compendium on the Southeast Asian Indian community is K.S. Sandhu and A. Mani (eds.), *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia* (Singapore, 1993)

5. G. Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration from India*, 67, and *Census of India*, Vol. XV1, part 1 (1921), 44.

6. Quoted in I.M. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834-154* (London, 1953), 174.

7. Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (London, 1974), 60. Tinker has reiterated this view in U Bissoondoyal and S.B.C. Servasing (eds), *Indian Labour Immigration* (Port Louis, 1986,), 1-8 (Continuity Between Slavery and Indian Immigration).

8. I.M. Cumpston, 'A Survey of Indian Immigration to British Tropical Colonies to 1910', *Population Studies* X (1956-1957), 159.

9. Among those who lean to this view are K. Hazareesingh, *A History of Indians in Mauritius* (London, 2nd ed. 1975), K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants. A history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), John La Guerre (ed.), *Calcutta to Caroni. The East Indians of Trinidad* (Port of Spain, 1974); Judith Weller, *The East Indian Indenture in Trinidad* (Rio Piedras, 1968); K.O. Laurence, *Immigration into the West Indies in the Nineteenth Century* (Kingston, 1971); Leo Despres, *Cultural Pluralism and Nationalist Politics in British Guyana* (Chicago, 1967), Morton Klass, *East Indians in the West Indies: A Study in Cultural Persistence* (New York, 1961), and many other studies.

10. Kusha Haraksingh, 'Aspects of the Indian Experience in the Caribbean', in John La Guerre (ed.), *Calcutta to Caroni:The East Indians of Trinidad* (St. Augustine, 1985), 155. This volume is a revised and expanded version of the 1974 publication.

11. For example, Kusha Haraksingh, 'Control and Resistance Among Overseas Indian Workers: A study of labour on sugar plantations of Trinidad', in David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (eds.), *India in the Caribbean* (Warwick, 1987), 61-80; Maureen Swan, 'Indentured Indians: Resistance and Accommodation, 1890-1913', in Surendra Bhana (ed.), *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal* (Leeds,

1990), 117-135; and Brij V. Lal, 'Murmurs of Dissent: Non-Resistance on Fiji Plantations', *Hawaiian Journal of History* (1986), 188-214. A larger body of literature relevant to the topic will be found in Brij V. Lal, Doug Munro and Edward Beechert (eds.), *Plantation Workers: Resistance and Accommodation* (Honolulu, 1993).

12. See, for example, Marina Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy: The Testimonies of Indian Women in 19th Century Mauritius* (Stanley, Mauritius, 1994); Brij V. Lal, 'Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations', in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* Vol. XX11 (1985), 55-72; idem, 'Veil of Dishonour: Sexual Jealousy and Suicide on Fiji Plantations', in the *Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. XX (1985), 55-71; John Kelly, *A Politics of Virtue: Hinduism, Sexuality and Countercolonial Discourse in Fiji* (Chicago, 1992), and Verene Sherpherd, 'Indian Women in Jamaica, 1845-1945', in Frank Birbalsingh (ed.) *Indenture and Exile: The Indo-Caribbean Experience* (Toronto, 1989), 100-107, among many others.

13. See, for example, Adrian Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific: A Study of Fiji Indian Rural Society* (London, 2nd. ed. 1973); and Verene Shepherd, *Transients to Settlers: The Experience of Indians in Jamaica 1845-1950* (Leeds, 1993).

14. Based on figures in the Protector of Emigrants annual reports. See also my *Girmitiyas: The Origins of Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983), and R.T. Smith, 'Some Social Characteristics of Indian Immigrants to British Guiana', in *Population Studies* Vol. X111, no. 1(1958), 34-9. L. Brennan, J.MacDonald and R. Shlomowitz of the Flinders University of South Australia are investigating the regional origins and demographic characteristics in more detail. A small sampling of their research can be found in 'The Geographic and Social Origins of Indian Indentured Labourers in Mauritius, Natal, Fiji, Guyana and Jamaica.' Their manuscript is in my possession.

15. The literature on the subject is vast and controversial. For me the best starting points are the 'Settlement Reports', comprehensive government documents that provide detailed accounts of rural social structure and problems. For some general accounts, see Eric Stokes, *Peasant and the Raj* (Cambridge, 1977), Walter Neale, *Economic Change in Rural India* (New Haven, 1962), and Elizabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India* (Berkeley, 1972).

16. *Census of India*, Vol. XV1, Part 1 (1911), 49, and Vol. XV1 Part 1 (1921), 51.

17. *Census of India*, Vol. XV1 Part 1 (1911), 49.

18. *Sultanpur Settlement Report*, 1898, 6.

19. *Azamgarh Settlement Report*, 1909, 7.

20. *Ghazipur District Gazetteer*, 1908, 79.

21. Birendranath Ganguly, *Trends of Agriculture and Population in the Ganges Valley* (London, 1938), 40-1. See also S. L. Srivastva, 'Impact of Emigration on Structure and Relations in a Village in Eastern UP', *Journal of Social Research* Vol. XI, no.2 (Sept. 1968), 73.

22. Emigration Department Proceedings, A Pros. 44, 30 September, 1882, National Archives of India.

23. See Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, for an articulation of this view.

24. Emigration Proceedings, A. Pros. 12, August 1882, National Archives of India. See also Roy Arthur Glassgow, *Guyana: Race and Politics Among Africans and East Indians* (The Hague, 1970), 74, and Arthur and Juanita Niehoff, *East Indians in the West Indies* (Milwaukee, 1960), 17; M.D. North-Coombs, 'Forced Labour in Mauritius', in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920* (London, 1984), 106, and most other publications dealing with Indian indentured migration.

25. K.L. Gillion, *The Fiji Indians: Challenge to European Dominance, 1920-1947* (Canberra, 1977), 7.

26. These figures are derived from the Protector of Emigrants Reports for these years. For a detailed discussion, see Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983).

27. Milton Singer, 'The Social Organization of Indian Civilization', in *Diogenes*, 45 (1964), 92.

28. Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 117.

29. Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy*, 35-39.

30. Estimate based on figures in the Protector of Emigrants Annual Reports.

31. K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A history to the end of indenture in 1920*, 67.

32. See Kelvin Singh, 'Indians and the Larger Society', in John La Guerre (ed.), *Calcutta to Caroni: The East Indians of Trinidad*, 39; and Kusha Haraksingh, 'Control and Resistance Among Indian Workers', in Dabydeen and Samaroo (eds.), *India in the Caribbean*, 73.

33. See, for example, Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 37-38; Maureen Tayal, 'Indian Indentured Labour in Natal, 1890-1911', in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. X1V, no. 4, 520; Bridget Brereton, 'The Experience of Indentureship, 1845-1917', in John La Guerre (ed.), *Calcutta to Caroni: The East Indians of Trinidad* (St. Augustine, 1985), 23-25.

34. From the foundation Indenture Legislation for Fiji (1891).

35. Haraksingh, 'Control and Resistance Among Indian Workers: A Study of labour on the sugar plantations of Trinidad, 1875-1917', in Samaroo and Dabydeen, 63. See also Dharam Yash Dev, *Our Countrymen Abroad* (Allahabad, 1940), 14; C. Kondapi, *Indians Abroad*, 8; and Surendra Bhana (ed.), *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal* (Leeds, 1988), 148; Morton Klass, *East Indians in the West Indies*, 14; C. Kondapi, *Indians Overseas*, 19.

36. Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) file 2159/1881, National Archives of Fiji.

37. CSO 1955/1892.

38. CSO 2315/1888. See also CSO files 3481/1887, 1029/1887, and Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 87.

39. CSO 443/1887.

40. Ibid.

[41] CSO 1955/1892. For corroboration of these points, see Haraksingh, 'Control and Resistance', 71; Verene Shepherd, *Transients to Settlers*, 59 ff; Maureen Tayal, 'Indian Indentured Labour in Natal, 527.

[42] CSO 3481/1887.

[43] CSO 2494/1894.

[44] See also M.D, North-Coombs, 'Forced Labour in Mauritius', in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920* (London, 1984), 95 where he argues that in Mauritius 'labourers seldom received the rate of wages at which they were hired.' Shepherd, *Transients and Settlers*, 60 says that 'Wage rates were not always promptly paid; neither did the employers always pay the correct wage rates or provide jobs to enable the immigrants to earn sufficient wages.' Kondapi, *Indians Overseas*, 21, on Natal in the 1860s: 'Wages were habitually held in arrears, and in many cases were not paid at all.' Sandew Hira, 'The Evolution of the Social and Economic and Political Position of the East Indians in Surinam, 1873-1893', in I.J. Bahadur Singh (ed.), *Indians in the Caribbean* (New Delhi, 1987), 349: between 1879 and 1891, adult male wages were one third less than the prescribed wage of 60 cents.

[45] The figures in this paragraph are derived from the Agent General of Immigration's *Annual Reports* which are available in several places. A similar situation existed in other places including Jamaica, Mauritius, Trinidad and Guyana. See studies cited above.

[46] CSO 4215/1899.

[47] For more discussion see my 'Murmurs of Dissent.'

[48] Quoted in Verene Sherpherd, *Transients to Settlers*, 78.

[49] 'Indentured Indians: Accommodation and Resistance, 1890-1913', in Bhana (ed.), *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal*, 128; Sherpherd, *Transients to Settlers*, 71.

[50] Tyran Ramnarine, 'Over a Hundred Years of East Indian Disturbances on the Sugar Estates of Guyana', in Dabydeen and Samaroo, *India in the Caribbean*, 123.

[51] Eric Wolf, 'Specific Aspects of Plantation Systems in the New World: Community Sub-cultures and Social Class', in M.M. Horowitz (ed.), *Peoples and Cultures in the Caribbeans* (New York, 1971), 163. See also George L. Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World* (New York, 1972) for an extended analysis. See also Doug Munro, 'The Indenture System and Worker Control on Pacific Island Plantations', paper presented at the Program in Agriarian Studies Colloquium Series, Yale University, 3 February 1995.

[52] M.D. North-Coombs, 'Indentured Labour in the Sugar Industries of Natal and Mauritius, 1834-1910', in Bhana (ed.), *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal*, 33.

[53] 1891 Indenture Ordinance for Fiji.

[54] CSO 156/1896. See also Tyran Ramnarine, 'Over a Hundred Years of East Indian Disturbances On the Sugar Estates of Guyana, 1869-1978: An Historical Overview', in Dabydeen and Samaroo (eds.), *India in the Caribbean*, 125

[55] 'Labour Protest Among Indian Immigrants', in Bissoondoyal and Servasing (eds.), *Indian Labour Immigration*, 132.

[56] Quoted in Deryck Scarr, *Fiji: A Short History* (Sydney, 1984), 99.

[57] Agent General of Immigration Annual Report, 1885. See also CSO 2026/1880.

[58] CSO 1405/1906.

[59] Adrian Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific. A Study of Rural Fiji Indian Society* (Berkeley, 2nd.ed. 1973), 5

[60] Brij V. Lal and Yogendra Yadav (eds), *The Story of the Haunted Line: Totaram Sanadhaya ka Fiji* (in Hindi) (New Delhi, 1994).

[61] Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution. Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge, 1979), 7

[62] Verene Shepherd, *Transients to Settlers*, 67. See also Maureen Swan, 'Indentured Indians: Accommodation and Resistance', 128; North-Coombs, 'Forced Labour in Mauritius', in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire*, 108-110; S.J. Reddi, 'Labour Protest Among Indian Immigrants', in Bissoondoyal and Servasing (eds.), *Indian Labour Immigration*, 126-123.

[63] CSO 3237/1900.

[64] S.J. Reddi, 'Labour Protest Among Indian Immigrants', in Bissoondoyal and Servasing, *Indian Labour Immigration*, 129.

[65] See Lal, 'Veil of Dishonour'.

[66] J. W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today*, 264.

[67] The Sanderson Committee report, House of Commons Parliamentary Paper, Cd 5192/4.

[68] It was universally the case in all the Indian indentured labour receiving colonies. See, for example, Hilda Kuper, *The Indian People in Natal* (Cape Town, 1960), 20; Arthur and Juanita Niehoff, *East Indians in the West Indies*, 89; Arthur Glassgow, 77; Adrian Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific*. For an informative introduction to the subject, see Barton M. Schwartz (ed.), *Caste In Overseas Indian Communities* (San Francisco, 1967). There are studies here on Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, Surinam, Fiji and South and East Africa.

[69] Leo Despres, *Cultural Pluralism and Nationalist Politics*, 58.

[70] Erickson, 142. This view is repeated ad nauseam in virtually every account.

[71] C. F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth, 1918), 6.

[72] See my 'Veil of Dishonour: Sexual Jealousy and Suicide on Fiji Plantations', in *The Journal of Pacific History* (1985), Vol. 20, 135-155; also Niehoff, *East Indians in the West Indies*, 100, and Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (Suva, 1980).

[73] See my 'Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review* Vol. 22 (1985), 55-72.

[74] See particularly Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy;* Brij V. Lal, 'Kunti's Cry', and 'Veil of Dishonour', Jo Beall, 'Women Under Indenture in Natal', in Bhana (ed.), *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal*, 89-116, and John Kelly, *A Politics of Virtue*.

[75] CSO 3121/1893.

[76] This is supported by the investigations of Viviane Johnson and Nicole Duncan; their research is being planned for publication.

[77] Jo Beall, 'Women Under Indenture in Natal', 103.

[78] Marina Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy: The Testimonies of Indian Women in 19th Century Mauritius* (Stanley, Mauritius, 1994), 142.

[79] 'East Indian Women in the Caribbean: Experience and voice', in Dabydeen and Samaroo (eds.), *India in the Caribbean*, 232.

[80] Roy Glassgow, 79. See also Brinsley Samaroo 'The Indian Connection: The Influence of Indian Thought and Ideas on East Indians in the Caribbean', Kusha Haraksingh 'The Hindu Experience in Trinidad', in I.J. Bahadur Singh, *Indians in the Caribbean* (New Delhi, 1987); J.B. Brain, 'Religion, Missionaries and Indentured Indians', in Bhana (ed.), *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal*, 209-225, and studies by Klass, Niehoff and others cited above.

[81] Information below comes from Brij V. Lal and Yogendra Yadav (eds.), *Bhut Len Ki Katha: Totaram Sanadhya ka Fiji* (The Story of the Haunted Line: Totaram Sanadhya's Fiji) (New Delhi, 1994).

[82] In nearly all accounts of Indians in the Caribbean, Tazia (tajah) or hosay, is mentioned as a very popular festival celebrated both by Hindus as well as Muslims.

[83] See Kelly, *A Politics of Virtue*, Purusottama Billimoria, 'The Arya Samaj in Fiji: A Movement in Hindu Diaspora', in *Religion*, Vol. 15 (1985), 103-129; and several contributions in Bahadur Singh (ed.), *Indians in the Caribbean*.

[84] Published in London in 1910.

[85] Seetanund Peerthum, 'Forms of Protest and Resistance of Indian Labourers', in Bissoondoyal and Servasing (eds.), *Indian Labour Immigration*, 92.

[86] Haraksingh, 'The Hindu Experience in Trinidad', 180.

[87] *Bhut Len Ki Katha*, 92-93.

[88] See, for example, Ahmed Ali,*Society in Transition: Aspects of Fiji-Indian History, 1879-1939* (Suva, 1976), 9; see also Adrian Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific* for more information.

[89] See Adrian C. Mayer, 'Fiji Indian Kin Groups: An Aspect of Change in an Immigrant Society', in *Oceania*, Vol. XXIV: 3 (March 1954), 161-164.

[90] Verene Shepherd, *Transients to Settlers*, 234-235 discusses some problems that the panchayat system encountered in Jamaica. See also Adrian C. Mayer, 'Associations in Fiji Indian Rural Society', *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 58: 1 (Feb. 1956), 97-108; J.C. Jha, 'The Indian Heritage in Trinidad', in Guerre (ed.), *Calcutta to Caroni*, 13.

[91] Roy Glassgow, 61. See also Brereton, 108-109.

[92] See Ahmed Ali, *Fiji: From Colony to Independence, 1874-1970* (Suva, 1977), 15.

[93] Glassgow, 75.

[94] Arthur and Juanita Niehoff, *East Indians in the West Indies*, 67.

[95] Shepherd, *Transients to Settlers*, 187.

[96] For more discussion, see my *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu, 1992); see also Kelvin Singh, 'Indians and the Larger Society', in Guerre (ed.), *Calcutta to Caroni*, 33-60..

[97] Vijay Mishra in his edited volume, *Rama's Banishment: A Centenary Tribute to the Fiji Indians, 1879-1979* (Auckland, 1979), 4.

[98] In his edited volume, *The Indo-Fijian Experience* (St. Lucia, 1979), 139.

[99] Samaroo, 'The India Connection: The influence of Indian Thought and Ideas on East Indians in the Caribbean', in Dabydeen and Samaroo (eds), *India in the Caribbean*, 56.

chapter 4

A Journey Begins

Above all things we must confidently expect, as an indispensable condition of the proposed arrangements ... that Indian settlers who have completed their terms of service to which they are agreed ... will be in all respects free men, with privileges no whit inferior to those of any other class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the colonies.
Lord Salisbury

The need for dependable outside sources of labour supply arose soon after Fiji became a British colony in 1874. Five years later, Sir Arthur Gordon, the first substantive governor (1875-80), introduced Indian indentured labourers into Fiji. But even before annexation others had considered India as a source of labour. In 1861, Commodore Seymour, sent to Fiji to assist British Consul W.T. Pritchard to establish peace between warring Tongans and Fijians, had mentioned the possibility of using Indian labour,[1] while in 1867 the Henning brothers made further enquiries, followed three years later by the planter Nathaniel Chalmers who approached India directly.[2]

These proposals were ignored by the Indian government, which did not sanction the emigration of its subjects to countries with governments unrecognized by Great Britain.

A few years later, John Bates Thurston was prompted by the acute shortage of plantation labour to write directly to the Government of India on behalf of the Cakobau Government of which he was an official. He argued that in 1872 Fiji had a 'fully constituted government of European residents and native chiefs', which had been recognised by Britain and other European powers. The indigenous Fijians, he went on, 'had lately emerged from barbarism' and were showing a 'remarkably cordial' attitude to foreigners, hinting thereby at the preclusion of any ill-feeling or hostility by the Fijian people to Indian immigration. Thurston also assured the Indian government of fair and vigilant regulation of the proposed traffic.[3]

The Indian government turned down the proposal. A.O. Hume, the secretary to government, firmly declined the proposal at 'the present time', while J. Geoghegan, an experienced and respected official on Indian emigration, was equally unenthusiastic.[4] The South Seas labour traffic had recently been the subject of widespread sensational publicity.

It was a well known though unwritten principle of the Indian government that the establishment of a Western type of government in the archipelago, preferably by Britain herself, would be the precondition for Indian emigration to Fiji. Moves had been afoot in Fiji since the late 1850s to have the country annexed to the British Empire, but these had proved unsuccessful on the grounds of economy and political expediency. However, the changing circumstances of the 1860s, such as European imperial rivalry, the arrival of increasing numbers of European, especially British, settlers in the Pacific and their involvement in the disreputable labour traffic, left Britain with little alternative but to accept the unconditional offer of cession made by Fijian high chiefs on 10 October 1874.[5]

Cession brought in its wake a host of difficulties. Apart from the fundamental problem of law and order which must confront any new government, the most immediate issue was economic solvency, made more acute by an unforeseen drop in revenues from native customs and taxes in 1875, and by the reduction in the initial repayable Imperial grant from £150,000 to £100,000. Gordon thus assumed power in a far from happy situation. He did not despair, though, and in a typically vigorous manner charted out the main areas of development. In an early address to the planters, he stated:

> We want capital invested in the Colony; we want a cheap, abundant, and certain supply of labour; we want means of communication; we want justice to be readily and speedily administered; we want facilities for education; and lastly (though, perhaps, that interests me more nearly and especially than you), we want revenue.[6]

In the circumstances, neither labour nor capital was easily available. To attract capital, Gordon soon saw the need to look beyond the local planters, who were themselves caught in the grips of recession following the collapse of the cotton boom of the 1860s. As it happened, he invited the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), an Australian enterprise, to extend its operations to Fiji, which it did in 1882, remaining there till 1973.[7]

The problem of labour supply proved less tractable. The two previous sources, Fijian and Pacific Island labour, were both placed in precarious circumstances, and neither could be expected to meet the needs of the rapid pace of projected economic development. The indigenous Fijian population was in a state of extreme distress. Some 40,000 of the estimated total population of 150,000 had already been killed by an epidemic of measles accidentally introduced by a visiting man-of-war from Sydney,[8] and if the depredations of the labour-hungry planters went unchecked, Gordon thought, the Fijian people would face extinction. He wrote to Lord Carnarvon: 'If the Fijian population is ever permitted to sink from its present condition into that of a collection of migratory bands of hired labourers, all hope, not only of the improvement but the preservation of the race, must inevitably be abandoned'.[9]

Gordon was, perhaps more than most colonial governors of the 19th century, deeply sensitive about the plight of native peoples abruptly exposed to the challenge of Western civilisation, and suffering the consequences of the predatory habits of Europeans in pursuit of profit or glory. He wanted Britain to be able to point proudly to at least one colony where the subjects were treated justly. He therefore moved to create a system of 'indirect rule' which would shelter the Fijians from the competitive pressures of the modern world, and allow them to proceed at their own pace in their own surroundings under the paternalistic hand of the government. The basic features of that system are well known: prohibition of the sale of Fijian land, a practice rampant in the decade before; the preservation of traditional Fijian social structure in a rigidly codified and institutionalised form; and the introduction of a native taxation scheme designed to generate additional state revenue, while allowing the Fijians to meet the tax burden without recourse to plantation employment. This policy was vehemently opposed at the time by the planters, who viewed the Fijians as being 'specially intended by Providence'[10] to work for them. But Gordon held his ground, with the approval of the Colonial Office.

It might also be noted, however, that Fijian way of life was not suited to plantation employment, which offered little except 'paltry pay, indifferent fare, and frequently anything but mild treatment'.[11] In a long letter to the governor, the chiefs explained their opposition:

> Regarding our people who engage their services to others, we do not dislike work for we know that idleness is not right. Employment is good to all men because by it their daily wants are satisfied. But what we most desire is that men should work for themselves in their several homes—that they should plant plenty; that they should build themselves good homes; that they be in a position to furnish themselves with household necessities; that their villages be kept clean and their houses in good repair; this is what we consider living in peace and prosperity. Our people are in many ways enticed and induced to go to work far away from their homes leaving their wives, their children, their relations and everything in their homes in a most bitter and pitiable condition—and it is the cause of the people being in a state of poverty and desolation—this compensation for services rendered by those engaged as labourers—the payment received whether it be in money or merchandise is quickly dissipated. If they remain at or near their homes and worked there, the benefits they would receive would be comparatively greater than those they receive by hiring themselves out to distant places as labourers.[12]

The other sources of labour for the Fiji plantations were the neighbouring Pacific islands of the New Hebrides, the Solomons and the Gilberts. The first labourers from these countries were introduced into Fiji in 1864, and by the end of the decade there were over a thousand of them in the group. This labour traffic was ostensibly well supervised and the rights of the labourers protected. The reality, however, was starkly different, at least in the early years. Abuse of the system abounded, and atrocities were perpetrated in the recruitment and transportation of the labourers. The curtailment of these had in fact been a strong motive for the annexation of Fiji by Great Britain. In addition, the Pacific Island labour supply was becoming 'eminently precarious' to use Gordon's words, because of the decline of native populations in the islands of recruitment, and increasingly intense competition from Queensland, Samoa and New Caledonia for labourers.[13] Despite these difficulties, the colonial government persevered with procuring Pacific Islander labour, though with declining success. But, the nagging question of an assured and sustained source of labour remained unresolved.

Other avenues would have to be explored. Gordon, with experience of Indian indentured labour in Trinidad and in Mauritius, where he had been governor before coming to Fiji, realised that he would have to turn to the 'super abundant population of India'. He had, perhaps, considered the introduction of Indians even before arriving in the colony; realities of the new situation may have merely reinforced his convictions. In his first address to the planters, Gordon outlined his scheme in considerable detail, discussing the advantages and disadvantages of introducing Indian indentured labour in the context of other topics.[14] He asked the planters for their opinion and they, in response, expressed opposition. But Gordon's proposals were supported by the Colonial Office which was optimistic about the success of the proposed scheme in Fiji.[15] With that support, Gordon authorised his Agent General of Immigration, Charles Mitchell, to arrange the details of immigration with the Government of India. The latter was normally inclined to leave emigration matters to the 'ordinary laws of supply and demand',[16] though for the sake of formality it requested information on such subjects as the geographical and economic character of the colony, the conditions of employment and the structure and regulation of agencies responsible for matters relating to indentured emigration.

The requisite details were furnished in due course, and Mitchell explained the basic features of the intended immigration.[17] The salary of the officers of the Immigration Department would be paid by the colonial government, and the cost of keeping the emigration depot in India, the recruiting of the girmitiyas, their transportation to Fiji and the return passage, would be borne by the employers and the colonial government. The employers would pay two-thirds of the total cost in the form of indenture fees, with the remaining third coming from government contribution. The indenture fee was to be fixed at a rate to provide for a 'fund in aid of return passages'. The fund would be used exclusively to meet the cost of repatriation of the labourers.

The indenture legislation provided that a term could only be extended for absence and desertion on the production of a magistrate's order. An employer wanting to recover lost work time due to a worker's absence was required to take the labourer to the Stipendiary Magistrate of his district who could extend the contract by the number of days the labourer had been absent. The labourers could re-indenture with the same or another employer, for which they were entitled to a sum of bounty money. Passes or Tickets-of-Absence were required if labourers wanted to leave the plantation for a period of time. Without these, they could be arrested by their employers, overseers or the headman without warrant, while anyone else would require a warrant to make an arrest. In this respect, Fiji was different from Mauritius, British Guiana and Trinidad, where a policeman could, without a warrant, apprehend any indentured labourer without a ticket of leave.

Actual conditions of employment were stated on a form of agreement in English, Hindi (Devanagri script), Urdu (Arabic script) and in Tamil and Telugu in the South, which the prospective girmitiyas were given by the recruiters in the districts of recruitment.[18] These varied in some minor details over the years and between the different colonies. But all specified the type of work to be done, the number of hours of work required per day and remuneration for it, availability of accommodation and other facilities and, above all, the provision for an optional return passage back to India. Typical conditions offered to Fiji girmitiyas stated that their indenture of five years would begin on the day of their arrival in the colony. The girmitiyas would be required to do work related to cultivation or manufacture of the produce on any plantation in the colony. They would work nine hours on each week day and five on Saturdays; Sundays and public holidays were free. Monthly or daily wages and task-work rates were specified. For time-work, each adult male was to be paid 'not less than one shilling' and every adult female 'not less than nine pence', while children were to be paid proportionately to the amount of work done. The same rates applied to task-work, a male's task being defined as six hours of steady work and a female's four-and-a-half.

The regulations stipulated that an employer could allot only one task per day but if, by mutual agreement, the labourers performed extra work, they were to be paid an additional amount. The girmitiyas were to receive rations from their employers during their first six months on the plantation according to the scale prescribed by the government at a daily cost of four pence. Children between five and 12 years of age were eligible for half the rations free of cost, and those under five for nine *chittacks* of free milk daily during their first year on the plantations. Suitable housing was to be provided free of rent to those under indenture and the ill were to receive free hospital accommodation, medical attendance, medicine and food. A girmitiya could return to India at his or her own expense at the end of five years' indenture. At the end of a further five years of 'industrial residence', he was entitled to a free return passage provided he claimed this right before the end of 12 years of residence in the colony. Children who had come with their indentured parents could claim the right of free passage before they reached the age of 24 years, whilst those born in Fiji were entitled to free repatriation until the age of 12 provided they were accompanied by their parents or guardians.

The Fiji Emigration Agent in Calcutta began recruiting in late 1878.[19] He licensed 37 recruiters to procure the 400 adults requested by Fiji. Two of the recruiters' licences were subsequently cancelled for fraud. Altogether 650 recruits were collected 'up country'. After registration at the sub-depots, they were dispatched to Calcutta, but by the time the contingent was admitted to the main depot at Garden Reach, the number of recruits had been reduced to 597. Some had changed their minds and opted out or withdrawn because their families had been rejected, but the majority were rejected because they were declared unfit for manual labour. In the depot itself during the waiting period before embarkation, further reductions took place: some died from cholera and smallpox and quite a few were transferred to other depots. When the *Leonidas*, the first immigrant ship, cleared port on 4 March 1879, there were 498 people on board: 273 men, 146 women, 47 boys and 32 girls.

In the beginning the Fiji planters showed little enthusiasm for the Indian indentured labourers. Possibly their negative reaction was due to the extra cost of Indian labour,[20] but perhaps they were also protesting against Gordon's policy of prohibiting the commercial employment of Fijian labour. Only one planter, J. Hill of Rabi, offered to take 52 men, 25 women and 29 children from the first batch which had arrived in the *Leonidas*; the rest were reluctantly employed by the government on public works and other miscellaneous jobs.[21] But the planters could not hold out for long. When they saw the Indians performing impressively on coffee plantations in Rewa in November 1879 they applied for an immediate allotment. Later, as the supply of Polynesian labour became increasingly less certain, the planters expressed greater appreciation of Indian labour. One planter, writing in the *Fiji Times* in 1885, noted:

> It is upon the Indian labour that the future of Fiji depends; for the Fijians have become so utterly demoralised by the mistaken policy of the Government that many of the larger planters have no Fijian labour, and others are only waiting for existing agreements to expire and will have no more. The supply from Polynesia is gradually ceasing, and therefore, we have nothing but the Indian labour to depend upon, and it is undoubtedly the best in Fiji. Seeing that it is our only source of labour we must take it with the conditions imposed.[22]

They did. And in time, Indian indentured labour not only helped create the modern cash economy which the colonial government so desperately needed, but also shielded the indigenous Fijians from some of the harsher aspects of the process of modernisation, enabling them to adapt to the new world at their own pace.

Fiji was the last major sugar colony to import Indian indentured labour, and in 1879 the indenture system had been in existence for some 45 years. It is to the origins of that indentured journey that we should now turn. Indian indentured emigration was begun in direct response to the shortage of labour in the 'King Sugar' colonies caused by the abolition of slavery in 1834, and by the termination of the system of apprenticeship for six years under which, until 1838, the planters had been able to obtain 'free' labour. Once liberated, the former slaves shunned plantation work, even on much better terms. The memory of the relentless pace of work under harsh discipline, usually for a pittance, killed any desire for re-employment.[23] The apprenticeship system, which had been hastily devised to cope with the problem of the sudden emancipation of the slaves, failed largely because of its inherent contradictions and paradoxes.[24]

Rapidly declining production of sugar caused by the precarious nature of the labour supply prompted the planters to look elsewhere. A number of smaller West Indian colonies looked to Europe, Africa and China,[25] but eventually, following Mauritius, they turned to India. Mauritius had been enjoying moderate success with Indian labourers imported on a simple contract since 1834. The tentative venture proved highly successful, and indentured emigration was put on a firmer footing. By the end of 1839, over 25,000 Indians had entered Mauritius.[26] Other colonies followed suit, as is indicated in Table 1.[27] By the time indentured emigration was finally abolished in 1917, over one million indentured labourers from India had been transported across the seas.

For the better part of the first decade of indentured emigration, the laws of supply and demand governed recruitment. The planters obtained their labourers through European firms based in Calcutta and nearby areas, and also through their own agents. However, it was not long before the more vigilant officials in India began to suspect irregularities in emigration procedures. Their doubts were increased by well-publicised reports of neglect and ill-treatment of labourers on four successive ships to Mauritius, all of which were ill-equipped and poorly supervised. In response to these criticisms, as well as to provide a semblance of legal supervision of indentured emigration, the Government of India directed the Indian Law Commissioners to draw up proposals regulating indenture. These were incorporated in Act V of 1837,[28] which provided, among other things, for greater control of recruitment at all levels in India, the specification of wages, and stipulation of the nature of employment and the period of service in the contract. Recruiters obtaining labourers through 'fraudulent means' stood to be fined up to 200 rupees or face 30 months imprisonment.

Table 1
Major Indian Indentured Labour Importing Colonies

Name of Colony	Years of Migration	No. of Emigrants	Indian Population in 1879	Indian Population in 1900	Indian Population in 1969
Mauritius	1834-1900	453,063	141,309	261,000	520,000
British Guiana	1838-1916	238,909	83,786	118,000	257,000
Trinidad	1845-1916	143,939	25,852	83,000	360,000
Jamaica	1845-1915	36,412	15,134	14,661	27,951
Grenada	1856-1885	3,200	1,200	2,118	9,500
St Lucia	1858-1895	4,350	1,175	2,000	-
Natal	1860-1911	152,184	12,668	64,953	614,000
St Kitts	1860-1861	337	200	-	-
St Vincents	1860-1880	2,472	1,557	100	3,703
Reunion	1861-1883	26,507	45,000	-	-
Surinam	1873-1916	34,304	3,215	-	101,715
Fiji	1879-1916	60,965	480	12,397	241,000
East Africa	1895-	32,000	-	-	-
Seychelles	? -1916	6,315	-	-	-

As these measures were being enacted, reports of further abuses reached the more enlightened public in India and Great Britain, which, ever vigilant, denounced indenture as merely an extension of slavery, pressing government to take sterner measures to curtail the abuses. The Government of India temporarily halted all emigration, while planning for more comprehensive and effective legislation. It asked the colonies to conduct their own enquiries into the condition of the indentured labourers, and itself appointed a committee of six on 22 August 1838 to investigate all aspects of indentured emigration. The six men were T. Dickens, Rev. James Charles, W. F. Dowson, Russomroy Dutt, J. P. Grant and Major E. Archer.[29] The committee examined witnesses from August 1838 to mid-January 1839, and submitted its final report in October 1840. Because of the massive and frequently contradictory nature of the evidence that had been gathered, the members differed in their interpretations as well as recommendations to the government. Consequently two reports were submitted. The majority report of Dickens, Charles and Dutt presented a scathing critique of the indenture system. Their report concluded:

> it to be distinctly proved beyond dispute that the Coolies and other natives exported to Mauritius and elsewhere were (generally speaking) induced to come to Calcutta by gross misrepresentation and deceit practised upon them by native crimps, styled duffadars and arkottis employed by European and Anglo-Indian undertakers and shippers who were mostly cognisant of these frauds, and who received a very considerable sum per head for each Coolie exported.[30]

They contended further that had the emigrants been given a proper idea of their actual place of destination, many would have refused to indenture; that the potential emigrants were given the impression that they would obtain employment with the East India Company as peons, gardeners, porters, etc.; that they did not fully understand the significance of the contracts they had signed, and that legislative measures enacted to counteract abuses had been to no avail; that the emigrants were threatened with legal action if they expressed an unwillingness to emigrate after they had signed the contract; and finally, that the labourers suffered considerable social and economic disabilities in the colonies where regulations had 'little practical utility in restraining illegal importation of coolies'. To prevent 'great misery and distress' to the emigrants, the members recommended greater government control; formal conventions between India and the colonies; restrictions of indentured embarkations to certain well-supervised ports; appointment of a Chief Superintendent and 'purveyors' of 'coolies' in the colonies; a fixed proportion of females to males among the emigrants; and government control of shipping.

J. P. Grant, in a minority report, dissented. He acknowledged irregularities in the indenture system, but urged against direct government intervention. The disadvantages, he argued, had to be clearly and dispassionately weighed up against the 'incalculable' advantages of emigration to the labourers themselves. It was to this view that the government was generally inclined, but in the circumstances considered it prudent to halt all indentured emigration.

In the correspondence that followed between the colonies and the Government of India it became clear that the prohibition of emigration could not be long maintained. Reports from the colonies appeared to show that the hardships and problems of the labourers had been exaggerated.[31] In January 1842, the Colonial Office passed an Order, re-opening indentured emigration to Mauritius. Most of its principles were later incorporated into the Government of India's Act XV of 1842, which was the first comprehensive measure to provide a semblance of government control and supervision.[32] The Act provided for the appointment, on fixed salary, of an Emigration Agent at the ports of embarkation in India, and a Protector of Emigrants in Mauritius. The Emigration Agent was required to examine each emigrant and to ascertain that he fully understood the nature of the transaction. He was also to report the proceedings to the provincial government. All the ships were henceforth to be licensed by the government, and required to observe certain conditions; dietary and medical supplies for the emigrants were prescribed, as were accommodation facilities and indeed the length of the voyage itself. The Act was a step forward, but it still had many defects: for a start it dealt perfunctorily with the system of recruitment, but perhaps most important of all there were no devices in it for the enforcement of the regulations. Unsurprisingly, subsequent investigations continued to unearth problems.

Mauritius opened the way, and it was not long after that the West Indian colonies renewed their request for Indian labour. In the past, officials in India had been apprehensive of allowing emigration to those distant colonies, partly on account of the great distance and consequent problems of communication, and partly because of the fear of the effects of competition among the recruiters for the different colonies. But reports from British Guiana were encouraging[33] and the Government of India gave the colonies the benefit of the doubt. Consequently, indentured emigration to British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica was recommended under the same conditions as those that applied to Mauritius.

In the 1850s indentured emigration began to the smaller West Indian colonies. Some modifications were made in the existing regulations, but perhaps the most significant development was the move afoot in the colonies to restrict, or even abolish, provisions regarding return passage of the migrants after the completion of their contract. Mauritius raised the question in 1851 and was followed two years later by British Guiana and Trinidad.[34] In the case of the former, the Government of India agreed to waive the provision of repatriation of the Indians after five years, provided Mauritius agreed to pay the return passages of those unable from sickness or destitution to purchase their own tickets. The Government of Trinidad proposed to give free return tickets only to those who claimed the right within 18 months of it becoming available; others, even after 10 years' residence, it suggested, should be required to contribute a certain sum to meet the cost of repatriation. Initially, the Government of India proceeded cautiously, but once it realised the full implications of the proposals, it retracted its earlier position. It observed in 1857:

> We should view with great jealousy any proposals for depriving the natives of India of the absolute right to a return passage to their own country, unless such provisions could be framed as would perfectly secure them from the risk of undue influence when it was sought to obtain their consent to an arrangement for keeping them in the colony.[35]

Despite persistent and genuine efforts to curtail abuses in the indenture system, careful investigation by independent-minded officials in the 1850s and early 1860s uncovered many irregularities and evasions. H.N.D. Beyts, for instance, criticised the continuing prevalence of unscrupulous tactics used by recruiters.[36] In many instances, he noted, recruits unwilling to go to one colony were taken to the depot of another. Often such activity was carried out 'in open defiance of the authority of the local laws', while the Protector of Emigrants was 'utterly powerless to prevent the abuses if not in all at least in nine-tenths of the cases in which offences were committed'. The problem was compounded by the 'peculiarly credulous and tractable disposition' of the recruits who, away from their villages and afraid of the unknown, succumbed to threats of reprisal from the recruiter. F. J. Mout, appointed by the Government of Bengal to investigate the problem of transporting migrants, had found distressingly high mortality rates on the voyages. The average mortality on the 12 ships which left for the West Indies during 1856-7 was 17.3 per cent, reaching as high as 31.2 per cent on the *Merchantman*.[37] Mout attributed the high mortality rates to the poor health of the labourers, especially those from Madras, defective selection procedures, inadequate facilities provided on the ships and changes in the diet of the emigrants on the voyage.

Further measures were passed, and these were incorporated in the Emigration Act XIII of 1864.[38] For the first time, the duty of the Protector of Emigrants was precisely defined. Previously the recruits had been transferred directly to the port of embarkation; they now had to be interviewed by local magistrates who had to be satisfied that the emigrants were leaving voluntarily and fully understood the terms of the contract. At the ports of embarkation the Protector was required as far as possible to personally interview each emigrant. The recruiters were given licences on a yearly basis, and had to wear badges to make their identity visible to all.

These efforts reflect the difference between the situation as it existed in the very early years of indentured emigration and that which prevailed after the mid-19th century. Much progress had been made, but the reforms failed to satisfy both the critics and the advocates of indentured emigration. The opponents pointed to sensational cases of kidnapping, and assumed that these were typical. J.C. Robertson, the Divisional Magistrate at Allahabad in 1871, condemned the irregularities in colonial recruitment by pointing to the great discrepancy between the number of recruits obtained by colonial recruiters, and that obtained by their inland counterparts: whereas the former collected 47 emigrants in the period of seven to eight months, the latter could only manage 14 or so during the course of the whole year.[39] His views were widely publicised. But what was not realised at the time was the crucial difference in the two types of recruitment: colonial recruitment was a highly organised and professionally co-ordinated venture, whereas inland recruitment, for the most part, was more amorphous and depended largely on the initiative and enterprise of the contractor or the middleman (*sardar*). Hence the discrepancy. But these facts were lost sight of in the heat of the argument.

Recruiters, on the other hand, complained of constant harassment and intimidation from magistrates and the police. W.M. Anderson, Emigration Agent for Jamaica, wrote that many officials deliberately delayed correspondence, and in some instances even refused to countersign recruiters' licences 'unless a respectable *zamindar* becomes a security for them'. He referred to the practice of daily police visits to emigration depots as 'in truth sending wolves and vultures to look after and take care of lambs'—a reference to widespread corruption in the police force. And he complained that there was a widely held impression that the government was opposed to emigration, and that subordinate officials were allowed to impede the process of recruitment at will.[40]

Persistent complaints from the Emigration Agents precipitated the intervention of Lord Salisbury, the Secretary of State for India. He enquired whether the Government of India 'might not more directly encourage emigration and superintend the system under which it is conducted'.[41] In Lord Salisbury's view, indentured emigration, properly regulated, would be to the benefit of India, Britain, the colonies and the emigrants themselves:

> While then, from an Indian point of view, emigration, properly regulated, and accompanied by sufficient assurance of profitable employment and fair treatment, seems a thing to be encouraged on grounds of humanity, with a view to promote the well-being of the poorer classes; we may also consider, from an imperial point of view, the great advantage which must result from peopling the warmer British possessions which are rich in natural resources and only want population, by an intelligent and industrious race to whom

> the climate of these countries is well suited, and to whom the culture of the staples suited to the soil, and the modes of labour and settlement, are adapted. In this view also it seems proper to encourage emigration from India to the colonies well fitted for an Indian population.

He then went on to suggest how the Government of India might intervene directly to encourage and facilitate indentured emigration and curtail bureaucratic impediments. He urged it to exercise direct control over the type of emigrants recruited by allowing the authorities in India to 'help and counsel' the colonial agents and, in times of difficulty, to even recruit labourers themselves. Salisbury further suggested that the Government of India should appoint its own officials in the colonies to enforce the observance of labour regulations and the indenture contract. The last paragraph of his despatch, which clearly shows that Salisbury intended permanent settlement and colonisation, read:

> Above all things we must confidently expect, as an indispensable condition of the proposed arrangements, ...the Colonial laws and their administration will be such that Indian settlers who have completed their terms of service to which they are agreed as return for the expense of bringing them to the Colonies, will be in all respects free men, with privileges no whit inferior to those of any other class of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the colonies.

These words have acquired a particular significance in Fiji and are perhaps the most misunderstood in its political history. Fiji Indian politicians have long regarded it as the charter of equal rights for the Indian population of Fiji, equal in spirit and intent, they point out, to the Deed of Cession which promised the paramountcy of Fijian interests when Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874.[42] Their critics and political opponents deny that the despatch had the same legal or moral force as the Deed of Cession. The general consensus is that whatever the form of words, a general sentiment of equality informed Lord Salisbury's document, which was subsequently repeated by the governors of Fiji.

Throughout much of the period of indentured emigration, the Government of India let its citizens depart without hindrance. But this is not to say that India 'was following the policy on emigration matters formulated in the colonial office', and that in doing so, it was neglecting the 'true interests of common people'.[43] On the contrary, as seen in the notable example of Lord Salisbury's despatch, the Government of India, after consulting with the provincial governments, followed its own course. Of course, its efforts were not as successful as the critics would have liked, but the fact remains that colonial interests, at least in emigration matters, were not allowed to supersede the interests of India. For when gross transgressions of labourers' rights took place in the colonies emigration was stopped, and not resumed until adequate assurances for the protection of the labourers had been given.[44]

Was indentured emigration detrimental to the 'true interests of the people' of India—as some people have contended and as Indian capitalists argued at the time? If by this is meant that indentured emigration took away labour needed in various industrial enterprises in India, then it was not detrimental. Numerically, indentured emigration was hardly ever big enough to constitute a serious drain on the labour force. The domestic colonisation or resettlement schemes were not (or could not have been) affected adversely, for the type of people required for their success—'cultivators with some small capital and accustomed to independent enterprise'[45]—were not emigrating to the colonies. The colonial emigrants were mainly 'labourers, dependent for their support upon cultivating classes'.[46] Furthermore, as we shall see later, colonial and internal recruitments were, by and large, centred in different regions of the subcontinent, with little conflict of interest or purpose.

The Salisbury despatch once again opened up the whole question of indentured emigration in the 1880s. Two enquiries into the working of the system of recruitment were instituted: in the United Provinces under Major D. G. Pitcher,[47] and in Bihar under G. A. Grierson.[48] They uncovered a number of defects, necessitating further reforms which were incorporated in the Emigration Act XXII of 1882. This piece of legislation governed indentured emigration, with minor modifications in 1908, until the abolition of indentured emigration in 1916.

It is appropriate now to examine in some detail the way in which the indentured emigration was carried out in India. Embarkation of indentured emigrants was restricted by the Emigration Act to the ports of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, and was abolished altogether from the French ports. Each Indian labour importing colony was required to appoint an Emigration Agent at the port of embarkation. However, because of the different recruiting seasons for different colonies, one Emigration Agent usually represented a number of them. Thus for much of the late 19th century there were only two British emigration agencies in Calcutta. One recruited for British Guiana and Natal, while the other was used jointly by Trinidad, Mauritius, Fiji, Jamaica and, occasionally, Grenada, St Vincents and St Lucia. Surinam, being a Dutch colony, had its own agency.

The Emigration Agent rarely recruited personally, except when the recruit was found in the vicinity of the depot, or when he presented himself for registration in Calcutta. Usually the agent forwarded the requisition from the colonies to the sub-agents up-country. Who the sub-agents were cannot accurately be ascertained. But Major Pitcher found that in the UP many were Jews, and in Bihar they were former recruiters who had 'shown aptitude for the work', and who were able 'to meet the swindling tendency of recruiters by a thorough knowledge of their practices'.[49] There were also some European sub-agents, among the most prominent being Messrs Bird and Company of Allahabad in the 1870s.

Some sub-agents, such as those for Trinidad, were paid by a fixed salary,[50] supplemented by a commission to cover the expenses of collection, registration, accommodation, lodging and transportation of the recruits to the port of embarkation. The commission was paid only if the recruits actually embarked for the colonies, while the cost of repatriation to their districts of those who changed their mind or were rejected at the port of embarkation had to be borne by the sub-agent. The British Guiana agency did not pay its sub-agents a fixed salary but gave them a higher rate of commission, supplemented at the end of the season by a bonus per 100 emigrants embarked for the colonies. Thus while commercialism may have induced a temptation to corruption, it also enjoined vigilance on the part of the sub-agent who stood to lose the most if the emigrants did not embark. The commission varied from place to place, depending upon the proximity of the locality of recruitment to Calcutta (or other ports of embarkation), as well as over time. It also depended on the availability of recruits. In 1886, rates for men and children varied between Rs 17 and Rs 23, while for women they ranged from Rs 24-Rs 34. In Allahabad in 1882, the sub-agents were paid Rs 28 for women and Rs 18 for men; in 1905, the rates had increased to Rs 40 for men and Rs 55 for women, and these remained more or less constant till the end.[51]

The sub-agents appointed and employed recruiters although in theory the recruiters were to be directly responsible to the Emigration Agent. The recruiters, however, were licensed by the Protector of Emigrants upon the recommendation of the Emigration Agent. The licence was granted annually, and it needed the signature of the magistrate of the district where the recruiters intended to work. Their remuneration varied depending upon the colony they worked for. In the case of French colonies, *bona fide* recruiters were paid at a fixed salary, while those who worked for British Guiana were paid partly by salary and partly by commission. Thus Ghura Khan, British Guiana sub-agent at Buxar, paid his recruiters Rs 5-Rs 8 per month, besides Rs 5 for males and Rs 8 for females.[52] In Allahabad in the 1880s, recruiters received only commissions, without salary, of Rs 6 for men and Rs 8 for women, which by 1912 had increased to Rs 6-Rs 9 for men and Rs 18-Rs 20 for women. These amounts may seem meagre today, but at the time they compared favourably with the average wage of unskilled labourers of two to four annas per day.

The critics of the indenture system reserved their harshest words for the recruiter. He was generally regarded as the 'scum of the earth', 'low class, unscrupulous in his methods', 'by no means respectable and not likely to have much scruples where money is to be made'.[53] Indeed, sometimes the district magistrate cancelled the recruiter's licence or refused to renew it because the recruiter was 'not respectable looking' or he happened to be a Chamar.[54]

Who were the recruiters? Again, little is known about them during the first half of indentured emigration, though scattered sources indicate the dominance of Muslims and higher caste Hindus.[55] For the second half, more information is available. Table 2, constructed on the basis of data in *Register of Recruiters for the Benares District for the Decade 1882-1892*,[56] shows that the recruiters came from all strata of Indian society, though there were not surprisingly few from the lower castes. As can be seen, the largest numbers were provided by Muslims who, if we include Pathans, Sheiks, Saiyids, Moghuls, and Hajams, accounted for 40.4 per cent. The preponderance of Muslim recruiters is a puzzle, though their higher numbers may have been a result of their urban residence, dating from Moghul times, as well as high literacy rates. Among Hindus, the largest number of recruiters came from Banias and Kayasths who together provided 19.7 per cent of the total, with 9 per cent originating from Brahmans, Thakurs and Chattris. Caste status by itself, of course, is not a reliable index about a person's character or his moral scruples, and it is quite possible that high caste recruiters were as unscrupulous and deceitful as others; but in any event the data throw some doubt on conventional assertions about the recruiters' social origins.

Most of the recruiters were males who conducted their own operations. Nevertheless in many cases they also hired unlicensed agents called *arkatis*. These were employed where there were few recruiters or where the prospects of obtaining enough recruits appeared slim. Again, little is known about these people. In the UP, Pitcher found the *arkatis* to be *chaukidars* (guards) and *patwaris* (record keepers) who took the opportunity of making a few rupees by turning in 'troublesome characters'. The *arkatis* came from all castes. Some of them had been recruiting for a long time, while others were shopkeepers, peons, domestic servants, cloth sellers and even labourers.

Table 2
Caste/Social Background of the Recruiters in Benares Region, 1882-1892

Name	No.	Name	No.
Muslim	169	Bhur	3
Bania	67	Pahari	3
Kayasth	33	Barhari	3
Pathan	19	Bind	2
Halwai	18	Gowala	2
Brahman	17	Fakir	2
Thakur	16	Jew	2
Chattri	13	Patwa	2
Gadariya	13	Rajwar	2
Sheik	13	Saiyid	2
Lallla	12	Kurmi	1
Chamar	12	Kori	1
Kunbi	12	Moghul	1
Ahir	10	Sweeper	1
Bhuya	10	Hajam	1
Christian	10	Kalwar	1
Kahar	10	Bengali	1
Koeri	7	Not Known	11
Nonia	5		
		TOTAL	507

Many emigrants were registered outside their districts of origin, as we shall see later. They had already left their homes before they encountered the recruiters. But the recruiters were also afraid of making frequent incursions into the villages for fear of being beaten up by the servants of the local *zamindars* who saw them as a drain on cheap labour. The villagers themselves were not averse to wielding the *lathi* when they heard of their friends and relatives being recruited through deception. Then there was the constant interference of the police officials who were more influential in villages than in cities. One sub-agent in Bihar, Badri Sahu, said that 'when he recruits men of respectable castes, the police find their way into the depot and turn them out, saying that the Government is going to make Christians out of them, and that they would be eaten up by maggots and leeches'.[57] And in the UP, a recruiter complained that the 'mofussil police give us great trouble and annoyance by entering our depots and trying to intimidate the coolies into confessions against us'.[58] Apart from prejudice against emigration, police harassed recruits because they resented having to conduct detailed, time consuming enquiries about the 'suspicious' cases. Speaking generally about the recruiters, Grierson, in an otherwise critical report, remarked:

> I think that recruiters suffer from a good deal of false suspicion . . . I heard many criticisms on the recruiters in the course of my tour, and, with few exceptions, they were the reverse of favourable. Such strong terms, as 'scum of the earth' applied to the recruiters generally, made one pause and think; but I invariably found that this bad opinion arose from too hasty generalisation. The notice of a district officer is drawn to cases in which one or two black sheep were concerned, and he hastily concludes that all recruiters belong to the same flock.[59]

He went on to add that 'a great part of any deterioration which they have undergone is due to the way they are treated by Government Officials'. Pitcher also found

> that the recruiter, though occasionally guilty of mal-practices in the exercise of what is looked upon by a number of people as not a very reputable calling, has to contend with many unnecessary difficulties, that he is frequently impeded in most objectionable ways by the police and the underlings of the Court...[60]

Clearly, one must treat with some scepticism the depressing picture of the recruiters painted by C. F. Andrews and other contemporary observers, as aggressive and adventurous people who invariably terrorised villagers into acquiescence and who had to be bribed to keep the peace.[61] There was deception, as is bound to be present in any enterprise of this kind, but its magnitude has probably been overstated.

Colonial recruitment was a vast, well-organised operation and, as Table 3 shows,[62] there were very few years indeed when there were not upwards of 500 recruiters at work. In at least four years, they numbered more than 1,000. A number of other features are clear from the Table. For instance, over the years there was a gradual increase in the number of licences granted to recruiters. Among other reasons, such as increased demand from the colonies, this may be attributed to the difficulty in obtaining the requisitioned number of recruits in certain years. The late 1890s and early

1900s was a period of relative economic prosperity in the United Provinces which provided the bulk of the emigrants, and in these times Indians were naturally reluctant to leave their homes. Hence greater efforts were required to fill the quota. The sharp increase in the percentage of licences cancelled after 1898 may indicate that the recruiters had to resort to questionable practices to fill their quota. This contrasts with the situation in the mid-1890s when fewer licences were cancelled. These were years of drought, scarcity and famine, when distressed peasants sought any alternative to alleviate their grim conditions.

Table 3
Colonial Recruiting Licences Granted and Cancelled

Year	No. Granted	No. Cancelled	% Cancellation	No. Recruited	Average No. per Recruiter
1880-1	559	11	2.0	15,430	27.6
1881-2	452	14	3.1	11,539	25.5
1887	345	3	0.9	6,882	19.9
1888	511	4	0.8	10,325	20.2
1889	171	15	2.1	16,813	23.4
1890	768	20	2.6	23,813	30.0
1891	1003	22	2.2	25,613	25.5
1892	857	2	0.2	17,225	20.1
1893	866	8	0.9	15,046	17.4
1894	1023	6	0.6	26,707	26.1
1895	838	13	1.6	17,315	20.7
1896	755	12	1.6	16,439	21.8
1897	539	3	0.6	12,315	22.8
1898	701	27	3.9	9,334	13.3
1899	801	43	5.4	14,051	17.5
1900	1088	27	2.5	18,489	17.0
1902	1415	37	2.6	13,807	9.8

One of the most remarkable features of the Table is the surprisingly low percentage of cancellations of the recruiters' licences. The critics would explain it as the result of the inefficient and corrupt administration of the indenture system in India.[63] They would argue that the cases of fraud and deceit which reached the officials were only the 'tip of the iceberg'. Perhaps.

But in the context of the general thrust of the argument developed here, and in view of the long history of indentured emigration, it could be suggested that the elaborate machinery set up to govern recruitment was in fact effective, and that cases of fraud were certainly far fewer than it would appear from impressionistic and oral evidence.

For what type of offences were licences cancelled? Each year the Protector of Emigrants gave the reasons—and those for 1902 were most comprehensive.[64]

1. Two for providing unsuitable accommodation.
2. One for absence, owing to illness, of the recruiter from the district for which he held a license.
3. One for endeavouring to obtain a license from an agent when he already held a licence from another agent.
4. One for keeping a married woman against her husband's wish.
5. Three for suspicious conduct in connection with the recruitment of emigrants.
6. One for recruiting in a district in which he was forbidden to collect emigrants.
7. Two for having put forward a man to represent another who did not wish to emigrate.
8. One cancelled at recruiter's wish.
9. Five for supplying emigrants to other agencies other than those for which they were licensed.
10. Three for conducting recruiting operations in districts other than those for which they were licensed.
11. One for an offence under Section 420 of P.C. (Penal Code).
12. Four for being considered by the magistrate to be men of suspicious character.
13. Two for providing a woman for registration under a wrong description.
14. One for being without sufficient means to carry on his work.
15. Two for inducing a minor girl to emigrate.
16. Three for recruiting emigrants prior to having their licences countersigned.
17. Two for misleading a woman and keeping the sub-depot register carelessly.

Abuses for which licences were cancelled seem to have been of a general nature, and likely to be present in any system of labour recruitment. In seven cases, for example, licences were cancelled because of suspicion (the nature of which is not specified) about the character of the recruiters or the way they conducted their business. Those in authority appear to have dealt with the recruiters with some arbitrariness.

Once a batch of recruits had been collected the recruiters took them to the sub-depot. This was normally a large *pucca* (brick) house, with special arrangements for the accommodation of emigrants.[65] Once the recruits had entered their domain, the sub-agents aimed to keep them *khush* (happy) and in good health. Food was free, and the sub-agents had to ensure that those taken for registration appeared physically fit for manual labour. To avoid violating caste scruples, the recruits were allowed to cook their own food which was bought from the local *bania*. In cold weather, they were provided with blankets. Sometimes, strict control was exercised on their movement, lest the recruits come in contact with people outside, change their mind and leave. But total *bandish* (confinement) could not be imposed for a very obvious reason: sub-agents feared public reprisal, even a riot, if it was discovered that people were kept against their will. In Bankipur district in Bihar, a sub-agent for Mauritius was falsely implicated in such a charge, which led to a police raid on the sub-depot. A long court case ensued which effectively ruined the sub-agent.[66]

But there were other more subtle ways of applying pressure on recalcitrant recruits. The sub-agents and the recruiters would often remind the recruit that he had eaten their salt and therefore was obliged to proceed. Others who expressed an unwillingness to emigrate were told to repay money spent on feeding them. An official recounted an imaginary conversation between the sub-agent and an unwilling recruit:

> Very well, you are at a perfect liberty to return but I have a little bill against you for road expenses, and as you have no money, I must have your *lotah* and *dupattah*—and anything else that will procure a refund of the amount I have expended.

Sometimes, things happened differently. As a UP official noted: 'if on the one hand there is a great agency for oppression, there is on the other a temptation to consent, get money or food, and then refuse to go'.[67]

In the waiting period in the depot, which could last a fortnight, the recruits were examined by the agency's travelling medical inspectors. The hopeless cases were rejected and presumably they returned to their villages at their own expense; the others remained in the sub-depot until a reasonable number had been collected. The district civil surgeon then examined them after which they were taken to the sub-divisional magistrate for registration. Here the sub-agents and recruits had their first encounter with the bureaucracy. Clerks had to be bribed to get early registration; failure to do so could result in disaster, for the contingent could be made to wait for days and even weeks. The recruits had to be shielded from petty Indian officials, especially of high castes, who frequently abused and taunted them. And finally, they had been schooled to give proper answers. Sometimes the interview began and ended with only one question: 'Are you going willingly?' Sometimes the recruits were rejected because of vague suspicion. Here is an example from the Benares *Register of Emigrants*, 1890: 'Inspected the sub-depot today—only one female coolie admitted this morning. She has got a little jewel on her, hence her case seems suspicious. Rejected.'

By the time the recruits finished with the sub-depot and had been registered, an average 18 per cent of the original entrants were rejected for reasons listed in Table 4.[68] A number of features are clear in the Table. The largest percentage of reductions took place in the mid-1890s. These, as noted above, were years of scarcity and famine in many parts of the UP, and it is more than likely that a large number of those brought before the district civil surgeons and registration officials would have included emaciated unfortunates who were naturally rejected. On the other hand, 1899 and 1900 were years of relative prosperity when the percentage of unfit recruits brought for registration would have been lower. Rejection for unfitness accounted for the largest percentage of reduction, and this again was more marked in the scarcity years. Another striking feature is the number of those who deserted from the sub-depot. The deserters may have included those who were initially tricked into the sub-depot, and escaped at the earliest opportunity; it may also have included those who changed their minds and decided to return to their villages. This was not difficult as the recruits were still in familiar surroundings. Those who were passed then did their *chalan* (journey) to the port of embarkation. Depending on the distance between the sub-depot and the main depot, weather and transport arrangements, the journey could take from a week to a fortnight or more. The batch was accompanied by the recruiter, who was required to have a special certificate for the purpose. Sometimes, the recruiter delegated this task to his deputy or the *chaprasis* (assistants) of the sub-depot, and set out himself in search of more recruits. Part of the journey was completed on foot and part of it by rail. Throughout, the recruits were provided with food, blankets and other necessities by the recruiter (or his deputies). Further reductions took place on the journey, mainly because of desertions.

Table 4
Deductions at Sub-Depot Before Despatch to Calcutta

Causes	Years 1893	 1894	 1895	 1896	 1897	 1899	 1900	Total	%
No. at depot from previous year	90	380	400	118	176	258	514	1,936	
New registrations	15,046	26,707	17,315	16,439	12,315	14,051	18,419	120,362	
Infants born in Sub-depot	-	-	2	1	-	-	-	3	
Total Recruits to be a/c	15,136	27,087	17,717	16,558	12,491	14,309	18,933	122,301	
Died	7	14	10	9	2	6	2	50	0.2
Deserted	343	963	600	592	460	146	338	3,441	15.3
Left behind/detained	54	221	194	-	-	3	-	472	2.1
Rejected as unfit	1,464	3,181	2,176	2,611	1,442	892	724	12,490	55.7
Unwilling	79	154	330	369	60	104	120	1,216	5.4
Claimed by relatives	90	140	83	292	58	102	71	836	3.7
Transferred to other depots	3	412	81	2	15	-	457	970	4.3
Surplus	25	-	-	188	557	542	1,487	2,799	12.5
Rejected because relation rejected, unwilling, etc.	33	41	-	-	83	-	-	157	0.7
Total No. Rejected	2,098	5,123	3,474	4,063	2,677	1,794	3,199	22,431	18.3
% of Total Rejected	13.9	18.9	19.6	24.5	21.4	12.5	16.9	-	-

Table 5
History of Emigrants Between Arrival at Depot and Departure for Colonies

	Years											
Causes	1881-2	1888	1889	1891	1894	1895	1896	1897	1899	1900	Total	%
Total no. accom. in dept	11,162	9,412	14,814	21,101	21,181	14,584	12,796	9,809	12,213	15,465	142,537	-
Died	64	59	108	141	109	41	33	26	39	131	751	2.7
Deserted	484	249	426	348	559	201	133	69	343	412	3,224	11.8
Rejected as unfit	590	703	1,236	2,057	1,602	1,516	1,145	742	728	932	11,251	41.2
Unwilling	125	144	62	91	226	149	83	56	215	397	1,548	5.7
Claimed by relatives	62	49	79	52	105	36	26	11	63	139	622	2.3
Not emig. on acc. of relation	54	264	580	1,013	554	522	337	145	155	218	3,842	14.1
Trans to other agencies, reject, unwill., etc.	155	175	178	707	306	280	204	261	390	197	2,853	10.4
Surplus	38	51	265	277	238	264	319	124	438	469	2,483	9.1
Released from engagement	-	4	17	17	47	17	2	2	62	135	303	1.1
Procd to colonies as passengers	-	5	43	17	2	2	8	1	2	-	90	0.3
Sent to hospitals outside	-	-	-	-	86	44	54	116	10	59	369	1.3
Total reduction	1,572	1,713	2,994	4,720	3,834	3,072	2,344	1,553	2,445	3,089	27,336	
% Reduction	14.1	18.2	20.2	22.0	18.1	21.1	18.3	15.8	20.0	20.0	-	19.2

Upon landing in Calcutta the recruits encountered further harassment: more palms had to be greased and more *baksheesh* was needed. Eventually, they were taken to the Emigration Depot at Garden Reach. The facilities here were usually shared between different colonies at different times, to ensure that ships avoided bad weather on the various routes. The buildings varied in size and structural layout, though each depot was required to have a number of facilities stipulated in the Emigration Act.[69] First of all there was a reception shed set apart from the other for the examination of freshly arrived recruits. Those recruits who were passed there by the medical officers were then taken to the accommodation depot. Single males and females were housed separately, and efforts were made to keep together married couples and others with families. Each persons was given a platform space of 12 'superficial feet' wide and six feet long in the accommodation depot. Cooking sheds with brick or mud plastered walls and tiled flours were situated at a distance, as were separate latrines for men and women. Each Agency had separate hospital sheds for treatment of ordinary diseases, observation sheds for suspected cases, and segregation sheds for the treatment of contagious diseases. Then there was the inspection shed for mustering the emigrants for various purposes including, wherever necessary, their feeding.

Soon after their arrival at Garden Reach, the Emigration Agent arranged for the recruits to be examined by the medical inspector whose main duty was to determine whether they were physically fit for five years of hard manual labour in the colonies. If satisfied, he gave a certificate for embarkation to the Emigration Agent, and if not, he notified the Protector of Emigrants. The Protector and his deputies interviewed all the recruits and if they discovered irregularities, or found that the recruits for some valid reason did not want to emigrate, they ordered the agent to pay them reasonable compensation as well as arrange their repatriation to the place of registration.

During the waiting period in the depot, a further reduction in the number of recruits took place, as shown in Table 5.[70] It is clear from the figures that, on the average, a little more than three-quarters of the recruits who were admitted to the depot finally embarked for the colonies. This proportion is much lower when compared to the number of recruits who were brought to the sub-depot up-country: in 1894 only 58.8 per cent of the original recruits finally boarded the ship, in 1895 60.3 per cent, in 1897 60.8 per cent, in 1899 65.5 per cent and in 1900 61.4 per cent. That is, on the average, 40 per cent of those originally recruited did not embark. The causes of the rejections are clearly indicated in Table 5, and much of what has been said about the reductions at the sub-depot applies here as well. However, some features call for comment. The figure of 41 per cent for rejection for unfitness seems inordinately high. The reasons for this are difficult to ascertain as our sources do not go beyond giving statistical aggregates. Recruits may have contracted disease or otherwise been disabled between the time they left the sub-depots and the time they were brought before the medical inspectors at the Emigration Depot. Perhaps also the authorities at the sub-depot exercised less vigilance than did those at Calcutta. The highest number of rejections for unfitness took place in the early to mid-1890s, years of economic hardship when there was little difficulty in filling the requisition from the colonies. Those who did not emigrate because their relations were rejected or remained behind for other reasons constituted the second largest non-emigrating category. However, over the years, there was a progressive decline in the importance of this factor. In 1891, for instance,. this accounted for 21.5 per cent of the total reduction, in 1895 17.0 per cent and in 1900, 6.4 per cent. In the case of Fiji, this trend is related to the discouragement by the colonial government of family migration after 1890 because planters persistently complained of having to feed and clothe 'uneconomic' families (see below). Desertion was the third most important cause of the reductions. The desertion figures for the main depot in Calcutta were lower for all the years except 1899 and 1900 than the figures for the sub-depots. Thus in 1894, the sub-depot desertion figure was 19 per cent, compared to 14.6 per cent at the main depot, in 1895 17 per cent and 6.5 per cent, in 1896 15 per cent and 5.6 per cent and in 1897 17 per cent and 4.4 per cent.

In the absence of anything other than statistical data, we can only speculate on the causes of desertion. Perhaps the deserters included those who were tricked by the recruiters and the sub-agents and decided to get away before they were taken to some place to which they did not wish to go. Perhaps also they may have been shrewd men and women who got enlisted as potential colonial migrants knowing from the very start that they would abscond in Calcutta. This view is not entirely implausible given that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries large numbers of people from the UP were increasingly finding employment in Calcutta and its industrial suburbs. A free trip would save them a few valuable rupees.

Those recruits who had been passed by the medical authorities and had obtained their necessary papers had to spend a compulsory period of seven days in the depot before they could embark the ships. The waiting period could, of course, be extended to several weeks if the ships did not arrive in time or if requisite quotas had not been filled. During this time, the recruits were encouraged to do light work such as cleaning and gardening within the depot.

Games and amusements were encouraged to keep the recruits away from melancholy and depression. The new life fostered a sense of companionship and togetherness that cut across barriers of religion, caste, and place of origin. The old, hierarchically organised and seemingly divinely pre-ordained world of the villages, and the tenacity of social bonds forged through many years of communal existence, were proving fragile and indeed irrelevant. Social barriers were impossible to maintain. Commensal tabus gradually broke down as all had to eat food cooked by unknown *bhandaris* (cooks). This process of fragmentation—for it was not abrupt disintegration—of the old world was aided by the attitude of the authorities who viewed all the recruits simply as 'coolies'. But along with this a process of reconstitution was taking place in which new ideas, new values and new associations were being formed. The recruits soon saw that success, even survival, in the world ahead depended more on individual enterprise than on ascribed status. They would realise fully the validity of this truth on the plantations in Fiji.

Endnotes

[1] Cited in Lucy Colaco, 'Labour Emigration from India to the British Colonies of Ceylon, Malaya and Fiji during the years 1850-1921', MSc (Econ) thesis, University of London (London, 1957), 83.

[2] K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: a history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne, 1962), 3; EP B Pros 2-4, January 1873.

[3] EP B Pros 2-4, January 1873, National Archives of India.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] For detailed discussion see, e.g. J.D. Legge, *Britain in Fiji, 1858-1880* (London, 1958), 15-35; Ethel Drus, 'The Colonial Office and the Annexation of Fiji', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, ser. 4:32 (1950), 87-110.

[6] Sir Arthur Gordon, *Fiji: records of private and of public life, 1875-1880* (Edinburgh, 1897-1912), I: 194.

[7] For a detailed study of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company in Fiji, see Michael Moynagh, *Brown or White? a history of the Fiji sugar industry* (Canberra, 1981).

[8] J.K. Chapman, *The Career of Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon: First Lord Stanmore, 1829-1912* (Toronto, 1964), 159. For a detailed discussion see Norma McArthur, *Island Populations of the Pacific* (Canberra, 1967), 3-26.

[9] Gordon to Carnarvon, 9 October 1877, *PP*, LV, Cmd 2149 (1878).

[10] See Colaco, 'Labour Emigration from India', 96.

[11] Quoted in Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 2.

[12] Colaco, 'Labour Emigration from India', 96-97.

[13] For further discussion see Legge, *Britain in Fiji*, 56; O.W. Parnaby, *Britain and the Labor Trade in the Southwest Pacific* (Durham, NC 1964).

[14] Gordon, *Records of Public and Private Life*, I: 179.

[15] Carnarvon to Gordon, 14 November 1877, in *PP*, LV, Cmd 2149 (1878).

[16] Fiji Government, *Fiji Royal Gazette*, IV, 23 March 1878.

[17] *Ibid.*, 9 February 1878.

[18] The following paragraph is based on 'Conditions of Employment' offered to Fiji migrants. These are found in the *PRs* and Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 210-12.

[19] This paragraph is based on *PR*, 1879, and EP B Pros 90-93, April 1882.

[20] Including wages, rations and the cost of introduction and repatriation, the annual costs to the planter was estimated to be £13 14s, as against the existing costs of £10 14 8d for an imported Pacific Island labourer.

[21] *PR* (1879); EP B Pros 90-93, April 1882.

[22] Colaco, 'Labour Emigration from India', 110.

[23] See HL (Emigration), A Pros 14, 8 May 1847. See also *PP*, xxxvii (1840), 459; D.W.D. Comins, *Note on Emigration from the East Indies to British Guiana* (Calcutta, 1893), 5; W. Kloosterboer, *Involuntary Labour since the Abolition of Slavery* (Leiden, 1960); W.L. Burn, *Emancipation and Apprenticeship in the West Indies* (London, 1937).

[24] See Dwarka Nath, *A History of Indians in British Guiana* (London 1950), 6-7.

[25] For more discussion see Panchanan Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour, 1834-1900* (New Delhi, 1970); K.O. Laurence, *Immigration to the West Indies in the Nineteenth Century* (Kingston, 1971); I.M. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834-1854* (London, 1953); Fred H. Hitchins, *The Colonial Land and Emigration Commission* (Philadelphia, 1931).

[26] General Department (Emigration), Consultation 6 (1837).

[27] The main sources of this table are: G. W. Roberts and J. Byrne, 'Summary Statistics on Indenture and Associated Migration to the West Indies, 1834-1948', *Population Studies*, 20:1 (1966), 125-34; J. Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration from India* (Calcutta, 1874); *PP*, LVII (1900), 467-68; EP B Pros 1-3, October 1881; Hugh Tinker, 'Indians Abroad: emigration, restriction, rejection', in Michael Twaddle (ed.), *Expulsion of a Minority* (London, 1975). It must be noted that the two terminal dates refer to the peak period of emigration; there were some years when there was no emigration to some colonies. The figures generally refer to the actual numbers entering the colonies, but in some cases they may also refer to numbers embarking at different ports in India. This distinction is not always made in the sources.

[28] Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration from India*, 433-44.

[29] *PP*, XVI, See. 2 (1841), 287ff. See also HP (Emigration), A Pros 15-20, 4 November 1840.

[30] *PP*, XVI, Sess. 2 (1841), 291.

[31] Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories*, 38.

[32] *PP*, XXXV (1844), 483-88.

[33] Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration from India*, 444.

[34] *Ibid.*, 447-47.

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] HP (Emigration), A Pros 36-38, 17 March 1862, and A Pros 6, 6 September 1861.

[37] F.J. Mout, 'Report on the Mortality of Emigrant Coolies to the West Indies', HP Consultations, 1 October 1858. See also Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration from India*, 454.

[38] Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration from India*, 467ff.

[39] EP A Pros 16-43, July 1872.

[40] P A Pros 16-43, July 1872.

[41] EP A Pros 41-67, May 1881. See also House of Commons Cmd. Paper 5192 (1910), 7-10.

42. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 26-27.

43. Saha, *Emigration of Indian Labour*, 155.

44. Cmd 5192 (1910), 4.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. EP A Pros 43-57, September 1881.

48. EP A Pros, 12-15, August 1883.

49. EP A Pros, 43-57, September 1881; EP A Pros 12-15 August 1883.

50. EP A Pros 43-57, September 1882.

51. *Ibid;* Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 30-31.

52. EP A Pros, 12-15, August 1883; and 43-57 September 1882.

53. Miscellaneuos File (Emigration), 1/102 (1865), Regional Record Office, Varanasi, UP.

54. EP A Pros 41-67, May 1881.

55. In 1865 among the many recruiters working in Benares were: Mudar Bux, Jainarain, Thomas Wyburn, Bisheshwar, Rahman Ally, Rain Lal, Kisoonersaud Lalji, Hans Raj, Sheik Mudaree, Khuda Bux, Abdul Khan, Faiz Khan, Sadak Ali and Sheik Chandoo. In 1871 the following recruiters were working for Messrs Bird and Company: Bundoo, Ram Surun, Gouree Sunkar Choubey, Madho, Mommed Hossein, Oahed Khan, Shewpersaud, Goroo Churn Dutt, Sheik Sunoo and Gunga Bissan Mistry.

56. The *Register* was located in the Collector's Office, Benares. I am grateful to Dr S.P. Sinha of the Regional Record Office, Varanasi, UP, who helped me to locate it.

57. EP A Pros 12-15, August 1883.

58. EP A Pros 43-57, September 1882.

59. EP A Pros 12-15, August 1883.

60. EP A Pros 43-57, September 1882.

61. C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, *Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji. An independent enquiry* (Perth, 1918).

62. Data obtained from the *PR* of the various years listed. Fiji cannot be isolated from other colonies, but the broad pattern applied to it.

63. E.g. see Andrews and Pearson, *Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji;* Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the export of Indian labour overseas, 1830-1920* (London, 1974).

64. *PR*, 1902.

65. Based on EP A Pros 12-15, August 1883; EP A Pros 43-57, September 1882; A.H. Hill, 'Emigration from India', *Timheri*, 4 (September 1919), 43-52; and the testimony of some of Fiji's indentured labourers in Ahmed Ali (ed.), *Girmit: the indenture experience in Fiji* (Suva, 1979), 1-57.

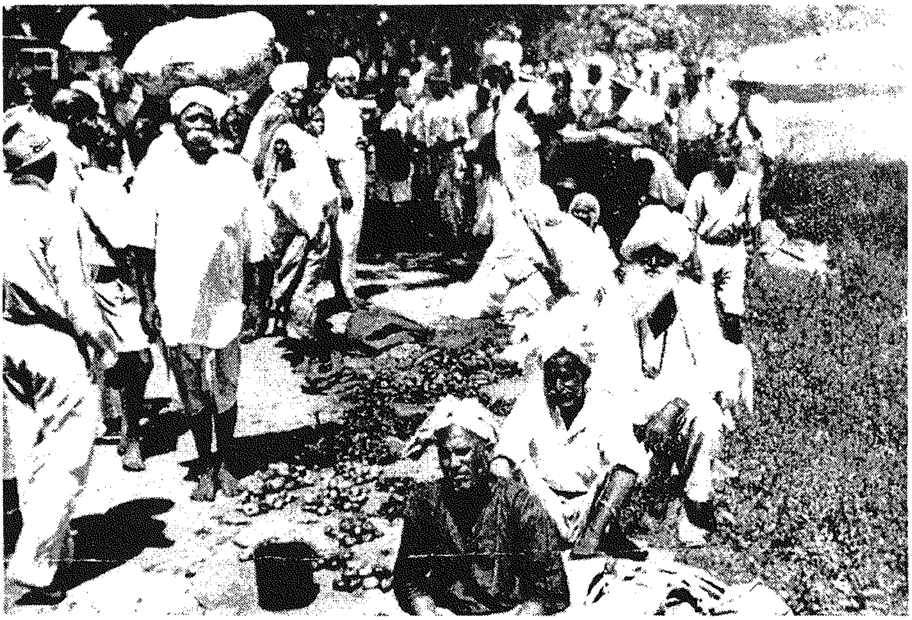
[66] EP A Pros 12-15, August 1883.

[67] EP A Pros 43-57, September 1882.

[68] Source: *PR* for the years listed.

[69] The following discussion is based on *The Indian Emigration ACT XXI for 1883, Rules and Notifications* (Calcutta, 1898); Hill, 'Emigration from India'; Ali, *Girmit*; Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*.

[70] Source: *PR* for the years listed.



A typical early Indian market scene with men dressed in traditional garb—dhoti, kurta and pagri. Note the man standing with a full sack on his head, a common sight until the 1940s. This photograph was taken in the mid-1930s.

chapter 5

Origins of the Girmitiyas

The rail is not my enemy, nor the ship;
O! It is money which is the real enemy
It takes my beloved from place to place
Indian folk song

On 9 September 1834 36 impoverished and lost looking Dhangars (tribal people) were accosted by some recruiters in Calcutta and asked if they would be willing to emigrate to Mauritius as indentured labourers. Since the sojourn was for a limited period, the remuneration promised extremely attractive—'expecting to have only to stoop down to pick up money, to scratch the surface of Mauritius and find gold'[1]—and *Miritch dvip* thought to be just off the coast of Bengal, they readily agreed; for after all, they had come to Calcutta for employment in the first place. Thereupon they were taken to the Chief Magistrate at the Calcutta Police Court, who read out and explained the contract that had to be signed. The Dhangars then affixed their thumb impressions on the document to indicate that they understood the terms offered, and that they were migrating voluntarily. The Vice-President-in-Council of the Government of Bengal saw no objection to the transaction, and authorized the departure of the labourers from Calcutta. These men were the forerunners of over one million indentured labourers who left India during 82 years of indentured emigration to colonies scattered across the globe.[2]

Most of the indentured labourers came from North India, especially from the unprosperous regions of Chota Nagpur plateau and Bihar before the 1860s, and the eastern districts of the United Provinces from the 1870s onwards.[3] Most of them, moreover, originated from the lower to middling social and economic strata of rural North Indian society, which was always the first to bear the brunt of economic vicissitudes and calamities of nature. Migration was of course nothing new to the peasants of India, for even in pre-modern times they had moved about quite freely in search of a better livelihood, or to escape from droughts, floods and not least, the constant depredations of tax officials. They were therefore not averse to taking advantage of the seemingly easy prospects held out by the colonial recruiters.

With the possible exception of those who migrated *en famille,* it would seem that migration was generally intended as a temporary expedient. The emigrants left under a written and apparently voluntarily accepted five year contract which promised, among other things, congenial working conditions, relatively high wages and an optional free return passage to India at the conclusion of 10 years 'industrial residence' in the colonies.[4] Many did return,[5] but as happens so often, intended sojourn was, in the course of time, transformed into permanent displacement. The struggle of these labourers in the 'familiar temporariness' of the alien colonial environment has left a legacy of problems which remain as unresolved today as they were at the turn of the century when indenture was at its height.

The story of indentured emigration is by now well known in its outline. In recent years a number of important historical monographs have appeared on overseas Indians which, taken together with the works of social scientists, especially anthropologists, have made the study of overseas Indians an autonomous and rewarding field of enquiry.[6] Many approaches and methods have been used, differing moral postures adopted, and a conflicting variety of themes emphasized, which is not entirely surprising since indenture itself posed a number of vexatious social, moral and political problems for all connected with it at the time of its existence.

Some scholars have emphasized the improvement in the condition of the indentured labourers and their descendants: permanent release from irksome and oppressive social customs, caste prejudices and general social degradation in India, and unsurpassed opportunities and incentives to industry in the colonies.[7] Others have stressed the iniquities and brutalities that the indenture system entailed. Hugh Tinker, for instance, has argued that there was one, but only one, difference between indenture and slavery: whereas one was a temporary abode, the other was a permanent institution.[8] Yet others have combined a deep sympathy with the plight of the downtrodden and the oppressed with remarkably objective scholarship and have suggested that improvements often did take place but at the expense of deep social and psychological suffering to the immigrants.[9]

The debate on the nature of indenture experience has in the main been carried on in the context of colonial societies, without relating it to the wider processes of migration. Questions relating to the social origins of the migrants, their motivations and thoughts and feelings about their predicament have very largely been neglected in most recent studies. Yet it is certain that any objective appreciation of the true meaning of the nature of indenture experience cannot be gained without a discussion of these aspects.

This chapter attempts to fill this lacuna. Using computerised analysis of Emigration Passes of Fiji's North Indian migrants, and poetic evidence from Hindi folk songs, it probes the structural characteristics and dynamics of indentured migration in India, and the responses of the indentured labourers at the time, respectively. The picture which these two contrasting sources paint questions the prevalent view of indentured labourers as inarticulate simpletons who were continually acted upon by forces beyond their control, and recognizes them as actors in their own right who were consciously aware of their situation.

The gap in our knowledge of the background of indentured labourers results partly from the emphasis most studies have given to the indenture experience in the colonies; but partly also from the dearth of reliable data in easily accessible official sources.[10] Those which do contain the data have generally been neglected because of their volume, magnitude and insusceptibility to conventional approaches of historical scholarship. One such source is the Emigration Passes. They contain full information about the personal and social details of each emigrant who embarked for the colonies (his sex, age, marital status), place of origin and registration in India, date of migration, name of the ship and the depot number of the emigrant, besides the certification of appropriate authorities about the voluntary nature of the transaction. The passes were constructed on the basis of information in the Emigration Registers in the district depots, duplicate copies of which were forwarded to Calcutta (or Madras). From there they were sent along with the emigrants to the colonies where, after appropriate examination, they were filed alphabetically year by year and subsequently deposited with the Department of Labour. Fortunately for the historian of Fiji Indians, a full set (60,965) of these was preserved in Fiji and microfilmed by the Central Archives of Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission.[11]

To investigate the structure and process of indentured emigration to Fiji from North India, each Emigration Pass of the 45,439 North Indian emigrants was examined. All important data were coded, transcribed onto a computer code sheet, put on tape and processed using the SPSS.[12] The results provide the closest understanding yet of the process of indentured emigration. Not only do they give a comprehensive synoptic picture of what actually happened, but also show the operation of the process over a period of time. A full discussion of all the results is not possible here, hence only three aspects pertinent to the argument are included: regional origins of indentured emigration, social characteristics of the migrants and family migration.

Indian indentured emigration to Fiji began in 1879. It was started by Sir Arthur Gordon, the first substantive governor of the colony (1875-80), to meet the shortage of labour caused by the prohibition of commercial employment of the Fijians and by the increasing uncertainty and cost of the Polynesian labour trade. In the early years, the Indian labourers were received somewhat hesitantly in the colony, as is evident in the low requisitions and the curtailment of recruiting activities in some years.[13] The colonial planters were initially opposed to Indian labour on account of its relatively higher cost.[14] However, later, as the sugar industry expanded and hopes of alternative means of labour supply vanished, the volume of Indian immigration increased markedly, reaching its peak after the turn of the century.

Fiji's North Indian migrants came from widely scattered regions of the subcontinent, though principally from its eastern and to a lesser extent central parts. Over the whole period of colonial migration to Fiji United Provinces furnished 21,131 or 46.5% of all the emigrants, Oudh 13,207 or 29%, Bihar 4,771 or 10.5% and the Central Provinces 2,808 or 6.2%. There were sprinklings from the Punjab, Rajasthan, Nepal and Bengal as well as from other colonies.[15] This picture holds true for the wider process of colonial migration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,[16] but was in marked contrast to the pattern for the first half of colonial migration from the 1830s to the late 1860s. Then, the largest numbers came from Bihar, 'the land of sorrow', especially from the districts of Arrah and Chapra, and the tribal areas of the Chota Nagpur plateau such as Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Bankura, Purulia and the 24-Pargunnahs.[17] Over the years, however, their contribution declined, partly because of the reputation of high mortality among the emigrants on the voyage and on the colonial plantations,[18] partly because of the intense competition for Bihari, especially tribal *(jungli)*, labour from the Assam tea garden recruiters from 1853 onwards,[19] and partly also because of the opening up of greater employment opportunities in the region itself, in the coal mines,[20] the indigo plantations[21] and in the industrial centres of Calcutta.[22] The focus of colonial recruitment therefore shifted to the United Provinces.

The break with Bihar is significant but it was not abrupt, and there were variations. In the case of Fiji, it supplied well over 27% of the total demand in the 1880s. The highest contribution from Bihar came in 1884 when it furnished over 51% of the emigrants, though this high figure was due chiefly to scarcity and decline in competition from other colonies.[23] The main districts of migration in Bihar were Shahabad, Gaya and Patna. The Central Provinces became important after the turn of the century, particularly in 1901 and 1903, when over 30% of the emigrants came from there. The main districts of recruitment in the Central Provinces were Raipur, Bilaspur, Rewa, Sambalpur and Jabalpur. For the Punjab, from where indentured emigration was always relatively small, the peak year was 1903 when it contributed 11% of the emigrants. Most of the Punjabis came from the densely populated, impoverished and migration prone districts of Jullundar, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana and Gurdaspur. However, the Punjabis tended to be troublesome elements; they were, for instance, instrumental in organizing a minor revolt in Labasa in 1907. For this reason, the Fiji government discouraged their emigration.[24] The Nepalis were widely admired in Fiji for their enterprising spirit, though their number was reduced substantially after 1894 when the Nepal Durbar discouraged their migration, perhaps so that they could provide recruits for the Indian Army.[25]

Two hundred and thirty actual districts or localities furnished Fiji's North Indian migrants, ranging from Tibet and Ladakh to Peshawar and Kabul. However, the largest numbers came from the eastern districts of United Provinces:

Table 1
Districts Supplying Over One Per Cent of Fiji's North Indian Emigrants

District	No.	%	District	No.	%
Basti	6,415	14.12	Bara Banki	769	1.69
Gonda	3,589	7.90	Gaya	765	1.68
Faizabad	2,329	5.13	Bahraich	750	1.65
Sultanpur	1,747	3.85	Raipur	744	1.64
Azamgarh	1,716	3.78	Benares	672	1.48
Gorakhpur	1,683	3.70	Patna	644	1.42
Allahabad	1,218	2.68	Lucknow	613	1.34
Jaunpur	1,188	2.61	Kanpur	583	1.28
Shahabad	1,128	2.48	Unao	556	1.22
Ghazipur	1,127	2.48	Agra	549	1.20
Rai Bareilly	1,087	2.39	Mirzapur	527	1.60
Partabgarh	894	1.97	Jaipur	473	1.04

Here, too, there were variations over the 37 years of indentured emigration. Basti, Gonda, Sultanpur all became prominent in the first decade of this century, the peak year for all of them being 1908, when a severe famine raged in many parts of United Provinces. The supply from Faizabad reached its peak in 1910, while Gorakhpur maintained a steady level. Shahabad, in keeping with the general Bihar trend, showed a marked decline after 1889-90, its peak years. But why eastern United Provinces? There were many reasons. Recruiting was largely concentrated in the eastern districts. Attempts had been made to recruit the sturdy and enterprising Jat cultivators of western United Provinces and Rohtak, but these did not meet with any success. There were, however, other structural factors at work which made migration an extremely attractive strategy for many to cope with the increasing problems of rural depression. The high density of population was one. In eastern United Provinces around the turn of the century it reached on the average 751 persons to the square mile, in certain parts of Basti it went up as high as 1,000 persons to the square mile.[26] By contrast, in western United Provinces population density was much lower, reaching on the average 546 persons to the square mile. Density of population *per se* may not be the most important factor, but seen in terms of its impact on other areas of a depressed economy, such as dwindling property rights in land, subdivision of property, fragmentation of holdings and increase in rent, it does acquire particular significance.

In addition, the eastern region was experiencing rapid de-industrialization in the 19th century. One view holds this to be the result of the stepmotherly attitude of the British administration bent on punishing the eastern districts for playing a leading hand in the 1857 uprising. The argument runs that while western United Provinces was provided with such facilities as irrigation, power and roads to cope with natural disasters, eastern United Provinces was neglected and allowed to suffer droughts, floods and epidemics with scant relief.[27]

A more tenable explanation, however, for the increasing disparity between the two regions of United Provinces lies in the destruction of the riverine trade marts in the eastern region by the extension of railways in the 19th century. Benares, once the entrepot of Upper India, was reduced to a local trading centre, as was Mirzapur, the commercial capital of the Bundelkhand region. Faizabad, Jaunpur and Ghazipur shared a similar fate. The railways aided the development of cities and trading centres in western United Provinces. Thus in the late 19th century, the rail-borne traffic in wheat, sugar and cotton of Chandausi, one of the great Rohilkhand marts, grew eight times; Agra's rail-borne traffic increased by 44%; and Kanpur's imports grew 20 times. By the turn of the century the eastern region, which had more than half of the province's population, came to have only a quarter of the share of total trade, while the western region controlled the rest.[28]

This trend had an important consequence for migration. The development of large industries and towns in western United Provinces obviated the need for its population to migrate long distances in search of employment. But in the eastern region the lack of available opportunities nearby forced displaced and uprooted people to march further afield to look for employment. The main movement was to the east—to Calcutta, Assam and Bihar; and it increased significantly during the last quarter of the 19th century. In 1881 United Provinces emigrants in Bengal numbered 351,933; in 1891 365,248; and in 1901 496,940.[29] The *Ghazipur District Gazetteer* commented: 'The extent of this migration is astonishing and its economic influence is of the highest importance, since these labourers earn high wages and remit or bring back with them large sums of money to their homes'.[30] Migration had thus become a much more accepted and integrated phenomenon in rural life in the eastern districts.

It is interesting to note that a substantial proportion of the North Indian emigrants to Fiji were registered outside their districts of origin, as the following Table shows:

Table 2
Numbers of Emigrants Registered Outside Their Districts of Origin

Name of District	Numbers registered in the district	%	Numbers registered outside the district	%
Azamgarh	50	2.9	1,666	97.0
Basti	2,607	40.6	3,808	59.4
Faizabad	1,458	62.6	871	37.4
Gonda	1,096	30.5	2,493	69.5
Gorakhpur	943	56.0	740	43.9
Sultanpur	182	10.4	1,565	89.6
Shahabad	254	22.5	874	77.5

Except when the emigrant himself declared that he had left his native district voluntarily, registration of emigrants outside their district of origin was illegal and on several occasions recruiters indulging in the practice were severely punished.[31] Even if some of the emigrants were schooled to give proper answers to the registration officers, it can fairly safely be assumed that a large majority of those registered outside had left on their own. Thus the initial break had already been made, a point those who emphasize deception do not take into account. Perhaps the break was intended to be temporary, but that is another question. However, the outside registrations took place not in large cities and centres of pilgrimages, but in local urban centres. Thus in the case of Azamgarh, Ghazipur provided 21% of the registrations, while for Basti, Gonda and Sultanpur, Faizabad registered 25%, 37% and 32% of the emigrants. Large cities such as Calcutta, Alipore, Lucknow, Kanpur, Allahabad and Benares are conspicuous by their insignificance. This trend too contradicts the all too frequent assertions about lost emigrants falling prey to the wiles of unscrupulous recruiters in large, distant and unfamiliar surroundings.

The emigrants came from a highly varied social background. There were altogether 265 castes and sub-castes which emigrated from North India to Fiji—though the overwhelming majority were a representative cross- section of the rural society of north eastern India. There were in the emigrating population the high castes—Brahmans, Thakurs, Rajputs and Khatris among the Hindus and high status groups such as Pathans and Sheiks among the Muslims; middling agricultural castes such as Jats, Kurmis and Koeris; and low castes such as Chamars, Dusadhs, Gonds and Luniyas. But despite the difference in their ritual and social status, most of the castes who came to Fiji derived their livelihood from the land, the higher castes generally as proprietors and sub proprietors, the middle castes as privileged tenants, and the lower ones as tenants-at-will, landless labourers and artisans. Except for the higher castes, whom caste convention prevented from handling the plough, the others were excellent cultivators. The 'Gonda Settlement Report' noted that it 'is no exaggeration to say that throughout Oudh, the cultivation of a Kurmi or a Murao is regarded as synonymous with excellence, while that of a high caste tenant with the reverse'.[32] The *Bahraich District Gazetteer* made the same point about the Chamars and Koris: 'Their holdings are small, and they are careful and industrious if not in the first rank of cultivators'.[33] But no amount of diligence could protect them against the adverse economic circumstances prevailing in the 19th century.

Table 3
Castes/Social Groups Contributing
Over One Per Cent of Fiji's North Indian Migrants

Name	Number	%	Name	Number	%
Chamar	6,087	13.40	Lodha	735	1.62
Muslim	5,455	12.01	Jat	708	1.66
Ahir	4,197	9.24	Gadariya	691	1.52
Thakur	3,416	7.52	Kewat	656	1.44
Kurmi	2,307	5 .08	Rajput	652	1.43
Kori	1,942	4.27	Pathan	584	1.29
Brahman	1,535	3.38	Murao	553	1.24
Kahar	1.500	3.30	Luniya	559	1.23
Khatri	1,182	2.61	Gond	541	1.19
Pasi	999	2.20	Sheik	493	1.08
Koeri	740	1.63	Dusadh	464	1.02

British land policy of 'territorial aristocracy', adopted after the uprising of 1857, buttressed the position of *taluqdars* (hereditary landlords) who rack-rented and evicted their tenants at will. The 'only law guiding the landlord', one official noted, 'is to get all he can and let the tenant shift for himself'.[34] Increase in rent, but more significantly the change from rent in kind to cash owing to increase in the number of cultivators, easy availability of money and growing volume of cash crops, all created ambivalence in traditional relations between landlords and tenants, which in turn contributed to increasing instability in rural areas.[35] Fragmentation of ownership rights among intermediate proprietors—large *zamindars* (landlords) were insulated by economic and institutional factors—progressively multiplied the number of uneconomic holdings, deepened indebtedness and reduced many to the unhappy lot of landless labourers.[36] The decline of the indigenous handicraft industry because of unfavourable competition with Great Britain displaced many artisan castes who were increasingly forced to join the already swelled ranks of landless labourers.[37] And finally, on top of the distress caused by the operation of man-made factors, was the constant spectre of famine which occurred throughout India with calamitous frequency in the 19th century, reducing all to precarious circumstances.[38]

While these economic changes affected everyone, they bore down particularly heavily on those whose position was already marginal—the middle-to-lower strata of society which, as we have seen above, supplied the largest number of emigrants. The higher castes were, to a certain extent, insulated against economic vicissitudes because a substantial proportion of them had firm, inalienable rights in land, and had the resources to tide them over crises such as famines and droughts. Even the higher caste tenants had several advantages over their lower caste compatriots. For instance, they generally paid less rent than lower caste tenants, sometimes, as in the cases of Gonda and Faizabad, 20% less.[39] Furthermore, assertive and independent of spirit, they were 'very difficult to manage' and closed ranks 'to resist any coercive process issued against one of their number'.[40] It was the lower caste tenants and labourers who suffered most the hardships caused by evictions and enhancements of rents.

This is evident in the variations in patterns of migration among the higher and the lower castes. One indicator of differential distress, besides family migration discussed below, is migration by sex among the castes. Altogether 31,456 males and 13,696 females migrated to Fiji from North India. While the lower castes furnished a very high proportion of both the sexes, their contribution, percentage-wise, to females was greater than to males. Thus while Chamars supplied 12% of all males, they furnished 16% of the females in the emigrating population. Muslims too sent a higher percentage of females: 14% in comparison to their contribution of 12% of all males. This is in marked contrast to the pattern among the higher castes, except the Brahmans, who maintained a rough balance between the sexes. Jats, for example, provided 2% of males but only 0.4% of all the females, while Thakurs sent 8% of all the males and only 6% of females.

Many of the emigrants who came to Fiji, or went to other colonies, may have intended temporary migration. There must, however, also have been some, who, seeing no respite from constant vulnerability and dreariness, desired a permanent break with their past. In this category must be counted those who moved out with their families. Little is known about them, and most of it is of an unflattering character. One of the most common beliefs in Fiji is that they were 'depot families', formed at the instance of the recruiter to avoid time-consuming investigation into the background of unattached females. A corollary is that most of the families were of mixed castes and mixed districts of origin. This view is not accurate; and in many ways a discussion of the structure and pattern of family migration neatly underlines the difference between the myth and reality of indenture.

Altogether 7,185 adult indentured emigrants stated on their Emigration Passes that they were married and were accompanied by their spouses. Of these 3,526 were males (11% of the total male population) and 3,659 females (26.7% of all females). The discrepancy between the two figures is explained by the fact that there were some men, particularly from the lower castes and tribal groups, who were accompanied by more than one wife.[41] Besides the married couples, there were a further 1,899 individuals, 1,769 of whom were males, who told the registration officers that they were married, but were leaving their families in the villages, perhaps in the care of the joint family. This practice was discouraged by the provincial governments who were sometimes called upon to provide for these families when they were tossed out to fend for themselves.[42]

In terms of actual family units, 4,627 families migrated to Fiji from Calcutta. The following table gives a breakdown by different categories.

Table 4
Family Types in North Indian Migration to Fiji

Family Type	Numbers	%
Husband and Wife only (HW)	3,175	68.6
Mother, Father, Child(ren) MFC	642	13.9
Mother and Child(ren) only (MC)	524	11.3
Father and Child(ren) only (FC)	61	1.3
Others	225	4.9
Total	4,657	100.0

Apart from the HW families, others, too, were quite small; in fact, 97.3% of them had fewer than four members. Only three families going to Fiji contained over 10 members, the largest having 13.

There were interesting variations in the pattern of family migration over the years, and among the different districts. The first decade of indentured emigration to Fiji was a particularly notable one for family migration, for each year without exception contributed proportionately more to family migration than to total migration. One of the peak years was 1884 when 298 families migrated, or 6.4% of the total. Another marked feature of this period was the high percentage of MC family migration. Thus, for instance, in 1879 MC families constituted 44% of the total family migration for that year; in 1882 39%; in 1884 44%; in 1885 44%; and in 1886 42%. This trend led the planters in Fiji to complain to the government about the unnecessary expenditure involved in sustaining uneconomical and unproductive families, and to ask for immediate curtailment of large scale family migration. The government heeded their call, and accordingly instructed its agent in Calcutta to recruit more single emigrants.[43] This attitude was paradoxical, for on the one hand the government had desired permanent settlement of the immigrants in Fiji, and on the other it favoured the curtailment of a process which might have facilitated this. Other colonies differed. Mauritius had always encouraged family migration, while British Guiana too was providing additional inducements to attract more families, though this perhaps was done to reduce the expenditure on the repatriation of time-expired immigrants.

Most of the families had migrated as family units from the villages; only 298 families (6.4%) had mixed districts of origin. Most of them, moreover, came from the high migration districts such as Basti, Gonda, Azamgarh, Shahabad, Ghazipur and Gaya. All these districts contributed more to family migration than they did, proportionately speaking, to total migration. While Basti supplied 20% of the families, it furnished only 14% of the total migrants, while Azamgarh sent 5% of the families but only 4% of the total migrants. The reasons for this are not clear though economic hardship and the established pattern and therefore, perhaps, the popularity of migration may be important factors.

However, there were important differences in the structure of family migration among the different districts, and these were particularly marked between the districts of Bihar and those of United Provinces. The United Provinces districts showed a marked prominence of HW families, and relative unimportance of the other types. The case of Basti is representative: HW families constituted 82% of the total number, MFC families 13%, MC families 3%, and others 3%. In the Bihar districts, although HW families are still very important, the most striking feature is the relative prominence of MC families. Thus from Shahabad district, HW families furnished 57% of the district's total, MFC families 16.7%, FC families 1%, MC 19% and others 6%. In the absence of any record on families in the emigration files and published reports it is difficult to put forward any definite explanation for the difference, though one informed guess may relate the prominence of

MC families in Bihar to its long history of colonial migration. Perhaps after years of patient waiting for their husbands' return, the emigrants' wives and their children, who had long been supported on a meagre joint family budget, were shunted to the periphery and indeed sometimes evicted to fend for themselves. The prospects held out by the recruiters may have attracted such desperate unwanted MC families in search of reunion. Perhaps in some cases the emigrants in the colonies may have arranged for the migration of their families.

A substantial proportion of the families were registered outside their districts of origin. In the cases of Azamgarh, Sultanpur and Gonda, for example, over 80% of the families were registered outside, mostly in the local urban centres such as Faizabad. For reasons noted above, this was to a large extent the result of voluntary migration. Apart from the fact that this trend sharply questions the deception thesis, it also suggests that the conventional picture of Indian families as highly immobile tradition-bound social units is in need of revising.

There were 152 families which migrated to Fiji as single family units, but which were registered at different places. Of these 97 were HW families, 48 MFC families and the rest FC, MC and other families. Eighty three of the mixed districts of registration families also had common districts of origin. What exactly happened here is unclear, though two possibilities are likely. One is that the husband had already migrated for employment outside his native district, and met a recruiter who registered him at the local depot. Thereupon, he returned to his village, registered his wife in their district of origin (to avoid complications), and either returned to where he was registered, or requested the transfer of his registration papers to his district, from where he and his family then migrated. The other possibility is that two persons from the same district who had left at different times and were registered at different places met on their way to Calcutta, and decided to form a liaison before embarkation. In the remaining 69 cases, both the district of registration and the district of origin were mixed, and these, in all probability, were genuine cases of depot marriages.

Most of the families originated among those castes such as Chamars which also contributed the largest numbers of migrants. However, it is clear that family migration was generally more pronounced among the lower castes, such as Chamars who supplied 18% of all the families but only 13% of the total migrants. Among the higher castes such as Brahmans and Thakurs and even among some middle order castes such as Ahirs family migration was more restricted. Perhaps this difference shows that the pressures to eke out an existence varied with the different castes. For

Chamars and other lower castes, as we have seen, life held few certainties, and thus they were not averse to migrating with their families in search of an extra rupee to supplement their barely adequate earnings at home. Among the higher castes relative economic security and social conventions with respect to family and women may have held family migration at a low level.

There were relatively few—251 or 5.4%—families with mixed castes. Of these 100 were of mixed districts of origin also. In the remaining 151 cases, mixed caste families had common districts of origin. Perhaps mixed caste marriages had taken place before the families had departed from the village (probably due to reasons of social unacceptance). Alternatively, mixed caste liaisons may have taken place outside the villages but before the emigrants were registered, suggesting the possibility of elopement.

The discussion thus far on the structural background of North Indian indentured emigration to Fiji has been based largely on the computerized analysis of one source, the Emigration Passes. Above all, it has attempted to show that indentured emigration was a highly differentiated process in terms of the social and regional origins of the emigrants, with important variations and changes in the pattern of migration itself. Seen in the context of 19th century North Indian social and economic history, indentured migration does not appear as an aberration or an unnatural phenomenon, but as a rational and conscious act. But while statistical analysis provides valuable details about trends and tendencies in indentured emigration, it does not give insights into the motives and perceptions of the emigrants themselves. These can be explored through positivistic methods using documents; but this is a well trod path of diminishing returns, and it would be more fruitful to turn to new and little used sources. One such is Hindi folk songs, which can movingly illuminate the feelings of the emigrants about various aspects of indenture.

The neglect of folk songs in the study of a community rich in folk traditions is a surprising, though not entirely accidental, factor. Many scholars regard them as 'soft' data prone to error and fallacy, and as handmaidens of science.[44] Nevertheless, folk sources have their uses. Their greatest value lies in the fact that they express and evoke attitudes and concerns that are important to the people themselves, and because of this they are generally representative of the human condition they portray. Moreover, in a folk or non-literate culture, songs must be sung, remembered and taught by one generation to the next, and the flexibility inherent in this procedure enables the constant development of themes and ideas, thus keeping the oral traditions in tune with the changing feelings of the people.[45]

Yet there are problems. It is often very difficult to determine precisely the time of origin, and a song, sung at a particular point in time, may wrongly be taken to represent the entire period. Since the folk songs discussed below deal with the background of indentured emigration in India and the experience of the labourers in the colonies, it can safely be assumed that they originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of the pieces are anonymous and this presents the difficulty of identifying the sex or the social status of the singers. Nevertheless, since the songs cover a wide range of topics and are derived from a number of places, they can be assumed to have been shared by persons engaged in different walks of life. They show the pressures and necessities of North Indian rural society which induced emigration, the deception in recruiting in India which facilitated the process, the difficulties on the plantation in the colonies and the gradual reorientation to the new environment.

The first song is from the region of Oudh and is sung by a wife whose husband has gone abroad for employment. There in no specific reference to any particular place, though the mention of a ship makes it fairly certain that migration took place to a foreign country. The need for money is given as the sole cause:

From the east came the rail, from the west came the ship,
And took my beloved one away.
The rail has become my sawat
Which took my beloved one away.
The rail is not my enemy, nor the ship,
O! It is money which is the real enemy.
It takes my beloved one from place to place,
Money is the enemy . . .[46]

Poverty is again given as the cause of migration:

Mother! Far away in a distant land,
The thought of thine is crushing me.
Poverty, abject poverty, mother,
Has separated me from thee.[47]

In the following song, a desperate agricultural labourer, fed-up with a life of constant drudgery and degradation, says that anything in the colonies would be preferable to the life in India.

Born in India, we are prepared to go to Fiji
Or, if you please, to Natal to dig the mines.
We are prepared to suffer there,
But Brothers! Don't make us agriculturalists here.[48]

Social oppression of the lower castes by higher castes is given as the reason for migration by an emigrant from Surinam:

I call India blessed, and the Brahmans and Kshatriyas too,
Who attach untouchability to their subjects.
They rule by the power of these very subjects,
While keeping the company of prostitutes.
The subjects escaped and came to the islands
And, yes, India turned on her side . . .[49]

But if economic necessities created the condition for migration, the recruiters played their part too by holding out glorious prospects of easy money, acquired in congenial working conditions. Folk songs in the colonies give the impression of unfulfilled dreams and broken hopes, and not infrequently, the blame is laid on the recruiters or the registration officials. A song from British Guiana:

Oh recruiter, your heart is deceitful,
Your speech is full of lies!
Tender may be your voice, articulate and seemingly logical,
But it is all used to defame and destroy
The good names of people.[50]

Similar feelings are expressed in songs from Fiji. One labourer sings:

I hoe all day and cannot sleep at night,
Today my whole body aches,
Damnation to you, *arkatis*.[51]

While another exclaims:

Oh! Registration officers,
May death befall you:
You have deprived me of my marriage bed.[52]

The crossing was a traumatic experience for most emigrants coming from landlocked areas. A song from Surinam relates:

Several months on the ship passed with great difficulty,
On the seven dark seas, we suffered unaccustomed problems.[53]

Emigration was a great leveller of social hierarchies and ritual separateness among the emigrants, reducing all to the status of 'coolies'. Some protested:

Why should we be called coolies,
We who were born in the clans and families of seers and saints?[54]

On the plantations, traditional patterns of interaction would receive further jolts and would eventually become irrelevant. The realities of a new life soon shattered any idealistic picture the emigrants had of their 'promised land'. A song from Mauritius hints at disappointment:

Having heard the name of the island of Mauritius,
We arrived here to find gold, to find gold.
Instead we got beatings of bamboos,
Which peeled the skin off the back of the labourers.
We became *kolhu's* bullocks to extract cane sugar
Alas! We left our country to become coolies.[55]

Some of the labourers could not reconcile themselves to their new situation, and spent much of their time in self-pity and depression, as shown in this song from British Guiana:

'What sins have we committed, Oh Lord,
That thou has given us these miseries?'
Repenting in their hearts they called for mother and father
Blaming their fate, their *karma*, or even the Lord Himself.[56]

The more sensible and practical ones tried to create fleeting niches of happiness, even in the crowded and ugly 'coolies lines' as the following song from Fiji shows:

The six foot by eight foot CSR room
Is the source of all comfort for us.
In it we keep our tools and hoe,
And also the grinding stone and the hearth.
In it is also kept the firewood.
It is our single and double-storey palace,
In which is made our golden parapet.[57]

However, the majority tried to avail themselves of opportunities for self-advancements that lay ahead of them. Even though unhappy in their new social situation, prospects of material prosperity tied the immigrants to the soil. A Surinami folk song explains:

Like the fly trapped in honey, we became slaves.
We toiled in the fields day and night, without sleep.[58]

The process of reconstitution and adaptation to the new environment gradually took place among those immigrants who, for various reasons, decided to stay back. Freer forms of social intercourse, new dress patterns and dietary habits were all part of this. The following folk song from Fiji in a somewhat light vein indicates this well. The topic here *is yaqona.*

O, my beloved,
I cannot leave yaqona.
I have left my country, and my caste,
I have left my parents behind also,
But I cannot leave yaqona.
Yaqona is the *Bhang (drug)* of this island,
Which we drink to pass our nights.
I cannot leave yaqona.[59]

Evidence from both the Emigration Passes and the Hindi folk songs shows that the indenture experience was a varied and complex process, which cannot easily be explained within a simple theoretical framework: the emigrants came from varied social backgrounds in India; they had different motivations; if many desired nothing but a brief sojourn in the colonies, there were others who made a conscious break with their past; if many had been deceived by recruiters, there were many others who had already left their homes in search of a better livelihood elsewhere, before they were registered for emigration; if many had unhappy experiences under indenture, many others found new possibilities for improvement which would have been denied them in India. Anthropological studies of overseas Indians have emphasized the themes of fragmentation and reconstitution,[60] and the historian of Indian indenture would do well to explore these further.

Endnotes

[1] S. B. Mookherji, *The Indenture System in Mauritius 1837-1915* (Calcutta, 1962), 51.

[2] The largest importers of Indian labour in order of importance were Mauritius (453,063), British Guiana (238,909), Natal (152,184), Trinidad (143,939), Fiji (60,965), Jamaica (36,200), Surinam (34,304) and Reunion (26,507).

[3] The contribution of South India remained less than one-third while that of Bombay and the French territories was sporadic and insubstantial.

[4] A copy of the contract is included as an appendix in K. L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (Melbourne, 1962), 210-12.

[5] Up to 1870,112,178 or 21percent had returned, while in the decade after 1910, one emigrant returned for every two who embarked for the colonies. See J. Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration From India* (Calcutta 1874), 67, and *Census of India, XVI:* I (1921), 44.

[6] For two succinct surveys of literature see S. Shigematsu, 'Overseas Indians—Bibliography of Books and Articles, 1873-1971', *Asian Studies, XXI:* 4 (1975), 25-49; and Chandra Jayawardena, 'Migration and Social Change: a Survey of Indian Communities Overseas', *Geographical Review,* LVIII (1968), 426-49.

[7] Cumpston, 'A Survey of Indian Immigration to British Tropical Colonies to 1910', *Population Studies,* X (1956-7), 158-65.

[8] Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (London, 1974). See also Ahmed Ali (ed.), *Girmit: Indenture Experience in Fiji* (Suva, 1979).

[9] Gillion, *op.cit.*

[10] Useful data is contained in Bengal Government, *Annual Reports of the Protector of Emigrants at Calcutta on Emigration to British and Foreign Colonies (1879-1919),* (hereinafter *Annual Reports.)* These reports are available at several places, including Calcutta, New Delhi and the colonies.

[11] The complete set covers 42 reels of microfilm. The National Library of Australia, Canberra, has a copy.

[12] Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

[13] For instance, there was no recruiting in 1880 and 1886 because of lack of demand from Fiji.

[14] *Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration),* April 1882, B Pros. 90-93, New Delhi, National Archives of India (hereinafter NAI). Initially only one planter, J. Hill of Rabi, agreed to employ the *Leonidas* emigrants, though later others did too.

[15] Unless otherwise indicated, the statistics introduced in this paper should be assumed to have been derived from my own computer analysis.

[16] See Annual Reports.

[17] See *Home Public (Emigration) Proceedings,* NAI, where a detailed breakdown is provided of the regional origins of the indentured emigrants.

18. *Home Public (Emigration)*, October 1858, Pros. 1, NAI.

19. Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton, 1951), 116; S. M. Akhtar, *Emigrant Labour for the Assam Tea Gardens* (Lahore, 1939), Sir Percival Griffiths, *The History of Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) and Government of Bengal, *Resolution on Immigrant Labour in Assam* for various years. (A full set of these after 1894 is available in the Victoria State Library, Melbourne.)

20. C. P. Simmons, 'Recruiting and Organizing an Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India: The Case of the Coal Mining Industry, c.1880-1939', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (here after IESHR), XIII (1976), 455-484.

21. Sir William Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (London 7th ed., 1897), 226.

22. The statistics on Bihari migration to Calcutta are available in several places, including L. S. S. O'Malley's *Bengal District Gazetteers* for the different districts published after the turn of this century, *Census* and *Administration Reports* and various volumes of the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (Oxford, 1907). All of these are available in NAI.

23. Gillion, *op. cit.*, 45

24. *Ibid.*, 48-9.

25. *Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration)*, October 1894, A Pros. 8-9, NAI.

26. A. G. Clow. 'Final Settlement Report for Basti' (1915-19), 4, NAI.

27. R. L. Singh (ed.), *India. A Regional Geography* (Varanasi, 1971), 189.

28. See Francis Robinson, 'Municipal Government and Muslim Separatism in the United Provinces, 1883 to 1916', *Modern Asian Studies, VII* (1973), 389-441.

29. *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 227.

30. H. R. Neville, *Ghazipur District Gazetteer* (Nainital, 1909), 78.

31. *Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration)*, November 1898, A Pros. 25-35, NAI.

32. H. R. C. Hailey, 'Gonda Settlement Report' (1903), 11, NAI.

33. H. R. Neville, *Bahraich District Gazetteer* (Nainital, 1921), 67-8.

34. T. R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt. India 1857-1870* (Princeton 1964), 196. See also Jagdish Raj *The Mutiny and British Land Policy in North India, 1856-1868* (Bombay, 1965).

35. Walter Neale, *Economic Change in Rural India* (New Haven, 1962), 65.

36. General discussion is provided in Eric Stokes, *Peasant and the Raj* (Cambridge, 1977).

37. P. C. Joshi, 'The Decline of Indigenous handicraft in Uttar Pradesh', IESHR, I (1963-4), 23-45.

38. See B. M. Bhatia, *Famines in India* (Bombay 1963).

39. 'Final Report on the Settlement of Faizabad District' (n.d., author unknown), 1 1, NAI; Hailey, *op cit.*, 10.

40. Hailey, *op. cit.*, 11.

[41] Customs relating to marriage, family and religion of the North Indian castes are discussed in William Crooke, *Castes and Tribes of North Western Provinces and Oudh* (Calcutta, 1896), 4 vols.

[42] Official pronouncements on this subject are found in *Annual Reports.*

[43] Gillion, 57.

[44] For a brief discussion see Edmund V. Bunkse, 'Commoner Attitudes Toward Landscape and Nature', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers,* LXVIII (1978), SSI-68.

[45] See Indra Deva, 'Oral Tradition and the Study of Peasant Society', *Diogenes* No. 85 (1974), 112-27.

[46] *Uttar Pradesh Ke Log Geet* (Folk songs of Uttar Pradesh) (Lucknow, 1971), 46. *Sawat* literally means co-wife.

[47] From the folk song titled From a Foreign Land' in D. N. Majumdar (ed.), *Snowballs of Garhwal* (Lucknow, 1946), 27.

[48] Source unknown. This song was recited to me during my field trip in eastern United Provinces in May 1979.

[49] U. Arya, *Ritual Songs and Folk Songs of the Hindus of Surinam* (Leiden 1968), 163. I have adapted Arya's translation.

[50] Ved Prakash Vatuk, 'Protest Songs of East Indians in British Guiana', *Journal of American Folklore, LXXVII* (1964), 224.

[51] Dr Vijay Mishra of Murdoch University provided this song.

[52] *Fiji Sun,* Girmit Centenary Issue, 15 May 1979 (my translation). *Arkati* here refers to the recruiter.

[53] Prof. Krishnadeva Upadhyay provided this song.

[54] Vatuk, *op. cit.,* 226.

[55] Abhimanyu Anat, *Lal Pasina* [Red Sweat] (New Delhi, 1977), 226. *Kolhu* is a machine used in the villages in India to crush cane.

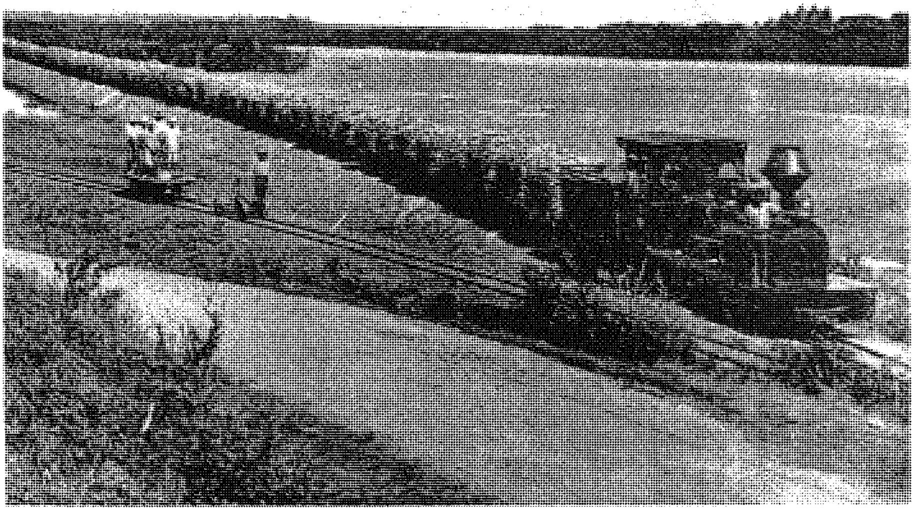
[56] Vatuk, *op. cit.,* 225.

[57] *Fiji Sun,* 15 May 1979. There is a very similar song in the *Fiji Sun* on the coolie lines in the paper which emphasises drudgery and hardship.

[58] See Footnote No. 54.

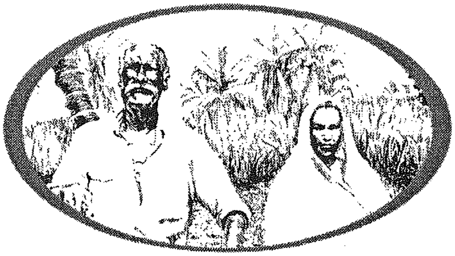
[59] *Fiji Sun,* 15 May 1979.

[60] See Morton Klass, *East Indians in Trinidad* (New York, 1961); Arthur and Juanita Niehoff, *East Indians in the West Indies* (Madison, 1960) Hilda Kuper, *Indian people in Natal* (Cape Town, 1961); Adrian C. Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific* (Berkeley, 1961); Burton Benedict, *Indians in a Plural Society* (London, 1961).



A familiar sight during the cane harvesting season—a train carrying laden trucks to the Rarawai mill at Ba. Lorries joined trains in transporting cane after the war.

chapter 6



A Time to Move

It is probably safe to say that the Indian populations historically have been as mobile, as, for example, the population of Western Europe at equivalent stages of economic development.
Morris David Morris

Was migration an alien phenomenon in nineteenth century Indian society? Evidence provided in this chapter suggests that it was not, at least not to the degree usually believed; that, in fact, constant circulation[1] was an integral part of rural Indian life, especially in those areas where the migrants originated. I argue that a large proportion of the indentured labourers came from an already uprooted and mobile peasantry, for whom, migration to the colonies was an extension of internal circulation. They knew they were going to some place far away and unheard of, but would return to their homes one day. Many, of course, did not. Thus an intended sojourn was transformed into permanent displacement. Conventional wisdom regards Indians as a 'home-loving' people and India as an immobile country. Some observers attribute this state of affairs to the predominance of agriculture, the caste system, early marriages and the Joint family system, diversity of language and culture, and illiteracy.[2] Perhaps the best exposition of this view is presented by William Crooke, a British civil servant and ethnographer, who wrote in 1896:

> The fact is that the Hindu has little migratory instinct, and all his prejudices tend to keep him at home. As a resident member of a tribe, caste or village, he occupies a definite social position, of which emigration is likely to deprive him. When he leaves his home, he loses the sympathy and support of his clansmen and neighbours; he misses the village council, which regulates his domestic affairs; the services of the family priest, which he considers essential to his salvation. Every village has its own local shrine, where the deities, in the main destructive, have been propitiated and controlled by the constant service of their votaries. Once the wanderer leaves the hamlet where he was born, he enters the domain of new and unknown deities, who, being strangers, are of necessity hostile to him, and may resent his intrusion by sending famine, disease or death upon the luckless stranger. The emigrant, again, to a distant land finds extreme difficulty in selecting suitable husbands for his daughters. He must choose his sons-in-law within a narrow circle, and if he allows his daughter to reach womanhood unwed, he commits a grievous sin. Should he die in exile, he may fail to win the heaven of gods, because no successor will make the due funeral oblations, and no trusted family priest be there to arrange the last journey of his spirit. So he may wander through the ages a starving, suffering, malignant ghost, because his obsequies have not been duly performed.[3]

There is considerable exaggeration in Crooke's views, for the typical Indian village was never a totally autonomous, self-contained and static social unit as he seems to suggest. Faced with adverse economic circumstances, as many were in the nineteenth century, Indians of all castes readily forsook their traditional occupations, and turned to those that offered better prospects. For many it was agriculture and general field labour.[4] For some, unable to eke out an existence in the village, migration offered an attractive alternative. The difficulty in migrating to 'distant lands' has similarly been exaggerated. However, Crooke is not alone in holding this view as other writers refer to the Indians' dread of crossing the *kala pani* (the dark waters) which resulted in the loss of caste and brought contact with *mlecchas* (polluting barbarians). Both these consequences were thought to invite divine retribution and thus further discourage foreign travel. Several points should be noted here. In the first place, the interdict on crossing the *kala pani* did not apply, to any meaningful degree, in

Western and Southern India where there has always been a strong seafaring tradition. Secondly, it was intended to apply only to the twice-born (*dvija*) castes, especially Brahmans; and most of the indentured migrants were, generally speaking, from non-*dvija* castes. But as A.L. Basham notes, even the Brahmans 'frequently travelled by sea during the Hindu period. The texts which forbade or discouraged ocean voyages cannot have been followed by more than a small section of the population'.[5] Those who were forced by economic necessity to disobey the strictures, compensated 'for any vestigal bad karma by leading ostentatiously devout lives on shore'.[6]

Little is known about the extent and nature of internal migration in pre-modern India. Yet a critical reading of scattered sources does call into question the static, immobile view of Indian society. Migration seems to have been used as a strategy to cope with the repressive authority of the state, feudal oppression and calamities of nature. Romila Thapar suggests that the absence of peasant rebellion in ancient India could have been due to the fact that distressed peasants had the option of migration: 'Given the availability of cultivable land, peasant migration appears to have been the more common form of alleviating the pressures of heavy taxation.'[7] Jaimal Rai and Abhay Kant Chaudhary corroborate this picture[8] while P.C. Jain and B.N.S. Yadav find evidence of spatial mobility among Indian peasants in such ancient texts as *Subhasitaratnakosa* and *Brhannaratiya Purana*.[9]

Much the same pattern persisted in later times. Irfan Habib, in his authoritative study *The Agrarian System of Moghul India*, writes of the ease with which the peasant could migrate, given his low level of subsistence, limited immoveable possessions and availability of vast stretches of virgin land. 'This capacity of mobility on the part of the peasants', he writes, 'should be regarded as one of the most striking features of the social and economic life of the times. It was the peasants' first answer to famine or man's oppression.'[10] Making a more general point, Morris David Morris has suggested that too much perhaps has been made of the stabilising effects of Indian rural social structures in acting as a barrier to population mobility. 'It is probably safe to say', he has written, 'that the Indian populations historically have been as mobile as, for example, the population of Western Europe at equivalent stages of economic development.'[11]

Whatever may have been the situation in earlier times, migration assumed much importance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Several scholars have written authoritatively on the patterns and characteristics of internal migration on an all-India basis.[12] In this chapter, I shall focus on migration from the United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh) as it was from there that well over two-thirds[13] of the indentured migrants to the tropical sugar colonies came. My main concern will be to indicate the pattern and important role of migration in UP, and to suggest its increasing popularity as a strategy to cope with the recurring vicissitudes of life.

Migration from UP increased in the second half of the nineteenth century chiefly due to three factors. The first was the deteriorating economic conditions caused by the British impact on Indian society, and accentuated by the effects of the Indian mutiny of 1857. Excessive revenue demands by the British, deepening indebtedness of the peasantry, fragmentation of landed property into uneconomic holdings, the enhanced power of landlords and their ejection of impoverished tenants at unprecedented rates,[14] and the destruction of the indigenous handicraft industry, intensified the already poor plight of the lower strata of Indian society and forced them to look for other avenues to make their living. The second factor was the establishment of labour intensive colonial enterprises in India such as the tea plantations in Assam, jute mills in Calcutta, and collieries in Bihar.[15] Since these could not be developed with locally available labour, they depended on immigrant labour from places like the United Provinces. And thirdly, migration was stimulated by the availability of relatively cheap and readily accessible transportation, especially railways. G.P. Dain, an agent of Calcutta Tramways, told the *Royal Commission on Labour* in 1931: 'It is the construction of railways which has made this large migration to the cities possible, and I do know of areas where the advent of means of transportation has had the effect of depopulating the areas instead of increasing their population'[16] By the turn of the century migration, or more appropriately circulation, was an established fact of life in most parts of eastern United Provinces. Knowledgeable observers, such as the 1911 UP Census Commissioner E.A.H. Blunt, remarked that there was probably hardly a family in the Benares Division which did not have at least one member in other provinces in search of employment.[17] The bulk of the movement from the United Provinces was eastwards, to the provinces of Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa.

The province of Bengal was the largest magnet for UP migrants. A fairly large proportion of the migration from UP was to the contiguous districts of Bengal (now Bihar). In 1891, for example, 92,163 or 25.3 percent of the UP migrants in Bengal were enumerated in these districts, and in 1901, 96,869 or 14.5 percent. There was considerable circulation between Gorakhpur, Ballia, Ghazipur, Benares (in UP) and Shahabad and Champaran (in

Bihar).[18] Much of this movement, it would be safe to assume, would have been due to seasonal agricultural work, temporary social visits, marriages and trading.

Nonetheless, a large proportion of the UP migrants were bound for more distant industrial centres of Bengal, such as Calcutta, Hoogly, Howrah and the 24 Paraganas. These areas accounted for 38 percent of Bengal's UP migrants in 1901; 59 percent in 1911 and 64 percent in 1921.[19] Many of these migrants were probably peasants or labourers seeking employment; for in Hindu society marriages, a big cause of migration, are usually contracted within narrow cultural, regional and caste circles. The UP migrants came to constitute an important part of the labour force in Bengal. As early as 1882, it was found that many factory operatives 'especially in the neighbourhood of Calcutta, came from the North-West Provinces'.[20] The prominence of 'up-country' labour was also marked in the jute mills of Calcutta. In July 1895, a detailed enquiry of 14 jute mills employing 49,729 persons—covering over 60 percent of the total jute labour force - found that 46 percent of the labourers had originated in UP and Bihar.[21] By the turn of the century, B. Foley reported, the up-country people had all but replaced Bengalis as jute mill hands.[22] Large numbers of the migrants people also found employment in the textile mills.[23]

Besides Bengal, the Assam tea gardens were also important importers and employers of UP labour. Tea cultivation had been introduced into India in 1834, and large scale importation of immigrant labourers began in 1853.[24] The districts of Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas of tribal Bihar provided 44 percent of the tea labourers, while UP was second with 20 percent.[25] However, the UP labourers fared poorly on the tea plantations; they deserted the tea gardens more frequently than did labourers from other areas, and they succumbed to diseases more than others.[26] Yet, successful or not, they still constituted a significant proportion of the tea labour population.

The UP supplied a smaller number of migrant labourers to other areas also. In the Bihar coal fields, they comprised 10 percent of the total labour force,[27] and by some accounts they were the best available. Large numbers also went south into the Central Provinces and Berar, as semi-permanent immigrants, labourers on road, railway and irrigation works, and as domestic servants.[28] Others for 'purely economic' reasons, and in smaller numbers, headed towards Bombay and to the textile mills of Ahmedabad.[29]

The bulk of the UP migrants to places within India, as indeed also to the colonies, came from the eastern districts of the province: Azamgarh, Ghazipur, Ballia, Basti, Gorakhpur, Fyzabad and Gorakhpur.[30] Some districts were more prominent suppliers of labour then others, but this depended largely on such factors as the access to transportation networks, established patterns of chain migration, and their popularity among recruiters. Why eastern UP and not Western UP? Among the most important reasons would be the relatively greater poverty of the eastern districts, their very high population densities,[31] absence of major labour--intensive industrial enterprises such as the cotton mills in Kanpur, and the destruction of the riverine trade of the eastern region by the extension of the railway which fostered the development of Western UP.[32]The easterners had to seek their livelihood outside the province, whereas the westerners could, if they needed to, look for employment nearer home. It was this established pattern of migration in the eastern region which encouraged the colonial recruiters to concentrate there.

Much of the movement from the UP was understandably male dominated. But a surprisingly large number of women also migrated long distances. In 1881, 29 percent of the UP migrants in Bengal were females;[33] in 1891, 33 percent;[34] and in 1901, 56 percent.[35] In Calcutta in 1921, 371 out of 1,000 UP migrants were females.[36] In the Assam tea gardens in 1901, females constituted 40 percent of the total UP population there.[37] Some might have gone as wives of migrants already on the plantations, but it is also likely that some may have migrated on their own. Little is known about the female migrants, and usually the worst is assumed about their social and moral character. But as I have shown in another context, they could have easily been women of initiative and enterprise who moved out to start their lives afresh after escaping from a variety of domestic problems.[38]

Both the male and female migrants from the UP came from a wide social background, representing various castes, though scattered evidence for Calcutta suggests the predominance of lower agricultural and labouring castes.[39] This is not surprising for, bereft of power and status, lower orders were among the first to feel the effects of adverse economic conditions. Many migrants were recruited by middlemen—*sardars* or *jobbers*—sent out by employers to enlist people from districts and villages where they, the middlemen, were well known, though in the case of the Assam tea gardens a significant proportion of the migrants had left on their own volition.[40] The process and nature of voluntary migration is vividly described in the following quotation:

> The average incoming worker is unskilled: he comes to seek *kam* [work], and has no definite idea as to what *kam* may be. He prefers to work in close

> proximity to his fellow villagers or relations, but if work is not available in their areas, he goes elsewhere. If he settles down in a manufacturing area, where he is absorbed in a regular calling in which in due course he becomes skilled, he has no difficulty in getting employment, if he loses his job, provided he is well behaved and reasonably good worker, for skilled workmen find a ready market for their services in this presidency. If he remains unskilled, he may move from place to place, as his inclinations dictate and opportunities offer. If, at the worst, he can get nothing to do, he returns to his home, and perhaps sends out a more competent younger or older brother to seek work while he himself works on the family plot of land. Actually the immigrant may prefer casual or seasonal employment. He may not desire to settle down as a factory hand for the reason that he may not wish to be separated from his family for the greater part of the year. His home circumstances may be such that he does not require regular wages.[41]

This quotation from the *Royal Commission on Labour* suggests that the Indian worker was not totally committed to industrial occupation; half his mind was still in the village from where he had come. The *Commission* cited high turnover of labour and absenteeism in support of its contention. This view has been questioned by scholars who have provided evidence of an increasingly large number of workers in permanent industrial occupation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[42] Absenteeism has been explained as a form of protest against the repetitive drudgery of industrial work.

The industrial worker may have, over a period of time, shed some of his rustic longing for village life, but at the time of departure, both historical and contemporary evidence suggests, he probably intended to maintain the rural link. In any case, he constantly remitted money to his family at home for their upkeep and for other social and economic reasons, thus keeping in close touch with the affairs of his home in the village. In Sultanpur, where migration was used as a strategy for 'restoring fallen fortunes or of easing of a redundant population which have long been familiar to the inhabitants of this district', the migrants remitted Rs. 1,627,000 between October 1894 and September 1897.[43] In Azamgarh in the 1890s, yearly remittances amounted to Rs. 13 lakhs, rising to Rs. 14.5 lakhs in famine years. After the turn of the century, the amount rose to Re. 16 to Rs. 17 lakhs and in years of extreme hardship to over Rs. 22 lakh.[44] In Ghazipur, 'even the cultivating classes no longer rely solely on the produce of their fields, for the savings of the emigrants are almost equal to the entire rental demands, the same thing occurring in Ballia and Jaunpur.'[45] Speaking generally about the eastern districts of the United Provinces, the 1891

Census Report remarked that temporary migration was extensive and 'in many families subsistence is only possible with the assistance derived from the immigrant members.'[46] The extent of relief this brought in the more congested districts is 'difficult to calculate', it noted.[47] Evidence of the important role that migration played in the economy of UP can be provided for later periods also.[48]

It is clear that migration, at least in the United Provinces, was not an 'unnatural' or 'unpopular' phenomenon. On the contrary, it appears that a great deal of circulation for purposes of employment was under way in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In comparison to industrialized western societies, the extent of circulation in the Indian sub-continent may not appear to be significant. Yet in terms of its impact on the life of the districts from where the migrants came, it played an important role.

The indentured migrants who were enlisted for the colonies came from the uprooted mass of Indian peasants already in circulation. Many of the migrants had already left their homes before they met the recruiters. The very great extent to which the migrants had moved to other districts where they were registered for emigration is surprising. Table 1 gives a detailed breakdown of this for all the major British Indian labour importing colonies.

Table 1[49]

The Registration of Indentured Migrants to British Colonies

Selected District of Origin	Total No	No Reg In	%	No Reg Outside	%
Azamgarh	18,061	4,309	23.86	13,752	76.14
Ghazipur	9,739	4,338	44.54	5,401	55.46
Jaunpur	8,373	2,531	30.23	5,842	69.77
Basti	23,300	10,705	45.94	12,595	54.06
Allahabad	6,589	4,376	66.41	2,213	33.59
Benares	4,580	2,501	54.61	2,079	45.39
Fyzabad	9,286	5,696	61.34	3,590	38.66
Agra	1,665	1,004	60.30	661	39.70
Gorakhpur	7,987	3,997	50.04	3,990	49.96
Gonda	13,448	5,338	39.69	8,110	60.31
Lucknow	2,285	1,017	44.51	1,268	55.49
Kanpur	2,420	1,595	65.91	825	34.09

There is obvious variation in the extent of out-registration among the different districts, though on the whole it is more marked in the case of rural, impoverished districts such as Azamgarh, Jaunpur, Basti and Gonda.

It should be noted that each recruitment district had its own sub-depots and facilities for registering migrants, under the overall supervision of the district magistrate. Recruiters were licensed to operate in a particular district only; unauthorised excursions into other areas could result in fines or cancellation of their licence. A recruit could, however, be registered in other districts if there was clear evidence that he or she had left home voluntarily and was not coerced to go to another district.[50] There was always the potential for unscrupulous recruiters to mislead recruits and to coach them to give correct answers before the authorities; and this is the view many writers have accepted. While acknowledging the possibility of fraudulence, I suggest, in view of the preceding discussion, that many of those who were recruited outside their districts or origin, were people in circulation who had left their homes voluntarily, most probably in search of temporary or seasonal employment.

Most of the already uprooted indentured migrants were registered in neighbouring districts. Thus, the districts providing over 5 percent of the registrations for Fiji were: Fyzabad (15.3 percent), Kanpur (8.3 percent), Basti (7.7 percent), Gorakhpur (6.1 percent), Benares (5.4 percent) and Lucknow (5 percent). In the case of Azamgarh, Ghazipur provided over 21 percent of the registrations, while, for Basti, Gonda and Sultanpur, Fyzabad registered 25 percent, 37 percent ant 32 percent of the migrants.[51] This pattern of registration suggests that the Indian labourers moved in stages. Initially, they turned to small rural towns and provincial urban centres, and if unsuccessful there, ventured further afield to Calcutta, Assam or Bihar.[52] It was a familiar and understandable pattern of moving from the known to the unknown.

The indentured migrants came from a wide social background in India, as already seen. However, irrespective of their caste background, rural Indians depended on the land for their livelihood. As such, they were all affected by forces bringing about significant changes in the rural Indian economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In varying degrees, representatives of all the castes were uprooted from their traditional background and were migrating. The extent to which this was taking place is indicated in Table 2, which shows percentages of different castes migrating to Fiji which registered in other ('non-native') districts. Several trends are clear from the figures. There is more mobility in some districts than in others, and some castes register in other areas to a greater extent than do others. However, the higher castes and Muslims show a greater tendency towards out-registration than the lower castes. Perhaps this was a result of the fact that they were better off than the lower castes, enjoying some proprietary right in land or a more secure status as occupancy tenants. They could thus grasp the opportunity to travel more readily and freely than others.

Table 2[53]
Percentage of Castes Registering Outside their Districts of Origins

Districts of Origin Castes	Brahmans	Muslims	Khattri	Ahir	Kurmi	Chamar	Pasi
Allahabad	82.35	86.27	69.56	49.00	75.75	50.45	41.46
Basti	75.81	55.53	64.34	61.55	66.17	45.76	61.03
Benares	60.0	66.23 -	84.00	53.3	75.00	47.36	50.00
Fyzabad	38.70	50.00	70.00	33.03	31.68	27.09	30.55
Gonda	79.71	66.81	69.13	70.91	65.25	75.13	59.15
Gorakhpur	47.36	56.95	49.09	31.86	32.66	26.66	16.66
Jaunpur	85.36	63.09	96.15	80.66	90.9	63.17	66.66
Lucknow	83.33	80.58	100.00	56.25	41.66	58.92	40.74
Ghazipur	86.66	66.23	44.23	-50.00	100.00	35.97	100.00

Not only males but females also migrated as indentured labourers. In fact, after the 1870s, the Government of India insisted that for all the Indian labour importing colonies except Mauritius, 40 females should be despatched for every 100 males. Why and how it arrived at this figures is not known, though the intention probably was to create a more stable immigrant population in the colonies. The ratio was invariably observed by the Colonial Emigration Agents.[54] Fiji was no exception, and in a number of years, there were over 40 females to 100 males in the emigrating population.[55] They came from all castes and many were part of the uprooted population in circulation. Table 3 shows the extent of out-registration among Fiji's male and female migrants. However, many were registered in neighbouring districts, and for many Fyzabad was the main centre of registration. The great extent to which Indian women were mobile, as shown in out-registration figures, is most surprising, especially in view of the widespread and widely shared view that Indian women are caste/tradition bound, and stay at home. The above figures show that at least those Indian women who migrated to the colonies were not immobile.

They were probably individuals of enterprise and initiative who were not averse to seizing other opportunities to improve their position when the situation at home become intolerable. Their history in the colonies certainly confirms this view.

For the most part, as already noted, the Government of India did not hinder indentured migration, silently hoping for a permanent or semi-permanent settlement of the Indian immigrants in the colonies. Nevertheless it ensured that those who went to the colonies could, if they wanted to, maintain contact with their kinsmen in the villages in India. To this end, it required the emigration officials to keep detailed record on the migrants: their caste, sex, age, martial status, district, town and village of origin. The information can be found on Emigration Passes, copies of which were kept in several places. Using this, the colonial governments enabled the migrants to remit money back to India or to send letters, which they did.[56]

Table 3[57]
Males, Females and Out-Registration in Selected Districts

Districts of Origin	% of Males Reg. Outside D/O	% of Females Reg. Outside D/O
Allahabad	54.4	54.4
Basti	59.5	59.0
Benares	60.3	53.3
Fyzabad	39.8	32.7
Gonda	70.6	66.5
Gorakhpur	45.2	41.8
Jaunpur	78.4	71.2
Lucknow	61.1	63.9
Ghazipur	64.2	48.4
Average	59.28	54.63

Most writers are agreed, and oral evidence also suggests, that the indentured migrants left their homes expecting that they would return one day. They viewed their absence from India as a sojourn to acquire easy wealth promised by the recruiters. Most migrants did not discriminate between the different colonies,[58] nor probably did they care too much about their eventual destination so certain were they of eventually returning to their homeland. Many did return. Up to 1870, 112,178 or 21 percent of the migrants from all the colonies had returned to India,[59] and in the case of

Fiji, from the 1880s to 15 May 1927, some 24,000 of the migrants had returned.[60]

But the majority stayed on, attracted by new opportunities, a greater sense of personal freedom, inertia, or a dread of going back to the eternal patterns of a rigidly organised village life in India. They carved a new landscape in their new homeland and contributed immeasurably to the development of the colonies. The indentured labourers themselves, though, lived in a crisis. They had left one home and in their own life time had not found acceptance in another which they had helped to create. An intended temporary journey often became a permanent exile. Unable to return, the migrants re-lived the India of their childhood in their minds. This is poignantly captured by V.S. Naipaul in his *House for Mr Biswas*:

> In the arcade of Hanuman House grey and substantial in the dark, there was already an assembly of old men, squatting on sacks on the ground and on tables now empty of Tulsi Store goods, pulling at clay *cheelums* that glowed red and smelt of ganja and burnt sacking. Though it wasn't cold, many had scarves over their heads and around their necks; this detail made them look foreign and, to Mr Biswas, romantic. It was the time of the day for which they lived. They could not speak English and were not interested in the land where they lived; it was a place where they had come for a short time and stayed longer than expected. They continually talked of going back to India, but when the opportunity came, many refused, afraid of the unknown, afraid to leave the familiar temporariness. And every evening they came to the arcade of the solid, friendly house, smoked, told stories, and continued to talk of India.[61]

Endnotes

[1] My understanding of the concept of circulation is based on the work of Murray Chapman and R.M. Prothero, *Circulation in the Third World* (London 1985), ch. 1.

[2] Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan* (Princeton 1951), 108; *Census of India,* Vol 1, Part 1 (1921), 83.

[3] William Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces of India: Their history, ethnology and administration* (London 1896), 326.

[4] *Census of India,* Vol 15, Part 2 (1911). Table XVI gives a detailed breakdown of the extent of occupational mobility among different castes in UP.

[5] A.L. Basham, 'Notes on Seafaring in Ancient India', in his *Studies in Indian History and Culture* (Calcutta 1964), 163

[6] Michael Pearson, 'Across the Black Water: Indian seafarers in the sixteenth century', unpublished MS (1979), 24.

[7] Romila Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice* (New Delhi 1975), 58.

[8] Jaimal Rai, *The Rural-urban Economy and Social Changes in Ancient India, 300BC-600AD* (New Delhi 1974), 128; Abhay Kant Chaudhary, *The Early Mediaeval Village in North-Eastern India* (Calcutta 1971), 49, 105, 264.

[9] P.C. Jain, *Socio-Economic Explorations of Mediaeval India* (New Delhi 1976), 110-11; B.N.S. Yadav, 'Immobility and Subjection of Indian Peasantry in Early Mediaeval Complex', *Indian Historical Review,* 1:1 (1974), 25; see also S.C. Misra, 'Social Mobility in Pre-Moghul India', *IHR,* 1:1 (1974), 36.

[10] Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Moghul India* (Bombay 1963), 117.

[11] Morris David Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India: the case of the Bombay cotton mills, 1854-1947* (Berkeley 1965), 42.

[12] See K.C. Zachariah, *An Historical Study of Internal Migration in the Indian Sub-Continent, 1901-1931* (London 1964), and Kingsley Davis, *The Population of India and Pakistan.* For a summary of research on Indian migration, see P.B. Desai, *A Survey of Research in Demography* (Bombay 1975).

[13] This figure is derived from an analysis of *The Protector of Emigrants' Annual Report on Emigration from the Port of Calcutta to British and Foreign Colonies,* 1881/82—1914.

[14] See for instance, T.R. Metcalfe, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India, 1857-1870* (Princeton 1964), 134ff. Other relevant studies include Elizabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India: The United Provinces under British rule, 1860-1900,* vol 1 (Berkeley 1972); Jagdish Raj, *Economic Conflict in North India: a study of landlord-tenant relations in Audh, 1870-1890* (Bombay 1958); Dietmar Rothermund, *Government, Landlord and Peasant: agrarian relations under British rule, 1865-1935* (Wiesbaden 1975).

[15] See Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India —sources of supply, 1855-1946: some preliminary findings', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter *IESHR*), 13:3 (1973), 277-329; A.K. Bagchi, *Private Investment in India, 1900-1939* (Bombay 1975).

[16] *Royal Commission on Labour in India,* Vol 5, Part 1 (1931), 215. For similar comments about the areas, see Sir William Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (London 1897), 235; F. Bradley-Birt, *Chota Nagpur: a little known province of the Empire* (London 1903), 5.

[17] *Census of India,* Vol 16, Part 1 (1911), 49. See also H.R. Nevill, *Gazetteer of Ghazipur* (Nainital 1908), 79.

[18] *Census of India,* Vol 5, Part 1 (1911), 198.

[19] *Census of India,* Vol 5, Part 1 (1921), 43.

[20] Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India', 238.

[21] Ibid.

[22] B. Foley, *Report on Labour in Bengal* (Calcutta 1906).

[23] *Census of India,* Vol 11, Part 1 (1921), 111. For other industries see Gutpa, 'Factory Labour'; Bagchi, *Private Investment.*

[24] For detailed studies on the subject, see Sir Percival Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London 1967); S.M. Akhtar, *Labour Emigration to the Assam Tea Gardens* (Lahore 1939); *Report of the Assam Labour Tea Enquire Committee* (Calcutta 1907).

[25] *Report of the Assam Labour Tea Enquiry,* 14. The percentages are calculated on the basis of figures for the years 1885-1902/03.

[26] Based on *Resolutions on Immigrant Labour in the Assam Districts of West Bengal.*

[27] *Royal Commission on Labour in India,* Vol 4, Part 1 (1931), 5. See also C.P. Simmons, 'Recruiting and Organising of Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India: the case of the coal mining industry, c.1880-1939', *IESHR,* 13:4 (1976), 456; *Census of India,* Vol 7, Part 1 (1921), 106.

[28] *Census of India,* Vol 10 (1911), 50, 86.

[29] *Census of India,* Vol 15, Part 1 (1911), 93. See also Great Britain *Parliamentary Papers,* Vol 59 (1890-91), 69; *Royal Commission on Labour,* Vol 1, Part 1 (1931), 5; Baniprasanna Misra, 'Factory Labour During the Early Years of Industrialization: an appraisal in the light of the Indian Factory Commission, 1890', *IESHR,* 21:3 (1975), 203-07.

[30] *Census of India,* Vol 11, Part 1 (1921), 111; *Royal Commission on Labour,* Vol 5, Part 1 (1931), 11; *Resolutions on Immigrant Labour* (1901), 69.

[31] See *Census of India,* Vol 16, Part 1 (1921), 26; Birendranath Ganguly, *Trends of Agriculture and Population in the Ganges Valley* (London 1938), 43.

[32] This point has been argued by Frances Robinson, 'Municipal Government and Muslim Separatism in the United Provinces, 1883-1916', *Modern Asian Studies,* 7:3 (1973), 389-441; see also *Report on the Present Economic Situation in the United Provinces* (Nainital 1933).

[33] *Census of India,* Vol 1 (1883), 151.

[34] *Census of India,* Vol 1, Part 1 (1901), 143.

[35] Ibid.

[36] *Census of India,* Vol 6, Part 1 (1921), 22.

[37] *Resolutions on Immigrant Labour* (1901). 69.

[38] See Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra 1983), 97-114.

[39] *Census of India,* Vol 1, Part 1 (1901), 143.

[40] I base myself on figures in the *Resolutions on Immigrant Labour,* 1893-1902/03.

[41] *Royal Commission on Labour,* [India] Vol 5, Part 1 (1931), 3.

[42] The seminal work here is Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India.* See also Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India'; P.S. Gupta, 'Notes on the Origin and Structuring of the Industrial Labour Force in India —1880-1920', in R.S. Sharma (ed.), *Indian Society: historical probings* (New Delhi 1974), 426ff; Misra, 'Factory Labour During the Early Years of Industrialization'.

[43] F.W. Brownrigg, *Sultanpur Settlement Report* (Allahabad 1898), 6.

[44] C.E. Crawford, *Azamgarh Settlement Report* (Allahabad 1898), 7.

[45] H.R. Neville, *Ghazipur District Gazetteer* (Nainital 1908), 79.

[46] *Census of India,* Vol 16 (1891), 332.

[47] Ibid., 283.

[48] See Birendranath Ganguly, *Trends of Agriculture and Population in the Ganges Valley,* 40-41; Bholanath Misra, *Overpopulation in Jaunpur* (Allahabad 1932), 44; Jai Krishna Mathur, *The Pressure of Population and its Effects on Rural Economy in Gorakhpur District* (Allahabad 1931), 21.

[49] Figures derived from Protector of Emigrants' *Annual Reports* for the years 1881/82, 1888-1897, 1900-1902, 1914.

[50] For fuller discussion see Brij V. Lal, 'Leaves of the Banyan Tree: origins and background of Fiji's North Indian Indentured Migrants, 1878-1916', PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1980, ch. 5 ('Patterns of Migration from the UP').

[51] Ibid., 182; see also my 'Approaches to the Study of Indian Indentured Emigration...' (in this volume).

[52] For a similar view, see Gupta, 'Origins and Structuring of the Industrial Labour Force', 422.

[53] For a detailed statistical breakdown, see Lal, 'Leaves of the Banyan Tree', Vol 2, 243-389 (Appendix 14: Cross-tabulation of caste by sex by districts of origin by districts of registration).

[54] Based on figures in the Protector's *Annual Reports.*

[55] Lal, 'Leaves of the Banyan Tree', Vol 1, 283-84.

[56] For the amounts remitted, see James McNeill and Chimman Lal, *Report of the Government of India on the Conditions of Indian Immigrants in Four British Colonies and Surinam,* Cd. 7744-5 (Simla 1914), Appendices.

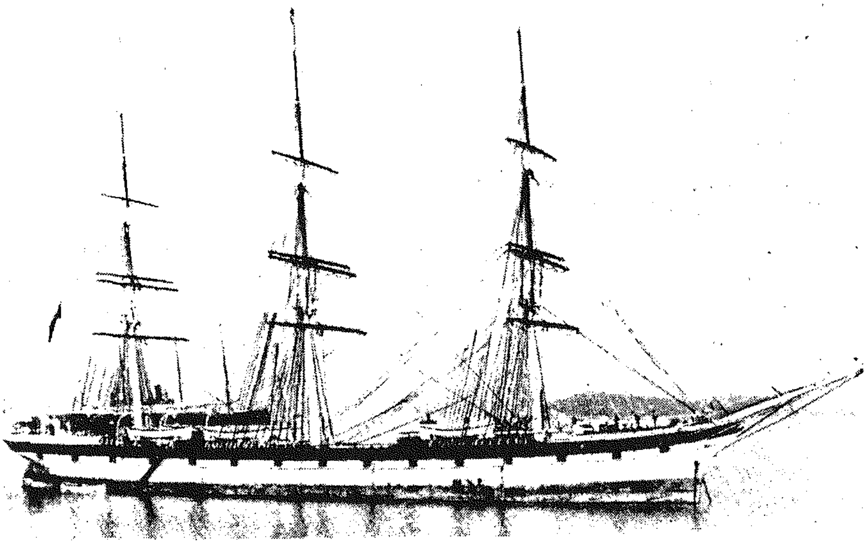
[57] Derived from Ibid., Vol 2, 217-242 (Appendix 13: Cross-tabulation of sex by districts of origin by districts of registration).

[58] *Report of the Committee on Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates,* Cmd. 5192/4 (1910), 18.

[59] J. Geoghegan, *Coolie Emigration from India* (Calcutta 1874), 67.

[60] K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: a history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne 1962), 190.

[61] V.S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas* (Penguin edition 1969), 193-94.



The *Elbe* which brought the first batch of South Indians to Fiji in 1903. The vessel was especially fitted to carry human cargo over long distances.

chapter 7

Bound for the Colonies in 1905

> *Presently it seems to dawn on one vivacious dame that she is leaving home and country, for with alarming suddenness she gives vent to violent lament, and weeping, in which she is ably seconded by other ladies.*
>
> Anonymous observer

In 1905, there were around twenty thousand Indians in Fiji, all descendants of indentured immigrants introduced into the colony since 1879. By the time indentured emigration ceased in 1916, over sixty thousand had arrived to work on the colonial sugarcane plantations. They were a part of more than one million men, women and children who had left the Indo-Gangetic plains of Northern India and crossed the kala pani, dark waters, for colonies in the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Indian indenture has been the subject of many studies.[1] Archival sources are rich,[2] but contemporary account of the system by non-officials are rare. For Fiji, Totaram Sanadhya and J.W. Burton provide tantalising insights into the social and cultural life of the Indian immigrants at the turn of the century, while Walter Gill, who worked as an overseer in the last days of indenture, describes the brutality of the system for all who were associated with it.[3] Other Indian labour receiving colonies are not as well served.

The following article entitled 'The Coolie Emigrant', published anonymously in Edinburgh in Chambers' *Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts,* Sixth series, Vol. 8, pp. 225-27 under the date 11 March 1905, provides a first-hand account of the recruitment and embarkation of indentured labourers. The account is obviously written by someone resident or travelling in India at the time and with some acquaintance with the system. The broad pattern described in the article will be familiar to the students of the subject, but it is the human detail, the close observation of recruitment and embarkation—'the violent lament and weeping' of women, 'the new comer's inquiries and anxieties', 'the double line of empty plates quickly piled with the savoury mess'—that add texture and colour to a story otherwise well known. It is a period piece in its style and allusions, but it is a rare account and for that reason worth preserving.

> The scorching heat of an Indian sun blazes down on Adjudhia's crowded streets, driving the motley throngs to the scant shelter of bazaar or *dharmsala* (travellers' rest).
>
> These are the days of the great bathing-festivals, and the streams of 'damp devout', having washed away the sins of the past year, and satisfied *pro tem.* the pecuniary demands of the priest, leave the ancient temples huddled together in grey piles on the banks of the sacred Gogra stream for the booths and *tamashas* (native shows), the never-failing concomitants of religious display in India. This is the coolie-recruiters' harvest-time. Will not the generous *Sirkar* (Government) pay him in silver rupees for every son of the soil won by his persuasive tongue for service in the far off countries? Well Ramjani knows his 'happy hunting-grounds'. He seldom attempts his arguments in the remoter jungle villages; he values his skin too highly for that, for new ideas do not find favour in these communities. Their depth of ignorance has a corresponding depth of suspicious fear, with an unshaken faith in the efficacy of a stout bamboo for leaders of new movements. Yet Ramjani knows well that it is just these men that, once secured, are the best working article. He patiently waits his opportunity to 'speak him fair' when the great event of his yearly visit to sacred city and holy shrine has removed him from the everyday influences of his life, and rendered his mind more expansive. The 'yokel' has much the same characteristics whether his skin be white or black, his native hamlet embosomed on the green slopes of some remote Yorkshire dale or buried in the tangles of an Indian jungle. It needs very little penetration to spot him, and practice has made it a very easy job to our friend the recruiter. Curiosity aroused and suspicion lulled, courage awakes, and Psuldham is seized with the spirit of enterprise (and cupidity). He and Sukee-Thesa (his almond-eyed wife) are tired of

the old mother's scoldings. Why should not they and the *batcha* (baby) go and become rich like old Ghosé the fat village *bania* (money lender)? So he listens to Ramjani's reasonings. The great *raj* has lands across the sea; not the cold, damp country that the sahib calls 'Home', but rich and beautiful lands, with the warm sun of Hindustan, where the soil is so fertile that the plantations yield abundantly to the toil of the labourer, whose earnings are trebled. 'Five days' work out of the seven, at seven hours a day, and a shilling a day, will soon make a man rich'[4]

Presently Psuldham finds himself standing before the great collector *sahib*, who reads to him in his own village tongue the words which bind him to work five years for the *Sirkar*, who in return will be a father to him, giving him house-room in health, medicine in sickness, and warm clothes for the long journey over the dark water. He is duly enlisted, and now becomes a Government article, to be forwarded with all due care and despatch.

In company with other parties of coolies, under charge of 'forwarding agents', he starts for Calcutta. 'Dry food' (the native term for anything eatable that does not come under the category of rice-curry or *chapatti*), that may be eaten by any caste, is supplied by the government to the emigrants, who, after weary days and nights in the train, arrive dazed and travel-worn in Calcutta, which must, indeed, be to them a land of wonders, the 'City of Palaces'. Many have never seen a ship and are now confronted with the varied and crowded shipping of the Hooghly. Dingies carry the new-comers down the river to their first resting-place, the depot of Garden Reach.

A dip from the bathing-steps, followed by a good meal and a night's rest, has made new men of the travellers, and they are able to take stock of their surroundings whilst confabulating with the hundreds of other coolies who are waiting till the numbers are complete for the big steamer lying at the end of the jetty.

A two-storied house with wide, shady verandas contains the offices and residence of the English Government emigration agent. The building, which dates from the days of the old merchant princes, stands back from the river, and is approached by a find old avenue of the crimson *goldmohur*-tree, with glimpses of a wide green lawn dotted with flowerbeds, in which, during the three comparatively cool months of the Calcutta winter, English flowers run riot. A path from the main avenue leads to the depot where the coolies are lodged, sometimes to the number of a thousand at a time, in neat wooden huts: a big family, for whose health and discipline the English manager is responsible to the Government. So six o-clock every morning sees him moving round the grounds, with an eagle eye for work possibly scamped and an ever-ready ear for the new-comer's inquiries and anxieties. A 'history-sheet' is drawn up for each emigrant, and on the same are entered marks of identification, with names of the next-of-kin, to whom, in the event of an emigrants death, his earnings and possessions are forwarded.[5] A little hospital, with an eye-ward and a hospital assistant, provides for cases of sickness or ophthalmia, which are reported to the health-officer at his next visit. The coolies keep their own grounds in order and help in the weeding and watering of the gardens till eight o'clock brings the breakfast-bell, and the hungry workers sit in orderly rows to enjoy the big helps of curry and rice which are rapidly ladled out by the Brahman cooks from enormous *chatties* mounted on wheels, so that the double lines of empty plates are quickly piled with the savoury mess. A similar meal is served at 5pm, and the emigrants make merry with weird music till 'order' is called, and the *chowkidar* (watchman) keeps watch till dawn.

The week before the boat sails is a busy one. The contractor provisions the vessel with the rice and curry stuffs for the eight hundred odd souls during a voyage of nearly three months. Flour, too, must be provided for the *chapatties* (unleavened cakes), which are the staple food of many of the emigrants. Below decks the 'passengers accommodation' is divided into three sections: married quarters, bachelors, spinsters; a sort of raised platform on either side of the saloons filling the double role of beds and tables.

On the day of departure each emigrant begins operations with an early dip in the river, after which the coolies are presented with a new suite of cotton clothing and head-gear differing in hue according to the districts from which they are recruited—a somewhat important matter for employers of labour, for some men can command a better wage than others, the planters being anxious to secure the hardier and more powerfully built Central Province man. Each coolie has his number embossed on a tin circle suspended round the neck; and the 'ornament' gives unbounded satisfaction to the owner. Some of the grubbier members are presented with a piece of sunlight soap, which oftener than not is tasted before the individual realises that this article is for 'outward application' only. The morning meal finished, the men and women stand in orderly rows near the jetty, waiting for the health-officer's inspection : an anxious time for the Government agent, for a case of fever may be detained till the doctor is satisfied that there is no fear of the dread plague developing ; and a delay of this sort, when all the preparation (victualling, &c.) are completed may mean a serious loss to the Government and their contractors.

If all are passed the embarkation commences, the emigrants being sent on board in parties of six at a time. *Place aux dames*: first the spinsters, then the married people with their children, and last the gay bachelors. At the end of the gangway two British tars are stationed, one helping the women and children, whilst the other presents each emigrant with a bright-coloured blanket. New clothes, blankets, &c. put the whole family in excellent good humour; and the scene, as we watch it from the upper deck, where the handsome old Scotch captain dispenses a farewell tea to his friends, is quite a gay one. The coolies, pleased and amused with their novel experience, are decked out in their brightest corals, beads and ornaments; and the women, one arm holding a baby on the hip and the other a small fan or some particular household treasure, make delightfully picturesque groups. Presently it seems to dawn on one vivacious dame that she is leaving home and country, for with alarming suddenness she gives vent to violent laments and weeping, in which she is ably seconded by other excited ladies. The captain takes it very calmly, and assures us that they, like women all the world over, will be relieved by a good

> 'weep', and that a few hours will see them quite resigned and eager for the privilege which the 'captain *sahib*' affords to little parties of women and children to sun themselves peacefully on his deck.
>
> The last scene is the inspection of the lascars (the native crew), and then the bell goes, and we scramble hastily across the gangway, wishing a good voyage and a happy fortune to the outward-bound emigrants.
>
> This has been a field-day to the emigration agent and his officials, who, the secretary tells me, have been hard at work since 6am, with a hastily snatched interval for lunch, and even now, although the red sun is sinking in the Hooghly, they have yet an hour or more of office-work. The secretary, however, is free to dispense hospitality, and gives us many interesting particulars as to the emigration scheme. The post of doctor on board one of these vessels is eagerly sought for; for, besides liberal pay, the doctor receives a capitation fee for each coolie safely landed, and if he is lucky enough to get a return ship, makes quite a neat little sum.
>
> A very fair percentage of the coolies settle down when their fives years' contract is concluded, and start little shops on the estates, or even cultivate their own plot of land. A very creditable proportion, too, of their earning is sent home to India to the 'old folk'. In spite of his many faults and failings, the native of India very seldom forgets his family obligation. I remember having this fact very forcibly brought home to me in Calcutta. One Saturday evening, while walking through Bhawanipur, one of the poorest native suburbs, I saw the little post-office fairly besieged by double lines of natives with money-orders in their hands, waiting to send a part of the week's earnings to old homes. Here a ragged coolie and a sleek *baboo*; farther down the line a very youthful clerk was helping a fine-looking old grandfather, who had evidently forgotten his spectacles, to write out his form.
>
> India's affairs and administration are much criticised by those who know least about them; but the implicit trust with which these thousands of emigrants consign themselves to the white man's care gives ample proof that this department is worked with unremitting zeal and an intelligent understanding of the wants of this working-man section of India's toiling millions.

The average trip for sailing ships to Fiji was seventy three days and for steamships thirty. Most of the eighty seven voyages were uneventful, registering a mortality rate of about one per cent. Death occurred mostly from measles, whooping cough and other minor illnesses. But there were exceptions as the next two chapters relate.

Endnotes

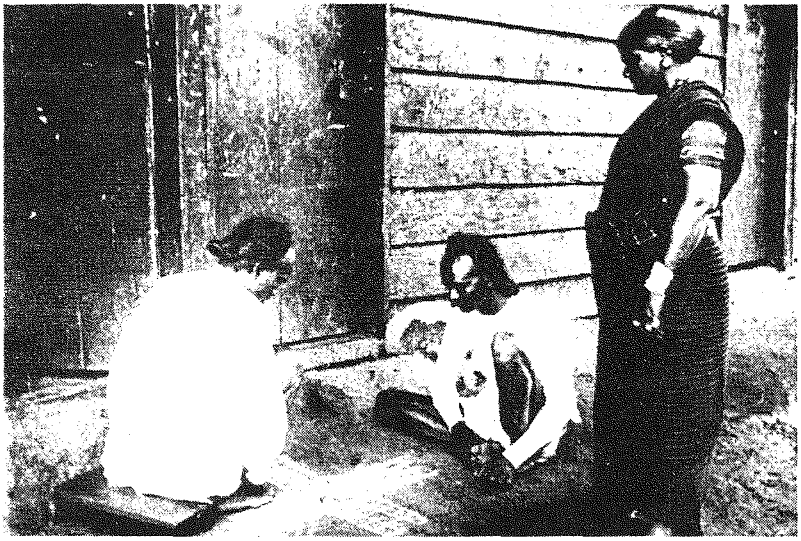
[1] Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery* (London 1974) is the standard work, though its argument and approach has been severely modified by many recent works. For just two examples, see Clem Seecharan, *Tiger in the Sky: The Anatomy of Indian Achievement in British Guiana, 1919-1929* (London, 1997), and Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983).

[2] For a collection of documents on the indenture experience in Fiji, see Brij V. Lal (ed), *Crossing the Kala Pani: A documentary history of Indian indenture in Fiji* (Suva, 1998).

[3] J.W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London, 1910), Totaram Sanadhya, *Fiji Dwip Men Mere Ikkis Varsh* (My Twenty One Years in the Fiji Islands)(Kanpur 1919), and Walter Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Adelaide 1970).

[4] In fact, it was five and a half days of work, Sundays being free.

[5] The history sheet referred to is the 'Emigration Pass'.



Two girmitiyas and a woman outside the line playing a game, probably on a Sunday, the only free day they had during girmit.

chapter 8

The Voyage of the *Leonidas*

There is a grand opening in the colony after the indentures are out as [the indentured labourer] can set up as a cow keeper, market gardener, and poulterer, there being no industries of this description amongst the Fijians, nor ever I imagine likely to be.

William Seed, Agent General of Immigration

The *Leonidas* was the first of 87 ships that transported over 60,000 Indian indentured migrants to Fiji between 1879 and 1916. The 1,600 ton vessel, which belonged to James Nourse, one of the two shipping contractors to the Fiji government, had been operating to the West Indies for some years, and was specially fitted for the labour trade.

On 28 January 1879, *Leonidas* cleared the port of Calcutta, carrying around 500 migrants, bound for Fiji.

Only three days after leaving the Hoogly, cholera and smallpox broke out on the vessel. Cholera struck a European sailor first, and soon spread to the migrants. The Surgeon Superintendent, Dr J. Welsh, acted quickly.

The stricken sailor was placed in a tent at the forecastle head, with a man to attend him. All his clothing and other possessions were thrown overboard, and the forecastle head was constantly washed with carbolic acid. Migrants with cholera were kept in the hospital under strict surveillance, while those struck by smallpox were restricted to the only spare place on the ship, the sail locker. The between decks, hospitals and privies were also thoroughly disinfected, whitewashed and fumigated. The diet for all on board was lowered, and children were dosed with castor oil, laudanum and rum, and fed on arrowroot and sago for four or five days.[1] Despite all the precautions, 19 lives were lost, a mortality rate of 3.80 percent, well above the average of one percent for the whole period of indentured migration to Fiji.

For most of the migrants who had never seen, let alone boarded, a sailing ship before, the journey was traumatic, the physical discomfort of crowded quarters, stench and seasickness demoralizing. Old standards of conduct, guides to action, values of obedience, respect and status, and an appreciation of one's defined position in an established hierarchy all proved inadequate and painfully irrelevant. For the more sensitive among the migrants who tried to make sense of their altered situation, there was little time for reflection or self pity. There was work to be done, even on the ship. A typical day began at 6.00 a.m., when the migrants rose, arranged their bedding and breakfasted between 8.00 and 8.30 a.m. while the between deck was being cleaned by *topazes*. The men helped draw water for cooking and drinking, while the women worked in the kitchen, although food itself was cooked by *bhandarries* appointed by the Surgeon Superintendent. When not working, the migrants were encouraged to enjoy themselves by wrestling, playing cards, singing and playing drums, to prevent depression and melancholy. The voyage fostered a sense of community among the migrants, irrespective of their social positions in India: they were 'coolies' all. The sense of comradeship formed during the crossing endured. Years after their *girmit* had expired, the indentured labourers would hobble long distances on foot to meet their *jahajibhais* (ship mates) and reminisce over the shared ordeals of the voyage.

The *Leonidas* arrived off the port of Levuka on the island of Ovalau on the evening of 14 May 1879, but because of the inexperience of the captain with Fiji waters, encroaching darkness and the presence of sharp coral reefs nearby, it was unable to enter the harbour.[2] The news of its arrival having reached the government within a few hours, J.B. Thurston, the Colonial Secretary, went early the next day in an open boat to warn the captain of the dangerous passage to the harbour. As he approached the vessel, the

Surgeon Superintendent shouted that there had been cholera and smallpox aboard. This was alarming news, for only a few years earlier an epidemic of measles had killed 40,000 of the 160,000 Fijians. Without lingering to learn the exact nature of the disaster, which in any case was difficult because of the deafening noise from the breakers, Thurston reported the news to the acting Governor, George William Des Voeux. After hurried consultations, Dr William MacGregor, the Chief Medical Officer, was sent to obtain further particulars. He reported that although the dreaded cholera had abated some time ago, the most recent cases of smallpox had appeared just a few days before the vessel entered Fiji waters.

The Governor was sufficiently concerned that he even considered sending the *Leonidas* back on the high seas without unloading the migrants. He wrote to Sir Michael Hicks of the Colonial Office in London:

> Had it been possible to ensure that the vessel, if prevented from entering the harbour, would leave the group altogether without touching anywhere or receiving any visits from natives or others, it might have become a question of whether she should not be sent away, even at the imminent risk to 500 lives, rather than that 100,000 lives should be subject to danger scarcely less grave. But having no man-of-war at hand or other means of prevention, it would be almost certain that the ship, if sent away, would put at one of the many islands lying in any course which could be taken for leaving the Colony, and in that case, while the 500 would perhaps have been sacrificed, the 100,000 would have been in still greater jeopardy.[3]

The course of Fijian history might have been different had he turned the ship away. But the officials agreed that the *Leonidas* should be brought inside the barrier reef, and anchored in the harbour to the leeward of the town. As the ship was being brought in through the reef, a further disaster caused anxiety: the *Leonidas* ran aground. Fortunately, in about two hours the ship floated on the rising tide, and soon afterwards found anchor in more placid waters of Levuka harbour.

As it was vitally important to prevent any contact between those aboard the *Leonidas* and the shore, a large and fully armed schooner was placed between the two. Three other boats, each containing three men, patrolled an area inside the reef up to 350 yards from the *Leonidas*. The guards, drawn from the armed constabulary and the police, were given express orders to shoot, after warning, anyone who might attempt to break the quarantine. Two more Europeans were provided with a boat and crew to make regular visits to the guards by night and day to prevent any laxity in vigilance. On one occasion Des Voeux himself visited the guards, and finding one of them asleep, ordered him flogged.

Meanwhile there arose the question of finding a satisfactory quarantine depot for all the migrants. Yanuca Lailai, a tiny island of about 100 acres, had already been chosen, and houses built to accommodate about 350 people. To accommodate the extra 150 people, the Governor levied the people of Moturiki and Ovalau, and by 20 May, only two days after the order had been given, 700 Fijian men were sent to Yanuca Lailai to construct twenty more Fijian *bures*. The necessary materials had already been collected from the forest and shipped to the island. The Fijians worked with 'extraordinary activity' and within three days the task was completed, together with a hospital, storehouse, and quarters for the depot keeper. Later thirty more houses were added for married couples and others with families.

Now the officials were faced with the greatest difficulty of all: transferring the migrants from the ship to the depot. Taking the infected *Leonidas* to Yanuca Lailai was deemed hazardous. Guards had to be posted all along the coast of Ovalau, to prevent contact between the migrants and the shore. Most of the available forces had already been deployed to keep a watch on the *Leonidas*, whose crew thought the colonial authorities overzealous, even refusing to cooperate with them. The Governor therefore approached Roko TuiTailevu (Ratu Abel, the eldest son of Cakobau) for men, and he readily obliged by sending an armed contingent of fifty. Precautionary measures taken, the tedious process of transfer began twelve days after the *Leonidas* had arrived in Levuka. The migrants had to be transported in rowing boats, the only craft available, and each boat could make only one trip a day, since the distance between the *Leonidas* and Yanuca Lailai was over ten miles. It took three days for all the migrants to be quarantined on the island. The Governor breathed a sigh of relief when, at the end of the month, the *Leonidas* cleared Fiji waters and headed for San Francisco. Apart from Des Voeux himself, Dr William MacGregor played the most important part in coordinating efforts to bring the immigrants to safety. He was handsomely praised by the Governor for his 'remarkable presence of mind, combined with fertility and readiness of resource . . . [and] his untiring energy and sustained exertion'.[4] However, MacGregor's hour of glory would come five years later, in 1884, when the *Syria* ran aground on the Nasilai reef (next chapter).

The Fijian people too brought much credit to themselves by their ungrudging cooperation and calm. Cakobau did make an enquiry to the Governor about the two diseases aboard the *Leonidas*, though this perhaps was done at the behest of 'certain whites passing there [who] had not failed to seize the opportunity for mischief in representing the presence of the smallpox as the natural result of the Government action in introducing coolies'.[5] The Governor replied that all possible precaution had been taken, saying that the disease had originated with one of the white sailors and not with the Indians who 'were well on leaving Calcutta'. A day before, he had decided on universal vaccination of the Fijians and had sent a long circular on the subject to the *Rokos* of the different provinces urging them to promote the operation.

The migrants remained in quarantine until 15 August.[6] During this period, 15 more died, mostly from dysentery, diarrhoea and typhoid. The survivors, after a period of convalescence, were brought back to Levuka for allocation among the planters, who showed little interest. Perhaps they were still angry with Gordon who, much against their wishes, had prohibited commercial employment of Fijian labour and had imported Indian labour instead. Only one planter, J. Hill, of Rabi offered to take a total of 52 men, 25 women, and 29 children. Some were taken as domestic servants but by far the greatest number—189 men and 97 women—had to be employed by the government itself on public works.

Table 1[7]

Allotment of the *Leonidas* migrants by Plantation (in 1882)

Name of Employer	Name of Estate/Place	Men	Women	Children	Infants
J.E. Mason	Gila Est, Taveuni	52	28	8	1
J.C. Smith	Viti Est, Viti Levu	43	21	6	-
Sahl & Co.	Muaniweni, Viti Levu	40	20	4	2
CSR	Nausori	43	25	7	1
John Hill	Rabi	50	24	21	4
Colonial Secretary	Suva	4	2	1	-
Police	Rewa	2	1	-	-
Sir John Gorrie	Suva	1	-	-	-
J.B. Hobday	Levuka	-	1	-	-
B. Morris	Levuka	1	-	-	-
Turner & Edgerly	Rewa	1	1	-	-
J. Conelly	Levuka	1	1	-	-
G. Smith	Levuka	2	2	1	-
Govt. House	Nasova	1	-	-	-
Smith	Levuka	-	1	1	-

Source: *The National Archives of India,* Emigration Proceedings, April 1882.

In November 1879, the government temporarily took over the Great Amalgam Estate in Rewa to stamp out a coffee leaf disease which had just appeared in the colony, and transferred 139 men, 58 women, and 18 children there for a year. This move proved to be the turning point in the employment of Indian indentured labour in Fiji. The Indians performed so impressively that four planters, J.E. Mason of Taveuni; and J.C. Smith, Sahl and Company, and H.Z. Baillie, all of Viti Levu, applied for an immediate allotment from this number. The distribution of *Leonidas* immigrants in 1882 is detailed in Table 1.

By the time the migrants reached the plantations, they had already resigned themselves to an uncertain future, and were prepared to accept stoically all that lay in store for them. By now they knew that it was foolhardy to hope for easy money; they would have to toil hard for every pittance. And they did. The planters could allocate labour to time work or task work (*ticca*). At first they tried the former. Soon, however, the overseers were complaining of deliberate time-killing on the part of the labourers, and quickly switched to task work. One official noted that this change 'satisfied master and men much better' but this assertion is questionable. Undoubtedly, there were some who preferred task work, its fleeting sense of independence and self-respect, and lesser chance of the overseer's whip. But this was illusory, for the tasks were tough, and set according to the pleasure of the overseers. Some years later, when the C.S.R. changed from time to task work, it was noted that this had caused 'a great dissatisfaction amongst the labourers'.

From the start, relations between the labourers and the overseers were strained. Misunderstanding, ignorance, prejudice, and sometimes deliberate vindictiveness on the part of those in authority, led to conflict. Very early on, things were especially bad on the Vunicibi Estate on which some *Leonidas* migrants were employed. The manager constantly over-tasked his labour force which, coupled with insufficient wages, led to several complaints, as a result of which the manager was called before the district magistrate and fined. But his behaviour did not improve. Soon afterwards, the enraged labourers set upon him and beat him very severely, for which, five were sentenced to one year and another five to six months imprisonment. All the labourers were subsequently removed from the estate until a new manager was appointed. Tension and violence were not confined to working situations alone; they pervaded the *girmitiya's* social life as well. The absence of institutionalized patterns of interaction and shared values often placed the labourers under considerable strain. Nevertheless, incidents of murder in the early years were confined to quarrels over women, for whom there was keen competition. Husbands who sensed infidelity on the part of their wives, were not averse to wielding the cane knife or the axe. In 1879 on Rabi Island, a *Leonidas* migrant hacked his wife's head off with an axe because of a minor alleged moral impropriety on her part. He received 6 years imprisonment. More such gruesome acts would occur in later years.

If *girmit* was *narak* (hell) or *kasbighar* (brothel) as some of the immigrants later recalled, it lasted only for 5 or at the most 10 years, depending upon whether contracts were renewed or extended. Moreover, if it brutalized many, it also provided others with habits of industry and thrift, and an opportunity to improve their lot. Among the most successful of the *Leonidas* migrants was Sohun who was able not only to buy his exemption, but also to deposit a sum of £40 in the local bank. Molladeen was another success: from the pittance of his wages, he had saved up £35. The ethos of *girmit* was clear for everyone: success was to be earned in the competitive open market; it was not divinely preordained as it had seemed in India.

The Indians would be better off once they had left the plantation, or so the government of the day thought. William Seed, the Agent General of Immigration, wrote:

> There is a grand opening in the colony after the indentures are out as he [the indentured labourer] can set up as a cow keeper, market gardener, and poulterer, there being no industries of this description amongst the Fijians, nor ever I imagine likely to be. He will also be able to set up as a petty trader, and purvey for his countrymen an occupation much esteemed by old Indian immigrants in other colonies.[8]

Two hundred and ninety of the 450 adults who had come on the *Leonidas* thought differently. At the earliest possible opportunity, they applied for repatriation, and many of them did in fact return to India. Those who stayed behind did so for a variety of reasons. Opportunities for social and economic advancement in Fiji were much better than they could ever have been in India, especially since the government had promised leases of up to 99 years, with generous financial assistance to set up new homesteads in the colony.[9] The experience of the crossing and life on the plantation had forged new bonds which persuaded many to stay. Some had married across caste lines, and knew that they and their children would never gain social acceptance in the ultra-conservative villages of the Indo-Gangetic plains. For some, it was simple inertia which led them to put off their trip until they had earned enough money to take back.

That day never came for many: time passed and memories of India faded as the *girmitiyas* struggled with the pressing problems of day-to-day existence in a new life, to which ancestral wisdom was proving frustratingly irrelevant. Well-tried methods of cultivation were woefully inadequate, tools and implements different, and the soil hard and untamed. Things which had been taken for granted in India—what to plant, when and how— all now posed perplexing problems. There was no *biradari* (brotherhood) and no village *panchayat* (village council) to lean on for advice and assistance. But most struggled on and many achieved at least a modicum of prosperity. The *Leonidas* migrants would have reason to be satisfied with the legacy they bequeathed to their descendants, the new girmitiyas.

A typical sugar cane farm of the 1930s and 40s, with thatched houses in the background. Bullocks replaced horses later, followed by tractors.

Endnotes

[1] J. Welsh to Dr William MacGregor, 16 May 1879, in Great Britain Parliament. *House of Commons Papers*, XLIV, 1880, 60.

[2] The following description of the incidents relating to the *Leonidas* and its immigrants upon reaching Fiji is based on correspondence on the subject published in the *House of Commons Papers*. References will therefore be restricted to direct quotations only.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

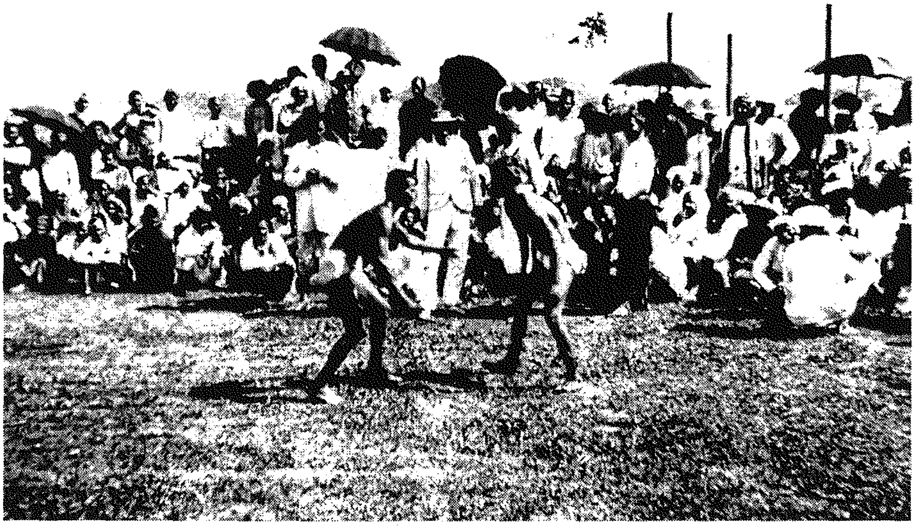
[5] *House of Commons Papers* XLIV, p. 62.

[6] The data in the following paragraph was obtained from the Department of Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration), April 1882, Pros. 90-93, *The National Archives of India.* (NAI)

[7] *Ibid.* The name of Baillie is not included in the Table because by 1882 Indian labourers had been withdrawn from his plantation due to his bad treatment of them.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] J.B. Thurston to Secretary of State for Colonies, 20 November 1888 in Department of Revenue and Agriculture (Emigration), October 1889, NAI.



Girmitiyas at play. Wrestling or *kusti* was a favourite sport, as late as the 1950s. Other games included *kabbadi* and *gulidanda*. They were later replaced by football.

chapter 9

The Wreck of the *Syria*, 1884

People falling, fainting, drowning all around one; the cries for instant help, uttered in an unknown tongue, but emphasised by looks of agony and the horror of impending death...

Dr William McGregor

At 8.30 pm on Sunday, 11 May 1884, the Indian immigrant ship *Syria* was wrecked on the Nasilai reef. By the time the shipwrecked passengers were brought to safety, fifty six immigrants and three lascars (Indian seamen) had drowned; many more would have lost their lives but for the prompt and efficient rescue operation mounted by Dr William MacGregor, then the chief medical officer and acting colonial secretary of Fiji. Later Dr MacGregor wrote emotional and vivid accounts of the tragedy, chiefly about the rescue operation, and these were well publicized in Fiji and elsewhere; some of them are reproduced here. A few other accounts of what happened are available,[1] but the full story is lost to history: important *Syria* papers, including the ship's log and the ship list which would have illuminated the events preceding the disaster, were lost at sea, the only important papers to survive being the emigration passes. And in Fiji, no record exists of the impressions of those who survived the disaster, while the recollection of the children of the *Syria* immigrants and some indentured labourers still alive (in 1979) is evanescent. It is not surprising in the circumstances then that many incarnations of the *Syria* tragedy are with us today, evoking haunting memories of some of the horrors of Indian immigration to Fiji. This article, based on the small number of remaining sources pertaining to the episode,[2] attempts to provide a fuller picture of the incident, the ship, its crew and the immigrants, the events leading to the disaster, and the rescue operation, and concludes with a few brief comments on the lives of those who survived. It will have served its purpose if it facilitates a more accurate and clear understanding of the tragic event; it would be an added bonus if it contributes to a more sympathetic appreciation of some of the unhappy conditions in which Indians came to Fiji and worked, lived and died.

Between 1879 when indentured Indian immigration to Fiji started, and 1916 when it finally ended, immigrant ships made eighty seven voyages to Fiji carrying over sixty thousand indentured adults and children to the islands. The *Syria,* a sixteen year old grey and white Sunderland clipper, was the fifth ship. It was one of the smallest and also one of the finest sailing ships in the fleet of James Nourse, one of the two shipping contractors to the Fiji government, the other being the British India Steam Navigation Company.[3]Like many other Nourse's ships, the *Syria* was especially designed and fitted for labour traffic. It had been operating to the West Indies for some years but it was making its first voyage to Fiji in 1884. Among the officers of the ship, the most important person was the surgeon superintendent, whose duties included medical inspection of the passengers and supervision of ventilation and cooking facilities. The safety and well-being of the immigrants was in his interest as he was paid a small gratuity for each immigrant landed alive in the colony. Even the captain and his crew deferred to the surgeon superintendent's views for their small pecuniary rewards depended, in part, on his report. The surgeon superintendent, of the *Syria,* Dr Charles Frederic Shaw, was an experienced officer, having been to Fiji aboard the *Berar* two years earlier. But those officers responsible for navigation and sailing were novices in their jobs: Charles Belson, William Henry Hurford Henson and Walter George Johnson were holding the positions of captain, first mate and second mate respectively for the first time. In addition, they were making their first trip to Fiji. Unfortunately, inexperience was not the only handicap as the ship was poorly equipped with navigational aids as well: sailing directions for the Fiji waters were dangerously outdated, being based on *Finlay's Sailing Directions*, which was first published in 1840, and the charts were similarly obsolete, with no currents marked on them. To make matters even worse, the inexperienced captain was not given a precise destination in Fiji.

What of the immigrants aboard the vessel? The *Syria* immigrants were on the whole unrepresentative of their later counterparts, not only in terms of their area of origin, but also to some extent in their social and occupational background as well.[4] Of the total number of Indians who emigrated to Fiji during the thirty seven years of indentured migration, almost seventy five per cent came from north India, mostly from the poor and heavily populated districts of the United Provinces (present day Uttar Pradesh): Basti, Azamgarh, Gonda, Ghazipur, Fyzabad, Jaunpur, and Allahabad; the remaining twenty five per cent came from south India. But the majority—fifty two per cent— of those on the *Syria* were from Bihar, the remaining thirty eight per cent from the U.P., five and a half per cent from the Punjab (including Delhi), two and a half per cent from Nepal, and another two per cent coming from the Central Provinces (present day Madhya Pradesh). Bihar was probably the most migration prone province in India, but its people went mostly to the neighbouring districts for seasonal employment, and further afield to the Calcutta jute mills and the Assam tea gardens; this movement diminished later with the development of indigo plantations and coal industry in Bihar itself. Its contribution to overseas Indian migration, however, remained small throughout, hardly ever exceeding the twenty per cent mark in any one year.

In Bihar it was the Monghyr and Gaya districts, two of the poorest and most heavily populated, that furnished sixty per cent of the *Syria* immigrants, while another thirty per cent came from Patna, Shahabad, Darbhanga, and Bhagalpur districts. In terms of their caste and occupational background, most of Fiji's north Indian immigrants came from middle order agricultural castes— Koris, Kurmis, Kohars, Ahirs, Lodhas—but on the *Syria* the percentage of low caste landless labourers was higher than normal, thirty five per cent compared to the average figure of thirty one per cent.[5] One low caste, the Mushars (or mousers) in particular predominated, constituting about sixteen per cent of the total number of immigrants on the *Syria*. This was somewhat surprising as the Mushars were not noted for their enterprising spirit; on the contrary, as the District Gazetteer for Monghyr, noted,

> They live in a land of social thraldom, sometimes selling themselves, their wives, and children to lifelong servitude for paltry sums. With an ingrained

> aversion to emigration, pilfering in times of plenty, and living upon roots, rats, snails and shells, they cause considerable difficulty to Government officials in times of dearth.[6]

However, in 1884 economic conditions in Bihar were so acute that even the Mushars, used to eternal poverty and servitude, had to migrate to escape death by starvation. Another striking feature of the *Syria* immigrants was the very high number of families among them, coming mostly from the district of Monghyr. Typical of the many families on the ship was the extended family of Somerea, a fifty year old widowed Mushar from Monghyr: she was accompanied by her son Bundhoo (twenty eight years), and his elder brother Gurdiaal (thirty years) and his wife Sonicharee (twenty eight years), their son, Bolaki (ten years), and their three daughters, Kublasia (seven years), Jeeroa (four years) and Sookeri (fourteen months). In previous years this family, like all the others on the ship, had determinedly fought to stay at home despite mounting adversities; they simply did not have the will-power or the resourcefulness to contemplate the consequences of group migration. To alleviate distress, individual male members of the family had gone to the neighbouring districts for seasonal employment, even venturing further afield to the Calcutta jute mills — but their wives and children had always stayed at home. However, things were different in 1884: the crops had failed, the cattle had died in the drought, and the landlord had threatened them with ejectment for arrears of rent. They therefore left with their families in desperation, never to see the sight of home again: for them, any alternative was better. But there were also many others who knew they were going to some place they had never been before or heard of, but they would be back soon after they had acquired a little wealth to provide for the simple amenities of life at home. Thus all the immigrants on board looked to the future with keen interest but not without considerable apprehension.

The *Syria,* carrying four hundred and ninety seven indentured adults, children, infants, and a crew of forty three (including thirty three lascars) left Calcutta on 13 March 1884. Its journey to Fiji seems to have been remarkably uneventful except for a minor storm off the Cape of Good Hope in which both the captain and the second mate allegedly lost their certificates of competency. The mortality rate of 0.80 per cent on the voyage compared favourably with the overall average of 1.00 per cent for the entire period. But perhaps the most astonishing feature of the trip was its length—fifty eight days—a record well below the average for sailing ships of seventy two days, and one that was broken only once, by another sailing ship in the same year, the *Pericles,* which took only fifty three days.[7]

The *Syria* was within Fiji waters on early Sunday morning, 11 May. It was between then and the late evening that the combination of inexperience and simple incompetence of the crew and the poor navigational facilities took their toll. We shall follow the ship upon its course and see how the errors that led to the disaster were committed. The captain sighted the island of Kadavu at 9 am, at which time he was fifteen miles leeward of his dead reckoning on the previous day's sight. The ship proceeded to about ten miles off the coast of Kadavu when her course was altered to the north-east according to the trend of the land without, surprisingly, taking any note of the strong winds and currents then prevailing. At noon, the captain hauled in the patent log (an apparatus for gauging distance of a ship), calculated the distance travelled, but without writing it down for future reckoning or cross-checking it with the hand log, as was the usual practice, he fixed his new position and proceeded along the Astrolabe lagoon. Bearings were reportedly taken along the way, but nothing was entered in the ship's log. At about 2.30 pm, the ship passed the island of Bulia which the captain recognized by 'a little pyramidical rock on the south side'; here a north half-east course was set along which the ship was ordered to proceed till 5.30 pm. The captain erred in setting his new direction by allowing only one point leeway instead of at least two or more, especially in view of the lightness of the ship and the progressively worsening weather condition. By 4 pm when the patent log was once again hauled, the ship had logged in about fifteen miles. In the next one and a half hours, another twelve or so miles were to be added, but here the captain thought differently; in his estimation the ship had travelled less than three miles between 4 pm and 5.30 pm. He based his judgment, he later said, on the observation that the wind had subsided after 4 pm, but his assertion remained unsubstantiated and indeed was contradicted by other members of the crew who testified to the increasing force of wind in the late afternoon.

Apart from miscalculating the wind factor, the captain had also neglected to take sufficient notice of the increasingly strong currents of up to five knots an hour by making only a two and half point leeway. At 5.30 pm the high mountains behind Suva were sighted and an east north-east course was set till midnight. The ship then was within the actual distance of eleven miles from the Nasilai reef and not twenty as the captain estimated. The squally conditions of the late afternoon improved somewhat by about 6 pm when the dark and heavy clouds began to dissipate. By 7 pm a nearly full moon was out. Between 6 pm and 8 pm, Ali Sakani (a lascar) was at the wheels and the first mate (Henson) was watching the helm and keeping a general lookout. During this time both the captain and the second mate were dining below the deck. There was a lascar placed on the forecastle-head to keep a lookout, but none, strangely, on the mast-head, a common practice on all sailing ships in the vicinity of reefs. The placement of a mast-headman might, in all probability, have averted the pending disaster because the breakers would have been visible in the moonlight from a considerable distance. The ship was making more leeway than ever before on the voyage, and was within half a mile off the Nasilai reef when the captain saw the breakers at 8.15 pm. He wrongly supposed it to be more than a mile and a half away. Nevertheless, he and his crew who by now had come on the main deck, undertook desperate measures to sail clear of the danger, but their effort proved fruitless. The final chance to stop the ship from striking was lost when the captain neglected to order extra sails to be put up when turning the ship around. The *Syria* ran aground on the Nasilai reef at 8.30 pm on Sunday.

Nobody on board had the faintest idea as to their precise location, least of all the captain who ventured to think loudly that they were on the Astrolabe reef which had been passed around 3 pm! After initial confusion, all the six lifeboats on board were ordered to be launched. Two were immediately broken by the motion of the ship, and another three were smashed on the skids by the heavy sea. In the sixth and only remaining boat, the first mate, the carpenter and two lascars went to get assistance. Among the remaining crew, much commotion followed once the exact nature and extent of the disaster was realized. The captain later recollected:

> The ship's crew were frightened on striking and made for lifebelts and lifebuoys. They were too frightened to do anything more. I told them I would shoot the first man that left the ship without orders. I took the cork belts and lifebuoys from them and locked them up, but they got possession of them again. They were armed with their sheath knives to defend themselves in case of being attacked by sharks.

Both the captain and the surgeon superintendent denied any knowledge of alcohol on board, but the following day several lascars were found drunk, some too drunk to save themselves. All the immigrants were on the between deck as was usual during this time of night. They had gone to bed early after their evening meal of *churah* and sugar, hoping to reach the promised land early in the morning. Events in the night would play havoc with their hopes. As for the captain, he added to his record of negligence and incompetence by not making any distress signals, or, after striking the reef, attempting to communicate with any passing vessels; he believed, wrongly, that his 'ship would last a couple of days'.

The first mate's party reached Nasilai village at dawn on Monday and asked to be taken to Suva, but due to failure of communication were taken to Levuka instead. From there at 5 pm a search party including Captain Cocks, the harbour master, and Captain Barracks, the president of Fiji Marine Board, left for the Nasilai waters aboard the U.S.S. *Penguin.* They reached the vicinity of the shipwreck around 9 pm but, unable to communicate with the shipwrecked vessel, left for Suva, reaching there around midnight. By then, the news of the disaster had already become known, firstly around 8.30 pm from the S.S. *Thistle* which had sighted the *Syria* earlier on its way from Levuka, and around 9 pm from the surgeon superintendent, Dr Shaw, who had reached land, partly by swimming and wading and partly with the help of a Fijian canoe.

Dr William MacGregor took charge of the rescue operation immediately. It was somewhat ironic that such a responsibility should fall on the shoulders of a man who made no secret of his dislike for Indians and who regarded them, in his own words, as 'necessary evils'.[8] But once in charge, he stood by the Indians in their desperate hour; without his courage, the loss of life would have been unimaginable. He ordered the captain of S.S. *Clyde to* prepare his ship for sea at once. Five government boats, all that were available at the time, were also got ready, in addition to a boat lent by Captain Hurburgh of the ship *Rewa* and a lifeboat from Captain Cromarty of the *Penguin.* Mr James Robertson, the general manager of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) also lent one of the company's fast and powerful steam launches. Dr MacGregor hurriedly organized a search party which, beside himself included, Dr Patullo, Dr Shaw, Lieutenant Malan, Captain Hedstrom and his crew of Fijian prisoners, two groups of police constables under the direction of Ratu Josua and Ratu Rusiate and commanded by Acting Superintendent of Police Fowler, Agent General of Immigration Henry Anson and his own crew, and twenty men from the Armed Native Constabulary.

The party left Suva shortly after midnight and reached the Nukulau waters at daybreak. The sea ahead was rough, especially for the steam launch, and the prospect of quick progress dim. Consequently, at Taituraga Island the party was divided into two groups: the first, consisting of Dr MacGregor, Dr Patullo, Captain Hedstrom, Superintendent Fowler and Constable Kingston and their crew, was to proceed along the shore and then to cross the reef to the sight of the disaster, while the other, including Dr Shaw, Dr Anson and Lieutenant Malan and their crew, with the steam launch, was to join the rescue operation by descending the Nasilai river. On its way the shore party was met by one Mr Davis, who put on board to act as a guide his Fijian servant, who was later to become one of the minor heroes of the episode. The first boats of the shore party reached the shipwrecked vessel at 12.30 pm, after weathering extremely strong winds and 'lumpy' water; the launch party arrived three hours later. This is how Dr MacGregor saw the scene:

> When the first boats reached the scene, the majority of the Indians were in the water on the reef, making as far towards the land as they could, but a considerable number were still in the wrecked vessel, chiefly women and children. The ship lay on her port side. The masts were all broken into fragments, and spars, sails, ropes, and debris of all kinds were mixed up and thrown about in the breakers in wild confusion. The front third of the hull was completely separated from the posterior two thirds, and driven about four or five yards further onto the reef than the posterior portion, and the sea rolled with tremendous fury through this gap, and sometimes broke right over the whole wreck... As the tide rose, the sea became more furious about the ship, and there was great danger when near it of getting injured by floating wreckage, or of being swept off by irresistible force of the reflux of the breakers.

Almost all the Indians were entirely at the mercy of the rescuers as very few indeed knew how to swim. Dr MacGregor observed that 'if an Indian fell into water, it was seldom that he or she ever rose again without help'. Most were simply immobilized by terror and confusion, and hung on to the remains of the rapidly breaking ship. There were some cases of husbands deserting their wives for their own safety, but on the whole most families, especially those with children, stuck together. The impatient and the reckless met certain death in the patches of deep water ahead and in the floating debris. The first to be carried to the safety of waiting boats and thence to land were women, children and the injured, while those already in water were aided to a nearby sandbank. Despite increasingly difficult weather conditions and considerable commotion among the immigrants, the rescue operation was carried out fairly smoothly. But a few mishaps could not be avoided, and these, not surprisingly, involved the drunk or the extremely hysterical. One such case was that of a diminutive half-drunk Indian woman who was being conducted by the captain across a piece of broken mast that lay at an angle extending across the gap that existed between the two portions of the hull. The unsteady movement of the woman knocked both of them over and they fell towards the perpendicular edge of the reef, the woman holding the captain by the neck 'like a vice'. Mr

Fowler waiting at the other end jumped promptly into the breakers to rescue the drowning couple but he too was knocked over and caught by the woman who by now had sustained a compound fracture in one of her legs. Finally Dr MacGregor went to their rescue and with the woman's hair in his teeth and the two men in his arms, he dragged them to shallower waters. The Fijian man put on board by Mr Davis then carried the woman on his back across a patch of deep water to one of the waiting boats. She was later admitted to the Suva Hospital. The captain himself sustained a deep cut in one foot, and fainted from loss of blood; he too had to be carried to safety. Another unfortunate case involved a drunken lascar who, after being brought to a safe point, scrambled back into the wreckage and drowned despite courageous attempts by Ratu Josua to save him. But perhaps the most moving was the plight of about ten men who were left to their fate on the sandbank as the last boat, already too full of people, left the scene in the encroaching darkness; later attempts that night to find them proved to no avail. They were presumed drowned.

The last of the rescue boats carrying the surviving immigrants and crew reached the village of Nasilai shortly after 8 pm on Tuesday where they were received hospitably by the chief of Nasilai with warm food, water and shelter for the night. Next morning, shortly before high tide, all except one hundred strong Indian men were put on board the rescue boats and taken to the Nasilai Immigration Depot. Those remaining behind were marched under Anson's supervision to Rewa, receiving food and fruit from Fijian men and women along the way. On the following morning they were carried by the CSR ship *Ratu Epeli* to Nukulau where they met their other *jahazi bhais* (ship mates). The Nukulau Depot was their first real contact with the promised land. Away from India, and shaken by their brief but unforgettable experience at the Nasilai reef, the immigrants were stoically resigned to the dreariness and vulnerability of the future. In addition to the fifty-six immigrants and three lascars who died in the Nasilai tragedy, in the next fortnight eleven others (eight men, one woman and two infant girls)[9] were to die chiefly from the inflammation of lungs, diarrhoea and dysentery. The loss of life would have been much greater but for the perseverance and courage of the rescue crew, especially its leader, Dr William MacGregor. But MacGregor himself was not satisfied, and in a long letter to Sir Arthur Gordon a month later he expressed his feelings about his own role and experience at Nasilai vividly:

> I hardly like to mention the matter because the press and people have spoken of myself in connection therewith in a way that makes me feel

> ashamed, and that I tell you honestly hurts me very keenly . . . The scene was simply indescribable, and pictures of it haunt me still like a horrid dream . . . People falling, fainting, drowning all around one; the cries for instant help, uttered in an unknown tongue, but emphasized by looks of agony and the horror of impending death, depicted on dark faces rendered ashy grey by terror; then again the thundering, irresistible wave breaking on the riven ship, still containing human beings, some crushed to death in the debris, and others wounded and imprisoned therein; and all to be saved then or never . . . Some sacrificed their lives to save others; some, such as the strong lascar crew thought only of themselves, and rushed into the boats surrounded by dying women and children. One of these lascar seamen I took out of the wreck paralyzed with terror; afterwards by brute force I threw him twice out of a boat to make room for drowning children . . . in spite of everything that could be done the loss of life was fearful. At 2 pm I was almost faint with despair, and I did not then think that a hundred or so could be saved. As I had somehow got to have charge of the whole concern, you can imagine the crushing weight of responsibility I felt, and you will, I am sure believe me when I tell you that I do not feel the same man since. I fear you may think it strange that fifty-six people should be killed and drowned and I, whose duty it was to see that assistance was given in the worst cases, came off with only a few bruises and slight wounds that were healed in a week. I can only say that I did the best I could. I did not ask any of those with me to risk their lives in going into the wreck with myself, save the four Fijians, whom I have recommended for the medal of the Royal Humane Society: and I could not know each time, for I went many times, whether I could return alive, especially as I am no swimmer of any use—although in the breakers there swimming was not of much avail. I feel it almost ludicrous to offer, as it were an apology for being alive: but I am sure you can understand the feeling that I entertain, half fearful lest you should think that because I am alive I did not do all that might have been done.[10]

But observers in Fiji and elsewhere thought otherwise, and he was rewarded with the Albert Medal of the Royal Humane Society of England and the Clarke Gold Medal from Australia. Superintendent Fowler received the Albert Medal (second class) and the Clarke Silver Medal. The surgeon superintendent received his gratuity of fifty pounds, and other members of the rescue crew were rewarded with pecuniary awards from the colonial government. [11]

Immediately after the shipwreck, an inquiry was held to ascertain the causes of the disaster, but J.B. Thurston, the colonial secretary, was unable to approve of its findings. On 3 June, he appointed Lieutenant Coser de Merindol Malan, R.N., William Kospen and Captain Frederick Craigie Halkett, the acting chief police magistrate, to the Fiji Marine Board to institute a thorough investigation into the wreck. In his own mind though, Thurston was certain where the blame lay, as he wrote to the secretary of state for colonies that 'the ship was lost by the incompetence and carelessness of the Master and the officers'.[12] The Board met from 4 to 17 June, closely examined the crew, especially the captain and the first mate, and sought expert opinion of those familiar with Fiji waters. It found the captain severely wanting in the exercise of his duties and suspended his certificate for nine months. The first mate was reprimanded for not having 'volunteered that interest in the navigation of that ship which might reasonably be expected from him', but no firm action was taken. Only one member of the crew, Second Mate Walter George Johnson, was singled out for praise for 'doing his utmost for saving lives'. The Fiji government itself, however, was not entirely free from blame as, despite repeated complaints, it had not taken sufficient measures to warn ships of the dangerous passage. The *Fiji Times* criticized the government for 'official indifference' and 'procrastination' and regretted that 'so great a sacrifice was necessary to stimulate official supineness'.[13]

The loss of the *Syria* was one of the worst maritime disasters in the history of Fiji, but similar losses of life, though perhaps not always as dramatic, were not uncommon in the history of overseas Indian migration. Indian immigrant ships were, by the standards of the times, much better equipped and looked after and took less payment in human lives than ships engaged in labour traffic in other parts of the world; but even so, severe losses of life could not always be contained. Cholera, fever, typhoid, and dysentery were the most frequent and indeed the most dreaded killers, and when they struck, lives were lost in great numbers: in 1859, 82 immigrants died of cholera on the *Thomas Hamlin* on its way from Calcutta to Demerara (present day Guyana); four years later on the same route, 124 died from a severe epidemic of fever on the *Clarence*, and nearer to home, 61 died from cholera and another 8 from measles on the *Fultala* on its way from Madras to Fiji in 1906. The Mauritius route too abounds with many examples, but perhaps the worst disaster there, and indeed in the history of overseas Indian immigration, took place in 1859 with the burning of the immigrant ship *Shah Allam:* of over 400 immigrants aboard, only one survived the disaster.[14]

These calamities served to emphasize the need for reform and vigilance, which, aided by rapid developments in naval technology, were not long in coming. In the case of Fiji at least, few major maritime catastrophe occurred after the wreck of the *Syria*. Things improved considerably after 1905 with the introduction of steamships which shortened the perilous journey by about half, avoided the cold weather south of Australia which brought pneumonia and bronchitis, and allowed the labourers greater time for acclimatisation before beginning work on the plantations.

The subsequent story of the surviving *Syria* immigrants cannot be told with any certainty. However, from the available records it appears that after two weeks of rest from the exhaustion suffered during the ordeal, the indentured labourers and their children were taken from the Nukulau Depot to Suva, where they were sorted out and allocated to the various plantations as follows:[15]

Table 1
Employment of *Syria* Migrants

Name of Employer	Adults		Children		Infants		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	
John Hill & Co. Rabi	14	6	1	-	-	-	21
Deuba Estate Sugar Company, Navua	14	6	3	2	-	2	27
CSR. Navuso	37	15	1	1	3	2	59
CSR, Nausori	71	35	1	-	1	1	109
CSR Naitisiri	45	19	2	1	-	-	67
Geo Smith & Co, Levuka	1	1	-	-	-	-	2
Stanlake Lee & Co. Tamavua	69	30	18	15	7	4	143
Allocated	251	112	26	19	11	9	428
Unallocated	8	1	-	-	-	2	11
Total landed	258	113	26	19	11	11	439

Among the many who had lived through and survived the shipwreck was Soomerea, the fifty year old Mushar from Monghyr district in Bihar, and her children and grandchildren. They too, were allotted and were employed by the CSR, Nausori, where Soomerea worked, at half rate of pay. But not for long: she died on 18 August 1884, three months after landing in Fiji. Many other *Syria* immigrants too died in the 1880s and 1890s, few living after the turn of the century. Some found the courage to return to India once their indentures had expired, and many others talked of one day returning to their *janmabhumi* (birthplace). But when the opportunity came they baulked, afraid to leave the security of what V.S. Naipaul has aptly called the 'familiar temporariness'. For them life ahead would be wrought with innumerable difficulties: they would collide with unaccustomed problems, work out new relationships in often harsh and hostile conditions, create values of neighbourliness and mutual assistance based on their remembered past, and build fortifications of social and cultural institutions to give meaning to their new lives. Many would be brutalized in the process and left by the side. But many would also survive the rigours of plantation life to build secure foundations for their children and grandchildren. The story of their traumatic experiences would reverberate for many years to come, serving as a haunting reminder of some of the less fortunate aspects of the Fiji Indian experience.

Endnotes

1. See K.L. Gillion. *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (Reprinted, Melbourne, 1973), pp. 64-65 for a brief account, and R.B. Joyce, *Sir William MacGregor* (Melbourne, 1971), pp. 72-73, for MacGregor's recollections.

2. These are in the Colonial Office Emigration Proceedings C.O. 384 series on microfilm at the Australian National Library, Canberra. The most valuable source was the 'Minutes of the Proceedings of the Fiji Marine Board Enquiry and Investigation into the Circumstances attending the wreck of the ship *Syria* on 11th May 1884'. Since most of my facts derive from this source, references and footnotes will be kept to a minimum.

3. Basil Lubbock, *Coolie Ships and Oil Sailers* (Glasgow, 1955), pp. 85-86, 174.

4. This observation is based on a preliminary analysis of the emigration passes of the *Syria* immigrants.

5. This average figure for the entire period is derived from Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 52.

6. L.S.S. O'Malley, *District Gazetteer of Monghvr, p.* 63.

7. Based on Gillion, *op. cit. p.* 59, and the annual reports of the Agent General of Immigration. The *Syria* was not the quickest ship to come to Fiji as Tinker (p. 154) says. The longest sailing voyage to Fiji was that of the *Elms* in 1904—123 days.

8. See Joyce, *Sir William MacGregor. p.* 73. The description of the rescue operation is based on Dr MacGregor's report to J.B. Thurston in C.O. 384/148, the *Fiji Times* account on 14 May 1884. and 'Minutes of the Board of Enquiry'.

9. This figure is derived from the General Register of Immigrants, 1884.

10. Joyce, *Sir William MacGregor*, pp. 72-73.

11. Ibid., see also C.O. 384/154. Ratu Josua, Constable Empraim, Corporals Swani and Osai, and Emosi (of Nasovata) each got £3; members of Police (presumably non-native) £2 each; 21 members of the Armed Native Constabulary £1 each. and the Turaga ni Koro, Nasilai £20.

12. J.B. Thurston to the Secretary of State for Colonies, 5 June 1884 in C.O. 384.

13. The *Fiji Times, 21* May 1884.

14. Lubbock *Coolie Ships and Oil Sailers. pp.* 30-32. 58-60. 68. The *Shah Allam is* referred to as the *Shah Jehan* by Lubock but Tinker (p. 395) states that '*Shah Allam* has been accepted as the real victim'. I have followed Tinker

15. This table is based on figures from the General Register of Immigrants, 1881 (under the heading *Syria*).

European (CSR) overseers at Ba, which was one of the earliest and largest areas of Indian settlement in western Viti Levu.

chapter 10

Murmurs of Dissent

Instances have been brought to the notice of His Excellency the Governor of excessive or improper penalties being awarded for minor breaches of the Ordinance that are not in accordance with the letter or the intention of the law.

A R Coates, Agent General of Immigration

The history of the Indian indenture experience in Fiji presents us with an apparent paradox. On the one hand, Fiji was widely reputed to be one of the worst employers of indentured labour in the world.[1] Yet, on the other hand, throughout the entire period of indenture, between 1879 and 1920, the Indian indentured labourers mounted few organized protests against the oppressive conditions under which they lived and worked. It is impossible to know precisely why the Indian labourers acted the way they did since they have left behind few records of their own thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of indenture. However, by using existing documentary, oral, and some hitherto unused quantitative evidence, it is possible to suggest reasons for their motivations and behaviour.

This chapter examines the social, political, economic, and legal controls to which the indentured labourers were subjected, and argues that the primary reason for the paucity of active protest on their part was the suppressive character of the plantation system in Fiji. The frequency and effectiveness with which the employers were able to prosecute their labourers, year after year, starkly underlined the workers' vulnerability and reinforced the futility of overt action. Active non-resistance, thus, became a strategy for survival. But the indentured labourers' difficulties were also compounded by serious problems of organization within the nascent Indian community itself. Their diverse social and cultural background, their differing aspirations and motivations for migrating to Fiji, their varying individual experiences on the plantations, and the absence of institutional structures within the indentured community, that could have become avenues for mobilization, also helped to reduce the potential for collective action.

Fiji was, to some extent, unique among the plantation colonies of the Pacific; and contrasts with Hawai'i are particularly striking.[2] Unlike Hawai'i, the sugarcane plantations in Fiji, which generated the bulk of the colonial revenue, were run primarily by one company, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) of Australia. This monopolistic position enabled the CSR to exercise a preponderant influence in the affairs of colonial Fiji. Again unlike Hawai'i, which drew most of its contract labourers from China, Japan, the Philippines, and elsewhere, Fiji relied chiefly on Indian labourers to supplement, and eventually supplant, the dwindling supplies from neighbouring Pacific islands. This recruitment pattern bequeathed a bi-polar demographic legacy which has long resided at the core of many problems facing contemporary Fiji. But while the contrasts are important, the basic experience of Fiji's Indian indentured labourers is echoed, in more or less degree, throughout all the plantation colonies in the Pacific and elsewhere. It is my hope that the argument and evidence presented in this chapter will provide a basis for future comparative studies of the plantation working experience in the Pacific islands and other colonies.

Background

Several factors in the labourers' background hindered the development of a more cohesive Indian community in Fiji and severely undermined the prospects for united action against its adversaries. To start with, a very large proportion of the recruits were sojourners. Their sojourner mentality was manifested in several ways, most significantly in the yearly remittances to the family they had left behind in India. From Fiji alone, between 1889 and 1912, the returning migrants deposited £62,773 for transmission to India, while taking with them jewellery and other items worth £111,962.[3] Forty per cent of the migrants and their families eventually returned to India at the expiry of their contracts. The desire and the pressure to save, to abide by the rules, and to return to India at an early date were the primary considerations in the sojourners calculations; and they acted as powerful disincentives to any involvement in time-consuming and potentially costly struggles against the plantation authorities.

The diverse cultural and social background of the Indian labourers also hindered the development of common perceptions, interests, and values among them. The labourers came from all strata of rural Indian society. More than 300 different castes were represented in the emigrating population who originated from more than 250 districts in Northern India alone.[4] Speaking a host of different tongues, worshipping a multitude of different gods, and occupying widely varying positions in the Indian social structure, they were initially brought together at the emigration depots in Calcutta and Madras, on the long sea voyage, and on the plantations where they lived and worked together for five years, at the very least. Emigration across the seas was a traumatic experience for a primarily inland people and destabilized the values of the 'old world', especially those that emphasized adhering to tradition and maintaining group solidarity. New values, forged in the crucible of indenture, stressed new goals: individual achievement and personal survival. This transition from an emphasis on communal to individual values was not precipitous. Many social and cultural institutions survived the ordeal, but the fundamental change in the Indians' world view was unmistakable.

The collective age of the emigrating population was another factor that worked against the labourers. The overwhelming majority of the migrants, both males and females, were young: 87 per cent were under 26 years of age.[5] This demographic pattern is not surprising. The planters wanted young workers, and in India, as elsewhere, these were the most mobile and adventuresome. But like their counterparts in other traditional societies, these young people did not enjoy a high status and were generally untutored and unskilled in deeper political and cultural matters and unprepared for leadership roles. The disruption of the institutions of religion, caste, and community, which accompanied emigration and indenture, further exacerbated their problems.

Furthermore, the labourers had little or no formal education, certainly not in English, and this placed them at a great disadvantage in articulating their grievances to the plantation management and the colonial officialdom in Fiji. The new kind of leadership that emerged on the plantations focussed on the sirdar, or Indian foreman, and it did not serve, nor indeed was it designed to serve, the interest of the indentured workers. The new leadership was, in Hugh Tinker's apt phrase, 'lackey leadership',[6]created and sustained by the plantation management to achieve its goal of exercising a tight control over the labour force. As we shall see later, the sirdars were chosen for their toughness and for their 'ability to get the immigrants to complete their tasks in the field by methods which were anything but diplomatic'.[7] They often turned out to be the indentured labourers' worst enemies even though they themselves had been indentured labourers a little while back. 'The sirdars were never with us',[8] recalled one indentured labourer, echoing the sentiments of many. The absence of good leadership, then, posed a major problem for the labourers in their struggle against the planters.

However, while these internal social and political constraints were certainly important, it should also be recognized that harsh as indenture was, for some immigrants, at least, it still represented an improvement over their position in India. This was particularly the case with the lower castes who were permanently consigned to the fringes of rural Indian society as untouchables, tenants-at-will, and landless labourers with little hope for betterment in this life. The relentless pace of plantation work was nothing new to them as strenuous physical labour was a daily condition of their lives in India. In Fiji, at least, their individual identity was recognized and their effort rewarded on the basis of achievement rather than traditional status. For them, the levelling tendencies of the plantation system heralded a welcome change that broke away from an oppressive past and promised a brighter future in which they and their children had a place. Others, perhaps those who had been victims of natural calamities, such as famines and droughts, or of exploitative landlords, welcomed the peace and security which the new environment offered them. Indeed, for them indenture was better than the life they encountered after they became 'free'. Reflecting on his indenture days, one labourer told the anthropologist Adrian Mayer in the 1950s:

> The time of indenture was better than now. You did your task, and knew that this was all. You knew you will get food everyday. I had shipmates with me, and we weren't badly off when there was a good sirdar and overseer. Of course, if they were bad then you had to be careful. But now what do I do? I have cane land, bullocks and a home. Yet every night I am awake, listening to see if someone is not trying to burn my cane, or steal my

animals. In indenture lines [estate housing] we slept well, we did not worry[9]

People with such satisfying memories were probably in the minority, but they had little reason to fight the system.

Important as the above mentioned conditions were, however, it was the conditions within Fiji itself that posed the most serious obstacles to the development of organizational activity among the indentured labourers. Upon arrival in the colony, the labourers were allotted to employers on the basis of requisitions received by the Immigration Department. The labourers, of course, were not given a choice of employers nor, ordinarily, the right to change them on account of ill-treatment or any other reason. On the plantations the movement of labourers was controlled by the overseers whose decisions were guided not by humanitarian concerns but by the needs of the plantation management. Occasionally families were broken up and sent to different areas for long periods of time,[10] while on some estates labourers were constantly moved about from one place to another to prevent alleged breaches of the peace.[11] Immigration officials, at the behest of planters, split up immigrants from the same districts of origin to prevent the possibility of 'ganging'. Older, more experienced immigrants were often made to work with newer arrivals to help them acculturate into the new way of life. The practice of breaking up old connections and creating and fostering new social groupings rendered the labourers vulnerable and thus more amenable to plantation control.

The labourers were further immobilized by the fact that the estates they worked on were widely scattered across the two main islands of Fiji, frequently separated from each other by rugged mountainous terrain, rivers, and generally poor communication. Thus, a very large number of indentured labourers in different parts of the island spent their entire indenture insulated from each other, without the opportunity to develop and coordinate strategies for collective action.

Limitations imposed by geography were compounded by indenture legislation which severely restricted mobility. An ordinance passed in 1886,[12] and in force for much of the indenture period, made it unlawful for more than five labourers employed upon the same plantation to absent themselves from employment for any purpose (such as for laying complaints) without the authorization of the employer. Anyone violating this law could be fined up to £2 or be imprisoned up to two months. Even labourers who had completed the required amount of work had to seek the permission of the overseer before they could leave the plantation. The law obliged the overseer to grant permission, but it could not compel him to issue the ticket of absence. Without this piece of paper, any person could be apprehended by the police or the overseers and convicted for desertion. In practice, for the most part, the movement of the labourers depended upon the goodwill of their overseers.

CSR and the Colonial Officialdom

The employers not only enjoyed great authority over their labourers but also exercised considerable influence on the colonial government. This was largely due to the dominance of the CSR in the colonial economy. At first only one among several sugar companies, the CSR was able, because of its more secure financial base and sound management, to withstand economic vicissitudes and edge others out of competition. By the turn of the century it was the dominant concern in the Fiji sugar industry, with investments in excess of £1.4 million and employing over three-quarters of all the indentured labourers.[13] From 1924 to 1973 the CSR and its wholly owned Fiji subsidiary, the South Pacific Sugar Mills Limited, was the sole miller of sugar cane in Fiji. The revenue-minded colonial government had a keen appreciation of the role and the contribution of the CSR, and the company used its dominant position as a powerful leverage to obtain concessions and to 'rely on government not to check illegal efforts of planters and its overseers to reduce the costs of labour'.[14]

Furthermore, the colonial government consistently sided with the CSR in cases where there was dispute about work and compensation. In 1887 Bootan, an indentured labourer, lost his hand in a mill accident at Nausori.[15] The CSR refused to pay the injured labourer his wages and rations on the grounds that it could not be 'called upon to help a man who will not help himself'. Without his wages and perhaps with a family to support, Bootan would have to expend his meagre savings, contract indebtedness, absent himself from work, and have his indenture extended. The Colonial Secretary endorsed the CSR position even while acknowledging that the injury had 'not resulted from carelessness' on Bootan's part. He wrote: 'The bare fact that a servant is injured whilst working for the master's benefit does not impose any obligation on the master'.

The government adopted a similar position on the question of remuneration for incomplete tasks. When indentured labourers were unable to complete tasks which were widely believed even by the colonial officials to be excessive, the CSR refused to pay them wages, even for the completed portion of work. The Attorney General of Fiji in 1886 offered an opinion that pleased the planters and sanctioned their practice: 'It may be stated as a general legal proposition that if a person engages to perform a given task or a piece of work for a given wage and fails to perform such a task, he forfeits all claims to the wage: for the performance of this task is the condition precedent to the payment of the wage'.[16] Later, in the 1890s, however, with mounting evidence of overtasking and the increasing misery among the indentured labourers, the colonial government was forced to require employers to pay wages proportionate to the amount of work accomplished.

Clearly, there was an identity of interest between the colonial government and the planters, but it would be misleading to suggest a simple collusion between the two. Some governors and immigration officials were more sympathetic than others. Under Sir John Thurston's tenure as governor (1888-1897), for example, initially there was an apparent unwillingness on his part to enforce the existing laws governing indenture. Thurston was faced, however, with an economic depression and a precarious financial situation in the colony, which weakened his hand in remonstrating with the CSR.[17] And he appears to have shared the planters' view of the indentured labourers as lazy, improvident, and disinclined to work except under close supervision and strict discipline. He therefore came to sanction progressively more stringent controls upon the indentured population and new repressive legislation which stipulated severe penalties for even minor breaches of the labour laws.

An Ordinance passed in 1896[18] imposed fines of up to three shillings per day or imprisonment for three months with hard labour if the labourers were convicted for 'unlawful absence', 'lack of ordinary diligence', and 'neglect'. It was made unlawful for labourers visiting their employers' office or house or the office of a Stipendiary Magistrate or any other public official to make complaint. The punishment for this offence was a fine of up to £1 or one month's imprisonment with hard labour. The indentured labourers could smoke outside their dwelling houses only at the risk of being fined 10 shillings or one week's imprisonment with hard labour. Further, it was during Thurston's tenure that the 'block system' was introduced whereby indentured labourers could be required to work on different groups or blocks of plantations owned by the same employer. This practice brought much hardship to the labourers for it meant longer working hours with no additional pay, separation from friends and family, and general uncertainty. Sensitive officials said as much, but Thurston did not pay heed.

But perhaps the governor's most serious act of disregard for the welfare of the labourers was retrenching the office of the Agent General of Immigration in 1888 and amalgamating it with the office of the Receiver-General. The services of the Immigration Department were curtailed at a time these were most needed. Inspections became infrequent and abuses went unrectified; and when some of these came to light, they were not mentioned in the *Annual Reports*, which themselves were not forwarded to India and to London for the fear that a knowledge of the conditions on the Fiji plantations might lead to the cancellation of indentured emigration to the colony.[19]

Other governors, however, were marginally more sympathetic to the plight of the indentured labourers, though they all were reluctant to inquire too closely into the affairs of the CSR. As Governor Sir Everard im Thurn said in 1903, 'I was (and am) most reluctant to interfere with the Company's management of their own affairs, my view being that a Governor should not interfere except on urgent public grounds'.[20] In short, the colonial government did not take seriously its role as the trustee of the indentured labourers' rights, and this, as much as anything else, aggravated the labourers' demoralization and engendered a lack of confidence in obtaining redress for their grievances.

Conditions of Employment: Theory and Practice

In theory, the conditions of employment and the general provisions of indenture were clearly laid out. The 'Form of Agreement for Intending Emigrants', which outlined the details, was distributed by recruiters and sub-agents in the districts of recruitment in India.[21] Among other things, it stipulated that indenture would be for five years, that the immigrants would be required to do work relating to the cultivation of soil or the manufacture of products, and that they would work five and a half days a week (Sundays and holidays being free) at the daily rate of one shilling (twelve pennies) for men and nine pennies for women. Further, the labourers would be given the choice of either time work (nine hours daily) or task work, the latter defined as the amount of work an able-bodied adult could accomplish in six and a half hours of steady work. The employers were to provide free accommodation as well as rations for the first six months at a daily cost of four pennies for each person over twelve years of age. Finally, the indentured labourers could return to India at their own expense at the end of five years, or at government expense at the end of ten years of 'industrial residence' in the colony.

By the standards of the 19th Century, when the very notion of a contract between an employer and an employee was largely unknown in many parts of the world, the Agreement was a truly remarkable document. Students of British imperial history have been at pains to point this out in an effort to provide a more sympathetic appreciation of the imperial position.[22] The critics of indenture, on the other hand, dismissed the document as inadequate and deceptive. For them, the real significance of the Agreement for the indentured labourers lay not in what was stated on paper, but rather in what was left unsaid—especially about the social and economic realities they would encounter in Fiji, the actual conditions of employment, and severe penalties for breaches of the labour ordinances. The critics asserted that deception, not voluntary agreement, had led the Indians to enlist for Fiji, and that, if they had been fully apprised of the conditions which awaited them in the colony, the recruits might not have migrated.[23] Deception was certainly present in the system, as it is bound to be in most systems of labour recruitment. But it was not the prime mover of people; the deteriorating economic condition of the Indian countryside was.[24] Would the emigrants have migrated had they been apprised fully of the conditions that lay ahead in Fiji? We can only speculate at the answer, but the fact that many saw emigration as a temporary strategy to alleviate some plight at home may suggest that a fuller knowledge of Fiji probably would not have played a decisive role in their decision.

A more serious breach of trust occurred after the indentured labourers arrived in Fiji where there was a great discrepancy between legislative enactment and its enforcement by the officials of the Immigration Department. In the first decade of indenture, a number of *ad hoc* legislative measures were passed to govern indenture. These were consolidated into a single legislation for the first time in 1891.[25]With minor subsequent amendments, this law provided the basic framework of indenture in Fiji. It was a very thorough piece of legislation (of 64 pages) which defined all aspects of plantation life, from the general powers of immigration officials to the release of prisoners and their delivery from public institutions. In practice, however, the ideals enshrined in the legislation varied greatly from the realities which confronted the labourers in the field.

One of the most important provisions of the Ordinance was the creation of the Office of the Agent General of Immigration, known in some other colonies as the Protector of Immigrants. The AGI was required to look after the welfare of the immigrants and to ensure that the employers fulfilled their part of the contract. But while the AGI's responsibilities and powers were clearly defined, many factors combined to limit the extent of his effectiveness. The retrenchment of his office following its amalgamation with the office of the Receiver General was a serious blow. Much depended on the energy, diligence, and attitude of the person who occupied the office. Some AGIs, such as Henry Anson and John Forster, were insistent that the planters honour their obligation to provide proper housing and medical facilities to the immigrants, even at the risk of inviting the wrath of their superiors. Most others, however, saw themselves as managers of the labourers rather than as their trustees. Moreover, many of them shared, with the planters, a deeply derogatory view of the indentured labourers. A. R. Coates, the Agent General of Immigration in 1911, penned a portrait of the labourers that reflected the racist ethos of the times. The Indian indentured labourers, he wrote, were a people 'of emotional temperament [who] have low moral standards, [are] prone to trickery, and under certain excitement to crimes of violence, even under the discipline of continuous labour'.[26]

Such views blunted the sensitivity of those in power toward the labourers. Over and over again the indentured labourers were apportioned a large part of the blame for the social and moral ills of indenture, such as suicide, murder, a high infant mortality rate, and unstable family life.[27] There was also the tendency to see problems from the point of view of the planters. When in May 1886 indentured labourers in Koronivia struck because their tasks had been increased from seven to ten chains (one chain is 22 yards), J. C. Carruthers, the Sub-Agent, did not ask *why* the tasks had been increased but argued, as the planters did: 'The men certainly had not the shadow of a right to leave their work en masse and rush to Suva to complain, without so much as putting shovel to ground to see whether they could do the 10 chain task'. Among the remedies Carruthers recommended for stopping future strikes were: a liberal use of corporal punishment (which 'would no doubt have a marvellous effect upon habitual idlers'); infliction of heavier fines than the maximum three shillings provided by law; limiting the option of fine in favour of imprisonment; making prison work tougher ('let hard labour be hard labour'); and instituting a system of random checks for leave of absence tickets. The planters could not have asked for a better ally than Carruthers.[28]

The AGI's main contacts with the indentured labourers in the field were the District Medical Officers (DMOs) and Inspectors of Immigrants. The Labour Ordinance required all planters to provide adequate medical facilities to the labourers under their control. The DMOs were expected to visit the plantation hospitals regularly and to inspect 'the supply of water for and the rationing of any such immigrants in such hospital and the supply of clothing, bedding, furniture, medicine, medical comforts and medical and surgical appliances'. They were empowered to impose a penalty of up to £10 on planters who failed to provide full amenities to the labourers.[29] The reality was somewhat different. The *Annual Report* of 1894 noted:

> The efficiency of the medical care required by the law is somewhat hampered by the expense (a serious one on small plantations) of maintaining a competent hospital attendant, the want of a working standard of competence and the absence of any control over this class of estate official by the DMO.[30]

How effective were the occasional inspection visits of the District Medical Officers? One indentured immigrant recalled:

> We were never told about the arrival of the big doctor. Once or twice a year, a new sahib would suddenly appear, peep into our rooms, shake his head, lift his nose to smell something, point to the overgrown grass to the accompanying *sahib*, talk very fast gesturing at our toilets, and then walk away smartly. Sometimes he would ask us whether we liked the place. We would complain about the overcrowded room, about theft, about heavy work, and other hardships. Once he was gone, our complaints remained only complaints and nothing came out of them.[31]

The inspectors, whose job was to enforce the employers compliance with the provisions of the Labour Ordinance, also functioned with partial effectiveness. Again, much depended upon the integrity and diligence of the individual inspectors. Some were admirably persistent in investigating the labourers' complaints, but many were not. They came from the ranks of the CSR overseers and generally shared their values and interests. K. L. Gillion, the historian of Fiji indenture, writes that the Indians had 'no confidence in most of the inspectors'. He goes on to argue that:

> inspectors shared much of the outlook and attitudes of the overseers, and it is not surprising that the employers were generally satisfied with their work. Although there were several instances of friction between employers and inspectors, usually the Europeans of a particular locality belonged to the same social circle, the government officers being dependent on the employers and overseers for fellowship, and on the companies for meat, ice, and transport for their families. The road to ease and even promotion did not lie along the way of trouble-making.[32]

Even the more assiduous inspectors conceded the hopelessness of their task. As one official noted in 1892, it was only a few cases in which the inspector could 'induce the employer to give relief, knowing even then that the relief will only be temporary and his interference be bitterly though silently resented'.[33] And there were many means by which the overseers could pressure their employees to withhold evidence from the inspectors. One indentured labourer recalled being told by an overseer:

> You know, we white men can find out things quickly. But before we can

> find out, your sirdar will find out about your reports. He has got friends among you. You should be able to guess that the outcome will be if you pinch the serpent. You have to work under me all the time. Don't spoil your chances of survival in five minutes talk.[34]

For many immigrants, then, the key to an untroublesome future lay in complying with the wishes of the overseers and sirdars, not in creating trouble for them.

Even magistrates showed a conscious or unconscious disposition to favour the planters.[35] They deliberately stuck to the letter of the law, even in circumstances where the evidence was far from conclusive. This was especially the case in complaints about task work. The Agreement which the labourers had signed in India had stated the possibility of *both* time as well as task work. But soon after the introduction of Indians into the colony, a change had been effected in Fiji which practically abolished the alternative of task work from the very beginning,[36] a significant alteration which was not brought to the attention to potential recruits in India. When the labourers sought a legal clarification of their understanding, they were fined for absence from work and had their indentures extended. As one magistrate in Lautoka stated in 1903: 'I can only assume as before stated that they, one and all, perfectly understand the terms and conditions of their contract and pains and penalties attaching thereto for non-fulfilment'.[37]

Excessive penalties, too, were common. A. R. Coates wrote in 1910:

> Instances have been brought to the notice of His Excellency the Governor of excessive or improper penalties being awarded for minor breaches of the Ordinance that by some magistrates views are held in regard to the position and liability of an indentured immigrant that are not in accordance with the letter or the intention of the law.[38]

The system of colonial justice, even government officials were forced to conclude, was double-faced for the indentured labourers.

Labourers' Complaints Against Employers

Further evidence of this is provided in the startling discrepancy between the extent to which the indentured labourers and their employers were able to use the courts to enforce the Labour Ordinance. Table 1,[39] compiled by this author from figures in the *Annual Reports* gives an indication of the nature and volume of charges the indentured labourers, both males and females, brought against their employers. Several things stand out. The first is the extremely small number of complaints which the labourers laid against the employers.

Indeed there were some years in the 1880s in which the labourers were unable to, or did not lay any complaints at all. The paucity of the complaints, however, was no indication of the plight of the indentured labourers. As one official noted in 1892:

> That there are no or few complaints is no more an indication of perfect satisfaction than the paucity of departmental prosecutions of employers is an indication of a careful and conscientious observance of the law and their obligation by the latter.[40]

Table 1
Indentured Labourers' Complaints Against Employers

	Years									
Complaints	1886	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	Total
Assault and Battery	29	18	6	7	8	28	14	36	40	186
Non-Payment of wages	-	3	6	7	12	10	25	15	19	97
Not Providing Tools	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	2	-	4
Not Supplying Rations	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Not Providing Work	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	-	3	6
Using Insulting Language	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	2
Requiring Work Illegally	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	-	3
Falsifying Paylist	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	3
Failure to take delivery of discharged prisoner	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Miscellaneous	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Overtasking	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Withdrawn	-	-	-	1	1	-	1	-	3	6
Dismissed	18	8	5	16	21	34	30	36	35	203
Convicted	12	13	7	1	3	7	15	18	32	108

Laying a complaint against an employer was a serious 'offence' and entailed great risks for the indentured labourer. It involved absence from work and therefore loss of pay, the extension of indenture by the days the immigrant was absent, and the wrath of the overseers. There were also instances of labourers being prevented from reporting abuses to the inspectors. These were especially common in isolated areas such as Labasa where, wrote Sergeant Mason in 1897, 'it is a usual thing for Indians to come to the police station between the hours of nine and twelve at night to complain of the treatment they get on some of the plantations'.[41] But perhaps a more important reason why the labourers reported so few complaints was the 'uncertainty of relief':[42] after taking all the risk, to see the accusations against the overseers discharged or the overseers fined lightly, as often happened, or to witness the reluctance of the Immigration Department to press charges even in the face of solid evidence against the employers. Another striking feature illustrated by Table 1 is the surprisingly low conviction rate of the employers, which is in marked contrast to the conviction rate of the labourers, as we shall see later. The main reasons for this are not difficult to find: the labourers' ignorance of the law, inexperience in conducting their cases, frequently without any assistance from the Immigration Department, and, as mentioned above, the prejudice of the colonial judiciary in favour of the planters. Their cases also broke down because the overseers were able to bribe or coerce other labourers to give testimony in their favour.[43]

Assault and battery were the major complaints of the labourers, accounting for 61 per cent of all the charges. To some extent, this is not really surprising since violence, coercion, and control are an integral part of the plantation system. As Eric Wolf has pointed out, a plantation is 'an instrument of force, wielded to create and maintain a class-structure of workers and owners, connected hierarchically by a staff-line of overseers and managers'.[44] Race also contributed its own share, not so much in causing violence to the indentured workers as in blunting sensitivity to it. All the planters and overseers were white, while the labouring force was coloured, members of an assumed inferior race whose own best interests were served by being kept under white tutelage.

Employer violence was rampant in Fiji at the turn of the century. Governor Sir Everard im Thurn noted in 1907 that 'the habitual attitude of many of the overseers towards the immigrants under them is, to put it plainly, brutal',[45] and he legislated stiffer penalties for the 'ill-use' of immigrants. A few years earlier an official had noted that if 'assault convictions mean that a man is a bad character then nearly all the officers of the company (CSR) are bad characters'.[46] It was on mechanically-run CSR plantations in such remote areas as Labasa and Ba that overseer violence was especially bad.

The overseers were assisted by sirdars, described by one scholar as the 'lynchpin of the system'.[47] As already mentioned, the sirdars were chosen for their unquestioning loyalty and willingness to serve the plantation management. The relationship between the overseer and his sirdar was one of mutual self-interest. An effective overseer needed a loyal and strong sirdar, while the latter needed the ear of his master. The threat of dismissal or relegation to field labour was a powerful incentive to please the management. The position also brought power and influence in the indentured community, and the sirdars used these effectively to enhance their own interests. They were allowed to own stores on the plantations, and, as one official pointed out, 'to those who have a knowledge of the conditions on the plantation, it is unnecessary to state how pressure can be put on an immigrant by the sirdar to compel him to deal at his store'.[48] They extorted money from immigrants and even forced labourers in their charge to work free for them on Saturdays and Sundays.[49] Many interfered with indentured women, and some even engaged in sexual trafficking.[50] There was at least one instance when a sirdar participated in the murder of a man who had caused trouble for his overseer.[51]

The indentured labourers found it extremely difficult to obtain convictions for assault and battery despite clear evidence of physical injury inflicted by overseers. A case in point is overseer H. E. Forrest's assault on his cook, Thermadu, because the breakfast curry had not been prepared to the overseer's satisfaction.[52] Thermadu had evidence of physical injury on his body: a black eye and a long cut over his left temple. Forrest, of course, denied the assault, and was able to call two sirdars to support his evidence. His counsel 'practically put the words into the mouths of all the witnesses for the defence who were not cross-examined nor examined by the court'. The charge was dismissed, despite the fact that Thermadu's testimony was 'sound and practically unshaken by rigid cross-examination by counsel and court'. This was not an isolated incident. As John Forster had correctly remarked seven years earlier in 1900:

> There have been too many cases where the complainants have the evidence of violence on their bodies and yet could not prosecute successfully. It is obvious that where violence is resorted to on a plantation and goes lightly punished, the victims might often be unable to prove their case and are under strong inducement to abstain from complaint or to withdraw complaints made.[53]

While the assault and battery cases were very difficult to prosecute, it was especially difficult to convict European overseers. As figures in Table 2 show,[54] only one third of the overseers were successfully prosecuted. Even when the overseers were convicted, the penalty was light. They usually escaped with small fines, hardly ever imprisonment, especially before the turn of the century. Some employers even thought the transfer of the offending overseer to another estate was a sufficient punishment in itself.[55]

The sirdars, too, got away with light fines, and some even with a history of previous convictions were re-employed, in spite of the remonstrance of the Immigration Department.[56]In open defiance of the law, some overseers publicly returned their sirdars' fines, and the 'fact of such return has been made known to the immigrant labourers',[57] further undermining their confidence in the efficacy of colonial justice and reminding them, if, indeed, any reminder was needed, of who had the last laugh.

Table 2

Conviction Rate for European Overseers

Year	No. of Charges	Convictions	Withdrawn/ Dismissed	% Convicted
1897	64	32	32	50
1898	7	4	3	57
1899	10	4	6	40
1900	2	-	2	0
1901	5	1	4	20
1902	14	6	8	43
1904	37	9	28	24
1905	20	4	16	20
1907	35	8	27	23
1908	30	8	22	27
1909	29	7	22	24
1910	39	5	34	13
1911	48	14	34	29
1912	62	22	40	35
Total	402	125 (30.8%)	278 (69.2%)	Av. 28.9

The non-payment of wages constituted the second largest ground for the labourers' complaint against the employers. The Agreement the indentured labourers had signed in India had promised a daily wage of one shilling for men and nine pennies for women. This was the maximum pay the labourers could make under ideal conditions, but these hardly obtained on the Fiji plantations. In fact, it was not until 1908, 28 years after indenture had begun in Fiji, that adult males were able to earn an average wage of one shilling per working day.[58] Sickness, absence, non-completion of tasks, and other such factors explain why the indentured labourers were unable to earn the maximum pay for such a long period of time.

The greed of the planters also played a part. Some of them devised their own tactics to retain a portion of the labourers wages as punishment for absence without their approval. In some places the planters used the practice of 'double cut' by which they docked two days pay for each day the labourer was away from work. Others disregarded the rules for the time when the wages had to be paid. The Immigration Ordinance required the payment of all wages on the Saturday of each week after noon, or, if this was not possible because of bad weather or public holidays, on the first available working day of the following week after working hours.[59] In practice, however, different estates paid their workers at different times, depending on the convenience to the employer. On some estates only fully earned wages were paid weekly, others being paid at the end of the month. Thus, an immigrant who had a dispute about the amount of work completed in the first week had to wait until the end of the month before he could take any action. His disadvantage vis-a-vis the employer increased with each day. Inspector Hamilton Hunter noted:

> This delay confuses the immigrant as to time, and he has merely his own vague recollection of day and date to lay before the courts, whereas the employer has his field book and paysheet to produce, and these are taken in evidence that the task was either badly done or not completed.[60]

Once again, the powerlessness of the indentured labourers was starkly underlined.

It is remarkable that for the years included in Table 1, in only one year (1892) was there a single charge for overtasking laid against the employers. This is especially surprising in view of the universal complaint of overtasking among the labourers.[61] Overtasking was the major cause of the Koronivia strike of 1886. A task, it will be recalled, was supposed to be the amount of work an able-bodied labourer could accomplish in six and a half hours of steady labour. In practice, as the Immigration Department officials themselves conceded, tasks were frequently set by overseers on the basis of the amount of work a few hand-picked men could do.[62] As one official wrote in 1886:

> I believe that they are being pushed too hard and think that a proper man should pass the greater part of his time on the river and go about constantly and examine all tasks and assist Indians in prosecuting employers.[63]

Yet prosecutions for overtasking were virtually non-existent. The main reason for this was the absence of a precise definition of what constituted an acceptable amount of task work. Wrote one official:

> The indefinitiveness of the legal definition obviously leaves the limits of a fair task entirely an open question and a matter of opinion, and supposing a prosecution for overtasking can be and is instituted, the weight of opinion is found on the side of skilled evidence the employer can bring forward in

> his favour as against the evidence of an ignorant coolie. The court has to decide on evidence not on the private opinion of the presiding magistrate.[64]

The 'ignorant coolie', of course, was fully aware of this reality. When redress could not be obtained for overtasking, it was pointless to complain.

Employers' Complaints Against Labourers

In contrast to the indentured labourers, the planters enjoyed astounding success in prosecuting a very high percentage of their workers. Every year, as Table 3 shows,[65] they laid complaints against a very large proportion of the indentured population. Both men and women were complained against, though in a number of years proportionately more women were complained against than indentured men. Women constituted a more vulnerable segment of the indentured population. They absented or were forced to absent themselves from work more often than men on account of the pressure of domestic work, pregnancy, child rearing, and sickness, and thus accumulated a higher rate of complaints against themselves.[66] Some areas were worse than others. Labasa stands out, as it did in many other respects also. The situation there was especially bad during the 1890s. In 1895, 96 per cent of the total indentured population was complained against; in 1896, 68 per cent; in 1898, 90 per cent; and in 1899, 68 per cent. Most of the complaints were successfully prosecuted. Ba was a distant runner-up. The highest percentage of complaints ever laid there was in 1895, or 50 per cent.[67] The reasons for the differences among the different districts are not explained in the *Annual Reports*, but they are not difficult to guess. Labasa was far away, on the island of Vanua Levu, inspections of plantations were less frequent there, and the planters exercised much greater control over their labourers.

The Labour Ordinance provided a very large number of offences for which the employers could prosecute their labourers. The offences for which the most number of convictions were obtained are shown in Table 4.[68] In the light of what has been said above, most of the charges are unexceptional, though the fact that the employers were able to obtain convictions in 82 per cent of all the charges they laid while the indentured labourers were able to obtain convictions in only 35 per cent of the cases (Table 2) starkly underlines the inescapable conclusion about who held sway on the plantations.

Table 3
Percentage of Male and Female Workers Complained Against

Year	No. Males and Females/ 100 Adults		No. of Total Charges	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
1897	73.8	26.2	65.2	34.8
1898	74.3	25.7	69.4	30.6
1899	73.9	26.1	67.3	32.7
1900	73.9	26.1	61.7	38.3
1901	72.8	27.1	56.2	43.8
1902	72.7	27.3	70.3	29.7
1903	74.2	25.8	75.4	24.6
1904	72.0	28.0	76.8	23.2
1905	73.5	26.5	76.0	24.0
1906	73.4	26.6	73.5	26.5
1907	74.7	25.3	70.5	29.6
Average	73.6	26.4	69.3	30.7

In many instances the indentured labourers were convicted for trivial offences, many of which they probably had not heard of until they were brought before the courts. The prosecution for 'committing a nuisance' (defecating) underlines the point well. The Labour Ordinance provided:

> . . . any person who shall commit any nuisance [ie., defecate] within sixty yards of any stream running through or any thoroughfare running through or adjoining any plantation shall on conviction in a summary way forfeit any sum not exceeding ten shillings [more than a week's pay] or be imprisoned for any term not exceeding one month.[69]

Were the indentured labourers ever notified about this provision? What was the nature of the 'evidence' presented in court? The record is unclear on this point. But even if we accept that the labourers heeded the calls of nature in the open fields, it is still astonishing that the employers were able to lay complaints under this category, while the indentured labourers were unable to lay charges for overtasking. It is difficult to believe that planters who laid such complaints were serious in their intent to prosecute and obtain charges. In the context of the plantation experience in Fiji, it was more likely a tactic to harass and intimidate those indentured labourers whom the overseers could not prosecute under any other category.

Many other provisions of the Labour Ordinance were also vague and placed a great deal of power in the hands of the planters. The indentured labourers could be prosecuted, fined, or imprisoned for using 'Threatening and Insulting Language'; for 'Threatening Behaviour; ' and for 'Refusal and

Neglect to Go to Hospital'. Labourers were not paid while they were hospitalized. Many were convicted for 'The Want of Ordinary Diligence', which was decided by the overseers who set excessive tasks in the first place. The planters viewed the labourers who did not complete the assigned work as malingerers who needed to be worked through firm discipline. Were these workers really as lazy as the planters made them out to be? One official noted in 1882:

> The fact remains that cases were brought to notice, and more possibly escaped notice, in which immigrants were committed to prison for the non-performance of acts that they were not capable of performing, and in more than one instance the condition of the immigrants was found to be such on entering gaol as to necessitate their speedy relegation to hospital.[70]

Unlawful absence comprised by far the largest source of planter complaints against the indentured labourers. It was defined as absence by truancy, detention in gaol, and even attendance at court. It is doubtful that the indentured labourers deliberately absented themselves from work, knowing that it meant loss of pay, fine, or even imprisonment. It is more likely that they did so because they were unable to work due to sickness, debility, and hospitalization. Perhaps many were also marked absent because they turned up to work late: a normal working day began at the crack of dawn. Desertion was narrowly defined: absence 'without lawful excuse for three whole days exclusive of Sundays or lawful holidays'. A deserter was subject to arrest without warrant wherever he or she was found, and faced a penalty of fine up to £2 or imprisonment not exceeding two months. The alternative of imprisonment was abolished in 1912, though a person convicted three times for desertion could face a fine of up of £5 or three months of imprisonment.[71]

Immigration officials always saw desertion as a deliberate act of defiance. It was seen in I885, for example, as a tendency 'on the part of a limited number of dissipated, dissatisfied and vicious coolies to desert from indentured service in order to indulge in gambling, prostitution, or seclusion and idleness'.[72] Desertion was, indeed, a strategy some indentured immigrants used when other means of seeking redress had failed. And they did so in the open. As the Immigration Inspector in Ba reported in 1900:

> The intention of desertion has usually been avowed beforehand, at the time of making the complaint in the most stubborn and determined manner . . . it was planned and systematized protest against assault [by overseers and sirdars].[73]

Table 4: Employers' Complaints Against Indentured Labourers

	Nature of Complaints										
Year	Non-Performance of Tasks	Unlawful Absence	Damaging Property	Want of Ordinary Diligence	Desertion	Committing Nuisance	Breach of Hospital Discipline	Others	Total	Convicted	%
1885	344	3565	30	774	94	63	24	207	5101	4140	81
1886	52	7121	15	1200	272	10	40	143	8853	6680	75
1887	358	1814	41	1308	162	6	9	122	3820	3124	82
1890	376	969	25	29	106	5	9	50	1569	1282	82
1891	596	955	16	5	87	18	2	118	1797	1602	89
1892	793	1125	4	6	82	10	-	133	2153	1825	85
1896	734	973	18	6	45	167	114	234	2291	1952	85
1897	83	802	45	694	29	41	83	134	1911	1603	84
1898	1080	813	75	35	36	60	142	386	2627	2046	73
1900	881	625	91	20	92	59	151	258	2177	2095	87
1901	1007	567	111	59	152	146	137	289	2468	2202	89
1902	717	619	110	30	120	111	113	314	2134	18314	85
1904	820	947	112	171	243	90	115	304	2802	2404	86
1905	625	671	54	216	324	42	76	326	2334	1875	80
1906	305	378	74	164	226	106	47	277	1577	1315	83
Total	8771	21944	821	4717	2070	934	1062	3295	43614	35759	82

Whether desertion was deliberate or unintended, the fact that it was so pervasive made a serious indictment of the indenture system. The Immigration officials, of course, rarely thought that the indentured labourers might have a genuine reason for deserting their employers.

Table 5
Extension of Indenture for Men and Women Whose Contract Expired

	Women				Men			
Year	Total Expired	Extended	%	Days	Total Expired	Extended	%	Days
1898	145	67	46	1213	363	169	47	6705
1899	183	69	38	1690	491	176	36	6835
1900	277	127	46	1984	739	315	43	16417
1901	251	141	56	3293	660	252	43	11454
1902	309	148	48	976	798	321	40	11208
1904	211	111	53	2399	564	169	30	11085
1905	524	276	53	6097	1254	500	40	32404
1906	587	169	29	2336	1385	539	39	31581
1908	358	125	35	1577	1014	386	38	31851
1909	204	40	20	779	630	178	28	22925
1910	577	129	22	2581	1648	437	27	19917
1911	445	88	20	1819	1379	303	22	22859
1912	407	76	19	2814	1314	333	25	36748
1913	415	45	11	291	1259	316	25	8694
1916	682	38	5	783	2061	287	14	20516

Indentured labourers convicted of breaching the Labour Ordinance could either be fined or imprisoned. Neither, however, was the end of punishment for the indentured labourer, for the planters were legally entitled to recover lost work by extending the contract of workers by the number of days they were absent from the plantation. The extent to which the employers were able to use this provision is shown in Table 5.[74] The indentures of both men and women were extended, though there was a decline in the proportion of extensions over the years. Around the turn of the century proportionately more women than men had their indentures extended; however, the extensions for men were for a much longer period. These extensions pointed to the same general conclusion as the high prosecution rate of the indentured labourers, the violence of the overseers, and the indifference of the colonial government did: protest did not pay.

This paper has attempted to highlight those factors that stifled protest in the Indian indentured community. It has focussed especially on the actions of the planters and the colonial government, which were the primary deterrents of collective action in the Indian community. But to leave the impression that there was no protest whatsoever would be misleading. Powerless as they were, the indentured labourers did resist, in their own ways, undue pressures that were put on them, though a full discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper. There were two strikes in the Rewa region in the 1880s and one in Labasa in 1907, the latter led by Punjabi immigrants. Some labourers attempted desertion, as we have seen, hoping perhaps to submerge themselves in the free Indian community slowly emerging on the fringes of the plantations. Some vented their rage on the crops and tools of the employers, feigned illness, and absented themselves from work in protest against the system. Others, fed up with the constant drudgery of work and the hopelessness of their situation, took their own lives through suicides, while a few avenged acts of injustices against them by murdering their overseers and sirdars.

Such acts of violence might strike temporary terror in the hearts of the overseers or raise concern in official circles. But they posed little threat to the planters and the colonial officialdom. In the end, the Indian indentured labourers chose non-resistance as their method of coping with their situation. This was not as strange a strategy as it might appear at first glance, for as Eugene Genovese has written of the slaves in America:

> If a people, over a protracted period, finds the odds against insurrection not merely long but virtually uncertain, then it will choose not to try. To some extent this reaction represents decreasing self confidence and increasing fear, but it also represents a conscious effort to develop an alternative strategy for survival.[75]

Endnotes

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1. K. L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1962) 93; C. F Andrews and W. W. Pearson, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji: An Independent Enquiry* (Perth: Independently published, 1916) 29; K. O. Laurence, *Immigration into the West Indies in the 19th Century* (Kingston: Caribbean UP, 1971) 74. For other comparative studies of Indian indenture, see: Alan H. Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves: The Political Economy of British Guiana, 1838-1904* (New Haven: Yale UP,1972); Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1981); Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export Of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (London: Oxford UP, 1974), and several studies in Kay Saunders, ed., *Indentured Labor in the British Empire, 1834-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

2. Two recent studies of the Hawaiian plantation experience which provide ample material for comparative purposes are Edward D. Beechert, *Working In Hawaii. A Labor History* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i Press, 1985), and Ronald Takaki, *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawaii* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii; Press, 1983).

3. The amounts annually remitted to India are noted in Agent General of Immigration, *Annual Reports* (Suva: Dept. of Indian Immigration, Government of Fiji), hereafter cited as *Annual Report.* For a summary of the amount sent to India for the period 1907-1917, see Fiji Legislative *Council Paper* (Suva: Government of Fiji) 48/1917. See also James McNeill and Chimman Lal, *Report of the Government on the Conditions of Indian Immigrants in Four British Colonies and Surinam.* Command Paper 7744-5 (Simla: Government Printer, 1914), Appendix.

4. For a complete list of all the castes and districts of origin, see my 'Leaves of the Banyan Tree. The Origins and Background of Fiji's North Indian Indentured Migrants, 1879-1916', diss., vol. 2, Australian National U, 1981, Appendices IV (12-28) and VIII (82-100).

5. Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The origin of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983), 103.

6. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* 226.

7. Adrian C. Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific: A Study of Fiji Indian Rural Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) 5.

8. Ahmed Ali, ed., *The Indenture Experience in Fiji* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1979) 10.

9. Mayer, *Peasants in the Pacific* 5.

10. Minute paper 1050/86, National Archives of Fiji, Suva. All unpublished documents cited in this paper are located in this place.

11. Colonial Secretary Office file 3517/14, hereafter cited as CSO; Minute paper 457/13.

12. Ordinance XIV of 1886.

13. See *Annual Report 1899: 9; 1900: 10 ; 1902: 10; 1905: 10.* See also Jay Narayan, *Political Economy of Fiji* (Suva: South Pacific Review Press, 1984) 42.

14. Michael Moynagh, *Brown or White? A history of the Fiji sugar industry, 1873-1973* (Canberra: Pacific Research Monograph, 1981) 59.

15. CSO 1591/87.

16. CSO 443/87.

17. This is the view of Deryck Scarr, Thurston's biographer. See his *Viceroy of the Pacific, The Majesty of Colour: A Life of Sir John Bates Thurston* (Canberra: Pacific Research Monograph, 1981) 192.

18. Ordinance XIV of 1896.

19. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants* 89.

20. Governor im Thurn, Dispatch to Colonial Office, 11 Aug. 1903, CO 83/77.

21. Lal, *Girmitiyas,* Appendix 1, 36-41.

22. See, for example, I. M. Cumpston, *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1783-1850* (London: Oxford UP, 1953) 174, and George R. Mellor, *British Imperial Trusteeship, 1783-1850* (London: Oxford UP, 1951) 223.

23. See generally the works of Tinker, Andrews, and Ali, cited above.

24. For a fuller discussion, see my *Girmitiyas,* chap. 3.

25. Indenture Ordinance no. I of 1891 (an Ordinance to amend and consolidate the law, relating to Indian immigration).

26. CSO 3027/11.

27. For a discussion of this, see my 'Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations', *Indian Economic and Social History Review,* 22, (Jan.-March 1985): 55-72, and 'Veil of Dishonour: Sexual Jealousy and Suicide on Fiji Plantations', *Journal of Pacific History* 20 (1985): 135-155.

28. Minute paper 3481/86.

29. Indenture Ordinance I of 1891, part XI, section 141.

30. *Annual Report 189:* 29.

31. Shiu Prasad, *Indian Indentured Workers in Fiji* (Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association, 1975) 9-10.

32. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants* 111.

33. CSO 1955/ 189.

34. Prasad, *Indian Indentured Workers* 19.

35. Ali, *The Indenture Experience in Fiji,* xvii, as well as studies in Saunders, ed., *Indentured Labour in the British Empire*(for example, M.D. North-Coombs' contribution on Mauritius, 97).

[36] On many estates the change to task work, without the option of time work, took place in the early 1880. The *Annual Report 1882* noted that 'the change has not been brought without the expression of great dissatisfaction on the part of the immigrants'.

[37] CSO 4705/1903, cited in my 'Veil of Dishonour'.

[38] Governor im Thurn, Dispatch to Colonial Office no. 277, 23 Dec. 1910, CO 83.

[39] I have compiled these figures from the *Annual Reports* of the following years: *1886: 16; 1890: 39; 1891: 29; 1892: 28; 1893: 34; 1894: 33; 1895:* 35; *1896: 31;* and *1897: 30* I have grouped together some similar complaints.

[40] CSO 1955/1892.

[41] CSO 1315/1897; 3237/1900; 4215/99; and 4224/95.

[42] CSO 1955/92; Annual Report *1893: 32.*

[43] CSO 5-79/14.

[44] Eric Wolf, 'Specific Aspects of Plantation Systems in the New World: Community Sub-Cultures and Social Class', in M. M. Horowitz, ed., *Peoples and Cultures in the Caribbean* (New York: Natural History P, 1971) 163. See also George L. Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World* (New York: Oxford UP, 1972) for an extended discussion.

[45] CSO 800/07. Penalties for assault on indentured labourers were stiffened by Ordinance VI of 1907, with fines of up to £3 or two months imprisonment with hard labour.

[46] CSO 5064/99.

[47] Ali, *The Indenture Experience in Fiji* xxiii.

[48] CSO 1045/06. This practice was barred by Ordinance II of 1912.

[49] *Ali, The Indenture Experience* xxiii.

[50] Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labor* 36; *Annual Report 1909:* 23.

[51] Walter Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1969) 44. Gill was an overseer in Fiji during the last days of indenture, and his book is a vivid account of the conditions under which the indentured labourers lived.

[52] CSO 4012/07.

[53] CSO 3491/1900 and 3237/1900; *Annual Report 1901: 25.*

[54] Figures in this table derived from *Annual Reports of 1902: 27; 1904: 24; 1905: 24; 1907: 25; 1908: 26; 1909: 24;1910: 18; 1911: 19;* and *1912: 16.*

[55] CSO 4412/02; *Annual Report 1901: 25.*

[56] CSO 4412/02 and 2555/93.

[57] CSO 3121/97.

[58] Wadan Narsey, 'Monopoly Capitalism, White Racism and Superprofits in Fiji', *Journal of Pacific Studies:* (1979) 86.

[59] Indenture Ordinance I of 1891, part VIII, section 116.

[60] CSO 2315/88.

[61] CSO 2315/88; 86/511; 1955/92; and 3481/86.

[62] *Annual Report 1886: 15.*

[63] CSO 1800/86.

[64] CSO 1955/92.

[65] Figures in this table have been derived from *Annual Reports* of *1897: 20; 1902: 26; 1904: 25; 1905: 26; 1907: 26; 1908: 24;* and *1910: 17.*

[66] For a fuller discussion, see my 'Kunti's Cry'.

[67] *Annual Reports* of *1897: 20* and *1902: 26.*

[68] Figures in this table have been taken from *Annual Reports* of *1885: 16; 1886: 17; 1887: 11; 1888: 35; 1889: 29; 1890: 38; 1891: 46; 1892: 29; 1893: 33; 1894: 32; 1896: 30, 1898: 34; 1899: 36: 1900: 39; 1901: 42; 1902: 37; 1905: 39;* and *1906: 37.* Some similar complaints have been grouped together.

[69] Indenture Ordinance I of 1891, part VII, section 92.

[70] *Annual Report 1882: 30.*

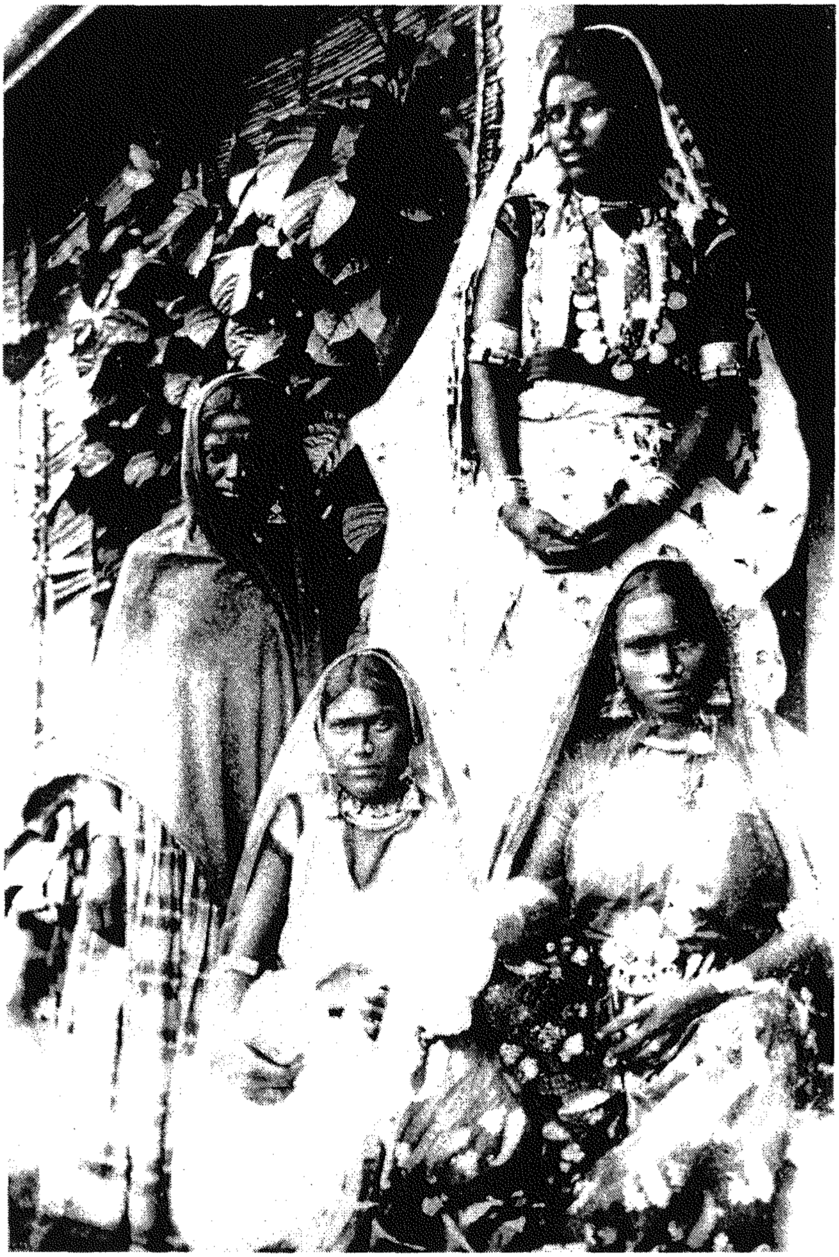
[71] *Annual Report 1912: 17.*

[72] *Annual Report 1885: 13.*

[73] CSO 3237/1900.

[74] Figures presented in this table have been derived from, *Annual Reports* of *1898: 19; 1899: 11; 1900: 12; 1901: 13; 1902: 12; 1904: 13; 1905: 12; 1907: 12; 1908: 13; 1909: 12; 1910: 8; 1911: 10; 1912: 9; 1913: 6;* and *1916: 6.*

[75] Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution. Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1979) 7.



Girmitiya women in traditional finery. Note the necklace of gold coins (*mohur*) worn by the woman standing on the right. *Mohur* was the most prized ornament among women.

chapter 11

Kunti's Cry

An employer often complains that the women suckle their infants too long and that they could be left in the lines much sooner than is usually done. These gentlemen forget that these people have no other means of providing suitable nourishment for their children.

Dr Hirsche, Chief Medical Officer, Fiji

On 10 April 1913, Kunti, a female Indian indentured labourer, was sent alone to weed an isolated banana patch at Nadewa in Rewa, Fiji.[1] Enforced isolation was a common and very effective technique to deal with recalcitrant workers. Kunti was being punished for her allegedly quarrelsome behaviour and for giving the plantation management 'a great deal of trouble'. Later that afternoon, Overseer Cobcroft came on his usual round of inspection, caught hold of Kunti and made 'improper suggestions to her'. Kunti screamed, struggled herself free from Cobcroft, ran towards the Wainibokasi river a little distance away, and threw herself into the water. Fortunately—so Kunti told the world—she was saved from drowning by Jagdeo, a boy who happened to be in a dinghy nearby.

Kunti's story appeared in mass-circulating Indian newspapers, the *Bharat Mitra* and the Allahabad *Leader*,[2] and sparked off an unprecedentedly intense campaign to stop the emigration of Indian indentured labour altogether. The move to stop the degradation of Indian women on colonial plantations attracted more support among the Indian masses, according to historian K.L. Gillion, 'than any other movement in modem Indian history, more even than the movement for independence'.[3] Even though of lowly cobbler caste, Kunti was eulogised by the still caste-conscious Indian press for her 'bravery, patience and strength of mind', and her name joined the 'list of honourable and brave ladies' in Indian history.[4]

Kunti's story was published at a time of growing agitation in India itself against the indenture system. Eager to avoid political embarrassment and to diffuse a sensitive and potentially explosive issue, the Government of India wanted 'to expose the *falsity* of the story before it attains a wider currency'[5] (my italics). The colonial government of Fiji obliged. The Immigration Department re-opened its files and unearthed supposed inconsistencies in Kunti's earlier testimony. Damaging declarations were extracted from witnesses, including one from Indian immigrant S.M. Saraswati who denied talking to Kunti or writing the story for publication. The Agent General of Immigration, Sydney Smith, thought Saraswati's account suspect, but it was decided that, in official correspondence with the Government of India, it would be 'better not to say whether or not Mr. Saraswati's statement was reliable'. But the ultimate ground upon which the Immigration Department rested its case was Kunti's alleged immoral character. It argued that Kunti had concocted the entire episode in revenge for the dismissal earlier of her paramour, Sundar Singh, as the sirdar (foreman) of the plantation. In response to the Indian government's demand for *definite evidence* linking Kunti with Sundar Singh, the Immigration officials forwarded the sworn declaration of Ramharak, Sundar Singh's successor as the sirdar and Kunti's implacable foe. A. Montgomerie, the Agent General of Immigration in 1913, summed up the feelings of his department as well as of the planters with the following sweeping statement:

> I believe the whole statement to be a fabrication. It is absolutely untrue that female indentured immigrants are violated or receive hurts or cruel treatments at the hands of their overseer. If such were the case, it would be quite impossible to manage the labourers on a plantation. It is only by fair and just treatment that labourers, at any late in this colony, can be worked.[6]

This essay examines this claim as well as the broader working experience of indentured women on Fiji plantations. It also probes the widely shared derogatory stereotype of the Indian female worker as 'mercenary' character who was responsible for all the major social and moral ills of the plantation society, such as suicide, murder, infant mortality and the general moral degradation of the Fiji Indian community. It is suggested that the system of coercive labour with all its attendant consequences rather than the women themselves produced the problems that bedevilled indenture. In doing so, this paper also underlines the need for more 'micro' studies to deepen the scope of existing studies on the indenture experience in Fiji and other ex-sugar colonies that were dependent upon imported Indian indentured labour in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Background

Like all the indentured emigrants, the women migrated on a 5 year contract that defined the conditions of employment in Fiji. A peculiar feature of the Indian indenture system was the insistence by the Government of India after the 1870s that 40 females migrate for every 100 males on all shipments leaving the subcontinent. Though this move was opposed by the recruiters and bitterly resented by the colonial planters, the Indian government remained unmoved, adamant in its desire to promote family life and alleviate problems caused by the disproportion of the sexes in the colonies. Contrary to the popular view and claims of recruiters experiencing extreme difficulty in recruiting the requisite number of women notwithstanding, the stipulated proportion was invariably met in the case of all the colonies.

Women of all castes and social backgrounds migrated. Among the North Indians, 4.1 per cent were Brahmans, 9.0 per cent Kshatriyas, 3.0 per cent Banias, 31.4 per cent middling castes, 29.1 per cent low castes, 2.8 per cent tribals and 16.8 per cent Muslims. Thus altogether, about half of the female indentured labourers were of higher or middling castes. With the exception of 4,341 women (36.1 per cent of the female population) who migrated as members of nuclear or extended families, the rest came unaccompanied by any male or female relatives. Many explanations have been put forth for the motive behind female emigration. An older, generally exaggerated, view holds deception to be the major factor in causing migration. There can be no denying that fraud and even kidnapping existed in some isolated cases; there is ample evidence of this in oral as well as documentary record. But all too often it is forgotten that women may have had their own reasons to leave their homes: to escape from domestic quarrels, economic hardships, the social stigma attached to young widows and brides who had brought an inadequate dowry, and the general dreariness of rural Indian life. Significantly, a very large proportion of the women had already left their homes before they met the recruiters and were shipped to Fiji and other colonies. Migration was not a new or unknown phenomenon for Indian women; thousands had moved to other parts of India (Calcutta jute mills, Assam tea gardens, Bihar coal mines, Bombay textile mills) in search of employment, either on their own or in the company of their male relatives. The journey to Fiji and to other colonies was a part of this larger process of migration. Most indentured emigrants left India hoping to return one day after they had earned enough money; the women, taking a greater risk, perhaps desired a permanent break from a condition that seemed to offer many problems but few possibilities.

Contrary to all the available evidence, even at the time of recruitment, contemporary officials and observers invariably described Indian indentured women as being of low caste and 'loose character'. The Trinidad Emigration Agent echoed a widely shared view: 'Of single women, those only will be found to emigrate who have lost their caste, by which all ties of relationships and home are severed, and, having neither religion nor education to restrain them, have fallen into the depths of degradation and vice'.[7] Even otherwise sympathetic observers shared such stereotypes. C.F. Andrews, the friend of the Indian nationalist movement, wrote after a fact-finding visit to Fiji:

> The Hindu woman in this country is like a rudderless vessel with its mast broken drifting onto the rocks; or like a canoe being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand. She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so.[8]

European overseers on the plantations concurred, without questioning their own morality or sexual practices. Walter Gill, who worked in Fiji in the last days of indenture, thought the indentured female labourer was 'as joyously amoral as a doe rabbit. She took her lovers as a ship takes rough seas; surging up to one who would smother her, then tossing him aside, thirsting for the next'.[9] Indian indentured men, again oblivious of any role that they might have played in the degradation of 'their' women, were only slightly more charitable in their comments.[10]

Indian indentured women thus stood accused in the eyes of their own community as well as those of the official world, carrying the double backpack of racism and sexism. The widely held, though empirically unsupported, perception of them as morally lax, profligate individuals made the women an easy target of malicious gossip and innuendoes. More seriously, it gave the sirdars and overseers the licence to treat the women with little respect and to view them simply as objects of sexual gratification. Not surprisingly, the indentured women also became convenient scapegoats for all the ills of the indenture system. In particular, they were singled out as the main cause of such major social problems as suicide, murder, prostitution as well as infant mortality on the plantations. Let us look at each of these problems in turn and see whether and to what extent women were, in fact, responsible.

Suicide

From the early 1880s to 1920, 333 Indians committed suicide in Fiji, the overwhelming majority of whom were indentured labourers.[11] Of this number, a very small proportion were females. Suicide was, theoretically, an avoidable tragic act that represented not only a serious moral indictment of the Fiji indenture system but also an economic loss to the planters. Called upon to explain the high rate—among the highest in the world around the turn of the century—the Immigration officials pinned the cause on 'sexual jealousy' arising out of the disproportion of the sexes on the plantations and the 'tendency among indentured women to unduly trade amongst their countrymen'. As the 1909 *Annual Report on Indian Immigration* put it:

> The number of cases in which the cause of suicide appears attributable to sexual jealousy is as usual large. It is connected with the disproportion of sexes at present existing on most plantations and the consequent facility with which women abandon partners to whom they are bound by no legal ties for those who offer a better inducement.[12]

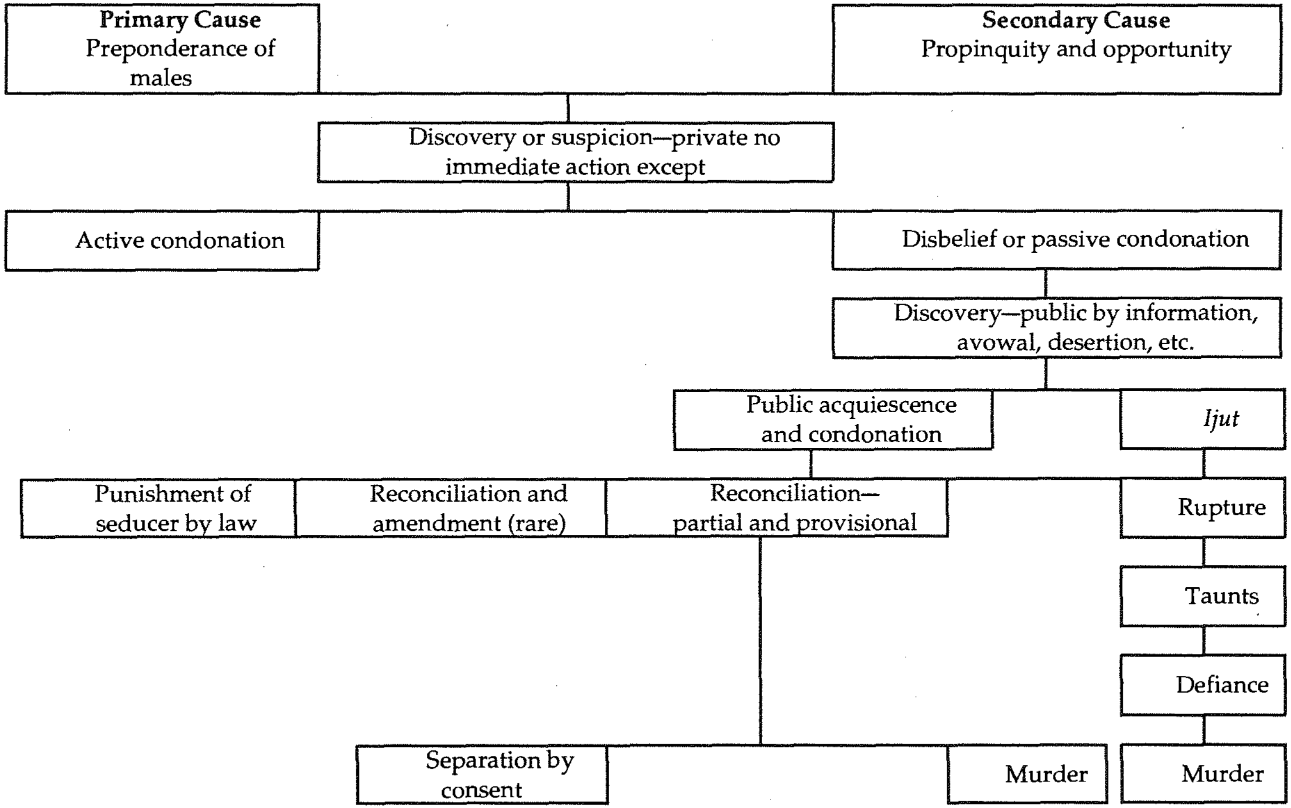
There can be no denying that the relative paucity of women on the plantations and the consequent competition among men for them was a problem. It threatened the security of matrimonial bonds and, in Durkheimian terms, contributed to the creation of matrimonial anomy. The promise of a better livelihood and freedom held out by another man was an ever-present (and understandable) inducement to escape the penury and wretchedness of the plantation lines where the indentured labourers lived. So also would have been the desire to escape an oppressive husband who viewed his wife as a 'chattel over which he has complete control-he has bought her and may dispose of her as he pleases'.[13] The deserted husband committed suicide and his wife inherited the blame.

But, contrary to the popular view, sexual jealousy was only one among several factors responsible for the disturbance of the 'collective conscience' of the plantation. There were other equally, if not more, important causes of suicide that pointed directly to the structure of the plantations system itself. These go unremarked in the government files. The brutality of the overseers and their sirdars led the labourers who felt their heavy hand to commit suicide. The general isolation and loneliness of the plantation life was a factor in some cases. Many newer migrants found the relentless pace of plantation work, from dawn to dusk, five and a half days a week all year round much too oppressive to cope with, descended into depression and took their own lives. The Dravidian South Indians found themselves the victims of the cultural and ethnic prejudice of their North Indian compatriots and committed suicide in disproportionately large numbers. Perhaps most significantly, most of the suicides occurred within a short time of the immigrants arriving in Fiji. Thus, about a quarter of all the suicides were committed within the first six months; 30 per cent within the first year and 57 per cent within the first three years.[14]Most of the males who committed suicide were single so that the question of desertion does not even arise.

Murder

Along with suicide, murder was a major problem in the Indian indentured community. Between 1890 and 1919, 68 indentured women were murdered as opposed to only 28 men.[15] Once again, the blame fell on women. In 1897, the Agent General of Immigration echoed the widely held view: murders were committed, he said, 'due to motives of jealousy owing to the immorality of women'. In 1902, he characterised Indian indentured women as 'unstable and mercenary' and the indentured men as 'revengeful and regardless of life'.[16] These assertions were accepted as adequate explanations, and the colonial officialdom seldom felt the need to probe further. However, at the turn of the century, murder and associated problems reached such epidemic proportions that the Immigration Department was moved to ask the plantation authorities to exercise greater vigilance on the social life of the indentured labourers. Immigration Inspector W.E. Russell of Labasa (on Vanua Levu, the second largest island in the Fiji group) where murder was rampant, prepared a detailed report that summed up the contemporary view on the problem.[17] He presented his thesis diagrammatically (See Fig. 1):

Figure 1
Murder on Fiji Plantations


Primary Cause
Preponderance of males
Secondary Cause
Propinquity and opportunity
Discovery or suspicion—private no immediate action except
Active condonation
Disbelief or passive condonation
Discovery—public by information, avowal, desertion, etc.
Public acquiescence and condonation
Ijut
Punishment of seducer by law
Reconciliation and amendment (rare)
Reconciliation—partial and provisional
Rupture
Taunts
Defiance
Separation by consent
Murder
Murder

Sexual jealousy is seen as the heart of the problem. As Russell put it:

> The sexual requirements of a class of men untrained in self-control—the facilities afforded by the nature of habitation and mode of life—the fact that the women are necessarily recruited from among those unsettled, and of more or less loose morals, that the men will satisfy their passions and that the women *do supply* the demand—these facts show each congregation of Indians in the customary sexual proportions to be a veritable hotbed of intrigue, a nursery of jealousy and murder.[18]

But he also went further than others and related the 'murderous instinct' of the Indians to their idea of *ijut (izzat* or honour) . Perceived or actual cases of adultery, infidelity or desertion on the part of the wife were seen, Russell suggested, as an intolerable attack on a man's *izzat* which had already been eroded to a considerable extent by the dehumanising ethos of plantation society. To vindicate their 'honour', the men were apparently required by the moral convention of their society to act publicly: the wife's 'crime' had to be discovered, proved and made public before the killing took place. The murderer frequently faced the gallows and in exceptional circumstances imprisonment for life. However, the 'other man' often went unpunished. The general consensus, according to Russell, was that 'the woman is the one at fault; that the death of her paramour will not keep her faithful; and that ijut is only cured by the *woman's* death'. And, Russell went on, 'these ideas are concurred in by women as well as men, the former showing, by subscriptions for legal aid, and other means, their sympathy with the murderers'.[19]

The focus on the supposed immoral character of the women conveniently detracted attention from those conditions on the plantations that promoted sexual jealousy and the murders. One important cause Russell identified was 'propinquity' or the 'next-door-opportunity', and this pointed directly to housing conditions on the plantations. All plantations were required by law to provide their indentured labourers with 'suitable' and hygienic dwellings. On paper, the provisions for housing looked the very model of spacious living, at least as far as plantations were concerned: one adult to every 300 cubic feet of space or three adults or a family of four to a room of not less than 900 cubic feet of space[20]'. In practice, however, overcrowding and filth were the most conspicuous features of the plantation lines. As K. L. Gillion, the historian of Fiji Indian indenture, has written: 'With three bunks and firewood, field tools, cooking utensils cluttered about, smoke, soot, spilt food, flies and mosquitoes, perhaps fowls, or a dog as a precaution against theft, and until separate kitchens were required in 1908, a fire place as well, living conditions were neither comfortable nor sanitary.[21] Worse still, married couples and bachelors shared adjacent quarters and there was no room for privacy. Partitions were not carried to the ceiling for the purpose of ventilation but were topped with gauze wire. Whatever privacy one enjoyed was the result of the understanding and sympathy of one's immediate neighbours; recognized social conventions were in short supply in the crowded plantation lines. Recommendations were made to separate married and bachelors quarters—by Russell himself—but, as Ahmed Ali has observed, 'they were not generally implemented'.[22]

Left to their own devices in matters of social and cultural life, the indentured labourers devised their own strategies to cope with loneliness and unaccustomed chores, and these could unwittingly disrupt families. Some cohabiting couples, out of pity or for companionship, accepted single men into their rooms as boarders. This was often done after notifying the plantation management and occasionally the police. Sometimes, single men, for whom the evening meal was 'one of the very few pleasures at their disposal' paid a certain sum to a married couple to cook for them.[23]Casual visits and temporary arrangements sometimes developed their own momentum, became entangled in emotional and sexual relationships, and led to tragedy.

Family life on the plantations was not always stable, and for this both the colonial government as well as the planters were to share a large portion of the blame. Indian customary marriages, conducted by Hindu or Muslim priests, were not recognized by the law unless they were formally registered with the appropriate government department. Ignorant of formal procedures, unable to afford absence from work especially on remote plantations and distrustful of civil registration which to them smacked of Christianity, Indian labourers often did not register their marriages. Perhaps this could have been, as some scholars have suggested, a deliberate example on the part of the Indians' 'indifference to the colonial superstructure',[24]but its unfortunate effect was to deprive the aggrieved parties of an instrument whose force might have acted as an effective deterrent to desertion, adultery or dissolution of marriage caused by either the husband or the wife. When conflict arose between traditional and civil marriages, tragedy was often the result. C.F. Andrews relates the case of an Indian woman who was married according to Hindu religious rites by her two brothers to a man they regarded as suitable. Then—and here details are not given—another man intervened and apparently induced the woman to get married to him through civil registration. This status was known as 'marit' in contrast to religious marriages. This marit was legal whereas the traditional Hindu marriage was not. Seeing no possibility of redress, the brothers murdered their sister and gave themselves to the police, defending themselves in the name of their family and religion. They were condemned to be hanged.[25] Had the legality of the Hindu ceremonies been recognized and enforced by the courts, the tragic loss of three lives might have been avoided. Customary Indian marriages were belatedly recognised only after the turn of the century.

There were other pressures on the family. It was a customary practice not to disrupt families when allocating indentured labourers to different plantations. This was generally adhered to, but once on the plantation itself, the overseers controlled the movement of their indentured labourers and shifted them around in accordance with the needs of the plantation rather than humanitarian considerations. Thus in Ba in western Viti Levu, husbands were moved semi-permanently from Rarawai to Varoko for work while their wives were left behind, putting further strain on marital stability on the plantations.[26] The Colonial Sugar Refining Company(CSR), the major employer of Indian indentured labour, viewed the labourers as its private property. Invoking existing legislation, it sometimes forbade visits by 'free' (ex-indentured) husbands to their wives still on the plantations.[27] The company even required that its consent be sought for the marriage of indentured labourers working on its plantations. Some magistrates agreed,[28] though in the end, the government refused to sanction the CSR proposal.

Finally, indentured women were frequently assaulted or harassed by overseers and sirdars if they refused sexual favours. This practice was especially common on remote plantations in western Viti Levu and in Vanua Levu where government inspection was infrequent or lax and overseers enjoyed untrammelled authority. The reign of terror was such that women went to report cases of assault to the resident Inspector of Immigrants several miles away late at night to avoid being noticed and thus spared heavier tasks and more violence the next day.[29] Overseers and sirdars colluded; on Nagigi plantation in Vanua Levu, reported Sergeant Mason, the overseer 'apparently encourages [the sirdar] in his acts of cruelty on the people'.[30] Both escaped with light punishment, often in the form of small fines. For the women, however, the consequences were often tragic. In at least one known instance, a sirdar threatened a woman with harder tasks if she refused sex with him. When the husband later confronted the sirdar, he was told that his 'woman is at fault'. The woman was severely beaten by the husband and later died.[31]

Accused women refused to accept responsibility for sex-related problems on the plantations. Russell commented on their 'defiant and provocative' behaviour: 'Detected, she brazens it out with defiance and recrimination—offered pardon, on amendment, she spurns the offer—threatened, she dares and defies; and the matter ends by a sudden blow, followed by blind and mad hacking and mutilation'.[32] The 'preference' for death, even violent death, over a life lived in humiliation through no fault of their own perhaps represented, on the part of the murdered women, a powerful protest against the double standards of plantation society and a refusal to accept a disproportionate share of responsibility for problems over which they themselves had little control. It was an act of courage and independence which must have baffled contemporary observers accustomed to thinking of the indentured women as 'timid and fearful'.[33]

Prostitution

Prostitution does not appear from the records to have been a major problem on the plantations, though officials remarked on its existence in the early years.[34] Most thought that prostitution was practised by a professional class of prostitutes who had emigrated from India. This view is wildly exaggerated for, as many scholars have observed, prostitutes had little incentive to migrate. Prostitution was directly the result of conditions on the plantations, especially the disproportionate sex ratio. Women in distress, in gaol for breaches of labour contract, became easy and lucrative targets of pleasure and profit for the few relatively well-placed freed Indian men. There were reports of free men bailing women out of gaol and then engaging in sexual trafficking.[35] The plight of women with dependent small children was especially difficult. Men shunned them, unwilling or unable to share the responsibility of bringing up the children. For the first 12 months, the planters were required by law to provide rations but after that period,

> the mothers, unassisted by husbands, find it impossible to put away enough money after supplying their own wants and those of their children, still too young to work. Under these circumstances, these women are prone to resort to means of livelihood which render them independent of the employment secured them by indenture, and, moreover, result in their becoming unfit for it.[36]

They were then classified as confirmed non-workers unable to earn a wage and as a result drifted into hospitals, gaols and places of prostitution. Sympathetic officials soon realised the need to provide additional support for dependents of indentured labourers beyond the mandatory first year, but the economy-minded planters resisted and the revenue-conscious government did not insist.

Indian husbands and fathers themselves were not above prostituting their wives and daughters to supplement the pittance they received as wages. The Agent General of Immigration described the system of exploitation thus:

> A man and woman will agree to live together, the woman contributing to the man's means by ordinary labour, and, too often, by the prostitution of her person. Matters go on this way until, owing probably to her contracting some loathsome disease, the man finds her no longer a profitable investment. She is then invariably cast adrift, without a proper share of their joint earnings, and often penniless, sometimes with the additional burden of children.[37]

Sometimes the greed went too far, and the women paid with their lives. Hugh Tinker describes the case of a young girl, Surumi, who was married to different men four times by her father before being offered to a young Brahman, Ram Sundar. Still unsatisfied, the father took his daughter back and sold her to another man, Lal Bahadur. Outraged, Sundar and a friend ended the trafficking by murdering Surumi, her child and husband as well as her parents.[38]

Infant Mortality

Perhaps the most distressing aspect of plantation life in the 1880s and 1890s was the 'ghastly' mortality rate among the indentured labourers, especially their children. Overall mortality among the labourers remained around 3.5 per cent in the 1880s and around 2.7 per cent annually in the 1890s.[39] Infant mortality constituted the bulk of the total Indian mortality rates: 61.8 per cent in 1903; 56.6 per cent in 1904 and 57.6 per cent in 1906.[40]Within the non-adult category, it was children under one year of age who contributed the most to the mortality statistics. In fact, about 20 per cent of the new-born infants died shortly after birth as Table 1[41] shows.

Tablel
Children of Indentured Parents Dying in the First Year of Birth

Year	Births	Deaths	Rate (%)
1896	264	52	19.7
1897	292	62	21.2
1898	289	49	16.9
1899	297	58	19.5
1900	271	56	20.7
1901	304	60	19.7
1902	469	84	17.9

The major killers of children varied in their devastation over time but they invariably included premature birth, congenital syphilis and debility, enteritis, bronchitis and bronco-pneumonia, diarrhoea and dysentery.[42]The high infant mortality statistics attracted public as well as official attention. But instead of examining conditions in plantation life and work that contributed to the high figures, the immigration officials returned to the familiar terrain, this time blaming the indentured parents for their 'carelessness, indifference and ignorance' which, they suggested, were the major causes of infant deaths. Later, however, the more thoughtful ones included 'debility and want of proper nourishment of the mother' as a contributory factor.[43] CSR officials predictably disagreed, accusing the Indian mothers of 'deliberate neglect of their children in order to obtain time off work'.[44] But the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Hirsche, expressed an opinion that was more in tune with the reality. The CSR officers 'allow their zeal to render their judgement obscure in these matters', he wrote: 'Of course some women may be negligent in performing their duties as mothers but this may often arise from ignorance and from the little I have seen, it appears to me that maternal instinct in the coolie is as well developed as it is in any other race'.[45]

In fact, the underlying causes of infant mortality rested squarely on the demands and pressures of plantation life. Sanitation around the plantation lines was often appalling. In many areas, an inadequate supply of clean water forced the indentured labourers to drink river water, and this was a direct cause of diarrhoea and dysentery.[46] Old, retired women substituted for trained midwives in often poorly equipped plantation hospitals. Employers were required to give maternity leave of up to 2 months before birth and 2 to 3 months afterwards, but this practice was not always observed.[47]During the period of leave, the mother was not provided milk or rations which directly led to malnutrition and improper feeding of the infant. In straitened circumstances themselves, the indentured labourers found it difficult to supplement the infants' diet. Cow milk (an obvious alternative) was generally unobtainable or very expensive because there were no plantations on which it was possible to graze cattle, at least in the early years.[48] Financial reasons as well as the unavailability of nursery facilities in the lines often forced working mothers to take their infants into the field and unwittingly expose them to the 'inclemency of the weather'. The humid conditions in the Rewa and Navua deltas (in the wet zone of Fiji) were the main cause of respiratory ailment among infants of indentured labourers. Pressure of work and lack of time prevented the parents from reporting the sickness until the child was beyond all chances of recovery. In view of all this, the CSR charge is hardly credible. Dr. Hirsche wrote eloquently:

> Here [on the plantations] we find little or none of what the coolie reckons comfort. The pair have to be up at grey dawn every morning save Sundays and very shortly have to trudge off a long way to their work in any kind of weather and if they have a suckling infant it must be taken too as it cannot be left with the usual old women who look after a few older children while their parents are at work. An employer often complains that the women suckle their infants too long and that they could be left behind in the lines much sooner than is usually done. These gentlemen forget that these people have no other means of providing suitable nourishment for their children.[49]

Work

Plantation work was relentless and demanding, digging, planting, dredging, harvesting and repairing machines all year round. The majority of the indentured labourers came from an agricultural and labouring background in India, and for them, therefore, field work was not a novel experience. What was unique about plantation labour in Fiji was the absence of any respite from the relentless pace of work, and harsh discipline for even trivial breaches of the labour contract. The infrequency of redress and the absence of the normal comforts of settled life such as the support of family, kinsmen, caste and religion made the suffering more unbearable. The wage was fixed for 5 years, taking no account of the increase in the cost of living or the wage earned by free labour. Moreover, the government chose the employer for the indentured labourers and these could not be changed except in exceptional circumstances. The indentured labourers themselves and scholars who have written about them are agreed that indenture was, indeed, a dehumanising experience. Indians called it *narak* which means hell.[50]

A major cause of friction in the first two decades of indenture in Fiji revolved around the question of overtasking. The contract the labourers signed in India offered the option of either time or task work. But soon after the introduction of Indians in 1879, the planters switched to task work without the option of time work.[51]This change does not seem to have been reported to India nor in any way brought to the attention of the prospective recruits. A daily task, in theory, was the amount of work an able-bodied worker could accomplish in 6 hours of steady labour. In practice, however, tasks were set by overseers who were, for all intents and purposes, 'the sole judge of the fair limits of the task work'.[52] Moreover, tasks were set on the basis of what a few *hand-picked* men could accomplish in a day's work.[53] Indentured workers complained bitterly and even struck work against overtasking in the Rewa region in the 1880s,[54] but often to no avail. Not surprisingly, they found it impossible to complete the allocated task. In the Rewa delta in 1885, men were able to complete only 78.4 per cent of the tasks while women only 62 per cent.[55]In the early years, non-completion of work meant no pay at all, even for the amount done, the argument being that any payment for incomplete work would encourage idlers. This quickly reduced many indentured labourers to indebtedness and drove some women into prostitution. The Immigration Department officials predictably saw the plight of women in a different light. They argued—and their views prevailed in the end—that the indentured women actually 'prefer[red] the easier and more remunerative channel of wealth open to them, to the more irksome pursuit of manual labour'.[56] The situation became so desperate in the 1890s that the government was finally forced to move against the planters and pass legislation requiring payment proportionate to the amount of work completed.[57]

Unsatisfactory attendance at work by the labourers was a major complaint by the planters and this problem frequently had to be resolved in court. Table 2[58] presents evidence of the extent of absence and earnings of labourers for the decade between 1893 and 1902. As can be seen, attendance by male labourers remained over 80 per cent but for the females it seldom reached the three quarters mark. About a quarter of them did not work because of sickness, holidays, bad weather and pregnancy. Sickness was a bigger cause of non-attendance at work among women than among men, as Table 3 shows.[59] This problem sparked off a debate in Fiji among the planters and the Immigration officials. The manager of Tamanua plantation in Navua echoed the feelings of his fellow employers: 'The want of health and vigour among the immigrants', he wrote, was caused by 'the poor physique and constitutional condition of the people when they arrive in the colony'. Fiji's indentured emigrants, it was widely believed (and in some quarters still is), were the 'sweepings of gaols and brothels' of India and the 'refuse of other colonial depots after the requisitions of other colonies are satisfied'.[60]

Table 2
Comparative Statement of Work, Absence and Earnings, 1893-1902

MALE	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902
% attendance at work	84	85	87	89	88	88	88	88	87	88
% of days lost through sickness, holidays, etc.	8	8	8	7	9	8	7	8	10	9
% of days lost through unlawful absence	7	6	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	3
Av. daily earnings per working day (pennies)	10	11	10	11	11	11	11	11	11	11
Av. daily earning per day of actual work	12	12	12	12	12	13	13	13	13	13

FEMALES	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902
% attendance at work	69	69	71	75	71	72	71	74	76	75
% of days lost through sickness, holidays, etc.	24	24	24	22	26	25	26	24	22	23
% of days lost through unlawful absence	7	6	5	3	2	3	3	3	2	1
Av. daily earnings per working day (pennies)	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
Av. daily earning per day of actual work	8	8	7	8	8	7	8	7	7	7

Table 3
Absence at Work due to Sickness

	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908
Males (%)	5	5	3	7	6	6
Females (%)	9	8	9	9	9	9

But A.C. Stewart, Fiji's Emigration Agent in Calcutta, the officer in charge of the overall recruitment operations in Northern India, produced evidence that showed that strict recruiting procedures were followed and that a sizeable number of the unfit recruits were rejected before shipment. Instead, he pointed to conditions on Fiji plantations that contributed to illness. Even if the planters' complaints were grounded in fact, it still remained to be explained, Stewart argued, why 79 per cent of the men were able to earn merely 8 pennies a day and 63 per cent of the women only 5 pennies.[61] Henry Anson, the sympathetic Agent General of Immigration squeezed out of Fiji by the economy-minded government of Sir John Bates Thurston, had made a similar point a decade earlier.[62] The fact was that throughout the period of indenture, the Indian labourers were seldom able to make the statutory amount of pay that the contract they had signed in India had offered. Therein lay the deception of indenture: the potential recruits did not know, and were not told, that the pay that they were offered was the *maximum* that they could make under *ideal* conditions. And ideal conditions never obtained on the Fiji plantations.

The history of indenture in Fiji was a history of both achievement and wreckage. Most indentured labourers survived the ordeal of 5 years of servitude, and many succeeded through sheer determination. Historians of indenture, under the influence of Hugh Tinker's revisionist studies,[63] have portrayed a starkly negative picture of the indenture experience throughout the world and have explicitly equated indenture with slavery, its predecessor. It is not necessary to embrace this view in its entirety to underline the point that indenture was indeed a harsh experience. But all too often it is forgotten that the benefits and hardships of indenture were not distributed equitably across the indentured population. Women, it has been shown here, generally suffered greater hardships than men. They shouldered the dual burden of plantation work, the double standards of morality, and carried the blame for many of the ills of indenture. To be sure, they were not the chaste heroines of Indian mythology that the Indian nationalists made them out to be, but neither, on the other hand, were they the immoral 'doe rabbits' of the overseers' accounts. Kunti's private cry was, in a very real sense, a protest against the veil of dishonour that Indian women wore, or rather were forced to wear, during their indenture on Fiji plantations.

Endnotes

I am grateful to Professor Doris Ladd of the Department of History, University of Hawaii at Manoa, and Caroline Hadfield of Honolulu for their helpful comments and advice. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Indian indentured women of Fiji, among whom was my own grandmother.

1. The official documentation on Kunti's case can be found in Minute Paper(M.P.) 8779/13 and M.P. 6609/14. Totaram Sanadhya provides the perspective of a contemporary observer in his *Fiji Dvip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh* (My Twenty One Years in the Fiji Islands) (Varanasi: Privately published, 4th edn., 1973).
2. *Bharat Mitra*, 8 May 1914 and *Leader*, 13 August 1913. Translations are found in the files cited above.
3. K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants. A history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 182.
4. *Leader*, 13 August 1913.
5. R.E. Enthoven, C.I.E., I.C.S., Secretary to the Government of India, to Colonial Secretary, Fiji, 10 June 1914, M.P. 6609/14. An earlier request was sent on 17 September 1913.
6. A. Montgomery to Colonial Secretary, 8 January 1914, M.P. 8779/13.
7. *Ibid* ., p. 98.
8. C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth: Privately published, 1918), Appendix, p. 6.
9. Walter Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1969), p. 73.
10. Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (Suva: World University Service, 1981), p. 11.
11. See 'Veil of Dishonour' in this volume for an extended treatment.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Annual Report of the Protector of Immigrants, Trinidad* (1895), par. 19. See also the *Report* for 1893, par.20. The situation was much the same in Fiji. For an analysis of Trinidadian indenture, see studies in John La Guerre (ed.), *Calcutta to Caroni. The East Indians of Trinidad* (Port of Spain: Longman, 1974).
14. See 'Veil of Dishonour'.
15. Naidu, *Violence Indenture, op. cit., p. 71.*
16. Quotes from *Fiji Annual Reports on Immigration* for these years.
17. Fiji Colonial Secretary Office (C.S.O.) files 5079/99.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. See Ordinance no. 1 of 1891, Part VII.
21. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants, op. cit., p.* 105; see also Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone, op. cit,* for more graphic descriptions.

[22] Ahmed Ali (ed.), *The Indenture Experience in Fiji* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1979), p. xx.

[23] C.S.O. 746/99.

[24] Ali, *The Indenture Experience, op. cit.*, p.xix.

[25] Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji, op. cit.*, p. 34.

[26] C.S.O. 1050/86.

[27] C.S.O. 5730/97.

[28] C.S.O. 2941/97.

[29] C.S.O. 1317/97; C.S.O. 443/13; C.S.O. 2555/93.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] C.S.O. 3453/08.

[32] C.S.O. 5079/99.

[33] See *Gillion, Fiji's Indian Migrants, op. cit.*, p. 107.

[34] C.S.O. 589/89.

[35] *Fiji Annual Report on Immigration* (1885), p. 13.

[36] *Annual Report* (1887), p 5.

[37] C.S.O. 589/89.

[38] Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery. The Export of Indian Labour Abroad, 1830-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 204.

[39] *Annual Reports* (1887), p. 14; (1895), p. 11.

[40] *Annual Report* (1906), p. 17.

[41] *Annual Report* (1902), p. 18.

[42] *Annual Reports* (1890), p. 1 1; (1891), p. 32; (1898), p. 15; (1904), p. 17; (1906), p.7.

[43] *Annual Reports* (1888), p. 5; (1889), p. 10; (1891), p. 12.

[44] C.S.O. 3121/93.

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] C.S.O. 487/96.

[47] See C.S.O. 7395/10.

[48] *Annual Report* (1889), p.10.

[49] C S.O. 3121/93.

[50] See the works of Gillion, Tinker and Ali cited above.

[51] *Annual Report* (1882), par. 41.

[52] C.S.O. 1955/92.

[53] *Ibid; Annual Report* (1886), p. 15.

[54] C.S.0. 511/86.

[55] *Annual Report* (1885).

[56] *Annual Report (1884),* par. 44.

[57] *Indian Immigration Amendment Ordinance,* XVII (1887).

[58] Table 2 is compiled from figures in *Annual Reports* (1897'), p. 28; (1899), p. 35; (1902), p. 36. The pattern continued. See the *Report* for 1907, p. 22.

[59] *Annual Report* (1912); p. 15.

[60] C.S.O. 2777/95; *Annual Reports* 1893), p. 29; (1894), p. 9.

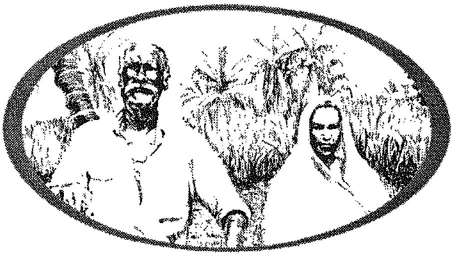
[61] C.S.O. 7/97.

[62] C.S.O. 3481/87.

[63] See Tinker, *A New System of Slavery,* op cit., Ali, *Indenture Experience in Fiji,* op cit.; and studies in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

On the Waidoi Rubber Plantation. The women are carrying latex, drawn from the trees, to be treated and turned into sheets of pure India-rubber for export.

chapter 12



Veil of Dishonour

Everything that would be recognised as Hindu has departed, and with this, the religious spirit has departed also. The yearly round of sacred festivals, which form so much of the brightness of a Hindu woman's life in India, is confined to a couple of days, of which the greatest is no Hindu festival at all.

C. F. Andrews

Between 1884 and 1925 over 300 Indian immigrants in Fiji committed suicide.[1] Most were indentured labourers brought to the islands between 1879 and 1916.[2] Suicide, as Table 1 shows,[3] was a relatively minor cause of death among the Fiji Indians. From the turn of the century to the end of indenture in 1920, it accounted, on the average, for only 5% of all deaths of indentured Indians; even at its peak, suicides never claimed more than 0.2% of the total adult Indian population in any one given year. Yet the suicides attracted wide attention within Fiji as well as in India. This was mainly due to the well-publicized fact that the Fiji Indian suicide rate during the first decade and a half of this century was the highest among all Indian labour importing colonies in Africa and the West Indies and much higher than in India itself. Thus in 1900, while the suicide rate in India varied between 0.046 per thousand in Madras and 0.054 per thousand in the United Provinces, the two principal regions of Indian indentured labour supply throughout the world, among Fiji Indians it reached 0.780 per thousand. Ten years later it climbed to 0.831 per thousand.[4] The suicide rate among Indian immigrants in Trinidad and Jamaica in the same period, on the other hand, averaged 0.4 per thousand, and in British Guiana 0.1 per thousand.[5] These statistics made a serious moral indictment of the indenture system in Fiji and provided, according to K. L. Gillion, 'one of the most important arguments' for the anti-indenture activists in India and elsewhere in their battle to abolish the indenture system altogether.[6]

The majority of those who committed suicides were males. Of the 291 suicides entered in the *Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants*,[7] 259 were males and only 32 females. The suicide rate among adult men was twice that among women: 0.14 per thousand to 0.07 per thousand.[8] This glaring statistical disproportion, as well as the uncommon spectacle of men rather than women committing suicide, as was the pattern in India, reflected what for most contemporary observers of indenture at the turn of this century as well as modern scholars,[9] was the primary cause of the Fiji Indian suicides: the persistent paucity of women on the plantations. Even as late as 1912, after over 30 years of indenture, the proportion of indentured adult Indian females to 100 Indian males in Fiji was only 43.17.[10] The intense competition for the women among the indentured men eager to put down roots in their new home, the observers asserted, provided the main reason for male suicides in Fiji. A wife, wrote C. F. Andrews, the Indian nationalist sympathiser, after an independent fact-finding tour of Fiji in 1916, 'is a matter for huckstering and bargaining, for fighting and suicides, for jealousy and murder. The proportion of murders, suicides, and other crimes in this country, arising out of sexual relations is nothing less than appalling'.[11] The Agent General of Immigration, Fiji's top colonial official responsible for the protection and welfare of the Indian indentured labourers, agreed. He wrote in 1909 that the 'number of cases in which the cause of suicides appears attributable to sexual jealousy is as usual large. It is connected with the disproportion of the sexes at present existing on most plantations and the consequent facility with which women abandon partners to whom they are bound by no legal ties for those who offer better inducement'.[12] Unable to obtain or, worse still, keep their women, who supposedly exploited their sexuality to promote their own material interests, the men—so the argument ran—descended into despondency and melancholia and committed suicide. Or, alternatively, they murdered their women first and then took their own lives. Between 1885 and 1920, 96 indentured immigrants in Fiji were murdered of whom 68 were women and only 28 men.[13] The main cause of the murder of the indentured women was their alleged infidelity which is regarded as one of the most reprehensible misdeeds in Indian society and is punishable by death.[14] The plantation lines where the indentured labourers were housed, Andrews heard, were like a poultry yard of quickly shifting loyalties, indiscriminate, promiscuous sexuality and general moral collapse, and this description, he wrote, was 'painfully accurate of much that we were obliged to see and hear'.[15]

Table 1
Main Causes of Death in the Fiji Indian Indentured Community, 1900-1915

Causes	1900	1901	1902	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	Total	%
Anaemia	4	8	-	-	-	6	2	5	4	5	2	7	8	9	9	69	1.6
Diarrhoea	3	8	7	3	-	-	-	8	15	-	9	-	-	-	-	53	1.3
Dysentery	10	22	12	17	39	52	28	24	28	83	69	63	55	24	20	546	13.1
Tuberculosis	19	18	17	9	5	15	20	5	16	-	68	72	55	67	27	414	10.0
Syphilis	2	3	3	2	6	4	7	5	1	11	4	4	4	2	-	58	1.3
Debility	2	3	1	1	3	12	1	2	6	13	6	7	-	-	-	57	1.3
Respiratory ailments	12	10	17	27	52	35	24	14	5	104	18	15	22	15	21	391	9.4
Circulatory ailments	3	7	3	12	9	2	4	13	5	18	10	24	20	13	21	164	4.0
Digestive ailments	10	10	13	32	15	29	30	12	11	47	29	27	25	16	10	316	7.6
Suicides	8	6	11	7	14	8	17	12	8	11	18	23	22	12	24	201	5.1
Other	67	80	57	73	79	90	134	193	148	183	149	189	161	142	137	1882	45.3
Total	140	175	141	183	222	253	267	293	247	476	382	431	372	300	269	4151	100.0
Total Indent. adult pop.	4731	6618	7170	8591	8684	9350	10182	10255	10374	10961	12526	13167	13617	13074	11922	-	
Mortality Rate (%)	2.95	2.64	1.96	2.13	2.56	2.7	2.62	2.86	2.38	4.34	3.04	3.2	2.73	2.29	2.25		

Note: 'Other' includes injuries, violence, various diseases and unspecified causes.

So widely held was this view among males of all classes and races that it was often assumed, without supporting empirical evidence, that there was direct causal relationship between suicide and sexual jealousy. Indeed, the sexual jealousy argument exercised such a pervasive influence that men charged with the murder of their wives sometimes even had their death sentence commuted to life imprisonment.[16] There is no reason to doubt that sexual jealousy, arising out of a disproportionate sex ratio, did play a part. But the uncritical application of a blanket generalization, created and sustained by men, has led to the neglect of material that suggests other causes and motives for suicide—factors which point to the dislocation caused by emigration and to the structure of the plantation system itself. It is argued here that the emphasis on sexual jealousy as the main reason for Indian suicides is misleading; sexual jealousy was a symptom rather than the cause of the problems that bedevilled indenture. Instead, it is suggested that it was the disturbance of the 'integrative institutions' of society—family, marriage, caste, kinship and religion—that was the underlying cause of suicide and other ills afflicting the Indian indentured population in Fiji. Indirectly, this paper contributes to the debate on the nature of the indenture experience in Fiji, resurrected in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a by-product of the centennial celebration of the arrival of Indians in the islands. It also emphasises the need to examine critically the rhetorical 'indenture as slavery' argument initiated by Hugh Tinker's recent revisionist studies.[17] Indenture was undeniably a harsh and brutalizing experience, but it was not uniformly so for all segments of the indentured population.

An abnormal sex ratio was inherent in the indenture system under which the Indian immigrants were brought to Fiji.[18] During the first phase of indentured emigration before the 1860s there were few specific regulations governing the recruitment and shipment of indentured emigrants, especially with respect to the sex ratio in the emigrating indentured population. The Government of India was content to let the laws of supply and demand govern recruitment of indentured labour. It changed this policy around 1870 with the advent of the second phase of indentured emigration. The passage of comprehensive new legislation, the Emigration Act XXII of 1882, signalled a greater willingness on the part of the Government of India to involve itself in the supervision of emigration matters. Among other things, it now insisted that in the case of all the colonies except Mauritius (which already had a large resident Indian population), 40 females should accompany 100 males on each shipment leaving India. The Government of India was prompted to act on this issue after persistent reports of deteriorating social and moral conditions among its Indian subjects living in the colonies. Complementing this concern were requests from some colonies, such as British Guiana, for more family migration to create a locally settled pool of dependable labour. It was hoped that the emergence of a local Indian population would discourage time-expired immigrants from exercising their right to an optional free return passage back to India after 10 years of residence in the colonies. Labourers with families and a stake in the colony were likely to be a more passive labour force, not prepared to jeopardize their already precarious situation. Recruiters in India complained of the difficulty of obtaining the requisite number of indentured women, and even some Fiji planters protested, unable or unwilling to look beyond their annual balance sheets. However, the Government of India remained adamant and the stipulated quota was always met.[19] Without such determined intervention, problems caused by the disparity of the sexes on the colonial plantations would have been graver than they already were. The fixed quota for women was a salutary move unparalleled in any other contemporary scheme of labour migration .

For most colonial officials, problems arising out of sexual imbalance in the indentured population were greatly aggravated by the supposed 'immoral' character of the Indian indentured women.[20] This was a subject upon which there was wide consensus among men of all races and classes. Nothing could be done, wrote the Fiji Agent General of Immigration in 1902, 'to suppress an evil which springs from a deficiency of a woman'.[21] Walter Gill, an Australian overseer who saw the last days of indenture in Fiji, wrote that the Hindu woman was 'as joyously amoral as a doe rabbit. She took her lovers as a ship takes rough seas; surging up to one who would smother her, then tossing him aside, thirsting for the next. In the strong cruel light of the tropics, the elfin promise of her said: 'Stop me and buy one'.[22] Andrews expressed moral indignation: 'The Hindu woman in this country is like a rudderless vessel with its masts broken being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand. She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so'.[23] An indentured male labourer, echoing a widely held prejudice, concurred, recounting: 'Our women have lost all shame; they change their husbands as they change their dress'.[24] Indeed, so low was their esteem for the indentured women that, writes Chandra Jayawardena, 'many regarded marriage with women they met in Fiji as a temporary convenience they would disown when they returned to India'.[25] Most, of course, did not return and in time temporary liaisons of convenience became permanent arrangements.

The prevailing stereotypes of the social origins of the indentured women sustained these derogatory views. It was widely held, and in some prejudiced circles still is, that the women who came to Fiji were prostitutes or others who had fallen in social esteem or lived on the fringes of rural Indian society. Invariably, the view went, they were from the lowest strata of Indian society, used to poverty and ill treatment and lax in their moral and sexual standards. These views are so exaggerated as to be untruthful.[26] The fact was that the indentured women came from *all* strata of rural Indian society and from all major castes, high and low. Thus, 4.1% were Brahmans, 9% Kshattriyas, 34.1% middling castes, 29.1% lower castes, 2.8% tribals and 16.8% Muslims.[27] Further, either because of desertion by their husbands, widowhood, poverty or an unceasing round of domestic turmoil, large numbers of women were leaving their homes in the depressed districts of the eastern United Provinces (UP) to seek employment elsewhere. In 1901 women constituted 56% of the entire UP emigrant population in Bengal, and 40% of the UP indentured population in the Assam tea gardens.[28] Fifty four per cent of Fiji's female indentured population had already been uprooted before they were recruited, a third of them as members of nuclear or joint families.[29] How many of them were prostitutes? This question will never be answered satisfactorily. Andrews estimated about 20% of the women to be of 'bad character' though he does not tell us how he arrived at this figure or what he meant by bad character. He further ventured the opinion that 'the number of prostitutes recruited [for Fiji] must have been . . . perhaps in excess of Natal, or elsewhere', and went on to suggest that this probably explained why the Fiji Indians had a higher suicide rate than expatriate Indian communities elsewhere.[30] Gillion remarks more aptly there were few professional prostitutes in the emigrating population 'for these had no incentive to emigrate'.[31] Emigration was, in fact, considered an 'honourable alternative' to prostitution.

The Euro-Australasian view of the indentured women, and indeed the indentured population generally, is at least explicable in the light of the prevailing racial ideologies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Indian indentured labourers were simply categorized as a people 'of emotional temperament (who) have low moral standards, [are] prone to trickery, and under certain excitement to crimes of violence, even under the discipline of s continuous labour'.[32] The uncharitable Indian males' view of the indentured women is more complex. It was partly a manifestation of their low social self esteem as people and partly a reflection of their failure to resurrect their traditionally dominant role on the plantations and in the wider Fijian society. Frequently, indentured Indian men evinced a proprietorial attitude toward 'their' women and some even saw their wives as their chattels. Unable to have their way, some men resorted to bizarre behaviour. In 1909 a man disfigured a woman's face by cutting her nose and cheek because the woman, whose husband had been dead five weeks, refused to live with him.[33] Another murdered a woman in anger and frustration because he was unable to entice her away from her husband whom he perceived as a 'mere lad'.[34] In 1915 a frustrated husband brutally attacked his young wife of 10 years of age when he was unable to take her away from her parents, and later committed suicide. This case led the governor to conclude aptly that 'unless we know Hindu laws and customs, and the Indian mind, it is impossible to understand'the cause of such senseless violence in the Indian community'.[35]

An important part of the problem was that the indentured women in Fiji were expected by Indian men to follow the age-old ideals of Indian womanhood: silent acceptance of fate, glorification of motherhood and virginity, deference to male authority and, above all, worship of the husband. Tulsidas's *Ramcharitramanas*, which defined the spiritual universe of the orthodox Hindus, and was the most popular religious text on the plantations, provides a clear picture of the dependence of the wife on the husband:

> My Lord, the mother, father and son,
> Receive their lots by merit won;
> The brother and the sister find
> The portions to their deeds assigned.
> The wife alone what'er await,
> Must share on earth her husband's fate;
> So now the King's command which sends
> Thee to the wild, to me extends.
> The wife can find no refuge, none,
> In father, mother, self or son:
> Both here, and when they vanish hence,
> Her husband is her sole defence.[36]

The women's subordinate role, sanctioned by the sages of Indian civilization as well as the religious scriptures, was reinforced by their early marriage[37] and the patrilineal and patriarchal structure of agrarian Indian society. Men owned both the means of production as well as the labour of their women. But Fiji was not India; emigration and indenture dramatically re-structured the women's position and thence their relationship with men.

The institutions which enforced women's subjection, such as kinship networks, had little jurisdiction in the domestic affairs of the indentured population. Indenture promoted a new egalitarian ethos and a freer society that respected individual initiative. Women were employed as individual labourers and were thus cash wage earners in their own right. Control over their own hard-earned income gave the women a measure of power and economic and social independence to fashion their own individual destiny. And, not surprisingly, when circumstances demanded, they were not afraid to leave their husbands. Ammakanna, who had left her quarrelsome husband, told the official investigating her husband's suicide on 30 January 1917: 'We were married five years ago. We had quarrelled constantly. He had complained constantly of my shortcomings as a housekeeper. He placed a rope on the beam of our room a fortnight ago when I expostulated with him'.[38] There were others who left with their share of the earnings and jewellery when domestic life became constantly embroiled in tension and torment, or when their own lives were endangered.[39]

Were indentured women really as disregarding of the sanctity of marriage and family and other cherished institutions of traditional Indian society as their male critics alleged them to be? The women's perspective is absent in the written records where, for the most part, their faces are shrouded by a veil of dishonour drawn by men. Even the oral evidence is tinged with bias against women. Hence, any approximation of their views can be gained only by an assessment of the conditions which confronted women in the colony. The indentured women were totally at the mercy of the overseers, most of whom were young unmarried white males, and the Indian *sirdars* (foremen) who supervised their daily work. They allocated the tasks and frequently harassed, even assaulted, women who refused their sexual advances,[40] especially on remote and infrequently inspected plantations and others under corrupt management. Further, the indentured women had the freedom neither to refuse a partner chosen for them by the employer nor the solicitations of influential men living in the plantation lines. As a small and generally powerless minority, they had little choice to be 'moral'.

There were other factors which compounded the women's weak position. The colonial government did not recognize traditional Indian marriages conducted by Hindu and Muslim priests until after the turn of the century. The aggrieved parties, both males and females, thus could not have recourse to a court of law to sue for separation or a fair settlement, for example, where marriages were conducted in the traditional manner. In the Indian community itself, women's chances of a sympathetic hearing were undermined at the outset, given the prevailing climate of opinion about their moral character.

Placing the blame for marital instability on women does not take into account the role of certain traditional Indian institutions which were transplanted on the plantations and which occasionally aggravated the problem. For instance, not all marital relationships were monogamous. Among some castes in India, the institution of polyandry was socially sanctioned and practised widely, and it was resurrected on some of the plantations, partially to cope with the added pressure of the scarcity of women. Extra-marital relations and the practice of a woman and her children passing from the household of one man to another also existed on some plantations.[41] Sometimes, out of duress or greed, some men even forced their wives to have sexual relations with other men, especially the *sirdar.* In Tavua an investigation into a double case of murder and suicide revealed the common practice, or so the investigating official thought, of the 'husband [being] a consenting [initiating?] party to the wife prostituting herself'.[42] Blinded by disillusion, the men seldom questioned their own morality or that of the social system under which they lived; instead, they blamed the women when things turned sour. But ultimately, the women's selfhood was seriously assaulted, as has been said generally of women in such circumstances, 'not just by the actions, hostilities, or indifference of men, but by the institutions of law, invested as they were with the majesty of the state, the formidability of the male jurists and lawyers, and the unbroken faith of the public'.[43]

Sexual jealousy became from the very start a catch-all phrase to account for most suicides even where the motives were not clearly ascertainable. Thus, an official investigating a suicide in 1889 commented: 'I can form no idea of the deceased's reason for committing suicide. Probably he had none unless his two women were annoying him'.[44] In 1904, out of a total of eight suicides, in only two were women held responsible as the main cause. In the rest 'actual motives are not apparent', but the official went on to assert nevertheless that 'they are, however, generally attributable to quarrels and jealousy arising out of sex relationships'.[45] In 1912 the investigation of 23 cases of suicide revealed varied motives, but 'it is probable that in the majority of the cases, sexual jealousy was the principal cause'.[46]

The accuracy of such sweeping generalizations is difficult to ascertain because suicides were so poorly investigated. Two typical entries in the *Annual Report* for 1912 are as follows: 'Umrao, registered no. 40428, indentured to Rarawai, deserted after murderous attack on wife: body found hanging in the bush', and 'Dasary Virasami, registered no. 18241, Etoko, good worker, no cause ascribed—recently arrived on plantation'.[47]Fortunately a few cases were more fully documented either because of the circumstances surrounding the suicide or because of the diligence of the local officials. These are available in the archival files, and they give us reason to treat sweeping generalizations about the role of sexual jealousy with some caution. The two following cases underline this point. At the preliminary enquiry into the suicide of Ramdin (on Viti plantation in 1909), sexual jealousy was presented as the main cause.[48] The Inspector of Immigrants concluded that the reason for the suicide 'was the conduct of the woman with whom he [the deceased] was cohabiting who intended to leave him for a man named Telhu Singh'. The *sirdar* was able to coerce a sufficient number of witnesses to corroborate this view. The real reason, however, was quite different. The Stipendiary Magistrate ended his detailed enquiry with the conclusion that Ramdin had committed suicide because of the *sirdar's* 'abuse and threats uttered on the day of the suicide of a thrashing with a belt when he returned to the lines, as a consequence of which the deceased, who had only been some six weeks in the country, was frightened to return to the lines and at the close of the day, hung himself'. There was no sexual jealousy involved; Ramdin's wife, Gaura, firmly denied the allegation that she had frequently quarrelled with her husband or that she intended to live with Telhu Singh. 'I had no wish to live with any other man' was her simple testimony to the enquiry. Telhu Singh himself denied ever being intimate with Gaura. The witnesses who had earlier corroborated the *sirdar's* account confessed that they had lied because they were threatened by the *sirdar* and feared reprisal. One witness recalled the *sirdar's* threat to the effect that 'two or more salas [bastards?] will commit suicide also [if they reported]: you will be no more loss to Mr. Hutchins than his pubic hairs'.

The other example is the suicide of Biram Enkayya.[49] The investigating official was uncertain about the motive but noted nevertheless that Enkayya was 'a somewhat miserable person, often laid up with sores on his feet. He was usually working with women'. However this version was contradicted by a fellow worker who testified that the *sirdar* had beaten Enkayya 'with a stick about a fathom long. He fell down and the overseer came and told him to keep quiet and not to cry'. Hurt and depressed about the future, Enkayya hanged himself. How typical are these accounts about widespread violence by those in authority we do not know from the available records, but in the general context of the indenture experience in Fiji, they are likely to be more than merely isolated incidents. At least one official noted:

> Assaults on indentured immigrants by persons in authority are far too numerous; an immigrant, especially a new arrival, is easily intimidated, and may have great difficulty in conducting his case. Several suicides were reported during 1905 of indentured immigrants. In most cases they were recent arrivals, and it appeared that in more than one case, ill-usage by a sirdar was alleged as the cause of suicide.[50]

The disproportionate sex ratio on the plantations did contribute to marital instability, but emphasis on this factor distracts attention from other aspects of plantation life that contributed to the problem. New evidence from hitherto unused sources suggests other reasons and motives for suicides. The basic raw data on Indian deaths in Fiji is available in the Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants mentioned above. All the statistics presented here were extracted from this source. The serial numbers of the deceased immigrants were used to trace their Emigration Passes,[51] documents that contain the most comprehensive data on their social and demographic background. Using these two sources together, it became possible for the first time to compile the life histories of the deceased immigrants, from the moment they left their villages to the moment they committed suicide. Presented below are the main results of the analysis of these sources.

Table2 , based on figures in the Register of Deaths, provides a decennial breakdown of suicides in Fiji.

Table 2
Decennial Breakdown of Suicides in Fiji

Year	Number	% of Total Suicides	%/Indian Pop.
1884-1890	16	5.5	0.083
1891-1900	36	12.4	0.93
1901-1910	97	33.3	0.10
1911-1920	130	44.7	0.15
1921-1925	12	44.1	-
	291	100.0	

It is clear that the bulk of the suicides (82.1 %) were committed after the turn of the century. At first glance this trend appears surprising. By 1900 indenture had been in existence in Fiji for over two decades. Improvements had taken place in the working and living conditions on the plantations. The terrible mortality rates of the 1890s were slowing down although not completely checked, and the worst disease-ridden days of the 1890s were over. Yet the suicide rate climbed to unprecedented heights. These increases were not the result of a sudden acceleration of sexual jealousy on the plantations but were, instead, caused by the arrival of South Indian indentured immigrants after the turn of the century. For reasons discussed later, they committed suicide in numbers far out of proportion to their population size in the colony. Between 1911 and 1920, for example, South Indians accounted for 56.9 % of all the Indian suicides.

Most of the immigrants who committed suicide were in the prime of life, as Table 3 shows.[52]

Table 3
Sex, Age and Suicide

	Age unknown	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60
Male	13	24	165	46	10	1
Female	2	6	14	7	3	-
Total	15	30	179	53	13	1

Moreover, over a half (161 or 55.3%) of all suicides were males who had left as single immigrants from India. Because few depot marriages occurred in Calcutta or Madras or on the voyage,[53] it is reasonable to assume that they arrived in Fiji single, and that their first few years on the plantations would have been spent as single labourers. Only 15 of the male suicides (5.15%) had emigrated as married individuals. In the remaining 115 cases (39.52%), the marital status of the immigrants was not stated on the Emigration Pass. This could mean two things: either these men were not married which was generally the case, or they had deserted their wives or left them behind in the care of their tended family in India. But even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that these 115 cases were married individuals, the prominence that contemporary officials gave to sexual jealousy and wife-snatching remains open to debate.

It should perhaps be pointed out that the pattern of single young men, and to a lesser extent women, committing suicide when faced with unaccustomed problems in unfamiliar surroundings, without the support of family and the guiding hand of an established community, is a fairly universal one. In his classic study, *Suicide*, Durkheim suggests that the institution of family provides immunity against suicides. 'Far from dense [extended?] families being a sort of unnecessary luxury appropriate only to the rich, they are actually an indispensable staff of daily life'.[54] The actual or threatened absence of the family in the lives of deeply depressed young individuals, together with all the disorganization that emigration and indenture caused, probably aggravated the sense of 'anomie' and alienation, both conducive to suicide. This theory is supported by recent studies of suicide among immigrants in the United States. Howard I. Kushner suggests a possible correlation between migration and suicide:

> Migrants are both deserting and deserted. Migration itself may be a strategy of risk-taking pursued by some who feel particularly self-destructive. Migrants tended and tend to be people in search of self-transformation. To the extent that such a change is either restricted or impossible, the guilt for having rejected past values and rituals is intensified as the dream of self-transformation fades.[55]

The feeling of alienation, he goes on to suggest, is exacerbated where the ritual and social structures of support, which enable migrants to deal with loss, have been abandoned and are not easily replaced.

The most telling evidence against the sexual jealousy argument is the fact that the majority of the individuals who committed suicide in Fiji did so soon after arriving in the colony. As Table 4 shows,[56] three quarters of all the suicides were committed within five years of arrival in the country. Perhaps more significantly, it is interesting to note that a quarter of all the suicides took place within the first *six months* of the immigrants reaching the colony. Clearly, the first encounter with the new environment must have been a traumatic and alienating experience for many. The process of social disorganization began much earlier, on the overland journey to the embarkation depots in Calcutta and Madras; it continued on the claustrophobic sea journey that could last up to three months before the introduction of steamships after the turn of the century. On the plantations, the disruption of traditional social institutions, family life, caste affiliations, kinship patterns and religious values—all of which gave the individuals a sense of identity and security—continued. The work routine was relentless: from dawn to dusk, five and a half days a week all year round. Hard physical labour itself was not a novel experience to the immigrants, most of whom came from a labouring background. What was new was the absence of any respite from an endless round of repetitive work and an almost total lack of freedom. The sudden realization that an intended sojourn in Fiji would in all likelihood become permanent exile could have been unbearable for some immigrants. There was no possibility of escape from the five years of servitude, nor ordinarily was it possible to change one's employer. Rigid enforcement of penal sanctions for even minor breaches of the labour contract ensured compliance. Magistrates stuck to the letter, rather than the spirit, of the law, whatever the provocation, with the result that articulate employers always had the upper hand, obtaining an astonishingly high level of prosecution, in most years over 75%.[57] And, the wider social environment outside the plantations did not offer attractive prospects for relaxation or escape, which invariably ended in capture, trial, fine and an extension of indenture. The following observation is apt:

> The immigrants find themselves in small groups in a strange and very sparsely populated country. Labourers on many estates cannot during holidays or weekends exchange the monotony of their daily lives for the social attractions of an Indian town or village in the vicinity. The few Fijian villages could have no attraction for Indians, who regarded their amiable and interesting but rather primitive inhabitants as 'jungalis' (bush people).[58]

Table 4
Suicide and Time Lag

Months	Females	Males	Total	Percentage
0-6	3	62	65	22.3
7-12	3	20	23	7.9
13-18	-	20	20	6.9
19-24	3	16	19	6.9
25-30	3	16	19	6.5
31-36	4	16	20	6.9
37-42	1	9	10	3.4
43-48	2	11	13	4.6
49-54	2	14	16	5.5
55-60	1	10	11	3.8
61-72	1	15	16	5.5
9 years	2	17	19	6.5
12 years	3	20	23	7.9
Unknown	4	13	17	5.8
	32	259	291	100.0

Further, a 'free' Fiji Indian society emerging from the debris of indenture was, outside the established centres in south eastern Viti Levu, socially and geographically dispersed and primarily functional in nature, and thus not always in a position to provide cultural sustenance to the immigrants still on the plantations. For the beleaguered and the most vulnerable there were, evidently, few avenues for escape. But not all immigrants suffered equally. Those who served on smaller plantations, or were fortunate in having good managers and overseers, or found domestic and other supervisory work, generally fared better than the field labourers. Life was marginally more attractive in the more settled older plantation neighbourhoods. Certain areas gained particular notoriety. Colonial Sugar Refining Company plantations in Ba and Lautoka in western Viti Levu and Labasa in Vanua Levu were especially notorious for the ill-treatment of indentured labourers. There in 1904, for example, the percentage of prosecution for labour offences in relation to the total indentured population ranged from

25% to 42% for men and 22% to 33% for women. Infrequent inspections and rigid enforcement of penal sanctions, even for minor breaches of labour laws, were common because these were in the interest of the employers. As Gillion writes, 'The paid overseer had little latitude and prosecuted automatically since the company wanted extensions'.[59] Such a situation was naturally conducive to a greater loss of self respect and inner helplessness among the immigrants, especially those on remote, far-flung plantations. The Register of Death figures for these three areas show that they accounted altogether for 127 or 43.64% of all the Indian suicides.

Not all the different caste groups—over 200 of which were represented in the emigrating indentured population—felt the hardships of the plantation with the same intensity. Table 5[60] shows a significant, though not conclusive, correlation between the suicide rate and the caste background of the immigrants.

Table 5
Caste Background and Suicide

Group	Total Pop. Emigrating	% Females	Suicide	Rate 1000/yr
Thakur	3416	24.7	25	0.18
Brahman	1535	33.2	8	0.13
Jat	708	8.5	7	0.25
Kurmi	2307	26.3	8	0.09
Kori	1942	29.0	9	0.12
Chamar	6087	35.2	18	0.07
Ahir	4197	26.9	23	0.14
Muslims	5455	34.9	16	0.07
South Indians	13511	28.1	98	0.37

There is an appreciable difference in the suicide rate of the lower castes (Chamars) and the middling and higher castes (Jats, Brahmans and Thakurs). The internal variations within these categories—the extremely high rate of suicide among Jats and relatively low rate among Brahmans—can only be noted but not explained because of the absence of data. The broader differences between high and low castes can perhaps be explained in social and economic terms. Chamars, to take the example of the most prominent of the lower castes who emigrated to Fiji, were tanners by traditional occupation, owned little land or other property and constituted a permanent part of the large and mobile landless labouring population in rural India in the 19th century at least. They were thus no newcomers to strenuous labour, even of the most demanding type.

Occupying the lowest place in the traditional Hindu caste hierarchy, they must have found the new environment in Fiji more humane; it rewarded individual achievement instead of celebrating divinely preordained social hierarchy. The presence of a relatively large community of their caste may have helped to provide the Chamars with a sense of group identity that cushioned the effects of precipitate change. The disruption of caste and commensality rules must have been a welcome change for them. Their family life was probably more stable. Of the total female population who emigrated to Fiji from North India, the largest numbers (16%) were Chamars.[61] And finally more Chamar families emigrated: altogether 823 families or 17.8% of all indentured families leaving from Calcutta.[62]

Among higher castes, on the other hand, the process of disruption was perhaps more keenly felt. Outnumbered in an alien environment, socially and economically weak, deprived of the support of the paraphernalia of culture and religion that had buttressed their traditional position in village India, they suffered more from the cultural upheaval and change that emigration brought about. The ritual prescriptions regarding endogamy, untouchability and commensality were irrelevant or impossible to maintain in the new context. Nor was it possible to check bogus claims of high status among the lower castes. The levelling tendencies of the plantation and the realization that they shared a common destiny as 'coolies' with their lower caste compatriots was perhaps a truth more difficult for them to accept than it may have been for others. In 1890, Manesa, a Rajput (warrior caste) on Navuso plantation, committed suicide because he was unable to face the 'indignity' of physical labour, especially when men of lower caste status were put in positions of authority. He is reported to have told a friend before his death: 'Here a man with a small amount of knowledge is made a sirdar while another with good education has to do hard manual labour, like myself'.[63] The plantation manager thought well of Manesa and was even vaguely aware of his desire for some form of supervisory work, but since the indentured labourer's pride prevented him from raising the subject, nothing was done.

South Indians were widely believed to be 'more prone to suicide' than the rest of the indentured population, and officials frequently commented on their perpetually despondent attitude, a tendency to long bouts of nostalgia and homesickness. The Agent General of Immigration wrote in 1907 that the Madrasi immigrant was 'easily depressed and disposed to suicide'.[64] Three years later, the Stipendiary Magistrate of Lautoka concluded that the Madrasis are 'given to suicide for very slight reasons, despondency, homesickness and such like'.[65] The South Indians, however, had their own reasons. One was their feeling of deception (or misunderstanding according to the immigration officials) regarding the nature and mode of employment they were promised before leaving India. Many maintained adamantly that they had been promised jobs as clerks, interpreters, teachers, policemen, soldiers and other such non-agricultural occupations. Some remonstrated, correctly, that they were not fully apprised of the details of indenture such as the inability to change employers, the penal sanctions for breaches of the labour laws and the cost of living in Fiji.[66] The Stipendiary Magistrate of Lautoka wrote in 1903:

> The new Madrasi coolies gave a lot of trouble during the month. It occupied a lot of time and infinite trouble during the month to make them thoroughly understand their contract with the company. One man produced the Agreement signed by the coolie in India and stated that there was nothing in the Tamil translation about task work. He also stated that the work which would be required of them was not properly explained to them before leaving. I had subsequently to somewhat severely punish some of these people for absolutely refusing to work.[67]

The unbending attitude of the Magistrate was grounded in his firm belief in the sanctity of the contract and the assumption that the labourers had entered into it voluntarily. The possibility that there may have been, as there evidently was, some deception and fraud involved in the recruitment procedures did not enter his mind. He wrote: 'I can only assume as before stated that they, one and all, perfectly understand the terms and conditions of their contract and the pains and penalties attaching thereto for non-fulfilment'. For those who complained of deception and failed to get redress of their grievance through legal channels, few other means were open. Some tried to desert the plantations hoping, strangely, to reach India on foot, but more often than not they ended up in a Fijian *koro* (village) from where they were promptly returned to the authorities for punishment.[68] Some preferred death to continued plantation employment. One South Indian committed suicide after only seven days on the plantation because he 'despaired at what confronted him in the shape of work', while another committed suicide after complaining in vain 'about the hardness of work and his inability to do the same'.[69] Another immigrant 'carried a cord with him for weeks and threatened to take his life because he did not wish to work'.[70]

The South Indians also laboured under a number of disabilities. As recent arrivals (after 1903), they were sent to newer areas to open up lands for cultivation, away from the more settled Indian communities. There, problems resulting out of isolation and loneliness were compounded by the unsupervised conduct of the overseers and *sirdars*. Inspections were infrequent, assaults and general evasion of indenture regulations common. And in such cases charges against *sirdars* and overseers did not often stick 'on account of the witnesses being either talked over or threatened before the hearing'.[71]

Within the Indian community itself, the South Indians were the victims of cultural and ethnic stereotypes of the North Indians who displayed all the traditional Aryan prejudices towards the Dravidian South Indians. Their generally smaller physique and darker skin, their different customs and unfamiliar tongues, were all subjects for North Indians' disparaging cultural comment and patronizing humour. This practice continues to the present day, though in a much more muted form. Extensive social intercourse and intermarriage between North and South Indians are still uncommon. The cultural prejudices had their roots in the basic Hindu religious texts recited on the plantations on Sundays and holidays. Tulsidas's *Ramcharitramanas* reinforced existing attitudes. The book is based on the story of the trials of exiled Lord Rama, a king of Northern India, and his eventual victory over the demon-king Ravana of Sri Lanka. The latter's followers, supposedly ancestral cousins of the South Indians, were portrayed as lesser human beings. Oral tradition has it that on some of the plantations South Indians were allowed the part of monkeys in Rama's army in the annual Ramlila festivals. The South Indians, then, grappled with two problems: the rigour of plantation work and the social oppression of the dominant North Indian Hindu consciousness. The stress showed in their higher suicide rate.

Besides the North-South division, there were differences in suicide rate along religious lines as well. Among the Hindus, the suicide rate was almost twice that among the Muslims, 4.5 per thousand to 2.9 per thousand.[72] These differences cannot be accounted for in terms of employment practices on the plantations, for all immigrants were worked and housed together with no special recognition of their caste, religion or social status. Rather, the difference was a function of the cultural meaning of suicide among Hindus and Muslims as well as of the social evolution of the two communities in Fiji. For Muslims suicide is a grave sin. It is an act of rebellion against the divine will of Allah, a defiance of divinely sanctioned *kismet* or preordained destiny. One Islamic tradition, according to Riaz Hassan, attributes to the Prophet Mohammed the view that 'whosoever shall kill himself shall suffer in the fire of hell and shall be excluded from heaven forever'. Hassan further suggests that the 'ethical influence of Islam, in its sense of obligation to make the acceptance of Providence the cardinal factor in obedience to Allah, has been an effective determinant of conduct, and its doctrine of future retribution has been efficacious in strengthening this virtue of active resignation to the will of Allah'.[73] Complementing this theological injunction against self-inflicted death was the fact that the Muslims, as a minority group within the Fiji Indian community, were able to preserve their religious and cultural values to a far greater degree than the Hindus. Andrews observed of the Muslims: 'They held together more, and even though they did not observe, to any great extent, the stated hours of prayer, yet they were proud of the fact that they were Musulmans, and this gave them a dignity of their own'.[74]

Hinduism, on the other hand, does not have a clearly defined position on the moral problems arising out of self-induced death.[75] The *Rig Veda* has an ambivalent position on suicide; later *Upanishads* appear, with some exceptions, to have censured the practice; while the *Dharmasastras* viewed suicide by poisoning, fire, hanging, drowning, jumping off a cliff or tree with disfavour but not social-religious suicide such as *Suttee* or drowning at the confluence of sacred rivers. Thus Brahmans suffering from disease or great misfortune were allowed, at various times in Indian history, to take their own lives. For death, after all, did not mean the end of life according to the law of *karma* or transmigration; it simply meant passage into another life the form of which was determined by one's deeds in this one. As a verse in one of the *Upanishads* puts it: 'It is the body that dies when left by the self; the self does not die'. The tenets of Hinduism could thus be extended to rationalize suicide as an escape from *narak* or the hell of indenture. Added to this was the fact that the organizational structure of Hinduism, sustained by temples and priests and embroidered in a rich tapestry of rituals and ceremonies, could not be maintained during the indenture period. And religion occupied, as it still does today, a central place in the lives of Hindus, especially of the higher castes. Andrews captures the spiritual poverty of Hindu life in Fiji thus:

> Everything that could be recognized as Hindu has departed, and with this, the religious spirit has departed also. The yearly round of sacred festivals, which form so much of the brightness of a Hindu woman's life in India, is confined to a couple of days, of which the greatest is no Hindu festival at all. The impoverishment of life, which has taken place, can hardly be understood in all its pathos, except by Hindus themselves . . . Hindu degradation could go no lower.[76]

Death by suicide is a problem that almost defies accurate analysis. It is seldom possible to understand the true intentions behind the act, a problem that has been noted from the very beginning of the study of the subject. Durkheim wrote: 'Intent is too intimate a thing to be interpreted by another. It even escapes self observation'.[77] Karl Meninger, another leading theorist, agreed: 'The analysis of motive is made difficult not only because of the untrustworthiness of conscious and obvious motives but especially by reason of the fact that a successful suicide is beyond study'.[78] And yet the astonishingly self -confident colonial officials in Fiji, themselves a world removed from the cultural and social life of the indentured labourers, seized upon a single factor and blamed sexual jealousy, arising out of the supposed immoral character of the indentured women, as the main cause of suicide among the Indians. This singular emphasis is questionable, and evidence points directly to the social and cultural disorganization and violence that emigration and indenture entailed. There was sexual jealousy on the Fiji plantations, as it is bound to be present in any comparable situation of abnormal sex ratio. But suicide on the part of the Indian indentured labourers represented something more: it was both a cry of despair and an act of protest directed ultimately at the principles and ethics of the indenture system itself. In its own way, suicide was a rational and understandable response to a terrible and alienating situation. As Arthur Schopenhauer has written: 'It will generally be found that as soon as the terrors of life reach the point where they outweigh the terrors of death, a man will put an end to his life'.[79] It would seem that the 300 Indian men and women in Fiji who committed suicide had reached that point.

Endnotes

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1. Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (Suva 1980), 74.

2. For a general survey of Fiji Indian indenture see K. L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants. A history of the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne 1962). The background to indenture is provided in my *Girmitiyas. The Origins of the Fiji Indians*(Canberra 1983).

3. Figures presented in this Table have been derived from the *Annual Reports on Indian Immigration* (henceforth *Annual Reports):* 1900: 34; 1901: 36-37; 1902: 32; 1904: 31; 190S: 34; 1906: 32 1907: 35 36; 1908: 34 35; 1909: 34; 1910: 10; 1911: 13; 1912: 11; 1913: 6; 1914: 16; 1915: 20. The *Annual Reports* are available at several places, including, on microfilm, The National Library of Australia in Canberra (MF catalogue no. L42).

4. Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery. The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* (London 1974), 201. Tinker bases himself on J. McNeill and Chimman Lal, *Report on the Condition of Indian Immigrants in Four British Colonies of Trinidad, British Guiana or Demerara, Fiji and the Dutch Colony of Surinam or Dutch Guiana* (British Parliamentary Command Paper 7744-15, 1914). It should be noted that the trend suggested by these figures is not entirely supported by the suicide data in Table 1. The reason for the discrepancy may be that McNeill and Lal used figures for the entire Indian community, whereas in this paper only suicides among indentured Indians are discussed.

5. C. F. Andrews and W. W. Pearson, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji. An Independent Enquiry*(Perth 1916), App 4. These two also derive their statistics from the McNeill and Lal report cited above.

6. Gillion *Fiji's Indian Migrants,*128.

7. This unpublished statistical document contains the record of all the Indian deaths in Fiji. It has the deceased's serial number on the Emigration Pass, his/her name, the name of the plantation, the date of indenture and the date of death. It is available on microfilm at the National Library of Australia, Canberra (MF Cat. no. A12).

8. This ratio only includes the Calcutta embarked emigrants who committed suicide. The South Indian suicides have been excluded here because the sex breakdown of that population is unknown to the present writer. Adult males from Calcutta numbered 29,349 and females 12,032. It should be pointed out that the suicide rate would be higher if the repatriates were subtracted from the above totals but the regional and demographic breakdown of the repatriated population is not known.

[9] Naidu *Violence*, 38ff; Tinker *A New System*, 201; Chandra Jayawardena 'Social contours of an Indian labour force during the indenture period' in Vijay Mishra (ed), *Rama's Banishment. A Centenary Tribute to the Fiji Indians, 1879-1979* (Auckland 1979), 45. Before detailed research tor this paper, this writer too found the sexual jealousy argument persuasive. See Brij V Lal, 'Working men and nothing more: some problems of Indian indenture in Fiji' in Kay Saunders (ed), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920* (London 1984). It must be admitted that going by the printed official documents alone it is difficult to come to any other conclusion.

[10] *Annual Reports (1910)* 9.

[11] Andrews *Indian Indentured Labour*, App. 7.

[12] *Annual Reports (1909)*, 19.

[13] Naidu *Violence*, 61.

[14] J. D. M Derrett 'Social and Political Thought and Institutions', in A. L. Basham (ed), *A Cultural History of India*(Oxford 1975), 127.

[15] Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour*, 33.

[16] Colonial Secretary's Office files (in the Fiji National Archives) (hereinafter CSO) 9776/13 9967/13.

[17] Tinker, *A New System*. The most assiduous application of the Tinker thesis for Fiji is in Ahmed Ali, 'An Introduction', in A. Ali (ed.), *Indenture Experience in Fiji* (Suva 1979), vii-xxxii.

[18] This is discussed at length in my *Girmitiyas*, Ch. 4.

[19] For figures, see my *Girmitiyas*, 102-3.

[20] A detailed investigation of moral and social problems faced by Indian indentured women on Fiji plantations is found in my 'Kunti's cry: indentured women on Fiji plantations', in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 22 (1985), 55-72.

[21] *Annual Report* (1902), 20.

[22] Walter Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Adelaide 1970), 73.

[23] Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour*, App. 6; Naidu, *Violence*, 38-9.

[24] *Ibid.*.

[25] Jayawardena . 'Social contours', 50.

[26] Lal, *Girmitiyas*, Ch. 4, 'Kunti's Cry'.

[27] Brij V. Lal, 'Leaves of the Banyan Tree: origins and background of Fiji's North Indian indentured migrants, 1879-1916', PhD thesis, Australian National University (Canberra 1981), Vol. 2, App. 12, 198-216.

[28] *Census of India*, Vol. 1: Pt I (1901), 143; *Resolutions on Immigrant Labour in the Assam Districts of Eastern Bengal*(1901), 69.

[29] Lal, 'Leaves', Vol 2, App. 13, 217-42.

[30] Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour*, 31.

[31] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants,* 57.

[32] CSO 3027/11.

[33] CSO 3719/09.

[34] CSO 2258/18.

[35] CSO 9965/15.

[36] P. N. Prabhu, *Hindu Social Organization* (Bombay 1958), 263; see also K. M. Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India* (Bombay 1955), 134.

[37] William Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces of India*(New Delhi, repr. 1975), 228, pointed out in 1897 that nine tenths of the Indian women 'pass into the married state' between the ages of 10 and 14 years.

[38] CSO 2173/17.

[39] CSO 6683/08; 2402/16; Minute Paper 10233/16: Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour,*33.

[40] For further discussion, see my 'Working men and nothing more' and 'Kunti's cry'.

[41] Jayawardena, 'Social contours', 46; also Minute Paper 10233/16.

[42] Minute Paper 2402/16.

[43] This quotation from Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honour. Ethics and Behaviour in the Old South* (New York 1982), 246, aptly describes the situation in Fiji and indeed the position of most women generally.

[44] CSO 2405/89.

[45] *Annual Report* (1904), 19.

[46] *Annual Report* (1912). 11 For a list of other causes. see *Annual Report* (1905), 18 1907, 19; CSO files 1161/91, 231/89, 1236/90, 2191/91, 5367/07 and 1511/14 also indicate poverty, insanity gambling and debt, disease and conviction as contributory causes of suicide.

[47] *Annual Report* (1912), 13.

[48] CSO 4961/09; also 3194/1900.

[49] CSO 5579/14.

[50] CSO 1045/1906; see also CSO 800/07, 4()12/07, 2555/93 and Adrian Mayer, *Indians in Fiji* (London 1963), 18.

[51] A brief discussion of the contents and usefulness of this source is provided in my 'Indian indenture historiography: a note on problems, sources and methods', *Pacific Studies,* 6:2 (Spring 1983), 33-50.

[52] Based on figures in the Register *of* Deaths. 68.5% *of Fiji's* Calcutta embarked emigrants were in the age category 19 to 26 years.

[53] See Lal, *Girmitiyas,* Ch. 5.

[54] Emile Durkheim. *Suicide. A Study in Sociology* (London 1952), 201.

[55] Howard I. Kushner, 'Immigrant suicide in the United States: toward a psycho-social history', *Journal of Social History* (Fall 1984), 18.

[56] Based on Register of Death figures. Six monthly time-frame is my construction.

[57] Naidu, *Violence*. 52-3: Gillion. *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 120.

[58] McNeill and Chimman Lal, *Report*, 319.

[59] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 119.

[60] This Table is based upon the Emigration Passes which provide the caste figures and percentage of females emigrating and the Register of Death which gives the number of suicides committed. The figure for the South Indians is derived from Lance Brennan, John Macdonald and Ralph Shlomowitz, 'The Geographic and social Origins of Indian Indentured Labourers in Mauritius, Natal, Fiji, Guyana and Jamaica', in *South Asia*, vol. XXI (1998), 20-39.

[61] Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 107.

[62] Ibid . 125.

[63] CSO 1346/90.

[64] *Annual Report* (1907), 20.

[65] CSO 8542/1910.

[66] For the indentured labourers' own testimony, see Ali, *Indenture*, and Naidu *Violence*. This writer has emphasised the 'push' factors and has suggested that while there certainly was deception, its magnitude has probably been magnified in popular mythology.

[67] CSO 4705/1903.

[68] CSO 2667/05: also 3340/05.

[69] CSO 2281/05, CSO 8541/15.

[70] *Annual Report* (1906), 19.

[71] CSO 2667/05.

[72] Derived from an analysis of figures in the Register of Death and the Emigration Passes.

[73] Riaz Hassan, 'Suicide in Singapore', *European Journal of Sociology*, 21 (1983), 202-3. 1 am grateful to Dr Ralph Shlomowitz of Flinders University for bringing this article to my attention.

[74] Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji*, 37-8.

[75] I have based myself on Hassan, 'Suicide in Singapore', 199-201.

[76] Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour*, 37.

[77] Durkheim, *Suicide*. 43.

[78] Karl Meninger, *Man Against Himself* (New York,1963), 23.

[79] Quoted in A. Alvarez, *The Savage God. A Study of Suicide* (Harmondsworth 1971), 160.

chapter 13

Hinduism Under Indenture

The religious situation of our people is very unstable. This is because of the lack of religious teachers and other dedicated people. As a result, the Fiji Indians are like an unsteady boat caught in a whirlpool.

Totaram Sanadhya

What follows is extracts from a remarkable text by a remarkable individual, providing a rare contemporary description of and commentary on the first attempts to resuscitate religious and cultural life in Fiji's early Indian community. The site of the investigation is Fiji at the turn of this century, but the story that Totaram Sanadhya tells here will resonate in the early histories of Indian indentured communities elsewhere as well. Cast adrift from their familiar cultural moorings, trapped in indenture, illiterate and poor, they struggled against great odds to preserve fragments of their ancestral culture in alien surroundings for reassurance, comfort, security, and memory. It is a moving story of defiance and resistance.

The project of cultural rejuvenation was fraught from the start. For one, as Totaram tells us, there were few teachers and religious books in Fiji. For another, many of the early priests were fraudulent men who preyed on the gullibility of their followers and, when caught, absconded to India or simply disappeared from sight. And then there were Christian missions which worked tirelessly but unsuccessfully to convert the Hindus and Muslims to their faith. Why these missions failed becomes clear in Totaram's encounter with the Rev. J. W. Burton, a Methodist missionary for whom Totaram had genuine affection but whose creed he refused to embrace. Nor was the chaotic social environment of indenture conducive to religious instruction. The colonial government's indifference to the cultural needs of the migrants contributed its share to the problem. But the real culprits in Totaram's account are the Hindu holy men whose habits ranged from fleecing their disciples to seducing their wives.

For the first time, we now know precisely the kinds of books which circulated in Fiji's Indian community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These range from simple instructional texts on astrology and witchcraft and manuals on how to conduct marriage ceremonies to ballads, enchanting tales of ghosts and goblins, and poems and stories of romance, heroism and adventure. Much of this escapist literature that provided a relief from the distress and despair of indenture was popular throughout North India, from where the bulk of the migrants had come.[1] This literature circulates in the Indo-Gangetic plains even today. The books were not read individually—there were just a handful of copies available and literate people were few in number—but recited at social gatherings in the evenings, at weekends, on holidays, and at festive occasions such as marriages. Together with prayer meetings, and such festivals as Ramlila and Tazia, these readings countered the fissiparous tendencies of indenture and its aftermath, and served to forge a sense of community.

Many of the sects that Totaram describes have declined in importance or disappeared altogether. But the centres of prayer and fellowship that they established had their uses. Most importantly, many of them later provided the nucleus of the first elementary schools in the Indian community. These rudimentary structures, often nothing more than grass huts on the outskirts of the Indian settlements, played a crucial role in educating the first generation of Indian children in Fiji at a time when officialdom refused to provide educational opportunities for Indians.

The sects were interesting in terms of what they preached. Some were pragmatic and flexible in their approach, showing a readiness to adapt to new circumstances. In one encounter recorded here, a priest invokes the Bible to justify meat eating. Others sought refuge in mysticism. But all the sects rejected the divisions and the hierarchy and the doctrines and practices of the Brahmanical socio-religious order. They rejected the caste system and preached, instead, the fundamental oneness of humanity and the principle of equality and brotherhood among all. The path to salvation, they taught, lay not in spiritual asceticism or pursuit of knowledge of the sacred scriptures but in devotion *(bhakti)*, in complete surrender to the Lord, and in singing songs of His praise *(bhajans)*. This approach appealed to the migrants, most of whom were simple, non-literate people from rural India, many escaping from the tyranny of the Brahminical socio-religious order. This emotional, egalitarian and non-intellectual tradition has become an integral part of the Fiji Indian moral order.

Of all the texts listed by Totaram, the most popular was Tulsidas' *Ramcharitamanas*. To this day, it remains the standard religious text for Fiji Hindus. This is so partly because the book is written in the Avadhi dialect of Hindi, the language of the Indian migrants from the Indo-Gangetic plains. Moreover, it does not require prior knowledge of Sanskrit or the intervention of the priestly class to understand the book. Fundamental moral values—such as the importance of righteous conduct in the face of even the greatest of adversities, observance of one's duty to one's family, selfless devotion to the interests and welfare of others no matter what the cost—these values are imparted through the trials of Ram, the legendary king of Ayodhaya, widely regarded as the incarnation of Vishnu. The story of Ram struck a particular chord with the Fiji Indians who themselves came from the region of Ram's kingdom. Ram was exiled for 14 years for no fault of his own, but he did return; good ultimately triumphed over evil. His story gave them hope and consolation: one day, they, too, would escape the exile of indenture.

Among those who managed to return to India was Totaram Sanadhya himself.[2] Totaram was born in Hiraungi village near Firozabad district of Uttar Pradesh. Though by caste Brahmin, to improve his chances of recruitment, Totaram enlisted for work in Fiji as a Thakur (warrior caste). He left Calcutta aboard the *Jamuna* on 26 February 1893, and arrived in the colony on 28 May. He was indentured to a Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) plantation on the Rewa. After his indenture, he immersed himself in community work initially as a priest. Among other things, he was instrumental in organising a petition to Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa to get an Indian lawyer (Manilal Maganlal Doctor) to Fiji.

Totaram impressed everyone with his dignified bearing, keen intellect, knowledge of Hinduism and his debating skills and oratory. Among those whom he impressed was Burton, whose book, *The Fiji of Today*, published in 1910, exposed the worst excesses of the indenture system. Burton does not mention Totaram by name, but there is little doubt that the person he describes as 'a clever and well-educated Brahmin with finely chiselled features and lofty brow so typical of his kind' is Totaram.[3] In April 1914, after 21 years of residence in Fiji, Totaram returned to India with his wife Ganga Devi. The *Pacific Herald* of 30 March wrote: 'Totaram is leaving for good and his departure is much felt by the Indians in Fiji, as he has been one of the leading Aryan lecturers and debaters in the Colony. It is noteworthy that Pandit Totaram is the first Indian who has received an address from his fellow countrymen in Fiji'.

In India, Totaram met the Hindi journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi, who had taken a particularly keen interest in the affairs of overseas Indian communities, and narrated his experience of indenture to him. From it came the tract, *Fiji Men Mere Ikkis Varsh (My Twenty One Years in Fiji)*.[4] The pamphlet was enthusiastically received and widely circulated in India and translated unto several Indian languages. Totaram became a well known figure in political circles. In 1922, Totaram and is wife entered Mahatma Gandhi's ashram at Sabarmati. He died in 1947, after a long period of illness. Altogether, Totaram was a remarkable man of indomitable spirit, proud of his cultural heritage but not enslaved by it, open to new ideas and influences, and not above turning adversities into opportunities to promote himself and his cause.

Fiji Men Mere Ikkis Varsh contains a selective reproduction of the material that Totaram narrated to Benarsidas, highlighting those aspects of the indenture experience— the violence, the collapse of moral and religious values among the migrants, the ill-treatment of Indian women, the indifference of the colonial government—that helped the anti-indenture campaign.[5] Those aspects of Totaram's story which treated social, cultural and religious issues in the nascent Fiji Indian community were left unpublished. Benarsidas gave the unpublished material to the late Ken Gillion, who used portions of it in his book.[6] Towards the end of his career, Gillion gave the manuscript to Brij V. Lal, his doctoral student.

This manuscript was published in Hindi in 1994 under the title *Bhut Len Ki Katha: Totaram Sanadhya Ka Fiji*.[7] What follows is a translation of those sections of the book that further our understanding of the social and religious evolution of the Fiji Indian society. In translating the text, we have followed the spirit and tone of Totaram's account, bearing in mind that the story was narrated to Benarsidas who then wrote it down. Totaram is a participant in the drama he describes, and not a disinterested bystander. But he is also self-critical. His own transformation into a holy man could be read as cynically self-serving. Reading the text will make it clear why it remained unpublished for so long, for here is a story that could hardly have furthered the anti-indenture crusade in India. But it is a part of the Fiji Indian historical experience, and for that reason alone it needs to be preserved.

The indenture system spawned a new society in Fiji, more egalitarian, more isolated, speaking a Hindi based lingua franca cobbled together from the dialects and languages which the migrants had brought with them. Totaram's account provides a valuable introduction to the evolution of a distinctive Fiji Indian society. He was present at its creation. For better or for worse, his is the only Indian indentured voice that is extant.

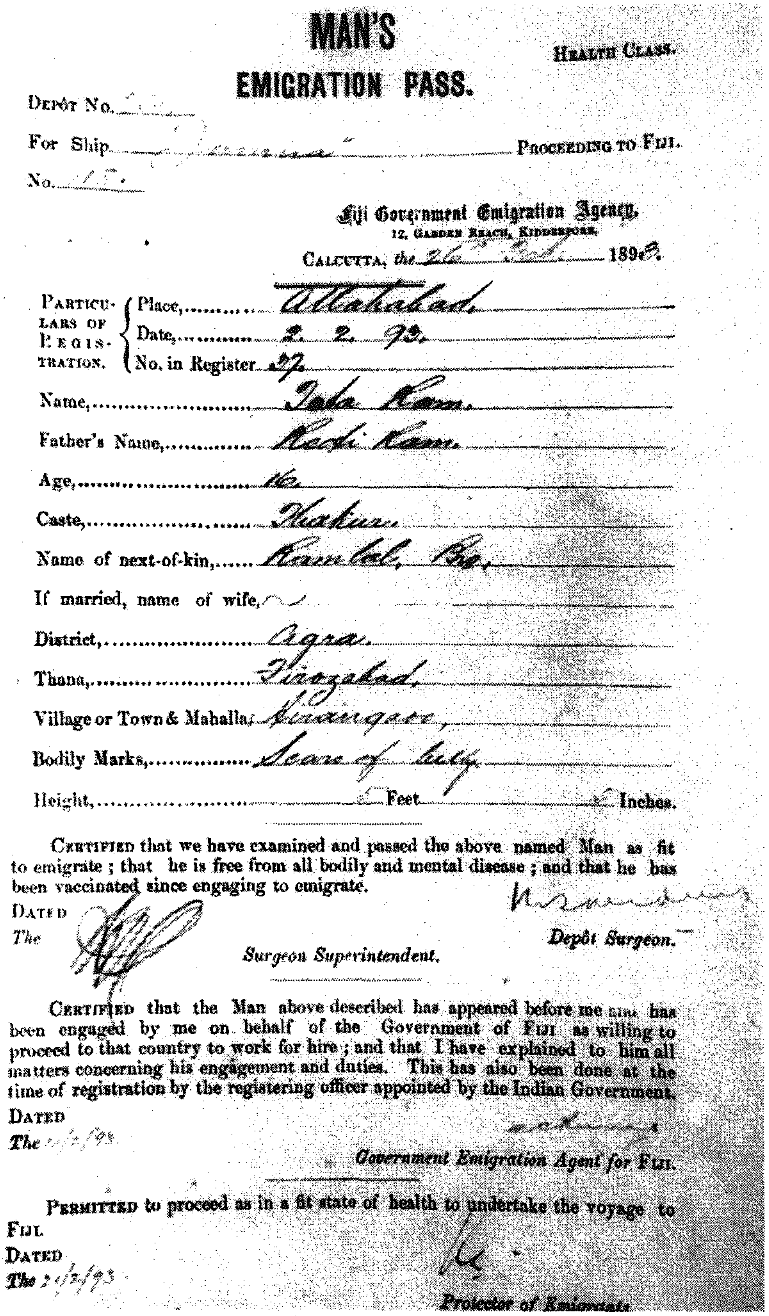
Totaram

When I finished my indenture and came to this place, I had nothing with me. No matter how hard one worked for the company,[8] one always remained poor. For four days, as I lay idle my fellow compatriots looked after me. Lying in the hut, I began to think about my future. If I started farming, I would need money, labour, bullocks and equipment, none of which I had. With only grade seven education, I was not qualified for community service. Even for such work, one needs money. In the end, I decided to become a priest for a few years. But to perform certain Hindu rituals, one needs texts, which are not available here. At that time,[9] only the following books were found in Fiji:

In the Rewa region there were six religious texts in circulation. In addition to four copies of the *Ramcharitamanas,*[10] Maqdoom Buksh of Korociriciri had one copy of *Sukhsagar,*[11] which he rented out for a deposit of 10 rupees and a daily rental of two and a half rupees, and Lalta Prasad had a copy of *Satyanarayan ki katha.*[12]

The Navua district had 32 books. These included six copies of *Ramcharitamanas,* three copies of *Satyanarayan ki katha,* four of *Surya Purana,*[13] one *Devi Bhagavat,*[14] one *Shighrabodh,*[15] eight copies of *Danlila,*[16] two of *Ekadashi Mahatm* ,[17] one of *Indrajal*[18] two of *Durga Saptshati,*[19] one *Rampatal,*[20] and three of *Alaha Khand.* [21]The last was popular throughout the distinct, while the *Ramcharitamanas* was especially popular among the *girmitiyas* from eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar.

In Ba, there were 41 books, including nine copies of *Salinga Sadabrij,*[22] four *Baital Pachisi,*[23]13 of *Indra Sabha,*[24] one *Valmiki Ramayana,*[25] two *Vivah Padhati,*[26]two *Satyarth Prakash,*[27] four *Ramcharitamanas,* four *Alaha Khand,* and two *Satyanarayan ki katha* (hand written). *Indra Sabha* was the most popular book in this region.



MAN'S EMIGRATION PASS.

HEALTH CLASS.

DEPÔT NO.

For Ship PROCEEDING TO FIJI.

No. 17.

Fiji Government Emigration Agency,
12, GARDEN REACH, KIDDERPORE.
CALCUTTA, the 26th Feb. 1893.

PARTICULARS OF REGISTRATION.
Place, Allahabad.
Date, 2. 2. 93.
No. in Register 27.

Name, Tota Ram.

Father's Name, Redi Ram.

Age, 16.

Caste, Thakur.

Name of next-of-kin, Ram Lal, Bro.

If married, name of wife, ~

District, Agra.

Thana, Firozabad.

Village or Town & Mahalla, Hirangaon,

Bodily Marks, Scar of belly

Height, Feet Inches.

CERTIFIED that we have examined and passed the above named Man as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.

DATED
The

Surgeon Superintendent.

Depôt Surgeon.

CERTIFIED that the Man above described has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of FIJI as willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to him all matters concerning his engagement and duties. This has also been done at the time of registration by the registering officer appointed by the Indian Government.

DATED
The [illegible]/2/93

Government Emigration Agent for FIJI.

PERMITTED to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to FIJI.

DATED
The 21/2/93

Protector of Emigrants.

Totaram Sanadhya's Emigration Pass. Although a Brahmin, he registered himself as a Thakur to improve his chance of recruitment

In Mango district, there were four books, two handwritten copies of *Satyanarayan ki katha*, and a copy each of the *Ramcharitamanas* and *Mahabharat*.[28] Apart from these, one also saw a few copies of Christian texts in Hindi.

I gathered this information during a two month period. In Nausori, there was a trading store by the name of A. M. Brodziak. Its [European] manager, whom I knew slightly, asked me for a list of things most needed in the Indian community. I asked him what my commission would be. He said two shillings per every pound of profit. The same day, I gave him a list of books to be ordered. The books arrived from India within three months. Within a fortnight, all the books were sold. The manager made a handsome profit, but baulked at giving me my agreed share. Instead, he gave me 40 rupees worth of books I had chosen myself. I brought the books to my hut, and hoping to become a priest, I began to read them with great enthusiasm. First I memorised the *Shigrabodh* and then all five chapters of *Satyanarayan ki katha*, gained some knowledge of *panchang*, and all the 16 kinds of Hindu rituals for worship. This was not a problem since I already knew how to read. Thus, I acquired enough knowledge to be a priest in Fiji.

I planted flowers all around my hut, including *tulsi*,[29] on an elevated ground to perform my rituals. Inside the hut, I kept Vishnu's image in a corner, which I partitioned off with cloth to separate my bedroom from the place of prayer. And on a small wooden platform there, I placed all the items I needed to perform worship, such as a conch shell, *tulsi* and banana leaves and flowers. Also on the platform I placed a bowl of pure (holy) water. I used to get up at four in the morning, bathe and blow loudly on the conch shell. Woken by the sound of the shell, neighbours would get up, bathe and come to partake of the holy water.

As the people arrived, I would busy myself in the prayer room, hidden from them by the cloth partition. To impress the people with my new priestly role, I would take a long time decorating my forehead with *tilak* marks. Then I would come out taking Lord Ram's name. The people gathered outside the hut would greet me respectfully. Putting my palms together and invoking the name of goddess Durga, I would greet them politely. The people would leave after I gave them *prasad* (food offered at a ceremony). I repeated this routine in the evening after returning from work. I would also narrate episodes from the *Ramcharitamanas* until about midnight.

This was my daily routine. Whenever I could, I would move among the people, making enquiries about the sick and the needy. In this way, I became well known and liked by the people. However, I secretly wished to be addressed as *pandit* (priest, learned person) so that my work would flourish. I wanted to use income from this to continue my community work.

One Sunday, a carpenter named Bihari came to me and said: 'Maharaj, I have 300 people at my place waiting to listen to *Satyanarayan ki katha*. But my priest is unwell. Please come and recite the *katha'*. Inwardly pleased with the invitation, I said: 'Alright, my friend, if you think I can help, I'll come, but on one condition. The ceremonial platform should be prepared according to my instructions. If you interfere in any way, I will leave immediately'. Bihari said: 'Don't worry, Maharaj, everything will be done your way'. 'Okay, then let's go. But remember, when we arrive there, you address me as panditji, not as a priest'. Bihari agreed.

I accompanied Bihari with my prayer bag. Upon reaching the house, Bihari announced: 'Here brothers, the pandit has come'. People attain the status of pandit after years of learning, and here I was, a nobody, who had become an instant pandit in Fiji. Everybody said: 'Greetings, panditji'. 'May you live long, brothers. May the Lord shower his blessings on you', I said diffidently, being a novice in this role. I decided to perform the *katha* in a novel way so as to impress the people.

Everything was set. I asked them to prepare an elaborate platform, had banana stems planted around it and little lamps lighted to make it appear attractive. People were impressed. I then sat Bihari down to a long *puja*. Since I had already memorised all the five chapters of *Satyanarayan ki katha*, I conducted the ceremony without a hitch. Seeing the new pandit and his new ways, people were thrilled. They said: 'O brother! This is just like doing puja back home'. I was given plenty of alms, some of which I distributed to the Brahmans present, which made them very happy. After the feast, I returned home. My clientele increased dramatically. For two or three years, my priest business thrived and I had accumulated one and half thousand rupees. From this sum, I bought some land, abandoned my priestly work and began looking into the condition of my fellow compatriots. I also learned Fijian.

The religious situation of our people is very unstable. This is because of the lack of religious teachers and other dedicated people. As a result, the Fiji Indians are like an unsteady boat caught in a whirlpool. The different sects are pulling in different directions. To overcome this, there is an urgent need for books, teachers and education, all of which are lacking. It is necessary to write briefly what some of the sects are doing.

Akhade (Sects)

There were the following *akhade* in Fiji: Kabir Panth, Nath, Nanak, Satnami, Dadu Panth, Jagjivandas, Ramanandi, and Arya Samaj.

Kabir Panth.[30] In December 1894, Baba Oridas founded this *akhada* in Manipatu. He initiated about 200 devoted disciples into this sect. Oridas was an employee of the police department. As he was well liked by his disciples, the number of his devotees increased to one thousand. Every fortnight, *bhajans* and prayer meetings were held at this place. Most of his disciples used to take alcohol. But being a shy person, Oridas hesitated in asking them to give up their habit. Eventually, he left for India, entrusting his sect to Baba Dalbhanjandas, his favourite disciple. Dalbhanjandas did his best, but he lacked Oridas's authority and influence. Like Oridas, he could not persuade his disciples to give up drinking and eating meat. Instead, he asked them to do penance every fortnight. Because he was a simple and kind hearted man, his disciples did not take much notice of him and did as they pleased. Unable to accomplish much, he, too, left for India. After his departure, his sect existed in name only.

In March 1898, Baba Bhaggadas arrived in Fiji and settled down in Davuilevu in Rewa. He summoned Baba Oridas's disciples and said to them that Oridas was not competent to explain the intricacies of Kabir Panth. He had misled them. 'I am the only one who is competent to teach Kabir Panth'. Falling for this, most of Oridas's former disciples and a few others joined him. Everyone in Davuilevu became his disciple. In this way, his *akhada* became very popular. His disciples collected 400 rupees and built a *kuti* for him. Every *purnamasi* [full moon], people would gather there for feast and festivity.

Pingaldas and Sitavdas were Bhaggadas's favourite pupils. Sitavdas taught the disciples while Pingaldas looked after his guru. Once Sitavdas went to Tavua to visit Rangu Pandey, a disciple of Bhaggadas. Rangu was not at home. He stayed there for a few days. One day, Sitavdas said to Rangu's wife: 'You have a curse on you. To get rid of it, you must cut your hair and give it to me.' Believing him, she shaved her head and gave him all her hair. Immediately, Sitavdas disappeared and made a wig for his bald head. When Rangu Pandey found out what had happened, he went looking for Sitavdas, found him at a festive gathering where I [Totaram] was also present, and thrashed him soundly. Soon afterwards, Sitavdas left for India, and Rangu Pandey broke all ties with the sect.

After Sitavdas left, Pingaldas took his place. Baba Bhaggadas sect became very popular. Crowds gathered regularly to receive the Baba's blessings. Every evening, *bhajan* was sung at the *kuti*, accompanied by cymbals, drums and other such instruments. Especially large crowds would gather at *purnamasi*. Large stocks of tobacco, mixed with hemp, were also kept. Baba Bhaggadas had a foot-long *chillum*, which he had brought with him from India. He would take huge puffs from it and exhale clouds of smoke as if a boiler had ruptured. Everyday, four packets of American-made 'Old Judge' tobacco would be smoked, costing about 90 rupees a month. On top of this, 60 rupees a month would be spent on food. What a waste of money. Each *purnamasi* celebration cost 200 rupees a month. Over a period of four years, 16,800 rupees were thus wasted, none of it on educational work. Well, if nothing else came of it, Baba's disciples at least learnt a few verses of Kabir and how to perform prayers.

On one occasion, some of the disciples got into a fight, which landed them and Baba in court. When the magistrate demanded that the prayer marks on his forehead be removed, Baba capitulated meekly. This act of abject submission ruined his reputation. People lost faith in him. Many went bankrupt paying the fine. Donations dried up. Except for a few families, people left Davuilevu.

Bhaggadas was exposed. He handed over the sect to Pingaldas and left for India. Pingaldas later built his own *kuti* in Suva. Once, a female disciple who had fallen out with her husband came there. She attached herself to Pingaldas and refused to return to her husband. A few months later, she gave birth to a son. When she went to register the birth, she refused to give the father's name. Pingaldas was assumed to be the father. He took the responsibility of bringing up the child. Pingaldas is a very capable man, a person of good birth (Kshatriya), straightforward and generous.

Nath Sect.[31] Baba Ramnath founded this sect in Fiji. He had 300 disciples. From them he chose a few deputies and had them pierce their ears and wear a ring, saffron clothes, and wooden sandals. The deputies would greet each other in the traditional manner of the sect, calling out 'Alakh, Alakh' [To know the Invisible]. Ramnath claimed he was initiated into the sect at a place called Bowhar [most probably in Uttar Pradesh] This man was completely illiterate, but he could recite well a few things he had learnt from his gurus.

In Fiji, only Europeans are legally allowed to take alcohol, hemp and other such intoxicants. But Ramnath had obtained a liquor permit from the government. On the day of Durga worship every year, he would pray to the light from a huge, hand-made *diya* [as a symbol of the Invisible], sacrifice a specially reared goat and drink liquor. His main message was this: 'Shiva is the Father and Shakti is the Mother. Men are Shiva and women Shakti'. Ramnath was a real nitwit. Pot bellied, he could only roll, not walk. His head was shaped like a pumpkin. His big eyes were always red from smoking opium. Naturally people were scared of him.

In Rewa, a man named Kharpat and his wife became Ramnath's disciples. Kharpat was a simple, trusting man. One day the guru said to him: 'My son, send your wife to my *kuti* where other women are coming as well. She might learn some spiritual things to make life worthwhile. Otherwise, she is doomed'. Kharpat sent his wife along. When Kharpat went to visit his wife after a month, Ramnath said: 'Thank God, Kharpat you came. I myself was about to visit you'. When Kharpat's wife appeared, Ramnath said: 'When Shiva and Shakti have merged, it is a sin to separate them. See for yourself how this girl is blooming'. Kharpat knew at once what had happened: his wife was pregnant. Dejected, he returned home while Baba Ramnath eloped with his, Kharpat's, wife to India. This incident shook the sect to its foundations. Thus ended the Nath sect in Fiji.

Nanak Sect.[32] The founder of this sect was Chota Singh. He had about 80 disciples. Singh was a showman. He would recite a few Kabir verses he knew. When people came for communion, he would withdraw into his room. Once, one of Singh's disciples revealed some damaging details about him. Chota Singh thrashed him soundly, for which he was fined 50 rupees. Upon returning from the court, Singh eloped with the disciple's wife to Labasa. After a while, he had a son from this woman. He abandoned her at the *kuti* and absconded to India.

Satnami and *Dadu Sects.*[33] The founder of the Satnami sect was Baijudas and Hardeodas was the founder of the Dadu sect. They did not have disciples as such. They managed to collect enough money from donations to pay their way back to India.

Jagjivandas Sect.[34] Baba Ram Adhin founded this sect in Fiji. Because he had the habit of closing one eye while talking to people, they nicknamed him the Kana Maharaj (The one-eyed priest). He had 135 disciples. As a distinguishing mark of his sect, he tied a thread around his disciples, called the *nirvani dhaga* (the thread of salvation). He instructed his followers not to eat eggplant. Adhin was popular because he knew the *mantras* and techniques to deal with magic and evil spells and was a good *bhajan* singer. He used his knowledge to dupe people. After he was thrashed by one of his disciples, Adhin gave up witchcraft. Sometime later, he married a widow and when his students abandoned him, he abandoned the sect altogether.

Ramanand Sect.[35] This sect had two founders, Baba Vasudev and Baba Raghodas. Vasudev was initiated into this sect at Ayodhaya, the birth place of Ram. A married man, he provided for his family from alms. He did not believe in accumulating wealth. Vasudev had 600 disciples. He initiated them into his sect by putting a sacred thread around their necks. He did not expect anything in return them, visiting them only when he thought it necessary. He did not expect his disciples to show him unquestioning obedience. Vasudev died in 1911 aged 76. His sons earned their livelihood as cultivators instead of relying on donations from their father's disciples.

Baba Raghodas came from the Kota region in Rajasthan. After completing his indenture, he founded a *kuti* in Lau.[36] Raghodas did cane farming, which earned him an annual income of 1,000 rupees. He had the largest number of disciples, numbering around 1,500. The disciples used to give Baba Raghodas a rupee each annually. He lived at the *kuti* and met all its expenses from donations he received, setting aside 1,000 rupees for his cremation. Later, he became asthmatic, and began taking liquor.

In the Naitisiri district, there lived a Thakur woman with a young girl and a 10 year old son. Although under indenture, she was not fit to work. She used to relate her troubles to Baba Raghodas, to whom she had gone after a European had attempted to rape her. Raghodas asked the manager to cancel her indenture, which happened after he paid £30. The woman began to live in a separate room at the hermitage. One day, the woman tried to kill Baba Raghodas by putting ground glass in his *dhal*. He somehow found out, and from that day, refused all food cooked by her. Then, the woman put opium in his soft drink. When Raghodas was in an intoxicated state, she stole the 1,000 rupees he had set aside for his cremation. With that money, the mother and the son left for India. The mother died in Mathura and the son returned to Fiji. Baba Raghodas took no action against them, but stopped saving money for his funeral. One disciple gave him 20 acres of freehold land. With money collected from donations, he built a *kuti* there. He passed away in 1907 at the age of 78 years. After his death, his sect dissipated and the disciples went astray. Thus ended the Ramanandi sect.

Arya Samaj :[37] The Arya Samaj was founded in Samabula in December 1902. Sucharam Ugo from Punjab with the help of enthusiastic people like Mangal Singh hoisted the flag of Arya Samaj in Fiji. Babu Mangal Singh donated his own house, worth around 150 rupees, to the Samaj, and moved into a small thatched hut nearby. He gave his all to the Arya Samaj. A school was opened at the Arya Samaj mandir attended by some 60 boys and girls. Sharmaji[38] was the principal of the school as well as the secretary of Arya Samaj. Enjoying the trust and confidence of the people, Sharma became the moving force behind the Samaj. As such, the responsibility of raising funds fell on him. He was also a good teacher and a father figure to pupils at the school. Under his leadership, the future of the Arya Samaj looked bright. Membership was increasing day by day. Babu Mangal Singh went back to India, but the work of the Arya Samaj continued to flourish.

Just when things looked promising, the fortunes of the Samaj came under a cloud. Mr Sharma eloped with a 14 year old pupil at his school to Suva. When people confronted him, he asked them to talk to the girl. The girl replied: 'I want to stay with Sharmaji. I have become his wife'. Sharma got what he wanted, and broke all ties with the Arya Samaj. After this episode came Swami Ram Manoharanand Saraswati from India. Soon after arriving, he married a 16 year old girl. He, too, got what he wanted. Now that he had become a householder, he passed himself off as a philosopher rather than a follower of any one particular sect.

In writing about the various sects and institutions, it has not been my aim to pass judgements on them. What I wanted to do was to make our cultural and spiritual leaders in India realise their duty to the thousands of our brethren abroad and try to do something for their spiritual uplift.

Encounter with a Baba [Priest]

At Rarawai [Ba], I met a well-to-do *Baba,* who was also the leading priest of this region. My conversation with him went as follows:

> Me: Well, Babaji, what do you teach your disciples?
>
> Baba: I have discouraged my disciples from reading ancient scriptures because they are so dry and prohibit us from enjoying worldly pleasures.
>
> Me: What religion do you follow?
>
> Baba: Stop worrying about such things as right and wrong. Focus on those that give pleasure, such as women and money. Don't worry about compassion to animals, worry about your taste buds. This is the way to salvation. Doctors say that meat is good for you. The Bible also permits you to eat animal flesh because unlike us, animals don't have soul. We eat meat because we regard it as a sacred offering to Mother Goddess. Tulsidas also tells us in his *Ramcharitamanas* that one can deceive anyone, even one's own guru, to satisfy human needs. This is the *dharma* of this *Kaliyug* (dark age).
>
> Me: Do you believe in any other text such as *Manusmriti*? [39]
>
> Baba: My dear fellow, this book was appropriate for Manu's time, not now. This is *kaliyug.* The god of this age has given me a handwritten copy of the text 'Doctrine of Self Gratification'. It contains a lot of information relevant to Fiji, which I have drummed into my disciples. They are so devoted to my philosophy that they have even been to jail for drinking liquor.

Me: Not only are you the victim of bad *karma* from a previous life, you are also ruining your next life, besides leading your disciples astray.

Baba: That's what you think. Neither Europeans nor I believe in transmigration. Enjoy the present because this is the only life one has. Look how the Europeans are enjoying themselves. For them, self gratification comes first. See how well they have done for themselves. They have enticed thousands of our women folk to the colonies as indentured workers, where they serve their white masters hand and foot. Reports of their conditions on the plantations are sent to India regularly. These are read by our well-heeled graduates seated on cushy chairs while stroking their pot bellies and picking their noses. Fresh contingents of Indian women are transported to Fiji. They are kept at Nukulau depot where they are medically examined. They appear happy as their masters take them to the plantations where they slave for five years, etc. Brother, our people say there is no *narak* [evil, shame, hell] in India. Where was their sense of honour when our poor women were trapped into indenture and sent away? The pit of hell was full to the brim so our people lost all fear of retribution. Hence they watched as our women were sent into slavery right before their eyes. Other countries have a sense of honour, and they don't treat their women like this.

Me: You are privileged to be born a human being. You still have time to rectify your mistakes for your next life. You have done shameful deeds and yet have no sense of regret. You don't ask yourself who you are. You eat meat, drink liquor and indulge in other bad things. Really, you are no different from an animal.

Baba: Two million of my countrymen are living in terrible conditions in the colonies. Even before they were born, the European invented the indenture system in collusion with some of our countrymen, which reduced us to the level of animals. We were subjected to medical examination like animals. He tried to destroy our sense of shame and honour, he stripped us of our clothes and made us run naked. We lost all our sense of modesty. For a few pennies, the *arkatis* [recruiters] sold us as if we were animals for farm work. As soon as we arrived in Fiji, we began to be treated as if we were in fact animals. Even animals behave according to some set of rules, but here we had none. Nor was there anyone who could show the way. There is no one here to enlighten us. So we, descendants of the great sages of India, live like animals with a new identity as Mr Coolie of Fiji.

Me: You must do penance because you have accumulated so much sin. Devote yourself to doing the right thing for the coming generations.

Baba: There is no sin left in the world since Christ paid the price for all of us. If people feared sin, then we would not be mistreated like this. The whole world knows our plight. You may be troubled by sin but they [European

> planters] are not. Why should they do penance? If, for the sake of argument, we believe that there is such a thing as sin, then those selfish Europeans and their flunkies should be the ones to do penance first. Please leave now. I have had enough. Jai Kali Maharaj.

Thus ended our conversation. The steamer was due to arrive soon so I took leave and came back home.

Hindu Ceremonies

Birth Ceremony. As soon as a child is born, a priest is summoned for the name-giving ceremony. Some [well-to-do parents] invite a lot of people and give a feast. When a child is born in a Kabir Panth family, the *Baba* and his disciples gather and sing *bhajans,* after which the *Baba* ties a small bell around the child's neck, gives his blessings and leaves.

Thread Wearing Ceremony. When our own people [from India] discard the thread as burdensome as soon as they arrive in Fiji, how can one expect the Fiji-born to wear it? As a result, the practice has disappeared. Even those few who go through the ceremony throw it into the river or hang it on a peg after a few days.

Marriage Ceremony. Now take marriage. Those who go as a married couple try to find worthy partners for their children. But such people, who were few in number, invite a priest to officiate at the ceremony. The majority of the marriages are registered at the magistrate's office for a fee of five shillings. Widows, victims of maltreatment back at home, normally have their marriages officiated by the magistrates. There is another way of getting married which I call 'indiscriminate marriages'. This is the most common pattern throughout the colony.[40]

Funeral Rites. The way the Fiji Indians bury their dead is pathetic. They dig a hole and dump the body in it. A well-to-do person might invite a few Brahmans to his place for a ceremonial feast. In some places, people read religious books and sing *bhajan* during the mourning period. Nowadays, there is no ban on cremation, but people still bury the dead because cremation is looked down upon. Suva people bury their dead—and their customs—in a casket. The most they do is erect a headstone. Once a year, they cut the grass around the grave. This is the sum total of their obligation to the dead.

Festivals and Charity

Our Fiji Indian brothers contribute enthusiastically to charity work. They listen to readings from the scriptures and fast on and celebrate such occasions as the birth dates of Lord Ram and Lord Krishna. Holi is also celebrated as also is Ramlila,[41] which is performed at several places. In some places, even the natives join in, as members of Ravana's army. For some time, the interest in the festival has declined. Tazia[42] is another festival which is celebrated enthusiastically in Fiji. Hindus contribute generously and take part in the festival. Hindu men and women make offerings, and join in the processions, beating drums and flagellating themselves. There is no religious disharmony among the people; everyone works together. But the biggest celebration among our people is Christmas. People spare no expense in celebrating it. Thousands of animals are slaughtered for the occasion, and a lot of liquor drunk, much to the delight of the hoteliers. This is the most popular occasion.

Untouchable Bhagvana's Revenge on Brahmans and Kshatriyas

I once went to the Luvluv sector [in Lautoka]. There, Bhagvana was the *sirdar* (foreman) over 150 workers. He enjoyed the confidence of the white manager, who asked him to supervise the work and the workers in the sector. On Sundays, he used to lie in his hammock and get the higher castes to serve him, preparing his smoking pipe and fetching him water. If anyone complained, he would note his name down, mark him absent for a day, and have his indenture extended by a week. In this way, Bhagvana maintained his stranglehold over his workers. Such a thing [an untouchable lording over the higher castes] would be unheard of back in India. All this is the result of the indenture system. Bhagvana narrated his story thus:

> I am from Faizabad district. My landlord there used to beat me every day. All day I would spend collecting his dues from his debtors. In the evening he would give me a few cheap *rotis.* Once my mother took me to the village temple on Lord Ram's birthday. Since my mother couldn't get a good glimpse of Rama's statue from outside the boundaries of the temple, she began to cry. Unable to bear this, I took her inside for a better view. My mother was delighted, but I was severely beaten by the [higher caste] villagers. Fearing more beating the next morning by the landlord, I ran away, got registered in Faizabad, and came to Fiji. Now, for the next five years, these people under me can't even squeak. Every dog has its day. What happened to me I still remember vividly, and won't forget for the rest of my life.

My Encounter with the Rev. J. W. Burton

There is a [Methodist] Wesleyan Mission in Fiji to propagate Christianity among Indians. Of all the missionaries, Rev. Burton was the most prominent. He was tolerant, kind, eloquent, well-meaning and a true Christian. He helped Indian Christians gain their freedom from indenture. His great mission was to convert as many Indians to his faith as possible. Yet despite his best efforts, Rev. Burton was disappointed with the results. Even those few he was able to baptise were quickly converted by the Kabir Panths to their sect.

One Sunday, Rev. Burton sent a message saying that he was coming to visit me. He arrived at midday and I welcomed him. He then said to me: 'Would you mind if I talked about Christianity with you?' I told him I had no objection because I believe in the truth of all religions. Rev. Burton then sang a hymn, talked a little and left. This routine went on for a year. If a week went by without him visiting me, he would send me good wishes. Rev. Burton was extremely keen to convert me to his faith, knowing that many more would follow me if I converted. All his efforts were directed to this end.

Whenever missionaries from Australia and New Zealand visited him, he would always bring them to me. Seeing me steadfast to my religion, in spite of all his efforts and inducements, he began to debate with me. One Sunday, he arrived early with a New Zealand missionary along with his Indian converts. Our conversation went like this:

> Rev.: You have listened to me with great interest and tolerance, but I seem to have made no impact on you. I would like to know if you have given serious thought to the teachings of Jesus Christ. To what extent are you prepared to believe the teachings of the Bible? What do you think of Christianity?
>
> Me: Why do you go to such lengths to convert others to your faith? Religion is something unchanging, unchangeable. True religion is about selfless social service, not about outward appearances or rituals. People may believe in different sects but that for me is not true religion. Religion cannot be divided into compartments such as Islam, Christianity or Hinduism. For me religion means righteousness. I readily accept some of Christ's teachings in the Bible, such as not inflicting pain on others, being benevolent toward others, and the like. For me these are some of Christ's main messages in the Bible. I welcome them, but I don't agree with the ritual of baptism.
>
> Rev.: I am very disappointed to learn that you disapprove of baptism.
>
> Me: What does baptism accomplish?
>
> Rev.: Only after baptism is a person considered a true Christian.
>
> Me: I am very surprised to hear this.

Rev.: Surprised!

Me: As you said, only after baptism can one become a true Christian.

Rev.: Yes, only after baptism does one become a true follower of Lord Jesus and his teachings: he shares other people's sorrow, loves his neighbours, is calm in the face of adversity. Such is Christ's glory that all these virtues come to a person as soon as a person is baptised, and he follows that path.

Me: So, all those Europeans who attend your church on Sunday and listen to the sermon and are baptised must be true Christians!

Rev.: Yes, they are true Christians. They believe in the teachings of Christ. Of course, there are some who don't go to church and don't follow His teachings.

Me: The employees of the CSR who attend church must be true Christians?

Rev.: Yes, those who do go to church are true Christians.

Me: You call them true Christians? How can that be when these people treat their workers like animals and skin them alive? Their cruelty knows no bounds. They pay them a pittance. Look at the atrocities they commit against our women. And yet in a court of law they take the oath on the Bible and deny their evil deeds. Does baptism wash away all their evil deeds?

Rev.: No, no. Those who do these things are evil people. They don't understand the meaning of Christ's teaching.

Me: So those Europeans or anyone else who are baptised but don't follow the Bible, are they Christians?

Rev.: Those who don't follow the Bible are not true Christians.

Me: So, there is no need for baptism as long as one follows the right path and serves mankind. This is true religion. All this has been preached by our sages long before Christianity.

Rev.: Whatever you say. But if you become a Christian, you will enhance your knowledge.

Me: Reverend sahib, what do you mean? There is no discourse on knowledge or metaphysics in the Bible.

Rev.: The word of Christ is the source of all knowledge.

Me: Our scriptures deal with metaphysics at length. Through ignorance, man has confused reality with illusion, just like a dog barks at its own reflection. When the dog realises that it is not another dog but its own image, that is knowledge. To know the Self is knowledge. There is nothing about this in the Bible. You Europeans are baptised as soon as you are born,

> so there is no need to go into metaphysics. You exploit our people for your own luxury without the fear of God. How will Christianity improve me? I am sorry, but what has Christianity got to offer me?
>
> Rev.: I am very glad that you have listened to me so patiently. I hope to see you again. I must leave as it is time for church.

Thus our relationship continued for 10 years. Rev. Burton did a lot for our people. They used to flock to him and tell him their tales of woe. He would plead on their behalf to their masters in the CSR company, but to no avail. Burton even had an argument with a manager of the CSR, who told him bluntly not to interfere. But Burton persisted. He would frequently take the workers' complaints to the magistrates, the agent general of immigration, the governor, or anyone else. The door of his house was always open to our people. Burton would visit the workers in the fields and shed tears at their plight. Burton wrote *The Fiji of Today*, where he has painted a true picture of our plight, but he published it only after leaving Fiji. He was savagely attacked by the local whites and the Planters Association even petitioned the governor to prosecute Burton and confiscate the book. But they failed. Rev. Burton was the first person in Fiji to raise his voice against the indenture system.

(*With Yogendra Yadav*)

A rare sight of Indian converts to Christianity. Despite persistent efforts of Christian missionaries, very few embraced the new faith.

Endnotes

[1] See Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra 1983).

[2] This sketch is based on Sri Krishna Sharma, Svargiye Pandit Totaram Sanadhya (*The Late Pandit Totaram Sanadhya*) (Rajkot, 1957) . In Hindi.

[3] J. W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London 1910) 322-3. See also his *Our Indian Work in Fiji* (Suva 1909).

[4] Published in Kanpur *c.* 1914 or 1915. The second edition was issued in 1919. An English translation is available in John D. Kelly and Uttara Singh, *My Twenty One Years In The Fiji Islands* (Suva 1991).

[5] For a finely-grained reading of this, see John D. Kelly, *The Politics of Virtue: Hinduism, Sexuality, and Countercolonial Discourse in Fiji* (Chicago 1991).

[6] *Fiji's Indian Migrants: A history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne 1962).

[7] Translated and edited by Brij V. Lal and Yogendra Yadav and published by Saraswati Press, New Delhi.

[8] The company here and throughout the text refers to the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), which was the main employer of Indian indentured labour in Fiji.

[9] The 1890s and early 1900s.

[10] This is the work of Tulsidas (1532-1623). It is the story of Lord Rama in some 10,000 lines of verse. There, according to R. S. McGregor, Tulsidas gives his version of the story an elaborate introduction, partly invocatory, partly devotional and partly puranic, and adds an interpretive conclusion . See his *Hindi Literature from its Beginnings to the Nineteenth century* (Wiesbaden 1984), 111. Written in the Awadhi dialect of eastern Uttar Pradesh, it is the most popular text among the Fiji Hindus.

[11] Compiled by Malukdas (b.1574),it is a text in the Awadhi dialect interspersed with standard Hindi. It is a discourse, in prose, on the different incarnations of the Absolute.

[12] A collection of five stories from the Reva chapter of the *Skanda Purana* , reputedly compiled by the sage Vyas in 1600 BC. They deal with concepts fundamental to Hinduism, such as the theory of transmigration.

[13] One of the *puranas* devoted to the glory of Lord Shiva.

[14] A text for the devotees of Shakti (Power/Strength). Sometimes Shakti is synonymous with goddesses Durga, Parvati and Kali.

[15] A manual of Indian astrology.

[16] Devotional verse in praise of Lord Krishna.

[17] A text that deals with the importance of, and certain rituals performed on, the 11th day of the lunar calendar.

[18] An instructional manual on how to perform magic and cast spells on others.

[19] A devotional text in praise of Shakti.

[20] A text of *mantras to* be chanted when carrying out ablutions (toilet, bathing, brushing teeth, washing, and the like).

[21] A popular North Indian ballad about two brothers who fight heroically for the hands of women they have fallen in love with. In India it is sung mostly in the monsoon season.

[22] An entertaining and widely popular love story (with a happy ending) of Salinga and Sadabrij.

[23] A collection of 25 stories popular throughout North India, told by goblin Baital to Raja Tri Vikrama Sen.

[24] Romantic (raunchy) folk tales which can be either read or performed on the stage. Popular throughout North India.

[25] Valmiki's story of Lord Rama in Sanskrit, with long expository passages, which Tulsidas later simplified and translated into Awadhi.

[26] A manual of *mantras* and rituals to perform when conducting a marriage ceremony.

[27] The teachings of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj (Society of the Aryas).

[28] A Hindu epic on the battle between the Pandavs and the Kauravs, the central part of which is the Bhagvada Gita, a religio-philosophical text, in which Lord Krishna, in conversation with Arjuna, talks about duty *(dharma)*, knowledge, devotion and other such concepts central to Hinduism.

[29] A plant of the basil family considered holy by Hindus.

[30] By common consent a great poet and figure in Indian religious history, Kabir was born (1898 AD) into a low caste weaving family. His teachings, preserved in verse, are devotional and mystical in content, with a strong moral and social emphasis. Kabir rejects the brahminical socio-religious system, and stresses the essential brotherhood of man. Salvation is to be attained through devotion *(bhakti)*. See McGregor, *Hindi Literature*, 46-9.

[31] Founded by Gorakhnath in 854 AD. Believed in strict self-discipline through the performance of certain kinds of yoga. To that end, it sanctioned the infliction of bodily pain.

[32] After Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of Sikhism. Practical and non-mystical in character, the Nanak panth 'evokes a love for God which can be expressed through meditation on God's Name and leads the devotee towards a condition of union with God' (McGregor, *Hindi Literature*, 54-5). The teachings are expressed in the form of parable and metaphor.

[33] Dadu (1554-1603), born into the same caste as Kabir, whose influence is apparent, repudiates the caste system According to McGregor, 'If Kabir is a unique figure in force of mystical passion, Dadu might be termed a mystic with a religious vocation'. Satnami poets belong to the 16th and 17th centuries.

[34] Jagjivandas (?1670-1761), a member of the Satnami sect found widely throughout north India. According to McGregor, 'Topics dealt with by Jagjivandas include the Name, invocation (vinay) and vanity of the world and

of all observances as compared to love. Use is made of sufi, Nath and Krishna symbolism' (*Hindi Literature,* 144).

[35] Sees Ram as the incarnation of Vishnu and stresses devotion and meditation on Ram's name as the true path to salvation.

[36] Lau is probably a mistake, for there were no Indians in that island group. Is Lau a short form for Lautoka?

[37] A reformist Hindu sect founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83). Advocated the discarding of rituals and ceremonies that had accrued to Hinduism, and returning to the teachings of the Vedas.

[38] Pandit Shiudatt Sharma. For a history of the Arya Samaj in Fiji, see Purusottama Billimoria, 'The Arya Samaj in Fiji: A Movement in Hindu Diaspora', *Religion,* 15 (1985), 103-29.

[39] Laws of Manu, a manual for the conduct and organisation of Hindu society. Sanctions a brahminical socio-religious system repudiated by the various sects mentioned above.

[40] By this phrase Totaram appears to mean inter-religious and even inter-caste marriages.

[41] Festival celebrating the life of Ram, the centrepiece of the evening being a play depicting the life and deeds of Ram.

[42] A Muslim (Shia) festival commemorating the death of Prophet Mohammed's grandsons, Hasan and Hussein.

The Story of the Haunted Line

> *A person who does not have stability of mind is like an unstable dinghy. In this struggle of life, I will confront all the challenges with truth and strength, and will never waver. Cowardliness is an evil which I should banish from my life.*
>
> Totaram Sanadhya

Totaram Sanadhya served his indenture in Fiji in the 1890s. After completing his five year term, he married the daughter of a wealthy Indian settler and lived in Wainibokasi on the Rewa for another 16 years before returning to India for good in May 1914. His experience of his Fiji years was published in *Fiji Men Mere Ikkis Varsh (My twenty one years in Fiji)* in Kanpur in 1914 or 1915. This book was translated into several Indian languages and had a great impact on Indian public opinion. Totaram was an orthodox Brahmin from Firozabad in Agra, which was also the birthplace of Hindi journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi who ghost wrote his works as Totaram himself was not very well educated. In Fiji, Totaram played a very active role in various social, cultural and political affairs of his community. He was also influential in the broader struggle to end the indenture system. His speeches and publications at political gatherings in India received a wide and sympathetic audience. Historian K. L. Gillion has written: 'Totaram was a remarkably able man. His writings in Hindi (for he knew no English) show a perception, idealism, tolerance, wit, balance, and shrewd practicality seldom matched by any of his European or Indian contemporaries, and as a debater he was supreme. As a *Sanatani* pandit he built up a following of several hundreds on the Rewa.'[1]

Some of these traits are evident in the story printed below. It was first published in a Benares-based Hindi journal *Maryada* around 1922. However, our translation is from a typescript of the story which Benarsidas Chaturvedi presented to Ken Gillion along with Totaram's unpublished manuscript 'The Religious and Social Condition of the Indians in Fiji'. We have tried to be as faithful as possible to the text as well as the spirit of the story, keeping editorial emendations to the minimum. Its main themes which played a crucial role in bringing about the abolition of indenture in Fiji are amply clear: the harshness of plantation life, the plight of indentured women, and the shaming of India into action.

The Haunted Line

On May 28, 1893, I became an indentured labourer of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company of Fiji and arrived in the Nausori sector of the Rewa district.[2] There were 140 others with me. On the order of the Sector Manager, a European overseer came and began allocating everyone quarters in the coolie Lines.[3] All my companions were given accommodation except me. The overseer told me that as there was no room left in the lines, I would be placed in the haunted line. Here it is necessary to say a few words about the conditions in that line to give my readers an idea of the terrible conditions there. In the Nausori sector, there were 26 lines available for the accommodation of indentured labourers. A line consisted of 24 rooms, each of which was 8 feet wide and 12 feet long. A room housed three single men while couples with children were given a room to themselves. Thus were some 1500 workers accommodated in the lines.

The haunted line was situated six chains apart from the other 26 lines. It had once been used to house the Company's Fijian workers. When eight of its Fijian residents died because of some illness, the remaining workers abandoned the line and fled. Hence its name. No one would agree to live there and no one walked past it at night. New arrivals who went there unknowingly would run away in fear as soon as they found out the truth about the place. In any event, the overseer took me to this line and allotted me a room. After I had put my belongings down, he said to me: 'This will be your accommodation for five years, and if you leave it, you will not get another one. It is an offence to leave it without permission, the penalty for which will be fine and imprisonment.' The overseer then left, and I walked around to see what the place was like.

The line had 24 rooms. It was surrounded on all sides by grass so thick and overgrown that a person standing upright in it could not be seen from outside. The grass was infested with mosquitoes and crickets. In one direction, the deafening noise of the engines of a sugar mill could be heard. There was a river three chains away. From the rooms came a foul smell and inside them were mounds of earth dug up by a huge colony of rats. The rats and I were the only inhabitants of the line. However, six or seven tired looking dogs used to lie around. I realised that I would have to spend my five years of indenture in this place.

I immediately got to work, cut down the grass in front of my room and threw out the mounds of earth. It took me about four hours to clean my room. Afterwards, I spread a blanket and sat down. No sooner had I done this than swarms of mosquitoes descended upon me. My body was covered with rashes and itched intensely. I panicked and fled the room. A little while later, I saw two rats covered with mosquitoes. They tried to escape into to a hole but came out again when the mosquitoes did not give up. When rashes on my skin seemed to grow as large as a rupee coin, I lit a fire in my room and the mosquitoes disappeared.

As I was lighting the *chula* [fireplace for cooking], an order came from the Company's office for all new coolies to get their rations. I joined the others and at the once collected seven days' rations consisting of flour (3 *seer)*, dhal (1 *seer)*, ghee (¼ *seer)*, salt (⅛ *seer)*, etc.[4] As I began to walk towards the lines, the manager said: 'This ration is to last for seven days. Don't sell, barter or share it. Anyone disobeying this order can face 1-3 weeks imprisonment. If you finish your ration early, then you will have to starve. This office will not give out rations in the middle of the week.' After listening to the order, I left for my line thinking to myself: 'What a country this is where sharing food is an offence punishable by imprisonment. Oh Lord! Who knows what else is to come.'

At the line, I had my meal and was sitting down when an old resident of the lines came over and said to me: 'What are you doing living in this haunted line? Many men have died here. I swear it's the truth.' I was amazed to hear this but what could I do? I feared the punishment which awaited those who deserted their lines. I said: 'Brother, help me get another place. It's the overseer who allotted me this accommodation.' The poor fellow became frightened as soon as he heard the overseer's name, saying 'Brother, he is an evil man. We are completely at his mercy.' I said: 'Well, it is the will of God. What will happen will happen. We will see when the ghost comes. He is the ghost of the line and I am the Company's ghost. If I win the contest with him, I will throw him out of the line. I know a thing or two about fighting ghosts.' My friend then left and tired out, I went to bed.

I got up in the morning and went to work. This became a daily routine. After a day's work, I would return home at dusk, have my meal and read the *Gita* before going to bed. This book, which was very dear to me, had been presented to me by my elder brother Ram Lal. I carried it all the time, and so when I left home [India] I took it with me. I read it every night until ten or eleven o'clock.

A man called Baiju began to visit me and listened to the *Gita* readings with great devotion. There is one *shlok* (religious stanza) in the book which I memorized by heart because I cherished its message.[5] Baiju and I used to sit until eleven o'clock every night and talk generally about spiritual matters. People began to ask him where he went every night and he would tell them about me and the *Gita* readings. They were surprised to learn that I lived in the haunted line, saying: 'Why, the ghost has not been able to bring any harm to him! Before, no one could stay there. They would be driven out by the ghost within two or three days. It seems that because of the *Gita* readings, the ghosts are now running away. Baijuji, tonight we would like to go with you to visit this Brahman.' And so in time, more and more people began to visit me as my reputation spread as the exorciser of the haunted line. Most people thought I had some special powers/knowledge to deal with ghosts. Hence in their blind faith, when their children became ill, they immediately brought them to me saying: 'Maharaj, this child is sick. Please make him well.' I told them time and time again that I knew nothing about these matters but they, of course, did not believe me. Eventually I would give up and offer them a few *tulsi l*eaves.[6] And so it went on.

On Sunday I went for a stroll in the other coolie lines. There I saw people singing ballads [*alha*] or reading from the *Ramayana,* playing the tanpura and singing devotional songs [*bhajan*], uttering obscene words, welcoming close friends, practising wrestling in the grounds, or standing mutely in the presence of a headman [*sirdar*] hurling abuses and threats at them. Some with tears in their eyes would be pleading with the headman: 'You are our benefactor. It would be better if you end our lives. Despite working so hard, we are not able to earn enough to feed ourselves. Alas, we will not be able to survive.' Their humble pleadings would be enough to melt even a heart of stone, but the headman remained unmoved. He was the very symbol of heartlessness.

With tears streaming from my eyes as I witnessed this scene, I continued on and came upon the lines which housed Indian women. To think that they had come from India, the land which the *Bhagvad Gita* says the gods considered to be a privilege to be born in, where Lord Ram Chandra endured the hardships of exile to preserve the sanctity of culture and religion? Is this the land where Sita and Anusuiya were born, where the great Rana Pratap suffered numerous hardships to defend the motherland? Is this the place where thousands of heroic women in Rajputana immolated themselves on funeral pyres to preserve their honour? Times have changed, indeed, Bharat, you are no longer the country you once were. Today, Indian mothers and sisters, separated from their parents, husbands and sons, are found in the coolie lines of Fiji. Alas, Bharat, you are old and timid and unable to see even though you have eyes. Your knowledge and wisdom no longer count for anything. You have become heartless. You put these women in the cage of indenture, rendering them powerless, and sent them overseas to work as slaves. In every way you have deprived them of their independence. You have tossed their ship [of life] into a deep whirlpool and are yourself sitting contentedly on the side. You seem to have lost your manly strength: don't you have any concern for your self-respect? Alas, Bharat, it is astonishing to see you in this state of deep slumber. Is there any other place like you whose women are enslaved and sent overseas? No, no, no other country would be prepared to endure such an indignity. Yes, unfortunate Bharat, you are the only nation that is exporting its women as slaves. The result of your callousness is that today thousands of women are bidding farewell to their motherland and are living in the coolie lines of Fiji like caged birds with their wings clipped.

Why have they been sent? So that as women used to agricultural work, they will work in the fields of their white masters and with their blood and sweat fill their coffers with their earnings. No longer able to protect their honour and dignity, they will become degraded and face countless hardships. Who knows what else they will have to suffer. I was pondering these thoughts as I walked into a shade of a mango tree in the middle of a courtyard. This courtyard served as the common ground for the four lines surrounding it. I saw women busy at work. One is washing dishes or preparing a meal while another is crying as she remembers all the relatives she has left behind in India. She sobs, takes a long sigh and then resumes work. She remains quiet for a while. Tears well up in her eyes as she says to another woman: 'Sister, where are our brothers?' She lowers her head and remains silent. Then another woman interrupts her work and comes over to console her. Choking with emotion, she says: now don't cry, sister. What good will thinking about the past do you? We are on our own now. Damnation to the recruiters. Oh Lord, we have become separated from all our relatives.' Another says: 'Oh Lord, I never worked so hard at home. Oh sister, how will we be able to endure five years of girmit.' Saying this, she begins to cry again. Then some women would come and console her.

Unable to bear this heart-rending scene, I turned my head away in another direction and saw a woman washing her tattered clothes on the banks of the river. As I watched, she stopped and began to cry loudly. I walked up to her and asked: 'Sister, why are you crying?' On regaining her composure, she told me her story. After seven years of marriage, her husband had died [in India], leaving behind his aged mother and a three old year son. One day she left them at home to go on a pilgrimage to Dwarika. On her way back she got separated from her companions at Mathura and ended up in Fiji. She felt very sad remembering her aged mother-in-law and son, wishing she were dead.

I was so moved by this that I wept openly. Waves of thoughts entered my mind as I arrived at my line. After sitting silently for a while, I busied myself with some work. When I regained my peace of mind, I prayed to the Lord for a way out of this whirlpool: 'Oh Lord, take pity on us, protect Indian women who have come to Fiji. Were India to see the condition of its daughters in the coolie lines, it would feel remorse for allowing this to happen and would say: 'I have fallen so low as a result of the indenture system.'

One day, Baiju came to me and began to cry. I asked him why he was crying. He told me that Mr Merv of the Korociriciri Sector [Nausori], had torn up and trampled upon his *tulsi* beads which his guru [religious teacher] had given him when he had taken the vow of poverty. Further, the overseer had seized hold of his *jata* [knotted hair] and jerking it violently had said that it would be cut off at the hospital the next day. He was deeply troubled by this. I told him to leave everything in God's hands. After Baiju had left, I spent some time thinking about the matter and then fell asleep.

Next day was Saturday when we were required to do only a half day's work. On the way home from work, I picked up my week's rations from the Company's office. On Sunday, a few of my countrymen came to visit me. It turned out that two were from Agra and three from Kanpur. We embraced and talked generally about the life in the lines. I prepared a meal for my guests which used up all my ration. As my guests sat down to eat, I was very worried that there might not be enough food to go around which would embarrass me deeply. But thanks to the Good Lord, there was enough for everyone. I left the pots on the stove after my guests had left; since there was no more food left in the house, why would I need the pots? For this reason, I completely forgot to clean them.

After the guests had left, I went to the *sirdar* to enquire about my task for the next day. He gave me the field number but said that we would be told what to do when we presented ourselves for work at 6 the next morning. The field was three miles away from the line. Returning to my room, I got the tools ready for work next day. It dawned on me that the next day was Monday, the first day of the week, and I had already used up the whole week's rations. I would get my next ration on Saturday, but what would I do in the meanwhile? If the manager found out what I had done, he would lodge a complaint against me and I would be penalised in court. For this reason, I could not borrow rations from anyone else. Unable to resolve the dilemma, I went to bed.

Early the next morning, I went to the field and worked as well as I could. So Monday passed without any food. On Tuesday we were let off because of heavy rains, and like everyone else I stayed in my room. At midday, I felt very hungry, there was a burning sensation in my stomach and my body became limp. Still, I somehow managed to get through the day. In the evening, I lit a candle and began to read the *Gita*. At around ten as I lay down, I felt sharp pangs of hunger. I immediately got up but felt giddy, broke out into a sweat and began to hallucinate. There was one scene in which I saw myself back in India surrounded by relatives on a joyous occasion in the courtyard of our house. Then I saw my mother coming out of the door. I run to her, touch her feet and say to her, weeping: 'Mother, I am dying of hunger'. Tears well up in her eyes as she lifts me up to embrace and says: 'Son, never again go to a foreign country. See how your face has become so pale and dry because of hunger. Come, let me feed you.' Then, lifting me up by one hand and brushing off dust from my hair with another, she takes me inside and gives me food. I drink from my old water bowl and buttermilk from the same old earthen pot. I am surrounded by my childhood friends. One of them asks: 'Where have you been all this time?' I reply: 'Fiji'.

My eyes opened as soon I uttered that word. I was crying. I realised that I was all alone, not in India among my friends, family and familiar surroundings, but in the haunted line in Fiji, ruined and helpless.

Somehow, I regained composure and spent the night tossing and turning in bed. The next day, Wednesday, was cloudy and drizzling. The cold breeze means nothing to the robust and the well-fed but to one who was starving, it was hell. I felt a hint of fever and wondered what a good idea it would be to be let off work. As I was thinking this, the overseer arrived. He said: 'You will go to Field No 34 and cut grass. Come on, move.'

When I heard this, it seemed as if a mountain had fallen on my shoulders; my hope for a break was dashed. Fearing that I might end up in a prison [for absence], I picked up my hoe and set out for work. I had walked a little distance when my legs began to tremble and I broke out into sweat. When I felt slightly better, I got up and somehow arrived at the field at ten. I had reached the field alright, but did not have the strength to do any work. How could I when I could not even stand up straight? So I threw away the hoe to one side and began to weed some soft grass with my hands. At two in the afternoon, the overseer came around to inspect the work. As I was so feeble, I had not been able to do much work. The overseer said to me: 'Well, you haven't done any work today'. 'I am sick, sir', I said. Overseer: 'What kind of sickness?' I said: 'An attack of indigestion'. Overseer: 'What? I have never heard of that. Are you telling the truth?' I said: 'There is an ailment of the stomach which, without medication, burns like fire and makes a person weak and listless, leading to his death soon afterwards. I have had this illness for three days.' Overseer: 'Don't you have any medicine?' I said: 'There was some, but I gave it to five patients on Sunday and now there is none left. My legs are trembling and I have become very weak.' The overseer gave me a note saying: 'Okay, go and get some medicine at the hospital and come to work tomorrow'.

I went to the hospital with the note, but the doctor said nothing was the matter with me and asked me to leave. I came back to my room, pondering how to survive the next two days. Then an idea came to me and I went off to the home of a Saraswati Brahmin hoping that he might offer me a meal. My friend spread a blanket on the doorstep and asked me to sit down while he excused himself and went away to prepare the meal. He then ate the food and put the rest away, forgetting in the haste even to ask me if I might want some. Then he invited a dozen or so neighbours to his place and said to me: 'Well friend, let's hear the story of the *Mahabharata*'. I said: 'There are still four days to go till Sunday. I am reading the story of the exile of Raja Nal and Damyanti. I have been so moved by it that my legs are trembling and my voice has become very weak. I came just to pay my respects to you. I will tell you the story of the *Mahabharata* at an appropriate time.'

I then took leave. As I was walking, I saw the sugar mill and it occurred to me that if I went in, some of my friends working there might give me some cane juice which would assuage my hunger. I entered the factory and was wandering about when I saw some of my compatriots sipping cane juice. One of them offered me a cup. Just as I was about to drink it, the sugar chemist arrived on the scene. My countrymen quickly dispersed. Snatching the cup from me, the chemist asked me where I worked. I said I was a field labourer. He said that a field labourer was not allowed to drink cane juice. As he said this, he slapped me on the head and seizing my ears marched me out of the factory.

I stood outside for a while and then went to my line. It was evening. At around eight, I shut the doors and windows, thinking to myself: I haven't had food for three days, my body is weak, my throat is parched, and I won't be able to go to work tomorrow. Every ounce of strength has deserted my body. What type of human beings will understand my plight? Only the poor people of the villages who have experienced hardship; it would be useless to relate my suffering to self-seeking and degraded slaves. Oh Lord, how will I live through five years of *girmit*. You are the friend of the poor and the helpless, but it seems You have neglected me. Perhaps I am paying for the misdeeds of my previous life. At the moment, I am completely helpless. I see everyone here suffering, but my plight is unbearable. My future looks bleak as I reflect on what happened today. What should I do? It is a dark, rainy and desolate night, and I am alone in this haunted line. When people find themselves so helpless and alone, they take their own lives. For me, both the time and place are right to do this. I should leave this place forever. There is no other way to end my misery.

I immediately got up and tied a rope to the beam. I then took my shirt off and fastened my *dhoti* [loin cloth] determined to end my life. I bid farewell to the *Gita* inscribed by my brother. Then as I closed my eyes and prayed, I began to cry. I climbed on to the bed which was about five feet from the floor and made a noose on the rope. It was completely dark inside. I took a deep breath and said: 'Oh Lord, I do not want to live without your blessing'. Just then I felt something biting my little finger. As I lifted my hand, I saw a rat dangling from my finger. I flung it away. Then I tore a piece of my dhoti and tied it around my bitten finger. As I was placing the noose around my neck, someone knocked on the door saying: 'Brother, open the door quickly'. I was puzzled and released the rope. What is this? Who could it be at this time of the night? Are there really ghosts in this line? I climbed down from the bed, thinking let me attend to this before I complete my job. I peered out of my window but because it was dark outside, I could not see anything and sat down. I began to think about the teaching that tells man to stay away from evil. I thought that before one does any deed, one should properly consider whether it is moral or immoral. If it is immoral, then it should be discarded (I thought of my mother who used to teach me this when I was young). Is it not cowardly for me to contemplate this horrendous deed just because I am starving? No, no, never. My mother suffered enormous hardships and brought me up in the hope that I would look after her in her old age. No matter what the hardship, I have no right to end my life. Life is a struggle, and only the brave and courageous emerge victorious. I should confront the struggles of life with patience and courage. The Good Lord never falters; He provides for everyone from cradle to grave. My mother did not touch food for eight days after my father's death and still survived. If I live, I will one day humbly tell my mother: 'Your son is present before you, permit him to serve you'. Parents desire nothing more than the devotion and service of their sons. My mother will be very happy with my decision. I will do whatever she asks me to. How my thoughts have strayed today. A person who does not have stability of mind is like an unstable dinghy. In this struggle of life, I will confront all the challenges with truth and strength, and will never waver. Cowardliness is an evil which I should banish from my life.

I was wrapped in these thoughts when someone again asked me to open the door. I got up and went to the window to see who it was. 'It's me', came the reply. Unafraid, I said 'Are you a ghost?' 'Yes, I am a ghost. Open the door.' Well, let's confront this ghost today, I thought, as I opened the door. Four men at once entered the room. I lit a candle and saw that these were not ghosts but indigenous Fijians. The four sat down on the floor. One of them could speak a little Hindi. He used to live in this line before. He had run away from it after eight of his companions had died there. I asked his name. He said his name was Sam and pointed out others—Maciu, Joni and Joe. Then, as they were seated, Sam said: 'Brother, give us some food'. I was very embarrassed at hearing this request. With tears in my eyes, I said to myself: 'Lord, why are you trying to test me in this state? What can I feed these guests?' I told Sam I had no food in the house, but seeing the pot on the stove, he said to me: 'Look at that pot and you say there is no food?' I told him to look inside it himself. He lifted the lid and found a small amount of leftover rice from Sunday. I had completely forgotten about it. They shared the rice among themselves, had a drink of water and prepared to leave. They left Joe behind with me as he had an acute stomach ache. Sam said they were returning from his brother's funeral in Suva. He told me that I had now become his friend because I had given him some food which had given them enough strength to continue on their journey. He told me not to go off to sleep as they would be back in a couple of hours. I was relieved that everything had worked out well.

Sam returned as he had promised. There were seven others with him. They brought with them four bundles of sweet potato, yams and other vegetables. Sam cleaned the pots, got some water from the river and boiled the vegetables. He then served me food on a plantain leaf, asking me to partake of it first. Sam's eyes caught the rope which I had intended to use to end my life. He quickly climbed up, unknotted it and asked me if he could take it with him to tie his boat. Saying this, he wrapped it around his waist. Then they left with some of the boiled food, leaving the four bundles behind. By now, it was 5 am. I got up, brushed my teeth and was about to eat when I remembered the *shloka* 'Followers of Vishnu. . .' I was overcome with emotion and thanked the Lord for saving me from taking my own life. I had my meal. Slowly the darkness disappeared. People were up and about. Soon it was daylight and the beginning of a new life for me.

(*With Barry Shineberg*)

Endnotes

[1] K. L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: a history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne 1962), 147.

[2] Strictly speaking, the Indian indentured labourers entered into an agreement—*girmit,* as they called it—with the Government of Fiji which then allocated the immigrants to different employers, of which the CSR was, by far, the largest. Altogether, some 60,000 indentured labourers came to Fiji, 45,000 from North India and the remainder from the south. For a detailed discussion, see Brij V Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra 1983).

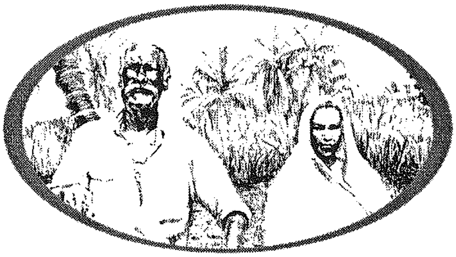
[3] A coolie line here refers to the plantation housing provided to the indentured workers.

[4] *seer* is an Indian unit of measure equivalent to about one kilogram.

[5] Followers of Vishnu should not trouble themselves with material things. Lord Vishnu is the provider of the world.

[6] *Tulsi* or basil plant is generally regarded as sacred by Hindus.

chapter 15



'A Want of Care'[1] Death and Disease on Fiji Plantations, 1890-1900

Glenn Fowler

This paper examines deaths caused by disease on the Fiji plantations between 1890 and 1900. Although only 16.59 per cent of the total number of Indian deaths between 1879 and 1920 occurred during this eleven-year period[2], its use as a sample is justified by the fact that it produced the highest death-rates.[3] I ask the following questions. What were the yearly death-rates among indentured Indians in Fiji between 1890 and 1900? How do these compare with those of unindentured Indians and other groups during the same period? What conclusions can be drawn from these death-rates? How soon after arrival (or birth) did Indians die as a result of a particular disease? Did conditions improve over time? If so, why? What were the significant differences, if any, between male and female deaths? What were the major causes of death among the infants and children of Indian immigrants?

The primary sources used for this essay are the Fiji Immigration Department's *Annual Reports on Indian Immigration to Fiji* and *Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants* (from which the death figures in the *Annual Reports* are compiled). As I soon discovered, any analysis based upon these supposedly correlating sources is fraught. For a start, dates of arrival are occasionally not supplied in the handwritten *Register of Deaths*, and the cause of death is often recorded as'unknown' or simply'?' These omissions do not prevent the researcher from obtaining the general picture, but they do mean that the findings will never be complete. The main dilemma in attempting to interpret the *Register of Deaths* is in determining the primary cause of death (a task which is necessary if one is ever going to arrive at some conclusions). In some entries, causes of death are numbered ('1' presumably denoting the primary cause), while in others the causes are labeled'primary' and'secondary' (or'proximate'). In just as many cases, however, the causes of death are simply listed without comment. Whether one can assume that the cause which appears first is the primary one will never be known.

There is, furthermore, a wide variance between figures entered in the *Register of Deaths* and those published in the *Annual Reports*. The variation between the death totals themselves begs the question: which of the deaths that appear in the *Register of Deaths* were ignored by the compiler of that particular year's *Annual Report*? The main problem one encounters when attempting to identify trends in Indian deaths is that the *Annual Reports* differ in what they include. For instance, the *Reports* from 1890 to 1892 differentiate between the deaths of infants and those of children, as well as between males and females of both, in terms of the numbers killed by the various diseases. The *Reports* from 1893 to 1895, on the other hand, do not differentiate between infants and children. From 1896 to 1900, the *Reports* distinguish between the causes of death of children under one year old to infants and those of children between the ages of one and ten, but there is no breakdown by sex.[4] These inconsistencies mean that we can discuss infant and child mortality only in general terms. Clearly, problems such as these stem from the Immigration Department's frequent alteration of the format of the mortality statistics in the *Annual Reports*. It is possible that changes could have been made to conceal figures which would have alarmed Indian Government or the Colonial Office.

Nonetheless, the *Annual Reports* are useful in that they provide the researcher with death-rates for indentured Indians and their children. Gillion made use of these figures in his analysis. From the *Annual Reports* it can be seen that the death-rate in 1884 was 5 per cent (or 50 per thousand). The death-rate peaked in 1886 at 5.61 per cent before plummeting the following year to 2.08 per cent. From this time, the death-rate rose gradually (the exceptions being a small decrease in 1890 and an even smaller one in 1894) until it reached an astonishing 5.28 per cent in 1895. Interestingly, the *Annual Report* for this year informs us that at the same time the death-rate for *unindentured* Indian immigrants was only 2.15 per cent.[5] In 1896, the death-rate for indentured labourers dropped sharply to 3.06 per cent and continued to decrease gradually until 1900 when it rose slightly to 2.84 per cent (See Appendix A for death-rates).

For almost every year between 1887 and 1894,[6] the death-rate for the indentured Indian population was significantly higher than that for the Europeans in Fiji. In 1892, when indentured Indians were dying at a rate of 3.49 per cent, the European death-rate was 0.96 per cent. In the following year, the indentured Indian death-rate was more than four times that for the European population, the rates being 4.05 per cent and 1.01 per cent respectively. The only exception to this trend was 1889, when the European death-rate actually exceeded that of the indentured Indians—2.86 per cent as opposed to 2.75 per cent. I have no explanation for this apparent turnaround (See Appendix A).

By contrast, for each of the seven years for which such a comparison is made in the *Annual Reports*, the death-rate for indentured Indians was lower than that for the indigenous Fijians (See Appendix A). If Gillion is to be believed, then this is at least partially due to the fact that Indians were better served by hospitals than Fijians.[7] Moreover, for all but two years between 1890 and 1900, the indentured Indian death-rate was lower than that of Melanesian indentured labourers on Queensland sugar plantations, which ranged from 2.38 per cent to 5.59 per cent over the eleven-year period. The exceptions were 1895 and 1898.[8] (See Appendix A.)

What, then, can be made of the death-rates for indentured Indian labourers and their children? Gillion's argument that these death rates reflected market conditions is persuasive and merits further attention. According to him, falling sugar prices—first in the mid-1880s and then in the early 1890s—'had important repercussions on the treatment of the Indian immigrants and the government's administration of the indentured labour system'.[9] Dramatic falls in the price of raw sugar led many of Fiji's sugar companies to fold, and even CSR threatened that it was in danger of collapsing.[10] Consequently, employers were desperate to reduce costs, and the Fiji Government, fearing that the collapse of the sugar companies would lead to the colony becoming insolvent, was reluctant to stop them.[11] This led to what Gillion sees as a'marked deterioration' in the treatment of indentured Indian labourers after 1884.[12] Gillion writes:

> The contemporary view [prior to 1900] that colonies should live entirely on their own resources, and not the British taxpayer, meant that the Fiji Government was dependent upon commerce for revenue and was forced to exercise a rigid economy. This enhanced the importance and power of commercial interests, and over much of the period prevented the government from imposing reforms in the conditions under which the immigrants lived.[13]

Gillion attributes the over-tasking that went on to both the rivalry between CSR's managers and the low cane price paid to those planters who were under contract to the company.[14] Plantation managers had few checks imposed upon them before 1900 and could work their labourers more or less as hard as they saw fit. The paucity of government inspectors, especially in the early 1890s, meant that the supervision of planters was grossly inadequate.[15] Moreover, the fact that there was no public criticism—from either within or outside Fiji—of the way in which the plantations were operated meant the Indian immigrants were very much isolated.[16]

A common explanation put forward by the Government for the high death-rates among Indian immigrants was that those recruited were of poor quality.[17] In fact, the Indians sent to Fiji were not inferior to those sent to other colonies.[18] The high rate of mortality among indentured Indian labourers throughout the 1890s can be attributed to the deterioration of conditions on Fiji plantations.[19] These conditions will be discussed later.

In identifying the main killers among Indian immigrants in Fiji between 1890 and 1900, it is useful to examine the death figures year by year. In 1890 a total of 181 Indians (both indentured and unindentured)[20] died in Fiji, of whom 117 were male. Dysentery was the main killer with 48 deaths: anaemia was next with 23, and diarrhoea was the cause of 15 deaths (including 2 described as tubercular diarrhoea).[21]

Among the 229 Indians (132 males and 97 females) who died in 1891, dysentery was again the major killer, causing 56 deaths. Diarrhoea killed 31 Indians, influenza 17, and 14 deaths were attributed to anaemia.[22] In the following year, anaemia was said to account for the colossal total of 50 deaths. The remarkable variance between these two figures does not indicate (as it seems to) that the deaths caused by anaemia increased three-fold in the space of a single year. Instead, it merely illustrates the inconsistency which permeates the Immigration Department's *Annual Reports*. The *Report* for 1891 gives the number of deaths caused by anaemia as 14, but it fails to take into account another 33 deaths in which anaemia was listed along with one or more additional causes. By contrast, the 1892 *Report's* figure of 50 deaths caused by anaemia not only includes those deaths caused by'pernicious anaemia'—of which there were 14—but also another 36 in which anaemia was a contributing cause. From 1892 onwards, the totals given for deaths caused by, say, anaemia include those deaths in which there were other causes. The problem confronting researchers today is that it was up to the compiler of each *Annual Report* to decide which column such complicated deaths were listed under—that is, which was the primary cause of death. This gave rise to a kind of'hierarchy of diseases'. If the *Register of Deaths* gave the cause of death as'anaemia and debility', it was most likely to appear in that year's *Annual Report* under'anaemia combined with other causes', which for all intents and purposes meant that the cause of death became simply'anaemia'. To the researcher's enduring frustration, the *Annual Reports* have a somewhat arbitrary feel about them, and this is mainly due to the inconsistencies of the *Register of Deaths*.

Among the 245 Indians (152 males and 93 females) who died in 1892, dysentery accounted for the second highest number of deaths with 36, while diarrhoea accounted for 20 deaths, influenza 10 and phthisis 12.[23] In 1893, 280 Indians died, 167 of whom were male. Anaemia was again the main killer, accounting for 81 deaths (45 as the result of pernicious anaemia and 36 as the result of a combination of anaemia and other complaints). Diarrhoea and dysentery accounted for 47 and 17 deaths respectively.[24] Of the 295 Indian deaths (180 males and 115 females) in 1894, 76 were the result of anaemia (57 from pernicious anaemia and 19 from anaemia combined with other causes). Diarrhoea and dysentery accounted for 37 and 19 deaths respectively.[25] In both 1893 and 1894, anaemia and ancylostomiasis (or hookworm) caused between them over half of the deaths among indentured Indian immigrants. This prompted an investigation of anaemic deaths in the *Annual Report* for the year 1894, which concluded that the 'greatest loss occurs in the two districts of Rewa and Navua, which in soil and climate present conditions not found elsewhere, and possibly favourable to these diseases'.[26]

In 1895 when 397 Indian deaths were recorded (243 males and 154 females), diarrhoea and dysentery both overtook anaemia as the primary killers. Diarrhoea killed 61 and dysentery 49, while anaemia caused 36 deaths (19 from'tropical anaemia' and another 17 from a combination of anaemia and other causes). Among indentured immigrants, the percentage of deaths caused by anaemia dropped from over 50 per cent to 29.41.[27] Ancylostomiasis, though, which had accounted for only 8 deaths in 1894, accounted for 20 in 1895, and debility accounted for another 18.[28]

In 1896, the total number of Indian deaths dropped to 258 (152 males and 106 females). Diarrhoea was again the main killer with 47 deaths (41 of which were caused by a combination of diarrhoea, marasmus and convulsions and occurred in children and infants). Anaemia caused 28 deaths (including 14 where there were contributing factors) and dysentery 24. The compiler of this year's *Report* continued to follow the progress of anaemia as a killer, and concluded that of all the deaths among indentured Indians, only 17.72 per cent were caused by anaemia or ancylostomiasis. If these figures are to be believed, anaemia was no longer anywhere near as rampant as it had been between the years of 1892 and 1894.[29]

The *Annual Reports* for the years 1897 to 1900 do not include a breakdown of the causes of death among the Indian population as a whole in terms of particular diseases—such a breakdown only appears with regard to child and infant mortality. The causes of death among the Indian population as a whole are broken down only into general and local diseases, and into general and local injuries. Hence, it was necessary to work through the *Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants* for the four years from 1897 to 1900 to obtain some idea of the main killers. The difficulties associated with doing this have been discussed earlier. Suffice it to say that in the case of a death involving multiple causes, in which the causes have not been numbered, or labeled'primary','secondary', etc, the assumption has been made that the first cause listed was the primary cause of death.

Of the 253 Indians (140 males and 113 females) who died in 1897,[30] 23 fell to diarrhoea, 20 to anaemia, 8 to syncope and 5 to dysentery. Other significant killers included marasmus, syphilis, tuberculosis and enteritis.[31] In 1898, 229 Indian immigrants (of whom 127 were male and 102 were female) died,[32] 22 from syphilis (especially congenital),[33] 20 from diarrhoea, 11 from anaemia, and 7 each from dysentery, syncope and debility.[34] Among the 256 Indians (147 males and 109 females) who died in 1899,[35] diarrhoea caused the death of 26, anaemia of 13, debility of 12 and dysentery of 5. Syphilis and enteritis were again fairly common.[36] In 1900, 343 Indians (of whom 188 were males and 155 females) died.[37] Diarrhoea was again the main cause of death claiming 25 lives, while ulcerative colitis (a condition similar to diarrhoea characterised by the frequent passage of stools containing blood)[38] claimed 15, broncho-pneumonia 13, pneumonia

12, dysentery 12 and bronchitis 11. As a primary cause, anaemia appears only four times. Syphilis, phthisis, ancylostomiasis, enteritis and fever were all significant killers.[39]

What emerges from these figures is that the three main killers among the Indian population as a whole between 1890 and 1900 were dysentery, anaemia and diarrhoea. Why were most deaths caused by these three diseases? Anaemia, according to the *Annual Reports* (and, between the years of 1897 and 1900, the *Register of Deaths*), was responsible for the deaths of 217 Indian males and 138 Indian females during the last eleven years of the nineteenth century.[40] The vast majority of those whose deaths were attributed to anaemia died within their term of indenture, though relatively few died within the first six months of their stay in Fiji.[41] Comparatively few infants (children less than one year old) died as the result of anaemia.[42]

The fact that so many deaths were attributed to anaemia alone is an indication of how primitive medical knowledge was at the time. Anaemia by itself kills rarely.[43] What it does do is break down the body's immune system, rendering one vulnerable to other diseases such as tuberculosis (which would not have been detected without an autopsy), and, most importantly, to parasitic infection, especially that of hookworm. It was hookworm, or ancylostomiasis, which, by finding its way to the person's stomach and preventing the body's absorption of protein, would have eventually caused their death.[44]

It was possible for Indians in the'lines' (or barracks) to become infected with this parasite in a number of ways. In such an environment, hookworm could be passed on by way of contaminated food—in particular, imperfectly cooked meat or badly prepared sausages. It is likely, though, that most Indians became infected after coming into contact with human stools (or faeces). *Black's Medical Dictionary* informs us that if one becomes infected with hookworm, worms, usually around twelve millimetres in length, inhabit the upper part of the small intestine, where they embed themselves in the mucus membrane lining the bowel. These worms produce an enormous number of eggs which pass from the body in the stools. The embryos, finding their way into water, mud, or damp earth, develop rapidly and are capable of maintaining their vitality for up to several months, provided there is moisture. These embryos can gain access to the human host through the drinking of polluted water, but in the insanitary conditions present in the Indian living quarters, it is more likely that they gained access through the skin—probably through the feet or ankles.[45] It would have been very easy for the labourers, who were mostly barefooted, to pick up the disease while frequenting the communal ditch-style latrines, which were some distance away from the lines. If a person was to walk or stand on any faeces, the hookworm could enter the body through the feet.[46] Gillion believes that hookworm was the cause of 'more real misery than anything else in the indenture system', causing many thousands of deaths either directly or indirectly, and weakening and/or breaking countless others.[47] In the wet districts of Rewa and Navua especially, where the ground was swampy and the drainage ineffective, hookworm thrived.[48] Chronic infestation with ancylostoma was (and still is) always accompanied by anaemia.[49] Contemporary medical officials in Fiji were, as the 1894 *Report* shows, not blind to the link between the two conditions, but the fact that so many deaths were attributed to anaemia and so few to ancylostomiasis indicates how little they knew about the relationship between the two.

The insanitary conditions on the plantations also accounted for the prevalence of dysentery, which, according to the *Annual Reports*, claimed the lives of 192 Indian males and 81 Indian females between 1890 and 1900.[50] A highly infectious disease, dysentery usually took the form of a very draining, prostrating, continuous watery diarrhoea, and left the victim dehydrated. Infection could be spread by flies (which interfered with food), by direct contact, or by pollution of the water by the faeces of infected persons.[51] Indentured Indians, living in overcrowded and insanitary conditions, and often malnourished, were ever vulnerable to infection, especially if those carrying the disease were permitted to handle food.[52] Improperly cooked food, especially vegetables, would also have been a potent source of infection.[53] A high percentage of those deaths caused by dysentery occurred within one year of the victim's arrival in Fiji, suggesting that dysentery struck early and killed quickly. Of the 48 Indians who died in 1890 as a result of dysentery, 26 (or 54.17 per cent) had been in Fiji for less than a year. Similarly, in the years 1892 and 1895, more than half of those whose death was attributed to dysentery died within one year of their arrival in the colony.[54]

While most of those who fell victim to dysentery were adults,[55] it was much less common for adults to die as a result of diarrhoea. In Fiji in the 1890s, as in Africa, South America and parts of Asia (Bangladesh even today), diarrhoea killed enormous numbers of children and infants. Of the 258 Indian immigrants who died from diarrhoea between 1890 and 1896, 182 (or 70.54 per cent) were under the age of ten.[56] Similarly, of the 101 who fell to diarrhoea between the years of 1897 and 1900, 88 (or 87.13 per cent) were children, and of these 67 (or 66.34 per cent) died in their first year of life.[57]

Diarrhoea among infants, today usually referred to as infantile gastroenteritis, involves looseness of the bowels accompanied by vomiting.[58] With this condition, it is a case of the younger the infant, the higher the mortality rate.[59] The first year is the critical period. Among Indians in Fiji, the high incidence of diarrhoea was probably due to the sheer uncleanliness of the plantations. An infant, often with nobody to adequately supervise it if its mother was at work on the plantation, was at liberty to crawl around in the dirt, thus contracting the disease (often via the ear or mastoid), and then passing it on to its siblings. Diarrhoea could spread like wildfire, and was often fatal within twenty-four hours of infection.

The condition is nowhere near as common among breast-fed babies (and when it does occur in these it is usually less severe),[60] a fact which accounts for the disproportionately high incidence of diarrhoea among female Indian infants and children in Fiji. In each of the years from 1890 to 1895 (the only years for which the *Annual Reports* distinguish between the deaths of male and female children with respect to particular diseases), the number of female children and infants that died as a result of diarrhoea was higher than that of male children and infants. Of the 140 Indians under the age of ten who died during this six-year period, 82 (or 58.57 per cent) were female.[61] The chief reason for this imbalance is that girls were, on the whole, not as highly valued, seen as a burden, and thus tended to be breast-fed for a shorter period of time. Boys were often given superior nurturing, and the fact that they were breast-fed longer increased their chance of avoiding diarrhoea infection. Diarrhoea often combined with marasmus and/or convulsions (and even debility or fever) to cause the death of Indian children and infants in Fiji. In 1896, for instance, 41 deaths were caused by'diarrhoea with marasmus, convulsions, etc', as opposed to 6 deaths caused by diarrhoea alone.[62] Thirty of these dead were children under one year of age. [63]

What is noteworthy about the three main diseases among Fiji's Indian population in the 1890s is that all of them can be attributed to the conditions under which the workers lived and worked. These conditions warrant closer examination. On a typical plantation, there were two or three lines, each housing between forty and fifty Indians.[64] It is generally agreed that these dwellings were cramped, dirty and unhealthy. In *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, Gillion writes:

> With three bunks, and firewood, field tools, cooking utensils and wet clothes cluttered about, smoke, soot, spilt food, flies and mosquitoes, perhaps fowls, or a dog as a precaution against theft, and, until separate kitchens were required in

1908, a fire-place as well, living conditions were neither comfortable nor sanitary.[65]

One can imagine how quickly infection would have spread under such conditions. When conditions were damp, the danger of infection was further increased, parasites such as hookworm thriving in moisture. The floors of the line, usually made out of cow-dung and clay,[66] were themselves often damp (especially in Rewa and Navua).[67] Furthermore, it was not uncommon for Indians to be forced to work in the pouring rain,[68] and this must have increased the chance of contracting pneumonia and similar complaints. When one notes that one of the major causes of dysentery is food poisoning, it is not surprising why so many Indians died. Meals were often prepared in the same quarters in which animals lived, and few precautions were taken against flies settling on food.[69] Moreover, the water Indians drank was often contaminated.[70]

The weak condition of many Indians left them wide open to disease, and their poor state of physical health can be attributed to three factors. Firstly, most Indians were, by the Fiji Government's own admission,[71] undernourished, usually lacking in protein.[72] Even during the initial six-month period in which food rations were provided for Indian labourers (at their own expense), the amount of food they received was inadequate. According to Vijay Naidu,'[m]ost of them finished their weekly supplies in four days and only managed by borrowing from older immigrants'.[73] After this period of compulsory rationing ceased, many could not afford to eat sufficient amounts, especially if they fell sick and were thereby unable to earn a full day's wage.

The second factor to which the weak condition of indentured Indian immigrants can be attributed is the often callous over-tasking that went on, especially in the early to mid-1890s. Plantation managers and overseers, who were under constant pressure to obtain maximum production at minimum cost, were inclined to impose unreasonable demands upon their Indian workers.[74] Digging and clearing drains, along with planting, weeding, trashing, cutting, and loading cane were typical tasks. All were physically demanding at the best of times, but when performed for over nine hours a day, as they often were, they were doubly so.[75] A fatigued labour force is unquestionably more susceptible to disease than one which is well rested.

The third reason why the Indian labourers in Fiji were so susceptible to disease was that they received inadequate medical care. Indians, it seems, were fairly well served in terms of the number of hospitals available to them, unless they were on an isolated plantation.[76] According to Gillion,'[t]he District Medical Officer, a government official whose main duty was the medical supervision of immigrants, visited the larger estate hospitals once or twice a week and inspected the lines twice a year'.[77] Although good medicines were often provided in these hospitals (by employers who recognized that it was in their interests to get workers out of the sickbeds and into the cane fields), the immigrants received what Gillion describes as'rough and ready treatment'.[78] As Vijay Naidu points out, the hospitals'were run by people who had hardly any knowledge of medicine, and qualified medical doctors were difficult to come by, especially for immigrants'.[79] Furthermore, there was no real nursing.[80]

It is interesting to note that in 1891, 17 deaths of Indian immigrants were recorded as being caused by influenza.[81] This coincides with a pandemic of influenza which began sweeping the world in 1890. This pandemic clearly reached Fiji in the following year, and the most plausible explanation for this is that it was brought to the islands by ship, possibly by way of parcels. The incubation period for influenza (that is, the period for which the virus can survive in the open air) is usually three to five days—two weeks at the outside. If the virus had been taken on board a ship at its port in India, the disease would have been detected on the voyage (over 70 days by sail or around 30 days by steam), and the ship would have been quarantined on its arrival at Suva. It is probable, therefore, that the virus was brought to Fiji aboard a ship from Sydney or Auckland. The former seems most likely in view of the fact that Australia's eastern seaboard was experiencing the pandemic in 1891, and that the Sydney-based company CSR was frequently sending ships to its Suva depot. Another 10 deaths were caused by influenza in 1892 (6 of these being attributed to a combination of influenza and other complaints),[82] but by 1893 the number of deaths caused by influenza had dropped to two.[83] This coincides with the petering out of the pandemic in that year. The fact that so many of the Indians were undernourished meant that their chances of contracting influenza were increased.

Death-rates among the infants and children of Indian immigrants in Fiji were high by comparison with other colonies to which Indian labour was sent.[84] Among infants (that is, children under one year old), the death-rate was consistently over 15 per cent between 1890 to 1900.[85] Rarely, though, did it exceed 20 per cent until 1895 when the death-rate among infants was an astonishing 32.92 per cent.[86] By the following year, this rate had dropped to 19.7 per cent and for the remainder of the decade it never exceeded 21.23 per cent (the 1897 figure).[87] The death-rate among children (that is, those from one to ten years of age) was also consistently high, often over 10 per cent.[88] The death statistics for the year 1897 are remarkable. Of the total number of deaths among indentured Indians (166), 81 or 48.8 per cent, were those of infants (under one year of age). Of those children of indentured people who died, 79.41 per cent were under one year of age, 66 per cent were under six months, and only 9.8 per cent were over two.[89]

The main causes of death among children and infants overlapped, but while children mostly died as a result of dysentery, bronchitis and broncho-pneumonia, infants more commonly fell to asthenia (or want of strength), marasmus (progressive wasting attributable to defective feeding), rickets, convulsions,[90] debility, malnutrition, premature birth, tetanus neonatorum, enteritis (particularly in the latter part of the decade) and congenital syphilis (which killed 22 infants in 1898). Both children and infants were, of course, hard hit by diarrhoea.[91]

Throughout the 1890s, the *Annual Reports* tended to stress the same reasons over and over again for the high death-rates among infants and children. The 1890 *Report* attributes the mortality among children, especially infants, to'[t]he carelessness, indifference and ignorance of the parents, and also the debility and want of proper nourishment of the mother'.[92] It is true that many mothers, deprived of the traditional kinship relations which they would have had at home, were ignorant of the ways of raising a child. In this *Report* it is also noted that'[t]he supply of milk is still insufficient on the majority of estates'.[93] The author of this *Report* was convinced that infants were, in some cases,'purposely made away with', but he believed that most infant deaths could be attributed to a'want of care' on the part of the mother.[94] Similarly, the 1897 *Report* states that'in many cases the apathy, want of cleanliness, or ignorance of the mother has resulted in gross neglect'.[95] Other *Reports* refer to the'negligence'[96] and'lack of attention'[97] of mothers. One wonders how an Indian mother could be expected to pay round-the-clock attention to a baby or small child when she spent most of her time completing grueling tasks in the field. Although women often took their infants into the field with them and left them to lie on sacks (the alternative was to place them in a fly-ridden'nursery'), these infants were still very much left on their own.[98] From the toddling stage until the age of fifteen (when they usually went to work), children, who had no school to go to, could, as Gillion put it,'run wild'.[99] This left them highly vulnerable to infection, especially diarrhoea. The 1893 *Report* was more compassionate in its reference to Indian mothers, ascribing the problem of infant mortality to'the inability of the parents to properly attend to the wants and ailments of these children' than to the'wilful neglect of the parents'.[100] The author of the *Report* for the year 1900, though, was adamant that the high number of deaths among children was'not due to neglect on the part of employers or failure to provide for the care of children'.'[101] This, as we know, is not true.

Both the rates of mortality and the numbers of deaths among Indians in Fiji between 1890 and 1900 were, not only by today's standards but by the standards of the day, excessively high. As Gillion observes, between the years of 1891 and 1894, more than one quarter of the Indian immigrants died or were repatriated as incapable within their five-year term of service.[102] As an examination of the main killers reinforces, a great many of these deaths could have been prevented had an effort been made by both planters and governments to improve conditions sooner. According to Gillion, the growing prosperity of the colony after the turn of the century led to significant improvements in the conditions under which the Indians lived and worked.[103] Plantation managers, experiencing higher returns. were more willing to make these improvements, and the Immigration Department, which could afford to employ more inspectors, was more able to insist upon them.[104] From 1908, for example, sanitation on plantations was greatly improved.[105] Furthermore, an increasing awareness of the conditions under which Indians lived, fostered by J.W. Burton's 1910 book *The Fiji of Today* and the Sanderson Committee's Report of the same year, meant that the Fiji Government was obliged to treat Indians better. The Government was not only under mounting pressure from observers in Britain and India, but also from the'free' Indian community in Fiji. No longer were Indians as isolated as they had been during the early years of indenture.

Appendix A: Death-Rates (%)

	Indentured Indians (and their children)	**Europeans in Fiji**	**Fijians**	**Melanesians in Queensland**
1884	5			
1885	4.19			
1886	5.61			
1887	2.08	1.47	3.59	
1888	2.39	1.6	3.05	
1889	2.75	2.86	4.06	
1890	2.15	1.69	3.88	4.45
1891	3.28	0.98	4.97	5.59
1892	3.49	0.96	4.99	3.94
1893	4.05	1.01	4.93	4.74
1894	4.02	1.12		4.06
1895	5.28			2.96
1896	3.06			3.16
1897	2.62			3.28
1898	2.54			2.38
1899	2.57			3.28
1900	2.84			2.93

Source: *Annual Reports on Indian Immiaration to Fiji*
Source: C. Moore, *Kanaka*, p.246.

Endnotes

1. *Annual Report on Indian Immigration to Fiji* for the year 1890, p.12.
2. Between 1879 and 1920, approximately 17.9 per cent Indians (both indentured and unindentured) died. Three per cent of these deaths occurred between the years of 1890 and 1900. (Included in these figures are the deaths of those Indians who had been reindentured, but during the eleven years under study, only 22 such deaths were recorded in the *Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants.*)
3. KL Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants. A history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962), p.102.
4. From 1897 to 1899 a more comprehensive breakdown is supplied, but the diseases are grouped into general and local diseases, and in terms of which part of the body they affect—specific complaints are not listed.
5. *Annual Report* on Indian Immigration to Fiji for the year 1895. The previous year it had been 1.7 per cent (see *Annual Report,* 1894).
6. The comparison is only available in the *Reports* for these years.
7. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants,* p.106.
8. C. Moore. *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay* (Port Moresby, 1985), p.246.
9. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants.* p.79.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.* p.94.
14. *Ibid.* p.88.
15. *Ibid.* p.91.
16. *Ibid.* p.93.
17. *Ibid.* p.90.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. Unlike the death-rates. the death totals provided in the *Annual Reports* include the deaths of unindentured immigrants. To attempt to separate the deaths of unindentured Indians from those of indentured Indians would be a time-consuming and probably fruitless exercise.
21. *Annual Report,* 1890.
22. *Annual Report,* 1891.
23. *Annual Report,* 1892.
24. *Annual Report,* 1894.
25. *Annual Report,* 1894.
26. *Ibid.,* p.18.

[27] *Annual Report*, 1895, p.16.

[28] *Annual Report*, 1895.

[29] *Annual Report*, 1896.

[30] *Annual Report*, 1897.

[31] *Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants* for the year 1897.

[32] *Annual Report*, 1898.

[33] Syphilis was common because of the social condition under which the indentured immigrants lived. Women, whether they liked it or not, often had more than one sexual partner, and this made it difficult to check the spread of venereal disease.*Annual Report*, 1900.

[34] *Register of Deaths*, 1989.

[35] *Annual Report*, 1899.

[36] *Register of Deaths*, 1899.

[37] *Annual Report*, 1900.

[38] W.A.R. Thomson, *Black's Medical Dictionary*, 34th ed. (London, 1984), p.252.

[39] *Register of Deaths*, 1900.

[40] In the case of one death, the victim's sex was not stipulated.

[41] *Register of Deaths*, 1900.

[42] *Annual Reports*, 1890-1900.

[43] This information, along with much of the following information which has not been footnoted, was supplied to me by leading medical historian Barry Smith in an interview I had with him.

[44] Thomson, on page 47 of *Black's Medical Dictionary*, informs us that hookworm is even today widespread in the tropics and subtropic.

[45] Thomson, *Black's Medical Dictionary*, p.47. On the same page we are informed that ultimately, through the blood-stream and the lungs, the embryos gain access to the intestine, where they develop.

[46] Infants, therefore, whose feet went nowhere near the latrines, were not as vulnerable to hookworm infection.

[47] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.107.

[48] *Ibid.*

[49] Thomson, *Black's Medical Dictionary*, p.48.

[50] *Annual Reports*, 1980-1900. In five cases the sex of the victim was not stipulated.

[51] Thomson, *Black's Medical Dictionary*, p.291.

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] *Register of Deaths*, 1890-1900.

[55] Of the 244 whose deaths were attributed to dysentery between 1890 and 1896, only 60 (or 24.59 per cent) were under the age of ten.

[56] *Annual Reports*, 1890-1896. A figure for the number of deaths among infants alone is not available in the *Annual Reports* for several of these years.

[57] *Annual Reports*, 1897-1900. These percentages would undoubtedly have been higher had cases of dysentery not been included under the heading of diarrhoea. The most likely explanation for this is either that the two conditions were mistaken on account of the fact that diarrhoea is the chief symptom of dysentery. or that in certain years it was fashionable in medical circles to refer to dysentery as diarrhoea or vice versa.

[58] Thomson, *Black's Medical Dictionary*, pp.251-2.

[59] *Ibid*, p.252.

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] *Annual Reports*, 1890-1895.

[62] *Annual Report*, 1896.

[63] *Ibid.*

[64] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.104.

[65] *Ibid.* p. 105.

[66] *Ibid.*

[67] Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*, p.41.

[68] *Ibid.*, p.35.

[69] Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*, pp.31-2; Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, pp.105 & 121.

[70] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.107.

[71] On pages 11-12 of the *Annual Report* for the year 1890, for instance, it is stated that'want of proper nourishment' was'the primary cause of sickness' in most cases.

[72] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, pp.105-6. Gillion observes that in 1895 the ration diet was improved with respect to protein.

[73] Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*, p.31.

[74] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.109.

[75] *Ibid*; Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*, pp.33-4.

[76] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.106.

[77] *Ibid.*

[78] *Ibid.*, p.106.

[79] Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*, p.41.

[80] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.106.

[81] *Annual Report*, 1891.

[82] *Annual Report*, 1892.

[83] *Annual Report*, 1893.

[84] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.107.

[85] *Annual Reports*, 1890-1900.

[86] *Annual Report*, 1895.

[87] *Annual Reports*, 1896-1900.

[88] *Annual Reports*, 1890-1900.

[89] *Annual Report*, 1897

[90] Thomson, on pages 219-20 of *Black's Medical Dictionary* informs us that convulsions in infants are caused either by a difficult labour, by a sudden rise of temperature brought on by pneumonia, by an irritation in the bowels, kidneys, bladder, ears or teeth, by a disease of the brain such as meningitis, by asphyxia or by epilepsy.

[91] *Annual Reports*, 1890-1900.

[92] *Annual Report*, 1890, pp.10-11.

[93] *Ibid.*, p.11.

[94] *Ibid.*, p.12.

[95] *Annual Report*, 1897, p.16.

[96] *Annual Report*, 1891, p.13.

[97] *Annual Report*, 1900, p.17.

[98] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.108.

[99] *Ibid*.

[100] *Annual Report* 1893 p.18. This *Report* also stresses the need for daily inspections of the lines by employers; for the provision of competent nurses, good houses and good milk rations. and for prompt hospital treatment.

[101] *Annual Report* 1990, p.17.

[102] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.91. In 1895, he observes, this figure dropped to 19.75 per cent.

[103] *Ibid.*, p.95.

[104] *Ibid*.

[105] *Ibid.*, p.107.

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Death On Fiji Plantations, 1900-1909

Nicole Duncan

From 1900 to 1909, 1180 Indian indentured labourers in Fiji perished.[1] This number was extracted directly from the microfilm of the original unpublished record, *Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants, 1879-1927.* The *Register* was used to catalogue the deaths of all Indians in Fiji, not just those serving under indenture. As this analysis covers the death of indentured labourers only, each entry was inspected to determine if the subject was firstly, an adult, which meant that he or she was over the age of twelve, and secondly, was working under indenture[2]. To facilitate the discovery of relevant trends and causal relationships, a record was made of each person's sex and age, date of arrival in Fiji, allotted plantation, cause of death and date of death.

To make the analysis manageable, information regarding the plantation, the duration of indenture and the cause of death was grouped into categories. The plantations were grouped according to geographic districts and the duration of indenture served up to the date of death was recorded in periods of six months or one year.

Causes of death were placed into categories of major factors, such as tubercular diseases or childbirth complications. As the cause of death was determined in the first decade of the twentieth century, each entry was initially defined as it was understood by the medical personnel of that time. The definition was then matched to the modern-day term in order to benefit from advances in the understanding of causes of diseases and other medical conditions. For example, 127 people died of 'phthisis'. This term is now defunct and used only informally to describe the state of physical wasting.[3] At the turn of this century, however, phthisis was understood to be a serious and deadly tubercular disease of the lungs, characterised by the occurrence of lesions[4]. Consequently, phthisis was grouped with tuberculosis and consumption.

A difficulty in grouping the causes of death arose from the manner in which this information was originally recorded. Sometimes as many as four causes of death were listed for each person, with no indication as to which was the major factor. For ease of analysis, it seemed reasonable to try to attribute death to only one cause. In some cases, this was relatively easy. For instance, 207 people had either exhaustion, debility or asthenia listed as one of several causes. All these terms mean 'a state of weakness', which would have resulted from either a primary cause and/or from being overworked. Hence, when any of these terms were shown as one of several causes of death, they were excluded as secondary in nature. When exhaustion, debility or asthenia was the only cause of death listed, they were placed into the category of 'Weakness'.

In other cases, it was more difficult to isolate the primary factor. For example, one person died of both pleurisy and peritonitis. Pleurisy is an inflammation of the area around the lung and chest, often linked with pneumonia, tuberculosis, bronchitis and pericarditis; peritonitis is defined as an inflammation of the membrane investing the abdominal and pelvic cavities caused by bacteria spread through the bloodstream. Both conditions appear to be secondary in nature, meaning they result from another affliction. In this case, pleurisy was chosen as the cause of death because the contamination of the lung and area around the heart would have more likely poisoned the bloodstream and hence diseased the abdominal area, rather than an inflammation of the abdomen causing an infection in the chest. In other cases, the decision was purely arbitrary. For example, where dysentery and tuberculosis were listed as the causes of death, tuberculosis was taken to be the major factor, although affliction from dysentery can, and often did, result in death.

Besides the information extracted from the *Register*, use has been made of the *Annual Report on Indian Immigration to, Indian Emigration from, and Indentured Indian Immigrants in the Colony* for the years under study. The information contained therein provides insight into the manner in which the British authorities understood the conditions of indenture and explained the causes of death.

The Experiences of Indenture

Between the years 1900 and 1909, the number of Indians under indenture in Fiji rose steadily from 5,165 to 10,754.[5] During this time, however, over one thousand labourers died. Following is a discussion of the conditions in which the Indian labourers lived, worked and died.

Living Conditions up to 1908

Historians generally agree that life for the indentured Indian labourers in Fiji was extremely difficult. The 'lines' in which they lived were very cramped, with up to 50 people in one structure of 16 rooms or 80 people in 26 rooms. The rooms themselves were only 70 square feet in area. Within the lines, the Indians cooked, slept, and socialised, although these activities were hampered by the lack of privacy. Not only were the rooms small and attached to one another, but the walls also stopped short of the roof in order to allow for ventilation of the windowless structure. The need for ventilation in the sub-tropical islands of Fiji was often exacerbated by the fact that the labourers had to cook communally within their rooms, especially in the wet districts of Rewa and Navua. Within this humid, smoke-filled, enclosed space, an immigrant's personal problems, including infections, were known by and shared with their neighbours.

Living Conditions after 1908

Legislation was enacted by the Legislative Council in 1908 to improve the living conditions of the indentured labourers. In the *Annual Report* for 1908, the changes were described as follows.[6] Lines constructed after the passing of the Ordinance were to be enlarged, so that each room would extend over 120 square feet. Kitchens were to be constructed at a reasonable distance away from the lines. Drainage was to be improved and a specified area around the lines was to be cleared for use by the occupants. The District Medical Officer was to ensure that a constant supply of pure water was provided at a convenient distance from the lines. The fact that such changes had to be required by law testifies to the debased conditions of the pre-existing lines.

The Labour

By 1900, the indentured labourers were working under a task system. The Indian government had intended this system to act as a means of controlling the amount of labour that could be demanded daily from each immigrant worker. The task was to be no more than an average person what could complete within six hours. Females were to complete tasks three-fourths the size of tasks given to males. Unfortunately, the Indian government had no control over the daily implementation of this system. It was to the advantage of the plantation owners and their overseers to set more onerous tasks and force the labourers to complete the work. Hence, studies of indenture in Fiji are replete with observations that the allocated work of digging and clearing drains or the planting, weeding, trashing, cutting and loading of cane was difficult to finish within the day.[7] The labourer had to face this situation each morning for five and one-half days a week, for fifty-two weeks a year, for five years straight.

The Hospitals

Well before the turn of the century, central hospitals were available for groups of plantations, while there were also hospitals nearby the sugar mills. Each facility was under the charge of the hospital attendant, generally a European, who did not necessarily have certified medical training. Male Indian attendants and nurses also assisted in care of the sick.[8] Although the hospitals were stocked with an adequate range of medicines, the hospital staff had only rudimentary medical knowledge[9] and were not trained in the art of nursing a person through an illness or injury. Many must have returned to the lines before recovery was complete.

The Indian Community

It is generally agreed that the extended family and caste ties which bonded Indian communities were broken during the journey to Fiji. In total, 10,873 or 24% of all Indian migrants came to Fiji in families.[10] The remaining 76% can be assumed to have travelled as individuals. The men and women who came as indentured labourers represented all stratas of rural and urban

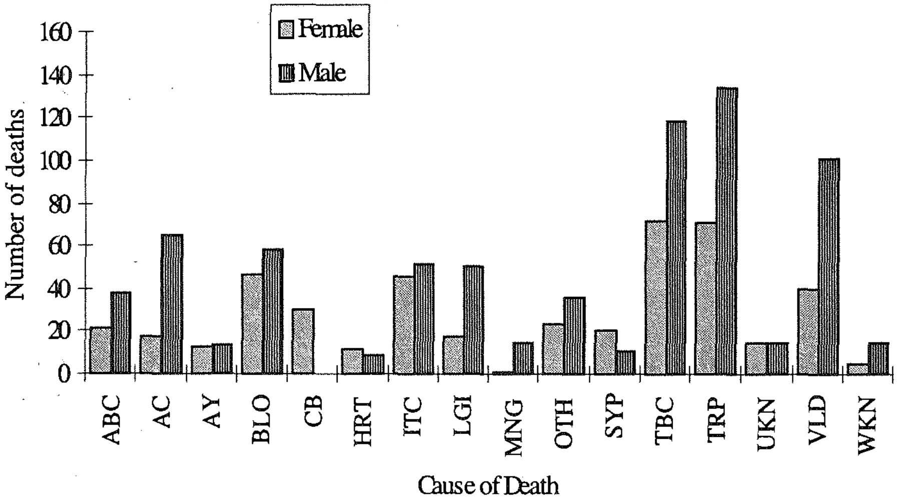
Indian society. When they arrived in Fiji, an effort was made, at the request of the plantation owners, to separate those migrants who came from the same district in order to prevent the formation of troublesome gangs.[11] As a result, the Indians in the lines most likely came from different castes and geographical regions, had differing religions, and generally lacked immediate family support. These conditions do not foster the creation of a strong community network. Added to this was the indifference with which the overseers semi-permanently separated families in order to meet the labour needs of the fieldwork.[12] It is not difficult, therefore, to imagine that when labourers fell ill or suffered from severe injuries, they were left to their own devices unless they had a loyal companion. Keeping in mind these general points regarding the lines, the labour and the community, I now turn to the analysis of the data.

Males and Females

The Indian Government specified that for every 100 men, the recruiters had to enlist 40 women. Planters complained that the women were not as productive, and therefore not as economical, as the men. Throughout the years of indenture, planters argued that the Indian Government should revoke this stipulation, but to no avail. Recruiters in India continued to encounter difficulty in enlisting women, but the required quota was always met. Be that as it may, 450 deaths, or 38% of the total 1180, were women, which is higher than the percentage of women emigrating as indentured labourers.

Attention was given, therefore, to the different experiences of each sex. A concise answer is not available, but the observations throughout this paper assist in determining the reasons for this disparity. Figure 1 gives a general overview of the causes of death by sex. Other than death arising from childbirth, deaths caused by syphilis or heart troubles were the only instances in which numerically more women than men suffered. However, equality in numbers is approached in cases of ancylostomiasis and intestinal complications.

Figure 1: Death Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Cause of Death and Sex



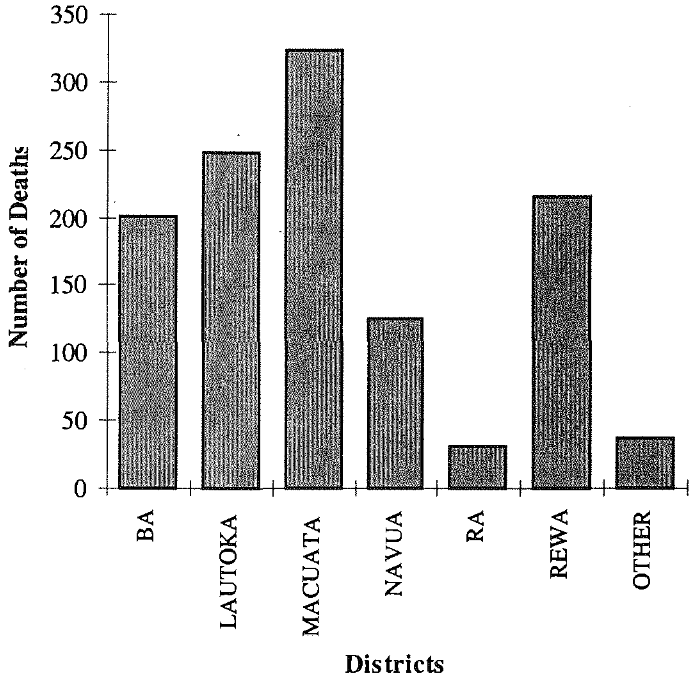
KEY

ABC: abdominal complications
AC: accident
AY: ancylostomiasis (hookworm)
BLO: infection of the blood or blood-carrying channels/organs
CB: related to pregnancy or childbirth
HRT: heart-related complication
ITC: intestinal complications
LGI: lung infection
MNG: meningitis
OTH: other
SYP: syphilis
TBC: tuberculosis
TRP: tropical disease
UKN: unknown
VLD: violence
WKN: weakness

Death in the Districts

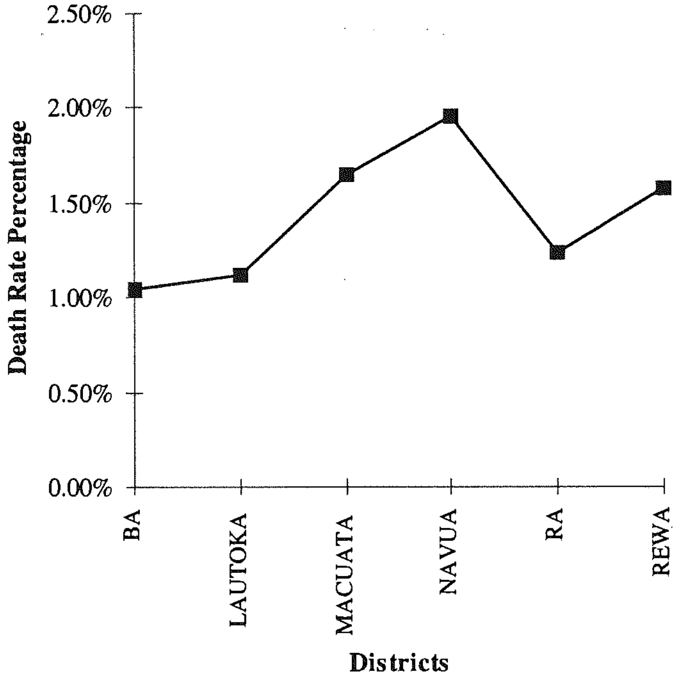
Figure 2 shows that most deaths occurred in the district of Macuata.

Figure 2: Deaths of Indentured Indian Immigrants



Within the context of average yearly indentured population by district over the 10-year period and the average number of deaths for each district, the death rate for Macuata reflects that it was a dangerous district, but Navua was the most dangerous area in which a labourer could work (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Death Rate of Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by District



When discussing the districts, Gillion remarked that 'conditions at Penang were consistently good ...'[13] Penang is situated in the district of Ra. Of the 31 people who died in Ra, 28 were allocated to Penang. Ra did have the lowest number of deaths, but this study shows that both Ba and Lautoka had lower death rates than Ra, at 1.04% and 1.12% compared with 1.23%. Since Penang constituted a large portion of Ra, both geographically and in terms of population, it is doubtful whether conditions at Penang were relatively that good.

As noted above, Navua and Rewa are the wet areas of Fiji, with the other four districts enjoying drier weather conditions. The contention that wet areas were more dangerous is supported by the fact that Navua had the highest death rate while Rewa had the third highest, after Macuata. The danger of Macuata could have been due to its distance away from Viti

Levu, the main island of Fiji. Although Macuata had a resident inspector who monitored each plantation's compliance with the regulations governing indenture, the inspector was only one colonial official on an isolated island. Additionally, most of the plantations on Macuata were fairly new and therefore preparation of the soil was more demanding upon the labourers.

Table 1:
Deaths of Indentured Indian Immigrants,
Fiji 1900 - 1909, by District and Cause of Death

DISTRICT	ABC	AC	AY	BLO	CB	HRT	ITC
BA	14	17	3	14	3	5	8
LAUTOKA	14	17	1	24	4	5	**32**
MACUATA	**15**	19	**19**	**28**	**9**	5	20
NAVUA	5	6	0	14	2	1	12
RA	3	2	0	3	3	1	0
REWA	7	**21**	3	17	7	4	22
OTHER	1	0	1	5	2	0	3
TOTAL	59	82	27	105	30	21	97

DISTRICT	LGI	MNG	OTH	SYP	TBC	TRP
BA	14	4	7	4	**50**	21
LAUTOKA	16	1	14	4	40	36
MACUATA	**17**	3	14	**20**	39	**67**
NAVUA	11	1	8	1	17	27
RA	0	0	0	0	9	0
REWA	7	**7**	14	1	30	44
OTHER	2	0	2	1	5	10
TOTAL	67	16	59	31	190	205

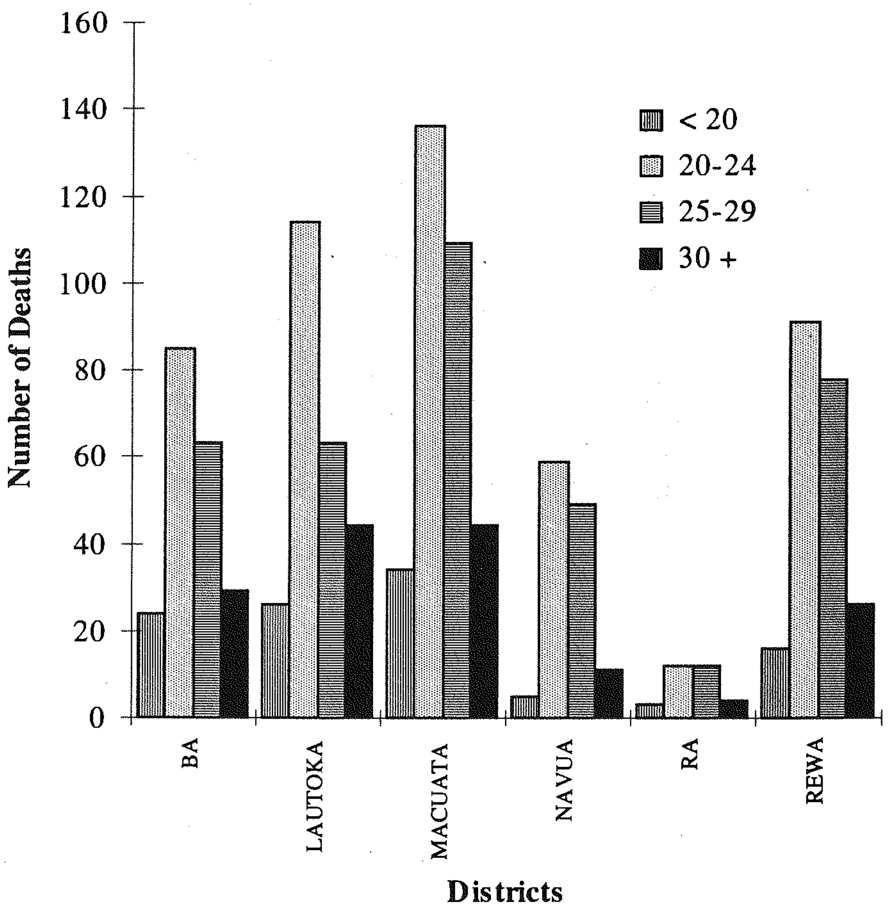
DISTRICT	UKN	VLD	WKN	TOTAL
BA	10	27	0	**201**
LAUTOKA	1	**36**	3	**248**
MACUATA	7	33	**8**	**323**
NAVUA	1	13	6	**125**
RA	3	6	1	**31**
REWA	8	21	2	**215**
OTHER	0	5	0	**37**
TOTAL	30	141	20	**1180**

Because the large majority of the causes are medical in nature, it is not possible to attempt a deep analysis of them here. For now, no definite explanation can be offered as to why most cases of tuberculosis occurred in the district of Ba, which was third-largest in terms of population. It may have been that the lines in Ba plantations were extraordinarily crowded, which would explain how tuberculosis, transmitted by inhalation, could cause almost a quarter of deaths there. If the living conditions were that cramped, it would be expected that tropical diseases, which are highly contagious, would have killed a large number of immigrants. But this study shows that tropical diseases such as yaws and dysentery killed only 10.5%. It is also interesting to note, and yet apparently unexplainable without further research, that the large majority of deaths by ancylostomiasis, a human parasite which feeds in the small intestine, occurred in Macuata. This parasite survives best in moist conditions and enters through the feet or contaminated drinking water. These parasites should have been more prevalent in a wetter area like Navua, where no cases were reported. What makes this pattern even more confusing is the fact that tropical diseases, which can be rampant in areas with moist weather conditions, accounted for over 20% of deaths in both districts, the single largest killer in each.

When deaths by district are sub-divided into the age groups at which the labourers died, an interesting change arises (see Figure 4). It is not surprising that the vast majority of deaths occurred among those aged between 20 and 29. The value of the indentured workers lay in their youth and strength. Therefore, recruiters concentrated their efforts on the young. Of those Indians who departed for Fiji from Calcutta, which constituted 75% of all indentured labourers, 68.7% were between the age of 20 and 30. When those between the ages of 10 and 19 are included, the percentage is 86.6.[14] Consequently, considering that indenture spanned a five-year term, the large majority of deaths took place among those over the age of 20 and under the age of 30.

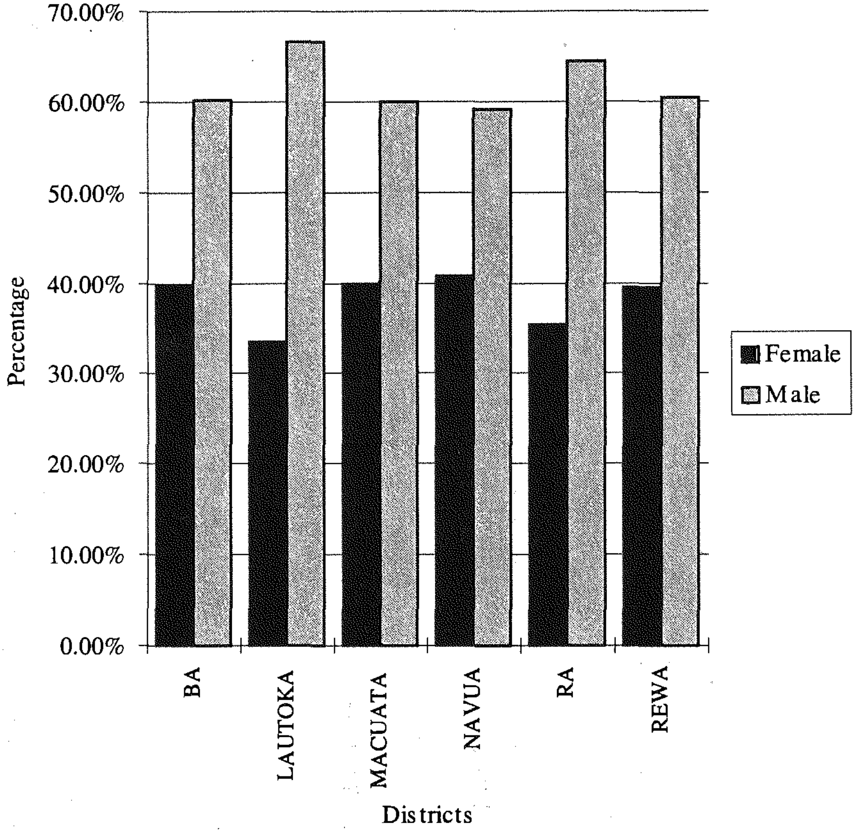
It has already been established that Macuata had the highest number of deaths. From Figure 4, it is noted that there is a larger discrepancy in Macuata between the total number of deaths of those aged 20 to 24 and 25 to 29 as compared with the differences in Navua and Rewa, the wet districts. For Navua, the deaths of those aged between 20 and 29 constituted 86.4% of all deaths there. In Rewa, the percentage was 78.6%, whereas in Macuata, those between 20 and 29 totalled 75.9% of all deaths. It is unfortunate that these statistics cannot be compared with the age distribution of the labourers in the districts. If that information were available, it could be determined whether these trends can be attributed to the fact that the wet areas had a younger indentured population or whether the younger labourers were assigned to the more treacherous work. As this information is not available, this pattern can only be noted for future reference.

Figure 4: Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by District and Age Group



When the data on districts is correlated by sex, it appears that the percentages for each district do not greatly deviate from the overall female percentage of 38% of total deaths (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, Percentage of Sexes for Each District

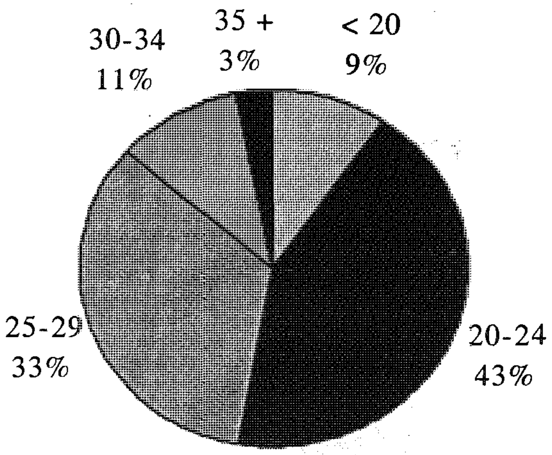


The most dangerous district for females was Navua, where women made up 40.8% of the total deaths. Lautoka appears to have been the least deadly district for females, where they comprise 33.5% of the total deaths. But these observations are subject to the distribution of the sexes among the districts, a topic that has not yet been researched.

Untimely Deaths

As argued previously, it was to be expected that most of the deaths fell within the 20 to 29 age range as that was the age of the majority of the indentured Indians.

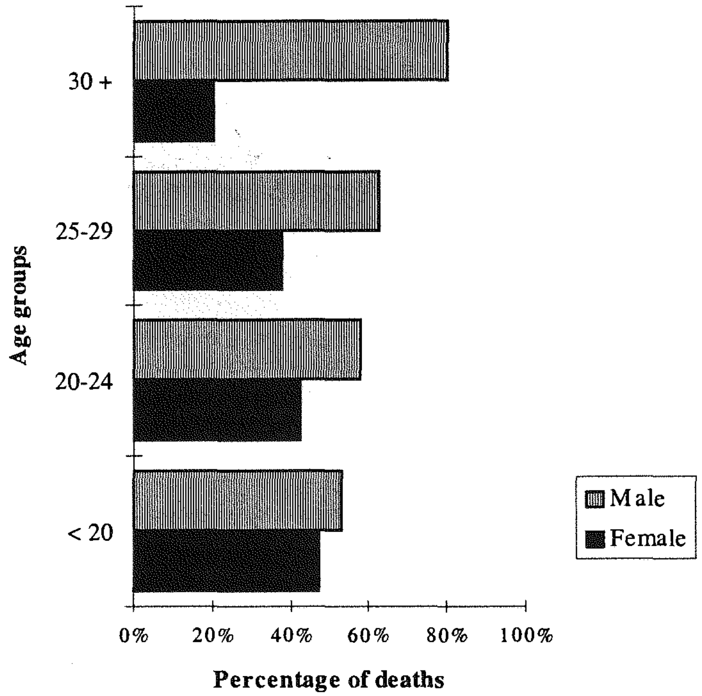
Figure 6: Deaths of Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, Percentage of Deaths by Age Groups



When each age group is considered individually and the percentage of each sex is calculated, a very interesting trend emerges.

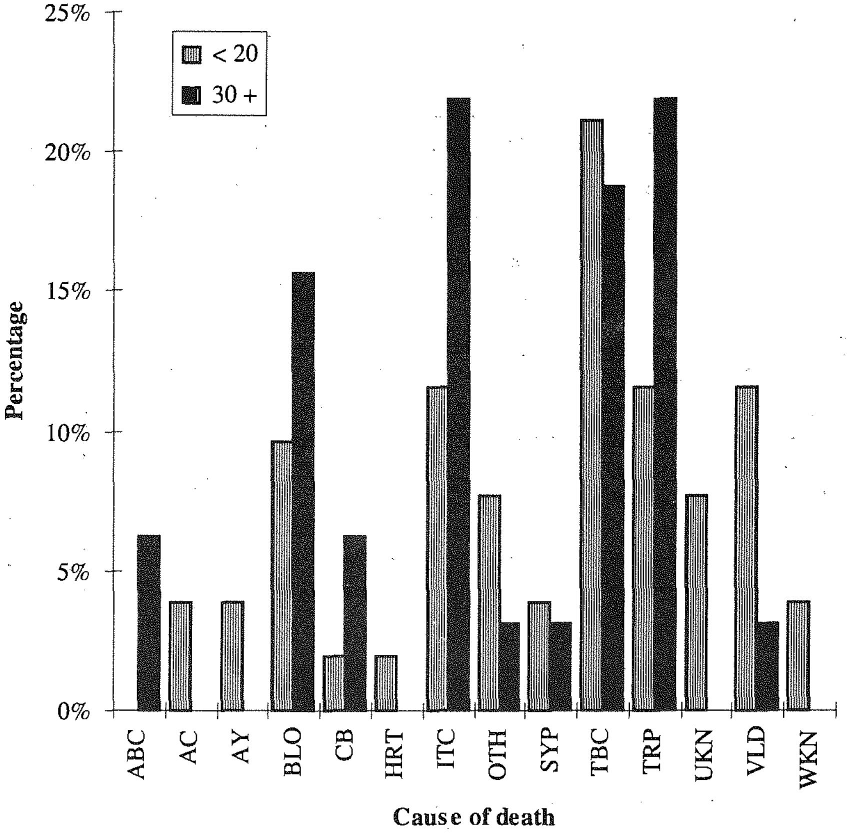
For those aged less than 20, the proportions of death is almost equal between the sexes, where women constitute 47% of the total. The proportions rapidly diverge until for those aged over 30, females form only 20% of the deaths. Remember that about 30% of indentured labourers were women, while 38% of those who died during the sample period were female. Provided that the age distribution of the sexes was similar, this means, firstly, that young women were more likely to die than young men. Secondly, at older ages, death rates among males increased considerably while death rates among women decreased substantially. An explanation for these trends could arise from the allocation of labour. Younger women may have been subject to harder tasks than older women, who may have been taken out of the fields and employed as house servants for the plantation owner. Figure 8 details the causes of death for females under the age of 20 and over the age of 30. The columns represent the percentages of females in the individual age groups that died from each cause. Meningitis and lung infections have been excluded as they did not cause deaths among females in these age groups.

Figure 7: Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 -1909, Percentage of Death for Each Age Group by Sex



Infections of the blood, childbirth, intestinal complications and tropical diseases were more dangerous for women over 30, while violence, tuberculosis and syphilis were more of a concern for females under 20. It is interesting that death from causes that connote troublesome sexual relations, that is violence and syphilis, occurred more among the younger women. That the younger women may have been worked to death is reflected in the fact that weakness brought about two deaths, while the older women seemed to have escaped this type of debility.

Figure 8: Deaths Among Female Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, Percentage of Total Deaths for Each Age Group by Cause of Death



When the age groupings are cross-tabulated with the causes of death (see Table 2), the dominant trend prevails without any deviation, except to remind the reader of the fact that these people were so young. It is hard to imagine that the authorities could have been satisfied with weakness as a cause of death for 15 people under the age of 30.

Table 2: Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Age Group and Cause of Death

AGE GROUP	ABC	AC	AY	BLO	CB	HRT
under 20	4	10	4	11	1	2
20-24	**30**	**39**	7	**50**	**15**	8
25-29	16	22	**14**	30	12	**10**
over 30	9	11	2	12	2	1
TOTAL	59	82	27	103	30	21

AGE GROUP	ITC	LGI	MNG	OTH	SYP	TBC
under 20	6	3	1	7	2	20
20-24	34	**34**	**8**	21	14	**78**
25-29	**37**	18	5	21	14	64
over 30	20	12	2	10	1	27
TOTAL	97	67	16	59	31	189

AGE GROUP	TRP	UKN	VLD	WKN	**TOTAL**
under 20	16	7	14	3	**111**
20-24	**84**	**14**	**63**	**10**	**509**
25-29	77	7	44	2	**393**
over 30	28	2	17	5	**161**
TOTAL	205	30	138	20	**1174**

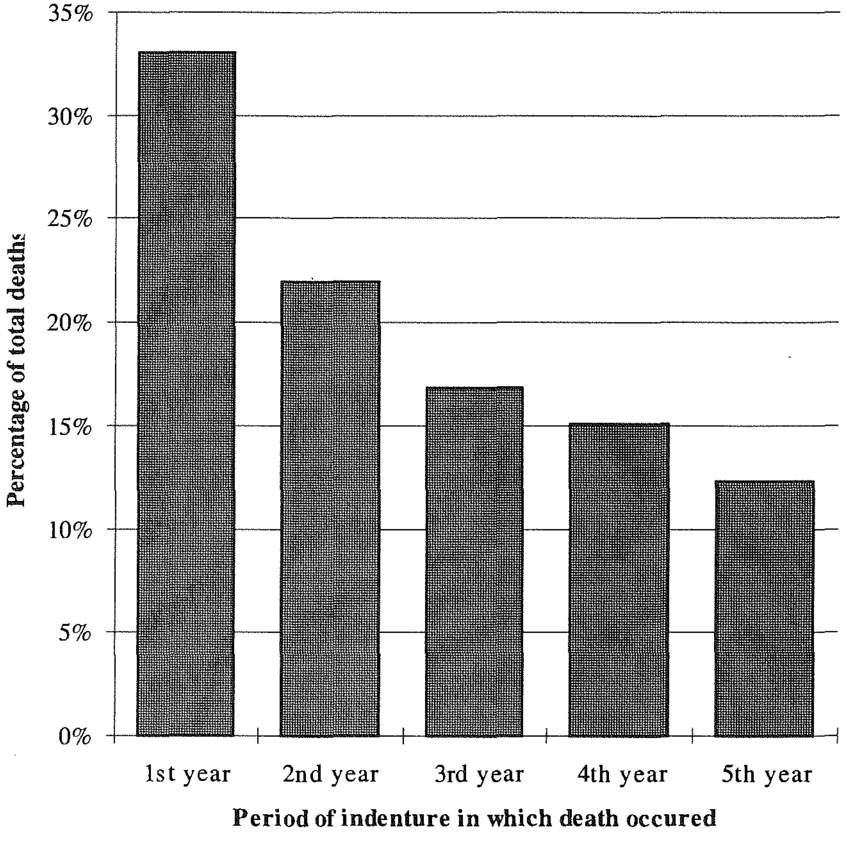
Note: the age of 6 immigrants was unknown.

The Expected Life-Span of Indenture

As it can be noted from Figure 9, 55% of all deaths occurred within the first two years of indenture. This may be explained by the fact that, by the third year, the labourer had learned of and adapted to the new ways of life that were demanded by indenture. As well, some resistance to infection may have developed. It is noted that 31% of the labourers reindentured themselves. In order to avoid skewing the numbers, these people have been treated as though their period of indenture began upon the date on which they entered into their new contract. However, it would be of interest to know how their life expectancy compared with those of similar age and sex in their first indenture. But such comparisons are not possible.

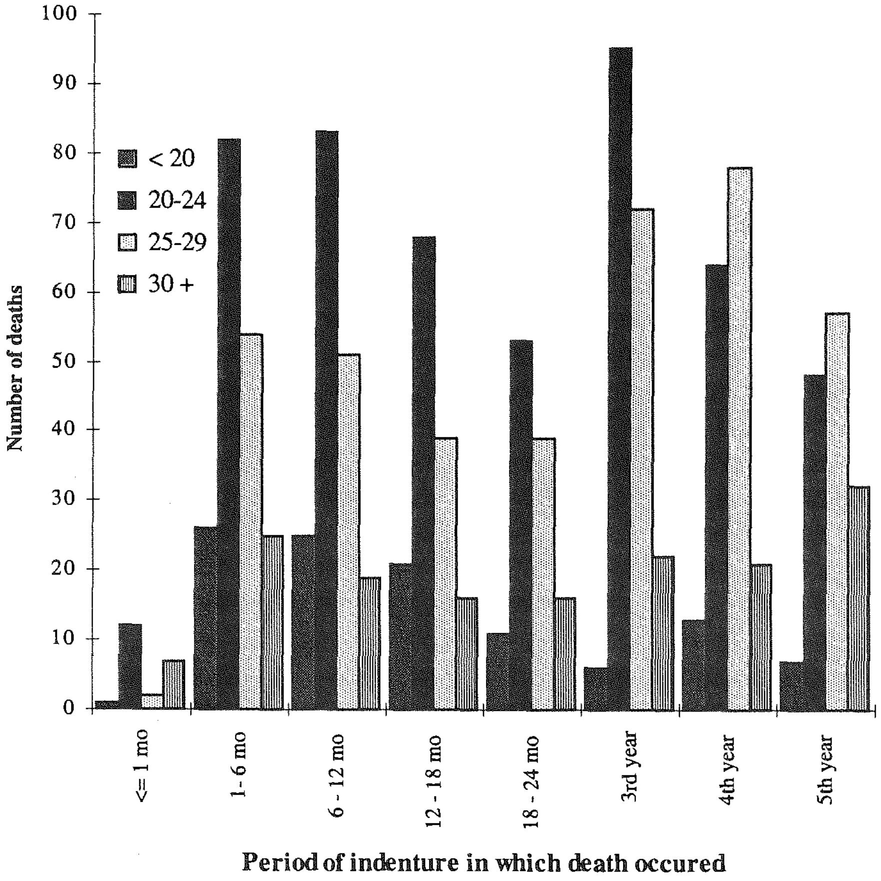
When the age group of the deceased is plotted against the length of indenture, a few interesting patterns emerge.

Figure 9: Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, Percentage of Deaths for Each Year of Indenture



Not surprisingly, the majority of the deaths occurred in the age category of 20 and 29, but between 25 and 29 more die towards the end of their term of indenture. A pattern also emerges for those who died at an age under 20. For those under 20, the majority die at the beginning of their service of indenture, while in the fifth year, only a small percentage perished. This trend can be explained by the age at which they began their service in indenture. Between 1900 to 1909, a person was considered an adult and allowed to enter into indenture if he or she was over the age of 12. It can be assumed, though, that the majority of people who began indenture at an age under 20 did so at an older stage, say at 18 or 19. An older person was more likely to be away from parental supervision and, therefore, targetable by the recruiters. Also, a young adult worker was a stronger worker. Therefore, assuming that the majority started indenture at an age approaching 20, by the fifth year of their indenture, they would have been in their twenties and out of the initial age category.

Figure 10: Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Length of Indenture



The length of indenture served previous to death is correlated with the district to which the labourer was allocated (see Table 3).

Table 3: Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Length of Indenture and District

INDENTURE	BA	LAUTOKA	MACUATA	NAVUA	RA	REWA	OTHER	Total
up to 1 month	3	4	5	1	1	7	1	**22**
1- 6 months	28	**51**	50	16	6	31	5	**187**
6 - 12 months	32	34	53	19	**7**	27	7	**179**
12 - 18 months	25	29	36	17	4	30	5	**146**
18 - 24 months	15	20	29	12	1	**34**	**8**	**119**
3rd year	**44**	45	47	**24**	4	29	4	**197**
4th year	31	27	**58**	21	5	30	4	**176**
5th year	23	38	40	12	3	25	3	**144**
Total	201	248	318	122	31	213	37	**1170**

Note: in ten cases, the length of indentures was unknown.

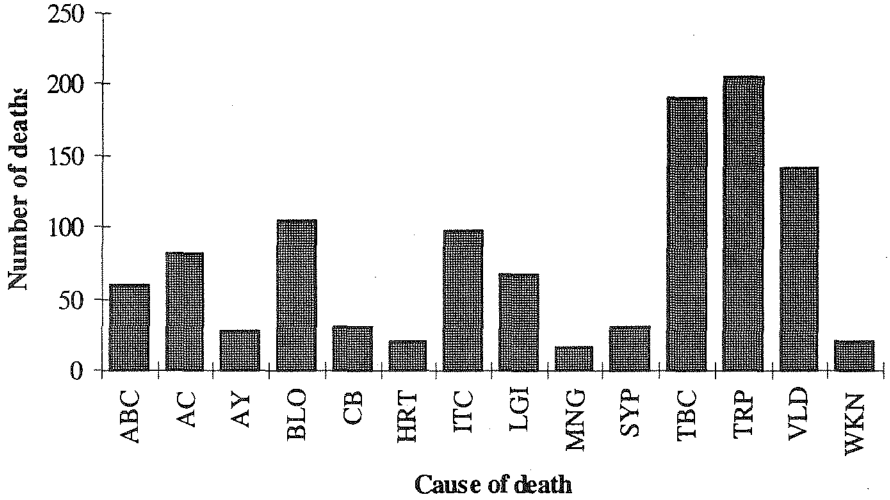
The data is spread fairly evenly among the districts; none appears to have been deadlier for a particular period of indenture.

Death by Disease

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the causes of death have been grouped into major categories. A brief description of these categories is necessary for the ensuing discussion. Most of the groupings are self-explanatory as they have been confined to the affected areas of the body (see the key on page 296). For instance, abdominal complication refers to those diseases which affect the abdomen and pelvic cavities and their contained organs. Lung infections are those which inflame the lung or the chest area. Other categories are smaller for the causes cannot be easily grouped. For instance, meningitis has been isolated because an infection of the brain and spinal chord could not be linked with any other type of disease. It is possible that the causes could have been grouped in another manner which would have included meningitis, eg. by bacterial or viral infection. Yet for an historian with no medical training, grouping the causes by areas of the body was thought to be wiser.

One category that warrants more detailed explanation is tropical diseases which accounted for the largest number of deaths. This group includes those conditions brought on by bacteria transmitted either through flies or mosquitos or drinking water. The cause of most deaths in this group was dysentery, an infection of the intestinal tract which causes severe diarrhoea with blood and mucus. Diarrhoea also constituted a significant part of this category, though it is recognised that diarrhoea is usually a symptom rather than a major factor. The potency of all the causes listed as tropical diseases is increased in crowded conditions with poor hygiene, two of the major problems of the lines. It is therefore not surprising that these diseases were the major killer.

Figure 11: Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Cause of Death



We now turn to those causes of death which are non-medical and, therefore, more comprehensible to the historian, namely accident and violence. Before embarking upon more detailed discussion of these categories, it is worthwhile commenting upon the troubles that would have affected those afflicted with a disease. As explained above, the labour expected from the indentured Indian on a daily basis usually exceeded that stipulated by law. To ensure that the work was completed, physical force was often used. Gillion cautiously states that 'every effort was made to induce immigrants to finish their tasks. Lazy or weak ones were urged on by overseers and sirdars [Indian foreman]—not always a gentle matter and frequently accompanied by abuse'.[15] The laziness or weakness could have resulted from sickness, but that did not often save the labourers from the 'efforts' of the sirdar or overseer. As one labourer recalled, '[i]f you were sick the *sardar* would insist that you worked. If you insisted that you were sick you would get a beating for that'.[16] Beatings were a common experience of indenture, as recent interviews with surviving labourers has shown.[17]

Table 4: Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Length of Indenture Served and Cause of Death

INDENTURED LIFE	ABC	AC	AY	BLO	CB	HRT	ITC	LGI	MNG	OTH	SYP	TBC	TRP	UKN	VLD	WKN	**TOTAL**
up to 1 month	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	2	1	0	5	1	6	1	**22**
1- 6 months	**11**	9	7	15	4	1	18	**20**	**4**	12	**8**	11	**42**	3	18	4	**187**
6 - 12 months	10	13	3	15	3	5	**22**	8	2	4	6	29	29	2	22	**6**	**179**
12 - 18 months	9	8	1	15	5	3	10	6	0	10	2	20	30	6	19	2	**146**
18 - 24 months	7	12	0	10	3	1	10	4	0	4	4	25	22	6	9	2	**119**
3rd year	8	**19**	3	19	7	3	20	10	3	8	5	**37**	30	4	19	2	**197**
4th year	6	8	4	19	7	**6**	10	9	3	10	3	36	24	4	**25**	2	**176**
5th year	7	11	**9**	10	0	2	6	9	3	8	2	31	23	2	20	1	**144**
TOTAL	58	81	27	104	30	21	97	67	16	58	31	189	205	28	138	20	**1170**

Note: in ten cases, the length of indentures was unknown.

A sick worker had three alternatives. The first was to check into the hospital, in which the best care was likely not offered, and it can be assumed that many were sent back to the lines still suffering from the complaint. Secondly, the labourer could refuse to work in order to rest in the lines, and hence suffer a beating. By refusing to work, the immigrant would lose his or her pay for the time spent out of the fields. Thirdly, the worker could return to the field and most likely suffer from both the physical exertion of the labour and the blows from the overseer or sardar, for a sick person can rarely equal the pace of a healthy one. That being the case, the ill labourer would not be able to finish the assigned task and would therefore be paid less. This situation would be manageable if the labourer had access to some savings. If not, recovery would be hampered by a lack of adequate food.

None of these conditions can be considered conducive to full recovery. The statistics on death from disease testify to this. And, as shown in Table 4, suffering from disease did not attack only those in the first months of their indenture. Disease was a deadly circumstance which preyed on the labourer for the entirety of their service.

Accidental Death

Accident was used as a catch-all category, incorporating death caused by burns, drowning (when the drowning was not a suicide), choking, being struck by lightning and injury through a work accident. Considering the randomness of causes under this heading, correlation of the data did not produce any significant results by district, age or sex. Yet accident is thought to be worthy of comment because it appears that 7% of all deaths were caused mainly through carelessness or unsafe living and working conditions. These types of injuries suggest that the authorities were either unaware of, or indifferent to, the need for safety. For instance, the *Annual Report* for 1900 noted that two indentured men were struck by lightning while working in a field during a heavy thunder-storm.[18] Many deaths resulted through such behaviour, and yet no effort was made to withdraw the labourers from the fields during thunder-storms. In the *Annual Report* for 1904, the author remarked that two women were crushed and killed when the water tanks that supplied water for the lines fell on them. These women had been washing clothes when the rotted supports for the tanks collapsed.[19]

Death by Violence: The Indiscriminate Nature of 'Sexual Jealousy'

When considering the ratio of females to males, J. W. Davidson, an Inspector of Immigrants, stated,

> [s]uch a disproportion of the sexes is favourable to the prevalence of those sexual complications and grievances which account for the majority of the homicides, and perhaps also of the suicides, that have to be recorded annually, not to mention many violent assaults.[20]

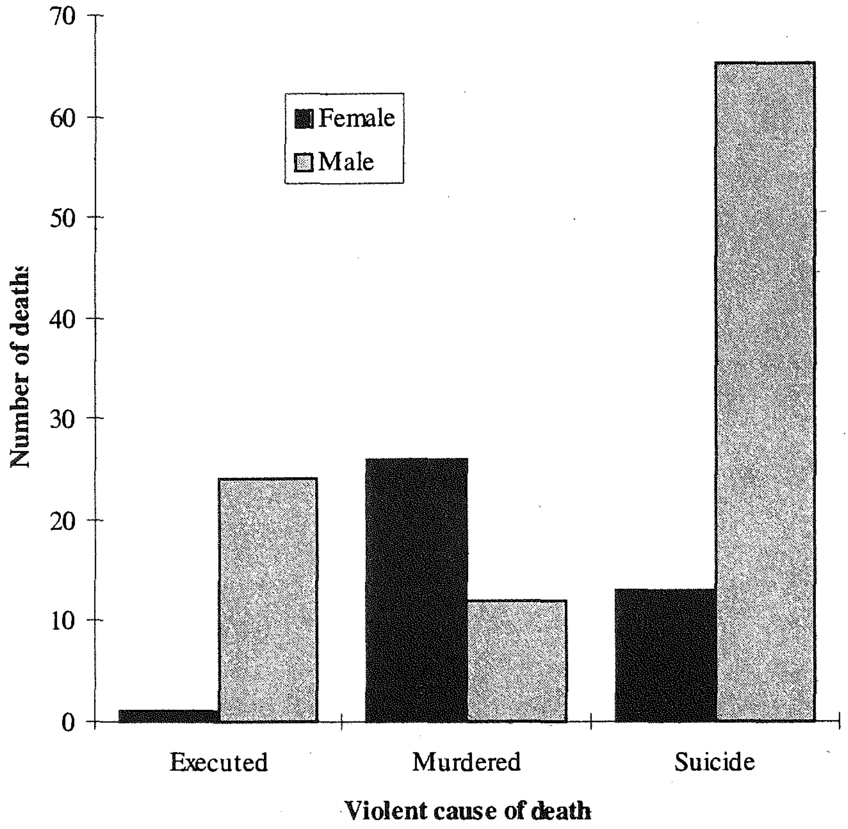
He remarked that these 'sexual complications' resulted from the wantonness of the Indian women, who made themselves available to males of every race. Blanket statements such as this are common in the reports where the officials were called upon to explain the unusually high rate of violence among the indentured labourers. These statements placed the blame for the majority of violent deaths, which constituted 12% of all deaths, upon the shoulders of the apparently 'wanton' Indian women. The indiscriminate way in which the phrase 'sexual jealousy' was used by the authorities warrants more detailed attention in the statistics gathered from this study.

Murder

Due to the inherent link between those executed for murder and those who were murdered, these causes of death will be discussed together. Of the twenty-five labourers who were executed for murder, only one was female. Consider, then, the circumstances in which a labourer was found by the courts to be guilty of murder and then punished by death to be a predominantly male experience. Women found guilty of murder, usually received life sentences as punishment.[21]

In the majority of execution cases, the male had killed a female labourer. This correlates with the information in Figure 12, where the majority of murder victims was female. Yet more precise explanations of this pattern are plagued by the vague nature of the relationship between the murderer and his victim. For instance, the *Annual Report* of 1907 recorded that three Indian male immigrants were sentenced to death for murdering Indian females. No further detail is offered, other than to state: '[t]he motive in two cases was the usual one—jealousy'.[22] It is not possible to deny that many of the murders were committed in circumstances heightened by feelings of sexual jealousy. But there are two main problems with the use of the phrase 'sexual jealousy'. Firstly, sexual jealousy is not a complete explanation, although it may have been used as such; sexual jealousy is purely a motive.

Figure 12: Violent Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Cause of Death and Sex



Secondly, the unfortunate outcome of attributing murder to 'sexual jealousy' is that it reflects poorly upon the females, as if the women were entirely to blame for the arousal of male passion. V. Naidu, in his study of the violence of indenture, remarked that '[w]omen were murdered for infidelity'.[23] This begs the question: in whose opinion was the infidelity believed to be committed? B. V. Lal has made the important point that indenture fostered a freer society which focused upon the financially independent individual.[24] Women were a part of this new atmosphere, one in which they could earn and spend their own money and command a choice of male partners. It is not doubted that some women abused this situation and intentionally incited jealousy, but others, heartened by these new circumstances, may have been searching for another man who was not as violent as their present partner. Unfortunately, these women and sometimes their new companion then fell victim to the violence from whichthey thought they had escaped.

Some of those executed for murder directed their deadly attentions upon their immediate authorities, namely the European overseers and the Indian sirdars. As noted above, these authorities often used physical violence to force labourers to complete their tasks. Most likely, the labourers did not appreciate these efforts. John Burton, who published his study of Fiji in 1910, remarked that the 'Oriental has somewhat primitive and summary ideas of justice, and cannot understand our calmer and slower methods'.[25] It has since been established that the Indian labourers did understand the legal system, and also understood that the law consistently operated to the benefit of those in authority.[26] In an unsupervised, violent atmosphere where no other avenues were sympathetic to them, it is not surprising that the labourers used violence in retaliation.

Overseers and sirdars were also attacked to avenge assaults upon the Indian women. Much attention is given to the fact that there were never many more than 40 Indian women for every 100 Indian men. Single male overseers are rarely entered into this equation. Both the overseers and the sirdars had such control over the labourers that they could force the indentured women to submit if their sexual advances were rejected. Some then paid for this abuse with their lives.

Table 5: Violent Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by District and Cause of Death

DISTRICT	Executed	Murdered	Suicide	**Total**
Ba	1	9	17	**27**
Lautoka	7	8	**21**	**36**
Macuata	**12**	7	14	**33**
Navua	0	7	6	**13**
Other	3	1	1	**5**
Ra	0	1	5	**6**
Rewa	2	5	14	**21**
Total	25	38	78	**141**

Note that Macuata accounts for a relatively high proportion of those who were executed for murder. Only further study can determine whether this figure was due to either a lack of control by the plantation authorities or an overwhelmingly active judicial system. It was only towards the end of the period under study that judges appeared to take note of the cycle of violence that ruled the plantations. In 1909, the Chief Justice presided over a murder case in which a sirdar had 'taken or enticed' a woman away from her partner, and then murdered her. The Chief Justice 'commented strongly on the conduct of [the] plantation sirdar ... as pointing to the necessity for steps being taken to prevent such cases of scandalous oppression'.[27] It would be interesting to study the next ten years of indenture to determine whether these comments were taken seriously by other authorities.

Suicide

As Lal has given detailed attention to this topic in his article 'Veil of Dishonour: Sexual Jealousy and Suicide on Fiji Plantations', this section will concentrate mainly on comparing the findings from this study with his assertions. Differences in numbers are bound to arise as Lal has studied suicide among all Indian immigrants, not just those under indenture, and for the much larger period from 1884 to 1925. Therefore, only general trends will be compared.

Firstly, Lal has noted that suicide accounted, on average, for only 5% of all deaths of indentured Indians from the turn of the century onwards.[28] For the ten years under study, the average number is slightly higher at 6.6% of total deaths. Secondly, as noted from the above table which identifies the sex ratio among deaths by violence, the majority of suicides was committed by males. Lal notes that the rate among adult males was twice that among women.[29] In the sample studied here, 83% of the victims of suicide were male. This discrepancy may be explained by a higher suicide rate among unindentured women, information about which is not available. Lal also remarked that most of the immigrants who committed suicide did so in the prime of their life, meaning between the ages of 20 and 30.[30]

This trend is reflected in the findings of this study, but note here that 53.8% of suicides were committed between the ages of 20 and 24, whereas only 20.5% were committed by labourers between the ages of 25 and 29.

In Lal's study, it was observed that a quarter of all suicides were committed within the first six months of arriving on Fiji.[31]

Figure 13: Violent Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Age Group and Sex

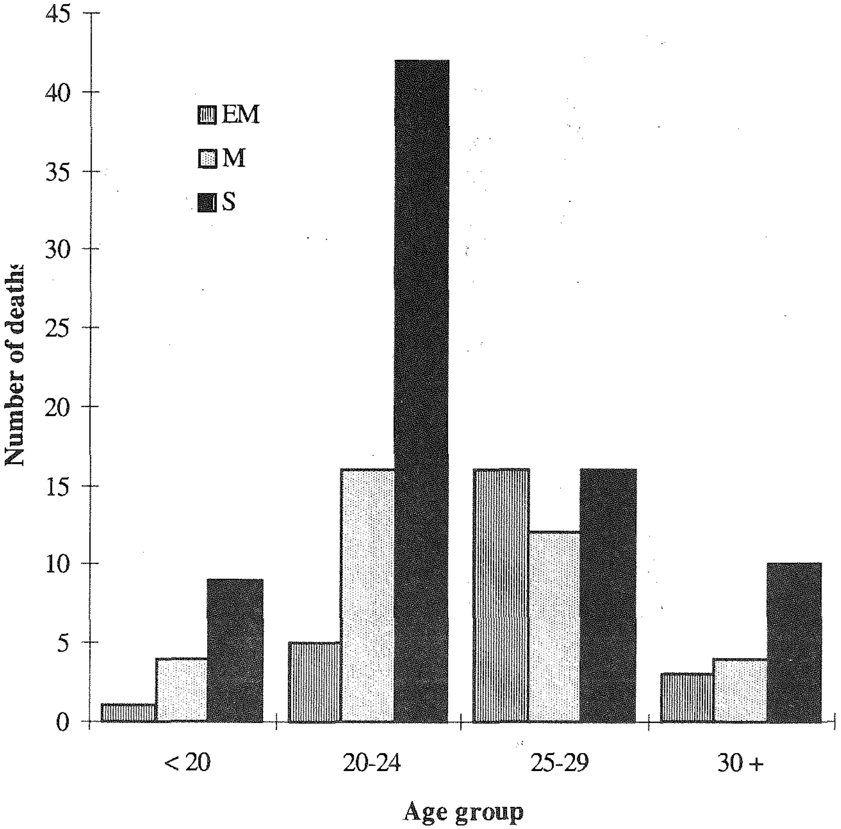
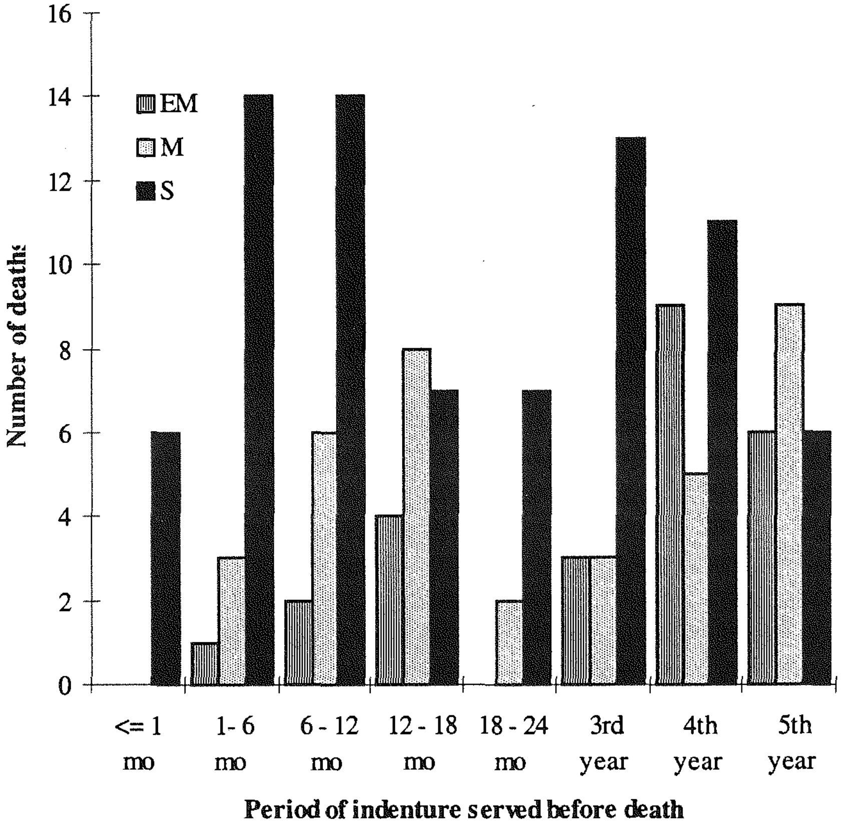
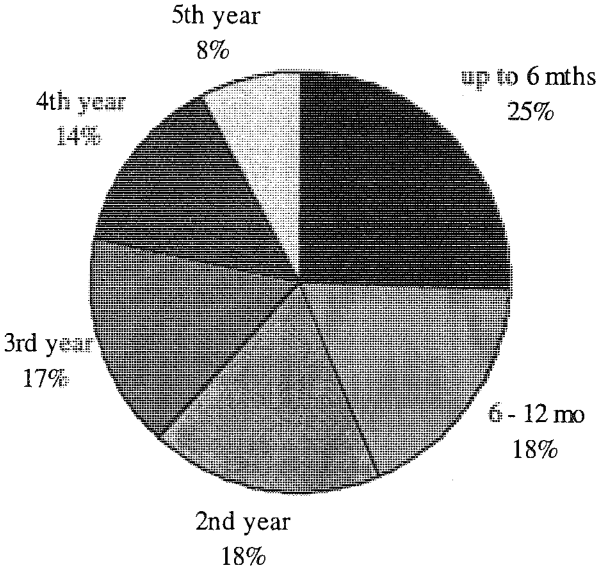


Figure 14: Violent Deaths Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Length of Indenture Served Previous to Death



The percentage of the suicides committed in each period of indenture is not easily discerned from this graph. Figure 15 provides a clearer picture.

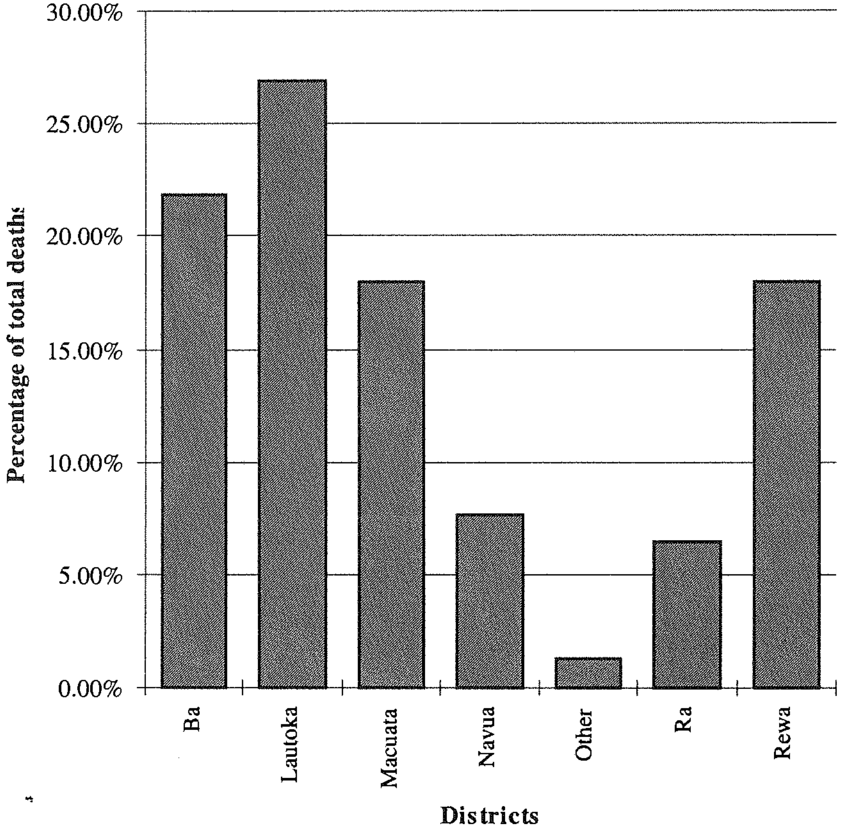
Figure 15: Death by Suicide Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, by Age Group



Exactly 25% of all suicides were committed within the first six months of indenture.

Lal also commented that the Colonial Sugar Refining Company plantations in Ba, Lautoka and Macuata were notorious for ill-treating the indentured labourers, reflected in the fact that these three areas accounted for 43.6% of all Indian suicides.[32] This trend is reflected in Table 5 as these districts have the three highest numbers of suicides, but the percentage rate is considerably larger.

Figure 16: Death by Suicide Among Indentured Indian Immigrants, Fiji 1900 - 1909, Percentage of Deaths by Suicide



Ba, Lautoka and Macuata accounted for 66.6% of all indentured Indian suicides. But this percentage is not noteworthy as 72.7% of the indentured population was allocated to these three districts.

Overall, the results of this study strongly support Lal's statistical findings. Sadly, it does appear that for many indentured labourers, the horrors of life overwhelmingly outweighed the terrors of death.[33] This situation was sympathetically explained by one labourer who managed to overcome his suicidal urges, '[t]here were times when our work became so tough that we thought death would be easier than some of the things we had to endure'.[34]

Conclusions

'The state of health of ninety percent of those working under girmit [indenture] is miserable'.[35] It is strange that such an opinion, though exaggerated, could be held when it is remembered that the success of the system of indenture was totally dependent upon the performance of the labourers. By paying for the journey from India, the planter had already invested in the labourer before he or she was allocated. Allowing the indentured labourers to suffer and die from the stresses of plantation life seems not only callous but uneconomical. As indenture lasted for five years, some might argue that the planters overworked the labourers to ensure that they received their money's worth. This explanation could have some support if the majority of labourers died in the latter years of indenture, which is not the case. But it does raise the question as to the value of the labourer to the planter and the management of the planter's investment. By 1900, most of the smaller planters had failed in competition with the main sugar-cane producing companies, such as the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. Did these larger producers view the labourer as an expendable commodity which could be literally worked to death?

Eleven hundred people perished in what is considered to be the better years of indenture. This study has analysed these deaths at both a general and detailed level. It was shown that female labourers suffered disproportionately and died at a greater rate at young ages. Navua was the most deadly district in which a labourer could work, while the largest percentage of deaths was caused by tropical diseases, such as dysentery and typhoid. The majority of labourers died between the age of 20 and 29, while over 55% of the deaths occurred in the first two years of indenture. The alarmingly high rate of deaths linked with murder shows that the lines on Fiji plantations generated a very destructive atmosphere, while the suicide rate, especially among men, indicates that the Indian communities were not able offer enough support to those individuals who found the strains of indentured life to be unbearable. Overall, it can be concluded that indenture, as it was practised in Fiji between 1900 and 1909, was a scheme based largely on survival of the fittest.

Endnotes

[1] This number is subject to the errors of the author of this study and of the original recorder.

[2] Indenture was indicated by a name under the heading 'Employer'. Persons were excluded if they were 6 months beyond their five-year indenture period. It was rare that an indenture was extended beyond 6 months, so this selection was rather conservative.

[3] Macpherson, G. (ed.), *Black's Medical Dictionary, 37th ed.* A & C Black (Publishers) Limited, London, 1992.

[4] Fowler, J. K. (ed.), *A Dictionary of Practical Medicine.* J & A Churchill, London, 1890.

[5] This information is taken from Appendix 3 of the *Annual Report on Indian Immigration to, Indian Emigration from, and Indentured Indian Immigrants in the Colony*, 1900 and 1909.

[6] *Annual Report*, 1908, p. 27.

[7] Lal, B.V., 'Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review.* Vol. 22, no. 1 (Jan-March 1985), pp. 68-69.

[8] *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 106.

[9] Prasad, S., *Indian Indentured Workers in Fiji.* The South Pacific Social Sciences Association, Suva, 1975, p. 12.

[10] Lal, B. V., *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians.* The Journal of Pacific History, Canberra, 1983, p. 118.

[11] Lal, B. V., 'Murmurs of Dissent: Non-Resistance on Fiji Plantations', *The Hawaiian Journal of History.* Vol. 20 (1986), pp. 190, 192.

[12] Lal, 'Kunti's Cry', pp. 64.

[13] *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 103.

[14] Ali, A., *The Indenture Experience in Fiji.* Bulletin of the Fiji Museum, Suva, 1979, vii.

[15] *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 112.

[16] As quoted in Naidu, V., *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji.* World University Service, Suva, 1980, p. 46.

[17] The reader is referred to the transcripts of interviews conducted by Ahmed Ali and published in *The Indenture Experience in Fiji.*

[18] *Annual Report*, 1900, p. 19.

[19] *Annual Report*, 1904, p. 18.

[20] *Annual Report*, 1902, p. 19.

[21] *Annual Report*, 1905, p. 23.

[22] *Annual Report*, 1907, p. 24.

[23] *Violence of Indenture*, p. 71.

[24] Lal, B. V., 'Veil of Dishonour: Sexual Jealousy and Suicide on Fiji Plantations', *The Journal of Pacific History*. Vol. 20, no. 3 (July 1985), p. 142.

[25] Burton, J. W., *The Fiji of Today*. Charles H. Kelly, London, 1910, p. 270.

[26] Lal, 'Murmurs of Dissent', pp. 199 - 209.

[27] *Annual Report*, 1909, p. 22.

[28] Lal, 'Veil of Dishonour', p. 135.

[29] Lal, 'Veil of Dishonour', p. 136.

[30] Lal, 'Veil of Dishonour', p. 146.

[31] Lal, 'Veil of Dishonour', p. 147.

[32] Lal, 'Veil of Dishonour', p. 149.

[33] Lal, 'Veil of Dishonour', p. 155.

[34] Ali, *The Indenture Experience*, p. 35.

[35] Sanadhya, T., *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*. J. D. Kelly and U. K. Singh (eds.), Fiji Museum, Suva, 1991, p. 69.

chapter 17

Accidental Deaths on Fiji Plantations, 1879-1916

Anthony Cole

Disease caused the majority of the deaths among Indian indentured workers in Fiji, especially diarrhoea and dysentery (see Fowler and Duncan, this volume). In this paper, I look at deaths caused by accidents. In so doing, I seek to add to the existing literature dealing with death on Fiji plantations. An analysis of accidental death is absent from that literature. It will be shown here that accidental deaths were themselves an important aspect of the indenture experience and that an understanding of accidental deaths also leads to a more complete understanding of the totality of the indenture experience.

The bulk of the primary evidence presented below is drawn from three main sources, *The Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants 1879-1922, The*

Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants by Plantation 1879-1922, and the *Annual Reports on Indian Immigration*. The two death registers provide a record of the deaths of Indian immigrants, both indentured and free, within the range of years specified. In both registers, deaths are listed individually and accompanied by details of the deceased's name, registration number, sex, age, the name of vessel on which they were transported to Fiji, the plantation on which they worked, their employers, the dates of arrival in Fiji and of death, and the cause of death.

The death registers were carefully vetted and the full details of accidental deaths between 1879 and 1916 recorded. It should be noted that a degree of error was unavoidable in the recording process. In some places the ink has faded to such an extent, or the original recorder's writing is so illegible, as to make entries unreadable. Where possible the accidental deaths recorded in the registers were cross-checked with the accidental deaths list in the *Annual Reports*. As a result, the data presented here is representative of the vast majority of accidental deaths.

The *Annual Reports* represent the other main original source of information. They began in 1879 and continued throughout the entire period of Indian immigration to Fiji. Until 1882 the reports were written by hand and contained only rudimentary information on a few aspects of Indian immigration. After 1885, however, they were printed in a semi-standardised form and contained qualitative as well as quantitative information on many aspects of Indian immigration including mortality and accidental death. The information in the reports increased in volume and detail with time. For example, beginning in 1898, the reports included brief descriptions of the nature of a random selection of accidental deaths occurring in each year.

The nature of the information on mortality presented in the *Annual Reports* has largely determined the form of the analysis presented here. That information was used as a comparative measure for the data collected from the death registers. For example, figures in the *Annual Reports* relating to the relative proportion between the sexes and between age groups of immigrants and immigrant children on plantations, were used as benchmarks against which mortality patterns within separate categories of accidental death were identified. The completeness of the analysis presented below is affected by some problems concerning the availability of the *Annual Reports* and the information presented in them. The reports for the years 1880, 1881, 1883, 1994, 1912 and 1915 are missing and those for 1910, 1911, 1913 and 1914 have been reproduced in the microfilms without important statistical tables relating to mortality that were included in the originals. Further, across all the reports there are inconsistencies in the nature and the form in which data are presented.

The average yearly number of deaths from all causes was 250.5, while the average yearly number of deaths by accident was 9.2. This means that between 1879 and 1916 accidental deaths accounted for, on average, 3.7 per cent of the total annual number of deaths of the indentured immigrants and their children. When the fairly small number of yearly accidental deaths is coupled with the number of separate plantations in different areas of Fiji, comparisons between type of death and other variables like employer, plantation, and district, reveal little statistically meaningful information.[1] Deaths varied so widely in their causes that they generally defy the identification of meaningful patterns. On the other hand, where statistical patterns do not exist, they gain added significance precisely because of that wide variation. Moreover, illuminating information can be gained by taking each type of accidental death in turn and comparing the age, sex and in some cases the year of death of those who lost their lives as a result of that type of accident.

Table 1 displays the total number of deaths amongst indentured immigrants and their children caused by different categories of accident between 1879 and 1916.

Table 1
Number of Deaths of Indentured Immigrants and Their Children by Type of Accident, 1879-1916

	Adults		Children		Infants		
Cause	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**	**Total**
Drowning[2]	105	33	3	5	10	3	159
Burns and Shock from burns	5	12	7	10	2	5	41
Mill Accidents	26	1	nil	nil	nil	nil	27
Unspecified accidents	7	1	1	1	6	3	19
Train/tram accidents	15	2	nil	1	nil	nil	18
Overlaying	nil	nil	1	nil	11	5	17
Accidents Involving Crushing	12	1	1	1	nil	nil	18
Opium Poisoning	8	5	nil	nil	1	nil	14
Struck by Lightning	7	2	nil	nil	nil	nil	9
Animal related Accidents	5	nil	1	nil	nil	nil	6
TOTAL	190	57	14	18	30	16	325

Drowning was by far the most common cause of accidental death. More adults males were drowned than adult females, the number of deaths being 105 and 33 respectively. Throughout the period of indenture, however, there were on average approximately 30 females in every 100 indentured adults. Given this ratio it becomes clear that, proportionally, adult men and women were drowned in approximately equal numbers. The same appears true among children and infants, classified here as non-adults. Between 1879 and 1916 thirteen male and eight female non-adults were drowned. The disparity in numbers is hardly significant when it is considered that from about 1890 onwards the proportion of non-adult females to non-adult males in the plantation population remained fairly constant, deviating only slightly above and below an approximate average of 91.5 non-adult females for every 100 non-adult males.[3]

It is unsurprising that drowning was the cause of almost half of the deaths. The sugar cane plantations on which most of the immigrants were employed were, as Gillion writes, 'on the flats of the river valleys and plains'. It was an alien environment for the majority of immigrants who had come from the 'flat and dusty plains' of landlocked areas of India.[4] For many, rivers, lakes and the sea must have been unfamiliar and treacherous. Many entries in the death registers include brief details of 'drowned while crossing Ba River', 'drowned whilst fording' or 'drowned in creek'. Perhaps most telling, though, is a brief description in the 1899 *Annual Report* of an incident in which five immigrants, two men, two women, and a child, drowned. The cutter which was transporting them from Ba to Rewa capsized and although all the Indians aboard lost their lives, the Fijian crew, presumably familiar with the sea, were able to get to shore.[5]

After drowning, the next most common cause of death was burns or shock due to burns received. Most remarkable about accidental burn-related deaths was the disproportionate number of fatalities between the sexes. Between 1879 and 1916, twelve adult females died from this cause as compared to just five males. When this ratio is adjusted to allow for the numerical disparity between the sexes, it emerges that proportionally eight times as many indentured adult females died from burns than males. Since males were exposed to greater dangers than females, working with mill machinery, animals, and cane railways, it can reasonably be deduced that most burn-related deaths were not work-related but occurred in the domestic sphere.

The *Annual Reports* merely noted the occurrence of accidental deaths by burning without elaborating on the circumstances of those deaths. It seems fairly certain, though, that most burn-related accidents probably occurred around the cooking fire. While three single men who lived together in the same room could share cooking tasks, men who were living with women required the latter to do all cooking-related chores. As Burton noted in *The Fiji of Today*, 'Indian domestic economy is different from ours. The husband does the marketing and takes charge of all the cash. He decides the bill of fare and allows his wife to do the cooking'.[6] This division of labour is confirmed by the description of a typical Sunday scene in the lines by Totaram Sanadhya, an Indian indentured immigrant, who wrote of his experiences in Fiji: 'women [were] busy everywhere. Some were washing up their cooking vessels and utensils, some were busy in the preparation of food[7]

Even in their limited free time, then, women were kept busy with cooking and related tasks. Failure by women to fulfill their set roles as preparers of food could provoke a violent reaction from their male companion. One indentured man who murdered his wife confessed that:

> I told her to make tea. She refused. I told her again to make the food as I had not had any for three days. She refused and said I will not make tea as I do not want to. She said if you want a drink of tea drink my water (urine). I told her again to prepare my food and she again refused. I told her to go inside the room. She did not go but caught me by the privates. I then got angry and I had a knife in my hand and struck her about four times with a knife and then left to come down and report at the police station.[8]

Women ultimately had little choice in taking on the role of the cook and the extra physical demands that it entailed. Already burdened with the constant fatigue symptomatic of indentured life, they had to cook around open fires set in the same tiny room in which they lived with their families.[9] Most likely, it was the combined factors of fatigue and cramped conditions which caused fatal accidents.

Table 2

Deaths Due to Burn-Related Accidents, 1879-1916

	Number of Deaths by sex 1879-1916	
Age Group in Years	**Male**	**Female**
Infants (<1 year old)	2	5
2	2	1
3	2	1
4	2	1
5	nil	2
6	nil	2
7	nil	nil
8	nil	nil
9	nil	2
10	1	nil

A significant number of non-adults also died from burn-related accidents. Table 2 provides a profile of the number of deaths by burning in each non-adult age group between 1879 and 1916.

Ten girls, seven boys, five female infants and two male infants died from burn-related injuries during indenture. Contemporary histories of girmit give little insight into plantation life as experienced by children. Two sentences from *Fiji's Indian Migrants* sum up the depth of analysis into the subject:

> While their mothers were at work the infants were either carried into the fields or put into fly-ridden 'nurseries', usually the two end cubicle of a line with the partition removed, in the charge of old women. After they reached the toddling stage the children were allowed to run wild, no schooling being provided, and at the age of fifteen, sometimes older, they went to work.[10]

The statistics on burn-related fatalities reveal a little more about children's experience. Although the *Annual Reports* contain one account of a child being burnt to death in a hut,[11] it is likely that most infants and younger children were burned whilst their mothers were cooking. In the case of older children, especially girls, it may well have been that they were given the responsibility of preparing the evening meal while their mothers were away working in the cane fields. The potential for tragedy when unsupervised children came into close proximity with fire needs no elaboration.

Accidental death by overlaying claimed a greater number of infant lives than did burn-related injuries. Figures relating to overlaying emphasise all that has previously been written about the conditions under which the girmitiyas lived. During the indenture period seventeen infants, ranging from newborns to six months old, died from asphyxia, after being accidentally overlain during the night by their mothers. Rooms in the lines contained three bunks and were allocated to three single men or to a man, a woman and not more than two children.[12] In the absence of cots, infants had to sleep with their mothers. The infants suffocated beneath the body of their mothers who were probably too fatigued to be awakened by their babies' feeble struggling.

An analysis of the frequency of accidental death by overlaying by year reveals an interesting pattern. For each of the years 1884, 1891, 1986, 1989, 1903, 1907, 1908, 1909, and 1911 a single fatality from overlaying was recorded. Most of those deaths occurred on different plantations in different areas of Fiji. However, a spate of deaths by overlaying occurred between 1913 and 1915. In 1913 there were three deaths, in 1914 four and 1915 one. Significantly, all the eight deaths in those three years occurred on plantations in the Navua district owned by the United Fiji Sugar Company.

The frequency of death by this cause on these plantations was significant enough to be mentioned in the 1914 *Annual Report*, though no explanation was offered. In the absence of any direct evidence it may be surmised that living and working conditions must have been particularly bad on those plantations in order for so many deaths to occur.

Work-related activities also contributed to accidental deaths. Accidents took place in mills, while carrying logs and other heavy equipment, working on trains or tramways, and working with animals. Between 1879 and 1916, twenty-seven deaths were recorded in the first category, fifteen in the second, eighteen in the third and six in the last. Most of those who died were male adults, with only five adult female deaths being recorded across all four categories. This simple statistic emphasises the nature of the division of labour on plantations. While men on the larger plantations at least had the opportunity of a break in the monotony of indenture by engaging in different work, women were relegated to the fields (or domestic service) for their entire five years of service.

The first two recorded fatal mill accidents were at the Colonial Sugar Refining Company's (CSR) Nausori mill in 1884. Nausori, CSR's first mill in Fiji, commenced production in 1882. In following years mills were built in the other main areas of cane production. From 1884 until 1916 the number of annual fatalities due to mill accidents fluctuated. However, the majority of deaths occurred at the Nausori and Rarawai mills before the turn of the century and at the Lautoka and Labasa mills after 1900.

The mill was a dangerous place. Massive shredders devoured cane fed to them by conveyor belts called 'cane carriers'; large iron rollers squeezed the juice from the cane fibre; and huge boilers were required for the purification process.[13] In an environment filled with moving machinery, it is little wonder that accidents happened. Its seems, though, that the element of danger in mill work was increased by the loose, baggy clothing worn by indentured labourers. The *Annual Reports* contain references to immigrants being drawn into the machinery after their clothing got caught. For example, the only woman to die as a result of a mill accident 'was taking food to her husband, and passed under some running machinery; it is supposed that her veil flew up and got caught in it'.[14] The report for 1899 tells of a 'man climbing up to oil some machinery (not his duty) and getting his clothes caught',[15] and in 1906 'an immigrant attending on a 'shredder' endeavoured to clear a pulley with his hand, his shirt got caught, and he was drawn in, sustaining fatal injuries'.

Another significant cause of death was crush injuries. The death registers record seven deaths as the result of being crushed beneath large pieces of timber. One man sustained a fractured skull when he was struck by a log thrown down by the men carrying it.[16] At CSR's Lautoka plantation in 1904, 'an indentured male immigrant died from effects of abdominal contusion, caused by a heavy log slipping from the truck on to which it was being unloaded'.[17] Another tragic case was the accidental death of a 'Madrasi immigrant, one of a gang carrying a heavy log of timber, [who] failed to let go of the log when ordered owing probably to his not understanding the order, and was crushed by the falling log'.[18] The circumstance surrounding the accident suggests that the language barrier was also factor in causing some accidents.

Many difficulties were caused by the language barrier between Europeans and Indians. Historians have viewed the language difficulties as a potential cause of violence, both by girmitiya on their white overseers, and by overseers on their labourers.[19] Very few overseers were ever fluent in Hindustani, relying on their *sirdars* (foremen) to communicate with the labourers[20] or improvised with what Burton termed 'Overseer's Speech'.[21] Yet 'Overseer's Speech' was only 'serviceable where no degree of exactness [was] required', otherwise it could 'sound like a foreign language ... to the coolie'.[22] While immigrants from northern India had 'few language problems and quickly adapted themselves to a Fiji version of Hindustanti',[23] the same was not true for immigrants who came from the south. They 'spoke entirely different languages, and often could not understand what their overseers said'.[24] Language difficulties were probably a factor in causing more accidents than the single one documented in the *Annual Reports*.

Work with horses and mules could also be dangerous. In the early years of indenture many ploughing tasks were done by men and women unassisted, but in later years horses and mules were used.[25] Certainly by 1915 horses and mules played a major part both in plantation work and also apparently in the lives of the labourers who were responsible for the animals. In their 1915 report to the Indian Government on the conditions of Indian indenture labour in four British colonies, including Fiji, J. McNeill and Chimman Lal wrote:

> In this colony much of the labour done by hand in other countries is done by using horses or mules, and to the ordinary observer the whole operations seems much more highly organised. We have seen some excellent examples of Indian ploughing but were unfortunately unable to witness any of the ploughing matches which employers organise. These matches add no little zest to the lift of these labourers, some of them have been known to rig up a bed in the stale above their teams so that neither by accident, nor design

> cold the fitness of these animals to compete be endangered. The employment of horses renders cutting a much larger percentage of the total manual labour than in sugar plantation in the West Indies.[26]

From the first recorded animal-related death in 1895 until 1916, approximately five men were killed in various accidents which involved being kicked or dragged by the animals they were tending. But sometime animals were also blamed for deaths which had other causes, including violence by those in authority. A case in the 1906 *Annual Report* illustrates this point:

> And indentured immigrant employed as a mule-driver on Esivo plantation, Lautoka, was kicked by an overseer while sitting and in the act of preferring some request. Afterwards he complained of pain and was conveyed in a cane-truck to hospital, eight miles distant; it was shown that a rib was fractured and the liver ruptured. The overseer, a European, was charged with manslaughter, but was found not guilty by a jury—evidence being given for the defence that the deceased had fallen from a mule earlier in the day on which the assault had occurred, and the injuries, it was shown, might have resulted from a kick from a mule.[27]

The final category of work-related accidental deaths involved the mill tramline system. In Fiji harvesting of the sugar cane, a period called 'the crush', began in June or July and ended in December.[28] Once cut, the highly perishable cane had to be transported as quickly as possible from the fields to the mill for processing. On plantations which were near waterways, boats and punts were used. However, on most plantations cane was loaded on to trains which then hauled their laden trucks to the nearest mill. The mill tramline system consisted of a light railway of 2ft. gauge and was 'located according to practical grades and the distribution of good cane lands'.[29] During the crush, portable temporary lines were laid up the valleys and in the fields where the cane was being cut, in order to hasten their delivery.[30]

During the indenture period, about eighteen labourers were killed in train accidents of whom all were men, apart from one girl and one woman. At least twelve of these deaths occurred during the crushing season between June and December, many of the rest occurring in May, when the tramline was being repaired for the harvest season. It seems that accidents occurred in two main ways, either in the handling of cane-trucks or through the derailment of trucks on which immigrants were riding. In the former class, the *Annual Reports* describe one 'immigrant employed late at night removing cane-trucks from field to tramline [who] was run over by a truck which left the line'.[31] Another man in Wainikoro was killed 'while attempting to couple an empty cane-truck to a train while yet in motion'.[32]

Work on the railways inevitably involved labourers riding the cane trucks. At least half the deaths on the tramline occurred when immigrants were crushed as trucks on which they had been riding were derailed. In 1910 five indentured men and three free immigrants were killed in this way, causing concerned comment in the 1910 *Annual Report*:

> In one case, by derailment of a train of trucks, three Indians were killed; and at the inquiry it was proved that the accident occurred through the unexplained movement of the points while the train was passing. It is apparent that there is a necessity for strict investigation in such cases, and for the adoption of precautions which will have the effect of preventing such accidents in future.[33]

But accidents did not diminish. The very next year, four indentured immigrants were killed while riding trains, and concern was reiterated in the *Annual Report*:

> The danger to immigrants being transported to and from their work by train in ordinary cane-trucks has been proved by the evidence given at the investigations held by magistrates in these cases, and steps have been taken to require employers to provide special trucks for the purpose of transporting immigrants when this is necessary.[34]

Whatever steps were taken to ensure the provision of special trucks they were ineffectual, because accidental deaths on the railway continued. Four men were killed in 1912, one in 1913, and one in 1916.

The last category of accidental deaths to be examined here relates to opium poisoning. The death registers report that fourteen people died from 'opium poisoning' or 'opium overdose'.[35] The earliest recorded death by opium was of an infant in 1899. The rest of the victims were adults, eight men and five women. Interestingly, all the adult deaths occurred between 1903 and 1913. In the absence of any direct evidence, it is reasonable to assume that opium was prescribed to the immigrants by the plantation hospitals to alleviate the symptoms of disease and the pain of injury.[36] The only substantial clue as to the source of the drug comes from the fact that one immigrant who committed suicide by opium overdose was a servant at the hospital.[37] Presumably he acquired some of the drug that was on hand for prescription. Why the immigrants overdosed is uncertain. Perhaps deaths occurred because the sick simply did not understand how much of the drug they were supposed to take. The language barrier may have prevented a precise understanding of safe dosage. Alternatively, opium would have provided temporary relief from the physical and mental pains of plantation life and it may have been a craving for that relief which caused some to overdose.

Between 1879 and 1916 accidental deaths on the Fiji plantations claimed approximately 325 Indian lives. While these deaths were tragic in their own right, they reveal much about the indenture experience as a whole. They highlight how alien an environment Fiji was to newly arrived immigrants; they reinforce notions of the division of plantation and domestic labour between men and women and between adults and children; they emphasise the poverty of life in the lines; they confirm the power imbalance between labourers and the overseers, and they show that language difficulties could have fatal results. An analysis of accidental death, then, offers a new angle from which to view the hardships, dangers and injustices with which immigrant men, women and children had to cope. Ultimately, the investigation of accidental death on plantations brings new meaning to Gillion's conclusion that it 'was not without reason that the Indians called their life on the plantations in Fiji '*Narak*', which means 'hell'.[38]

Endnotes

1. In 1886 there were already about 27 separate plantations, in 1916 there were over 200. These plantations were divided between approximately 11 separate districts.

2. There was some variation in the way in which death by drowning is described in the registers. Entries appeared in four general formats, 'suicidal drowning', 'accidentally drowned', 'drowned' and 'drowned—no evidence to suggested whether accidental or homicidal'. Only the first category was omitted in the data presented here.

3. This figure remained steady only from about 1890 onwards. Before that time the ratio of females to males was lower. In 1885 when figures are first available, there were only 66 non-adult females to every 100 non-adult males, but the disparity decreased rapidly in the ensuing five years, and given the number of deaths concerned the margin of error is negligible. See *Annual Reports*, 1885-1916.

4. KL Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants. A history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford, 1962), p. 103.

5. *Annual Report*, (1899), p. 18.

6. John W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1910), p. 292.

7. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 122. Totaram Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and The Story of the Haunted Line* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1991), p. 119.

8. Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years*, p. 169.

9. Gillion, *Fiji Indian Migrants*, p. 105.

10. Ibid., p. 108.

11. *Annual Report*, (1906), p.19.

12. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.105.

13. J.M. Dixon, 'Sugar Milling by CSR', in A.G. Lowndes (ed.), *South Pacific Enterprise: The Colonial Sugar Refining Company Limited* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1956), p.139.

14. *Annual Report*, (1899), p.18.

15. *Annual Report*, (1899), p.18.

16. *Annual Report*, (1899), p.18.

17. *Annual Report*, (1904), p.634.

18. *Annual Report*, (1908), p.20.

19. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.112; Brij V. Lal, 'Labouring Men and Nothing More: Some problems of Indian indenture in Fiji', in Kay Saunders (ed), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p.139.

20. Lal, 'Labouring Men and Nothing More', p.140.

21. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1910), p.289.

[22] Ibid., p. 289.

[23] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 128.

[24] Ibid., p. 128.

[25] Ibid., p. 109

[26] J. McNeill and Lal Chimman, *Report to the government of India on the conditions of Indian Indentured Labour in Four British Colonies*, 1915, p. 252. A copy of this document is available in the Noel Butlin Archives in Canberra. The file number is z303, F4.0, Folder 1, document 8.

[27] Annual Report, (1906), p.19.

[28] A.G. Lowndes, 'The Sugar Industry of Fiji', in Lowndes, (ed.), *South Pacific Enterprise* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956), p.78.

[29] Dixon, 'Sugar Milling by CSR', in Lowndes, p. 135.

[30] Lowndes, 'The Sugar Industry of Fiji', p.77.

[31] *Annual Report*, (1909), p. 19.

[32] *Annual Report*, (1911), p. 15.

[33] *Annual Report*, (1910), p. 13.

[34] *Annual Report*, (1911), p. 15.

[35] Suicide by opium poisoning was specifically recorded as such in the death registers. This is assumed here that entries in the death registers of 'opium poisoning' and 'opium overdose' had the same meaning.

[36] James R. Rush, *Opium to Java: Revenue Farming and Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Indonesia, 1860-1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp.34-35.

[37] *Annual Report*, (1909), p. 19.

[38] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.129.

chapter 18

Naraini's Story

Jane Harvey

In July 1910 Naraini, a twenty-four year old Indian indentured woman, was allotted to the Nasavusavu Estate in Nadroga, run by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR).[1] While her background and the circumstances that led her to Fiji are not known, it does seem that she was married and perhaps had indentured herself to follow her husband. She was pregnant on arrival and was told by the overseer that she was not to work but would receive rations for the duration of the pregnancy. On Tuesday, August 16 she gave birth, prematurely, to a child which died four days later. When she later came to give evidence in court she stated, 'my husband was cruel to me, having beaten me before my confinement', claiming that he himself had killed the child.[2] The details of exactly what happened are difficult to ascertain but it is clear that Naraini's marriage and home life were marred by violence. On Saturday August 20, the day her child died, Harold Bloomfield, the estate overseer, told Naraini that she was to go to work on

Monday. Bloomfield later denied this and recounted a different version of events:

> I complained to Naraini that her person and clothes smelt. She said 'what can I do? I have no money and no other clothes'. I said 'haven't you any soap'. She said 'No'. I said 'get some from your husband'. She said 'he is in hospital at present and if he were here would not do so'. She asked me to give her work. I asked if she was capable of it. She said 'yes'.[3]

According to Muniram, the women's *sirdar* who witnessed this exchange, Naraini did not ask to go to work. In any case, it seems highly unlikely that a woman in her distressed and weakened state would have done so. Early Monday morning, just two days after the death of her child and only six days after having given birth, Naraini set about her task of breaking stones with a hammer. After working for a few hours in the hot sun she stopped and sat down, too weak to continue. The *sirdar* approached Naraini and told her to return to work before the overseer saw her and so she made a futile attempt to continue working. When Bloomfield visited Naraini, he demanded to know why she was not working. The *sirdar* claimed that he told the overseer that the woman was very sick 'and bleeding from her private parts, and couldn't stand up to work'.[4] Hearing this, Bloomfield walked over to Naraini, kicked her and asked her why she was unable to work. She said to him 'I can't do this work, it is too heavy for me, give me some other work'.[5] It seems that Bloomfield had difficulty understanding what she was saying, partly because she was crying but also because he did not understand Hindustani. He asked another worker what Naraini had said and then proceeded to assault her, picking her up by the hair and dropping her on a heap of stones several times, kicking her and beating her with a stick. According to the *sirdar*, Mr Allman, the junior overseer, while not participating in the assault, simply stood by and did not do or say anything.

After Bloomfield stopped beating Naraini, he asked her to wipe the blood from her face and ordered her to go to the Nagaga hospital. Kaliram, an Indian male who had been working near Naraini on the tramline, was told to go with her and was given a note for the hospital attendant. Accounts differ as to how far away the hospital was, but the District Medical Officer later claimed that it was approximately five miles away. Bloomfield did not order Naraini to be carried on a stretcher, but expected her to walk to the hospital. He later claimed that both he and Allman 'saw them walking for two or three chains in the direction of the hospital'.[6] Kaliram, however, stated that Naraini was unconscious and he had to carry her on his back to the hospital. According to the hospital attendant, Albert

Whitaker, she had arrived at the hospital in a collapsed state, 'suffering from contusion and injuries to back, shoulder and buttocks - punctured wounds and clean cut wound on back. She was severely wounded. I thought there was danger to her life on admission'.[7]

CSR train on the Savusavu line at Nadroga. Naraini was working on the construction of this line when she was attacked by Bloomfield.
Photograph by Robert Green and reproduced courtesy of A.D. Weir.

Despite the extensive injuries, Bloomfield made no mention of the assault in the letter which he sent with Kaliram to the hospital attendant. Rather, he claimed that Naraini was 'apparently incapable or else damn lazy'.[8] He wanted to know 'if she is physically capable of work and if so how much'.[9] Whitaker was outraged and asked Bloomfield 'since when did you receive instructions to put women to work 5 days after confinement?'[10] Bloomfield's response is illuminating.

Whitaker: I don't understand your chit.

> Bloomfield: The woman's child being dead I believe she is legally liable for work. She asked for work herself and I asked her if she was sick or ill and she said no . . . The die [mid wife] who was with her told me her child was born quite normally and that the woman was all right. What is her sickness? If I was not right in sending the woman to work, please say what I should have done according to the Ordinance.[11]

As the Agent General of Immigration noted, 'the callous indifference to the suffering of this woman strewn in Bloomfield's notes is unmistakeable'.[12]

On the plantation Bloomfield set about covering his tracks by ensuring that someone else would take the blame. Eventually, Muniram, the *sirdar*, was told to assume the blame after he was paid £2 and assured that Bloomfield would also pay the fine. All the witnesses were instructed by Bloomfield that, if asked any questions about the matter, they were to say that the *sirdar* beat the woman, not the sahib. Kaliram said that he was 'sent for daily by sahib and told if I said anything I would be shot'.[13] Bloomfield did not report the incident to either the manager of the estate or the police.

The incident would have passed unnoticed had it not been for a visit by Dr John Halley, the District Medical Officer, to the hospital at Nagaga on August 30. He claimed that the woman was not shown to him in the usual way. After making his inspection, he asked if there were anymore patients to see, to which Whitaker said yes, hesitantly.[14] When he examined Naraini, he found eight 'large raw open wounds' on her body.[15] Halley said the facts pointed 'to a degree of brutality that can hardly be conceived by any man in his right senses'.[16] He claimed Naraini's recent confinement made the wounds more dangerous, retarding recovery. Two and a half months after the assault, her wounds had still not healed.

On September 5, 1910 Dr Halley reported the incident to the plantation manager, Mr Leslie. The matter, however, was not really investigated, nor any action taken until the visit of the resident inspectors of immigrants, Lord and Pateson, on September 26. Muniram had been kept in charge of the women's gang, despite his implication in the assault of Naraini, and the occurrence was not reported to police by the plantation manager. According to the Colonial Secretary this showed 'a want of appreciation of serious responsibility in dealing with a case that obviously demanded public enquiry'.[17]

When an investigation finally took place, Muniram was arrested and charged. He initially admitted guilt but was released after telling the Police Inspector that Bloomfield was the actual culprit. What prompted the *sirdar* to change his story is unclear. According to the resident inspectors, Muniram was 'instructed' to persuade the other immigrants to back up his story should they be questioned about it.[18] Enquiries were made and evidence identifying Bloomfield as the offender was impressive. A warrant was issued for his arrest. Five women and two men who had witnessed the assault but had said nothing out of fear of Bloomfield, now gave evidence against him. The case was tried in the Supreme Court on April 24 1911, with Bloomfield charged for wounding with intent to do grievous bodily harm and unlawful wounding. Despite the strong evidence, given not only by Indian witnesses but by the hospital attendant and the District Medical Officer, the jury found Bloomfield not guilty, though they did attach a rider to their verdict 'that the conduct of the overseer in putting a woman in her condition at such a heavy task was callous in the extreme'. The Chief Justice, however, 'added that he would exonerate the accused from the stigma of callousness in the circumstances'.[19]

The government retained a strong suspicion, based on the available evidence, that Bloomfield was in fact guilty of assaulting Naraini. Therefore, despite the acquittal, officials were not prepared to simply let the matter lie. As the Colonial Secretary wrote in a letter to the manager of CSR, 'Mr Bloomfield was acquitted, but in spite of that fact the Government cannot escape the conviction that he is not a fit person to continue in charge of indentured labour'.[20] They had reached this conclusion on the basis of evidence adduced at the trial: his callous conduct in putting a woman to work only six days after she had given birth, his cruelty in not having her carried on a stretcher to the hospital in spite of her serious condition, his neglecting to inform the hospital attendant that she had been assaulted, his indifference to her condition, and his neglect in not reporting the occurrence. The CSR was notified that if Bloomfield continued to be employed, no Indian labour would be allotted to the estate on which he was in charge.

The government was adamant. When they discovered that Mr Dawson, the manager of the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company, proposed to employ Bloomfield as a clerk and eventually as an overseer, officials quickly notified him that the decision made concerning the employment of Bloomfield would not be rescinded. Discovering that his instructions had been ignored, and that Bloomfield had been employed as an overseer at Tamanua in Navua for two weeks, the Agent General warned that 'the application of the VSF Coy Ltd for allotment of 200 Indian immigrants in 1912 will be cancelled and no immigrants will be allotted to Tamunua,'.[21] unless Bloomfield was removed from the field. The threat worked, and Bloomfield was confined to office work.

The whole incident seems to have left Bloomfield relatively unscathed, but for Naraini life was never the same again. Her ultimate fate is unknown - oral evidence suggests that she became mentally deranged - but we do know that her recovery was painfully slow. At the time of the trial, some eight months after the assault, she was still in hospital, weak and suffering from dysentery. One can only imagine the emotional and psychological condition of this young woman, who had lost her new-born child in awful circumstances, been sent to work and then subjected to a savage attack.

Naraini's case provides a shocking indictment of the plantation system and demonstrates the gulf that existed between rhetoric and reality. On paper, the welfare of female indentured workers may have been protected, but it seems that the overseers and plantation managers who were directly responsible for the treatment of Indian immigrants were actually subject to few controls. The merciless beating that Naraini suffered is disturbing, but equally alarming is the fact that a woman in her physical condition was expected to work at all. Her case highlights the way that racist and sexist beliefs sanctioned and excused the unsympathetic treatment which indentured Indian women received. Furthermore, it shows that the provisions specifically designed to protect women who were pregnant or had recently given birth were not always observed and that few effective measures were in place to enforce such initiatives. Naraini's story also gives a sense of the practical difficulties that immigrants seeking redress faced.

While ordinances specified that no employer was to require an indentured immigrant to perform work which he or she was physically unfit for, it seems that to a large extent overseers alone were responsible for deciding who was capable of working.[22] Bloomfield was indignant that he was justified in putting Naraini to work. The letters which he sent to the hospital attendant on the day of the assault indicate that he believed Naraini was physically fine because he had been told that there was no complication with the birth. In his eyes, child-birth did not equate with 'sickness' and accordingly no special treatment was required. Furthermore, Naraini's child was dead and, as she had no child to care for, maternity leave was no longer an entitlement. Bloomfield's action, in sending Naraini to work breaking stones so soon after giving birth, displays a disturbing inability or unwillingness to appreciate the physical and emotional stress that Naraini was facing.

The fate of indentured workers was determined to some extent by the character and temperament of those few individuals who were immediately in charge of them and who were employed by the companies that ran the plantations. Bloomfield did not have a good reputation for his treatment of immigrants. Indeed, Inspectors Pateson and Lord, who had formerly been overseers with Bloomfield at Labasa and who had helped conduct the investigation against him, claimed that, knowing his disposition, they believed he had been involved in the assault on Naraini. He was also subsequently prosecuted for kicking a pot of boiling dal (lentils) over an indentured labourer and for giving excessive tasks to nine others. Each case was dismissed. The Agent General thought that some of the blame for the treatment of Nariani lay with the CSR for 'employing [Bloomfield] at all'.[23] He also believed that keeping a check on the behaviour of the overseers was the responsibility of the plantation managers, but recognised that this supervisory role was not always carried out. Placing such reliance on employers to ensure that immigrants were treated fairly was an error. The companies which employed overseers who were notorious for their gross ill-treatment of indentured workers, rarely took steps to have them removed. This is hardly surprising, however, for the concerns of the plantation managers did not lie with the Indian immigrants but with the quest for profits.

In contrast, at least on this occasion, the colonial government showed a genuine interest in the welfare of the indentured workers. Naraini's case attracted a great deal of public interest. It could be argued that the case left the government with little choice but to take action against Bloomfield, such was the horrendous nature of the crime. But the case also demonstrates the ease with which overseers could cover up their abusive treatment of workers in their charge and escape the consequences of their actions. Bloomfield had little difficulty in bribing and threatening those Indians who had witnessed the assault. It was a problem of which the government was aware. The *Annual Report* for 1900 noted:

> Complaints made to the Police and Inspectors, where visible marks of injury were shown, could not be prosecuted or, if prosecuted were dismissed for want of evidence to support complaints, witnesses named being reluctant to depose.

Bloomfield was further protected by his employer and colleagues, who refused to report the matter to the police. Allman, the junior overseer who had witnessed the attack, supported Bloomfield even when giving evidence in court. The ties of social affinity that existed between Europeans on plantations were undoubtedly strong and worked to constrain people from speaking out against their colleagues.[24]

Interestingly no complaints of violence were filed by females. Rather than indicating an absence of attack on women, this suggests the weak position of indentured women within the plantation system. Seeking redress was fraught with difficulties. Sergeant Mason, who worked at the Police Station in Labasa, outlined the situation in a letter to the Superintendent of Police in Suva:

> It is a usual thing for Indians to come to the police station between the hours of 9 & 12 at night to complain of the treatment they get on some of the plantations. When asked why they are so late they say they have to wait till dark as the *sirdars* watch them and will not let them go. This is when they have been beaten during the day and if the overseers hear that they have been to the police station they get their money cut and also get heavy tasks to perform and most likely another thrashing. . . Sergt would like to know if he can take proceedings against the overseers for preventing the people from coming to the police station with their grievance as it is almost an everyday occurrence.[25]

Making a report was difficult because indentured immigrants were not free to leave the estate without permission, and an overseer who had beaten his workers was not about to grant them leave so that they could file a complaint against him. If a report was made, it involved the risk of further violence and the withholding of wages and rations. It was hardly deemed wise to report an overseer under whom you were contracted to work for five years. Practical considerations may have discouraged labourers from reporting abuses, but the fact that they were acutely aware of their own powerlessness was also significant. The system had effectively demoralised the Indian immigrants into a belief that, as one ex-indentured man stated, 'we were in a hopeless and a helpless state in this place hence [we] could do nothing'.[26]

Charges could be laid against an overseer, but getting conviction was another matter. Why this was the case is difficult to ascertain and involves a certain amount of speculation. Apart from the problems associated with witnesses, already noted above, Naidu suggests that magistrates were often employers, or past employers of Indian labourers, and on good terms with the overseers and managers employed by companies such as CSR. He concludes that their sympathies accordingly lay with those who employed indentured workers.[27] In Naraini's case, knowing who made up the jury could help explain why Bloomfield was acquitted. Bloomfield's emphatic response to the incredulity of the hospital attendant perhaps reflects the sentiments that were shared by those who were involved in dispensing the legal system, juries, magistrates and judges. He wrote, 'Don't be so ready to believe a white man a scoundrel unless you are quite sure of your ground'.[28] Naraini's case is distressing and could lead to the conclusion that the plight of the Indian indentured servant was a hopeless one. It is difficult not to see them simply as victims of the powerful plantation system, who were afforded little real protection by the authorities or the law. Indentured immigrants may have had limited avenues for official recourse against the overseers who perpetrated violence against them, but they did not simply accept such treatment without question or retaliation.[29] One indication that Indian labourers resisted the brutalities of the plantation system may lie in the number of cases, noted in the *Annual Reports*, of offences against immigration laws. Both men and women were listed as offenders and it is perhaps reasonable to assume that at least some of these actions were a form of protest. There are also accounts of direct resistance. Indian women sometimes chose to deal with brutal overseers, and let them know that their behaviour was not appreciated, by urinating on them.[30] An ex-indentured immigrant described a different response:

> One day my wife, who was pregnant, and was hoeing the field was whipped by the kulambar. Guljariya who made herself my mother and my wife, her daughter, pulled the kulambar from his horse and gave him a hiding - he ran for his kottee.[31]

These remained, however, individual acts of resistance that had limited potential for challenging the injustice and brutality that indentured Indian women encountered within the plantation system.

Naraini's case is just one account of the female experience of indenture in Fiji. It does, however, provide insight and understanding into some of the major problems that arose within the plantation system. In particular it highlights the vulnerable position of women and the gap that existed between the rhetoric of indenture and the actual experience of Indian indentured workers. Indian women were affected by issues of race and class which saw employers subject them to gross exploitation. In a system driven by profits they, like all indentured workers, were viewed simply as a means to an end. The system of indenture may have had formal boundaries that placed limits on the powers of employers, but few measures were in place to ensure that they were followed through. Overseers were, therefore, given virtually unlimited control over Indian immigrants and the abuse of that position was common and widespread. Subjected to harsh working conditions, cruel and violent treatment and given little effective protection from the colonial authorities or the law, indentured Indian women suffered disproportionately on the Fiji plantations.

Endnotes

1. Naraini's story has been compiled from a variety of documents including correspondence from the Agent General, reports of the Distnct Medical Officer and evidence given in the case of *Rex v. Bloomfield,* found in CO83/101. The specific source has been cited only when a direct quote has been used.
2. Evidence given by Naraini in the case of *Rex v. Bloomfield,* April 24, 1911, CO83/101.
3. Evidence given by Harold Bloomfield in the case of *Rex v. Bloomfield,* April 25, 1911, C083/101.
4. Evidence given by Muniram in the case of *Rex v. Bloomf eld,* April 24, 1911, C083/101.
5. Evidence given by Naraini in the case of *Rex v. Bloomfield,* April 24, 1911, CO83/101.
6. Evidence given by Bloomfield in *Rex v. Bloomfield,* April 25, 1911, CO83/101.
7. Evidence given by the hospital attendant, Albert Whitaker, in *Rex v. Bloomfield,* April 24, 1911, CO83/101.
8. Letter from Harold Bloomfield *to* Albert Whitaker, August 22, 1910, CO83/101.
9. Letter from Bloomfield *to* Whitaker, August 22, 1910, CO83/101.
10. Letter from Whitaker to Bloomfield, August 22, 1910, C083/101.
11. Letter from Bloomfield *to* Whitaker, August 22, 1910, C083/101.
12. Letter from the Agent General to the Colonial Secretary, April 15, 1910, CO83/101.
13. Evidence given by Kaliram in *Rex v. Bloomfield,* April 24, 1911, CO83/101.
14. Evidence given by Dr. Halley in *Rex v. Bloomfield,* April 25, 1911, C083/101.
15. Report from the District Medical Officer to the Chief Medical Officer, August 3, 1910.
16. Report from the District Medical Officer to the Chief Medical Officer, August 3, 1910.
17. Letter from the Colonial Secretary to the Manager of CSR, May 13, 1911, C083/101.
18. Letter from the Resident Inspector of Immigrants to the Agent General, November 11, I 910, CO83/101.
19. *Rex v. Bloomfield,* April 25, 1910, CO83/101.
20. Letter from the Colonial Secretary to the Manager of CSR, May 13, 1911, CO83/101.
21. Letter from the Agent General to the Colonial Secretary, December 28, 1911, CO 83/101.

[22] Section 104 of the legislative framework of indenture states, 'The employer of any indentured adult immigrant may require such immigrant to perform either by way of task-work or time-work any work for which he is not physically unfit. . .'. Indenture Ordinance I in Brij V. Lal, *Crossing the Kala Pani: A Documentary History of Indian Indenture in Fiji* (Canberra and Suva, 1998).

[23] Letter from the Agent General to the Colonial Secretary, April 15, 1911, CO 83/101.

[24] Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture,* p.44.

[25] Letter from Sergeant Mason Police Station, Labasa, to the Superintendent of Police, Suva, March 21, 1897, C083

[26] Ali, *Girmit,* p. 16.

[27] Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture,* p.55.

[28] Letter from Bloomfield to Whitaker, August 22, 1910, C083/101.

[29] Beall, 'Women Under Indenture', p. 111.

[30] Walter Gill gives an account of this happening in his book *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1969), p.30.

[31] Ali, *Girmit,* p.46.

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chapter 19

The Labasa Strike, 1907[1]

Matthew Ryan

Indenture in Fiji was a system of oppression through which the labour of Indian migrants was extracted largely by coercive control and the denial of legal justice.[2] Such systems of power, however, are not self-maintaining. They are created, reproduced and interpreted by human actors in the face of challenges by those they attempt to control. Whatever else it might be, a sugar plantation is structured around the exercise of power designed to control and discipline labour. The purpose was to maintain output and production (i.e. to produce a crop) in circumstances where workers had no stake in the enterprise, where the nature of the work itself was intrinsically unattractive, and where few channels existed for promotion through the ranks. Hence the authoritarian character of the plantation and the appeal of coercive control.

The mechanics of oppression varied from place to place but the underlying purpose was the same everywhere: to suppress worker resistance and to maintain planter control. The success with which planters, under the indenture system, maintained discipline and control may be gauged from the muted nature of worker resistance. Given the disparity in the power relationship, it soon becomes apparent why collective, organised resistance was generally not a viable option, despite labourers often having strong reasons for grievance. So instead of engaging in open and futile confrontations with management and the law, workers largely confined themselves to what have various been termed 'day to day' resistance, 'silent sabotage', and the 'weapons of the weak'.[3] In other words, they kept a lower profile and contented themselves with innumerable petty acts of 'passive noncompliance, subtle sabotage, evasion and deception'[4] that went undetected and, therefore, unpunished.

Strike action under indenture was not only forbidden but rare; and it is noticeable that the big plantation strikes in places such as Queensland, Fiji and Hawaii only occurred *after* the institution of indenture had been abolished.[5] David Northrup, the historian of indenture world-wide, has suggested that the paucity of large-scale strikes 'suggest[s] that most migrants found in their indenture experience sufficient measure of satisfaction of the dreams that had driven them into indenture'.[6] 'Satisfaction' is not a word that readily springs to mind when discussing the indenture experience in Fiji. More plausibly, the answer for lack of strike action in Fiji stems from the extent of coercive power wielded by planters. Equally, as Brij Lal has argued, the diverse cultural background of the labourers hindered the development of common interests and values, and because they were young and generally of low status in their communities, they lacked leadership and organisational skills. Being confined to widely dispersed plantations only increased the difficulties of mounting concerted opposition, and in any case many had no incentive to fight the system. Rather, there was pressure to save money and return to India: these were the primary considerations in the sojourners' calculations, and they acted as powerful disincentives to getting involved in futile and costly struggles against the planters.[7]

It comes as no surprise that only four plantation strikes occurred in Fiji under the indenture system. In 1886, in separate incidents at Navuso and Koronivia, labourers protested at being systematically over-tasked. They were serious affairs, involving 300 and 130 labourers respectively, but short-lived. There was another short-lived strike at Koronivia in 1888, also prompted by over-tasking. The 1907 Labasa strike involved fewer labourers and the grievances were different—on this occasion being deceptive recruiting, low wages, physical abuse and unacceptable work.[8] Although in global terms the Labasa strike was but a 'minor revolt',[9] it nevertheless constituted the most significant and sustained challenge to the indentured labour system by Indian immigrants. The strike is instructive because those involved were far from acquiescent and displayed an unusual degree of solidarity and determination. This caught both plantation and colonial authorities off their guard, and they struggled to find a solution when confronted with particularly tough and resolute labourers.

* * *

The strike began on 6 April 1907 when a group of seventeen labourers, who had arrived the previous January, complained to the Inspector of Immigration, Mr Russell, about the measures of rations they were receiving on the Colonial Sugar Refinery's (CSR) plantation at Labasa. On the following Saturday, the 13th, the same group again approached Russell, with the complaint that they did not receive any flour among their weekly rations, but only rice. Russell advised the men to take their rations, promising to procure flour as soon as possible. The men did not do this. The following Monday morning, a larger group approached the Government station complaining that they could gain no satisfaction from the Inspector of Immigration, and demanded to see the Stipendiary Magistrate. The number of strikers had by then increased to 59. Their main complaint now was that they had been lured to Fiji on false pretences. They claimed to have been engaged to work for the government, either in the police or as non-manual servants. They had not signed on to work as 'coolies' for the CSR, and refused to do any more of this work. Russell 'put the necessary facts' before them, but 'seeing they were determined not to listen to reason' he sent them to the courthouse. [10]

At the courthouse, the strikers proceeded to put the necessary facts, in addition to those already expressed to the Inspector of Immigration, before the Stipendiary Magistrate, Dr. Brough.[11] Their complaints focussed on deceitful recruitment, the nature of the work in Fiji, and general mistreatment. All five complained that they were deceived in India about the identity of the employer and the nature of the work they would be assigned. The immigration agents had said they would be given police or 'bungalow' (servant's) work. One interviewee, Khani Zeman, related the story of his recruitment. He had asked the recruiting agent what sort of work he was to do, and was told 'coolie's work'. On complaining that '[w]e cannot do coolie's work' he was told that 'the people who come form the Punjab will be employed as Sirdars or Police. You will get employment with the Government'. He went on to explain his illiteracy, to make the point that he had not, 'nor did any of us', sign any agreement: 'nor did we even put our thumb-marks to any paper'. Gunda Singh complained that no agreement was read to him: 'I was only told that I would have Government work'. Another, Mahi, claimed that when the Indenture Ordinance was read out, it stated that '[w]e would have government work, but not work as coolies'. His statement also indicated that deception was ongoing: 'We were 4 times examined by the Doctor and each time were told that by the Sahib [Immigration Agent] who sent us that we would not get coolie work – that we would have to work 5 years for the Government'. A final complaint was that they trusted the Sahibs in India. Khani Zeman said that '[t]he sahibs who come to our country never speak false words—they always tell the truth'. Similarly, Gunda Singh says: 'I thought that the Government would never speak falsely—by Government I mean recruiting agents. I thought I would be given Government work since it was promised to me'.

A specific grievance was that their employment backgrounds did not suit them for this style of work, and that better alternatives were available in India. A fourth labourer, Jerdad, testified that 'since my childhood I worked in the palace with Sahibs at Rajirari. I had charge of men who work with silver ore keeping accounts of what was carried'. Mahi complained that '[w]e are given work that neither our fathers or grandfathers have ever done', and again told of previously tending cattle. The fifth spokesman, Budha, described his position in India as 'servant to Contractors of Public Works', saying he was 'an orderly and always followed orders'. After being told in India that he would have to do coolie work in Fiji, he 'told Grant Sahib [Protector of Immigrants] that [he] could not do coolie work, ... could earn better wages here, or in Burma or Assam, and the Chota Sahib told us that it would be alright, in Fiji you will get Police work or other work suited to your class'.

The five men also complained that they were unable to earn a decent living doing 'coolie' work. Gunda Singh reported weekly wages as low as one shilling or even sixpence after rations were deducted; Khani Zeman, who had been there ten months, reported wages of 3 shillings and 8 pence and 2 shillings; while Mahi, who earned between 4 shillings and 6 shillings after rations, came closest to making the nominated wage of a shilling a day.[12]

Nor were the complaints restricted to fieldwork. Those who worked on the launches and in the mill also registered their dissatisfaction with the conditions. The wages, in the region of 7 shillings to 9 shillings, were an improvement on what was earned in the fields. The jobs, however, held their own grounds for complaint. The mill worker, Jerdad; complained: 'I do not get the work I expected to get, and that I am given work I never did before and do not understand'. He further complained that he could not understand the instructions from the supervisor, who spoke only English. The launch driver, Budha, offered no particular complaint against the work itself or the pay, but complained that he worked very long hours, and did not get Sunday off. The watchman also complained of long hours; and those interviewed at Labasa also testified to physical abuse by an overseer.

Brough ordered the men to return to work, saying that their complaints would be referred to Suva for investigation. But the strike continued. The men returned to the plantation but refused to work; and refused also to accept rations on the grounds that they had nothing to do with the company and that it was the Government's responsibility to feed them. The strikers collected £10 to buy food, and supplemented this by eating large quantities of the Company's sugarcane.[13] They also attempted to entice other workers to join them, as well as encouraging their 'shipmates at other plantations'. Also, the plantation overseer asked for police protection, claiming the strikers had threatened to kill him, although no specific individual could be prosecuted for this threat.[14] Further accusations of intimidation came to light when two Madrasi labourers complained of being assaulted and their evidence, that ten men had threatened to thrown them off the Labasa bridge in an effort to stop them working, led Brough to issue arrest warrants. The complainants did not know the names of the assailants but claimed to be able to point them out.[15]

That same morning (19 April) the Inspector of Constabulary at Labasa was sent to deliver the warrants. The police contingent numbered 9 men. The local Fijian village leader, the *Buli Labasa*, provided a further twenty men, who remained in a boat a quarter mile away from the lines (plantation houses). The police approached the lines and arrested the men identified by the Madrasis. They offered no resistance, but about thirty strikers accompanied the arrested men when the constabulary marched them off. The police decided to allow the strikers to follow, while ensuring they remained a safe distance behind. Meanwhile a message was sent to the back up force to travel to the courthouse. At the courthouse, the arrested men were locked up, while Brough talked to the body of strikers, exhorting them to return to the lines. The strikers insisted that no assault had happened and that it was the men who made the complaint who should be arrested.[16]

Brough then authorised the constabulary to move the strikers back to the lines, which was achieved with little resistance. Once at the lines, however, a melee broke out. Shots were fired and three labourers were wounded. The police version of events is that the strikers had threatened them with axes, knives and sticks. The strikers denied that they had taken up arms, saying that they were on their way to complain to the mill manager. According to the strikers, the Inspector gave an order to fire. The Inspector, however, denied that such an order was given; but acknowledged that it was a dangerous situation and there was much noise and confusion. The strikers were calmed by the timely arrival Duncan, the mill manager, who somehow managed to persuade them to return to the lines and to accept rations.[17]

That night Brough decided that the strikers should be sent on the steamer *Clyde* to Suva, where their complaints and conduct could be properly investigated. His decision was endorsed by the other officials at the station, who were concerned that the situation might get out of hand. There were 40 Fijian villagers at one stage backing up the regular police.[18] The initial response to the situation had been to request additional police from the station at Savu Savu, on the other side of the island. Consideration had been given to augmenting the police force and the *Buli Labasa* assured Brough that he would be able to call on a reinforcement of up to 90 Fijian villagers. But there were countervailing fears this would provoke a racial feud: 'the men remained firmly resolved not to work and there is no adequate force to coerce them'. Duncan described these precautions as 'unnecessary', and he deprecated Brough's proposal that the CSR vessel *Marama* be dispatched to Suva to secure armed Constabulary.[19] Duncan seemed determined to keep the strikers on the plantation: their labour was needed and he wanted, no doubt, to avoid the impression of being dependent on government support. He preferred the back-up of the local rifle club and thought it sufficient to send only the 'ringleaders' to Suva. But he was overruled, because the strikers refused to be separated. On reflection, Duncan concurred. It was 'better', he said, 'that they should be out of the district and out of the colony than in it, for they are very difficult people to deal with; besides as you know the Pathans are notoriously treacherous'.[20]

The strikers were all from the northwest of India, not only Pathans but also Punjabis and Peshawaris (for convenience, the strikers will hereafter be described as Punjabis, after the actual province of origin). Indian indentured immigrants initially came in large measure from the northeastern districts of the United Provinces. By the late nineteenth century, the expansion of acreage under sugarcane, coupled with difficulty in recruiting from the United Provinces, resulted in the search for labourers widening to the Punjab, the Central Provinces and Madras. The Punjabis rapidly gained a reputation in every colony as being difficult and quarrelsome.[21] At Labasa, Russell, Inspector of Immigrants, was concerned that the 'racial character of these men required different treatment from the ordinary coolie', and that it would have been 'fraught with danger to employees and overseers to appear to treat the matter too lightly'.[22] These perceptions were shared by the CSR managers who now called for the end of recruitment from the Punjab, stating a preference for labourers drawn from the Central Provinces of India: 'for the Jangalis, as they are called, are about the most tractable people we ever introduced into the country'.[23]

The Punjabi strikers at Labasa were the more formidable on account of their solidarity, despite arriving in different ships, being housed in different lines, and in at least one instance being joined by a compatriot from another plantation. Their common cultural and linguistic background, moreover, cut across differences in position on the plantation and transcended religion: Brough identifies Hindus and Moslems amongst his interviewees.[24] Following the shooting, the strikers took ceremonial oaths against working for the company, 'such as were Hindoos wading into the river up to their breasts, and such as Mussulmans catching the Koran with their teeth'. Fears among local colonial officials were intensified by reports that, after the violence, the Punjabi recruits had gained sympathy from other labourers and the free Indian community.[25]

But a serious challenge to authority takes more than commonality of language and identity among workers. It is well known that '[an] important ingredient in the development of revolts out of local disturbances was the division of whites into warring factions and the general weakness of state apparatus'.[26] Both these pre-conditions, to varying degrees, are applicable to the Labasa strike. The weakness of the state was initially demonstrated when Brough decided to transfer the entire body of 56 strikers to Suva, precisely because the situation could not be contained at Labasa without the risk of a bloodbath. There were disagreements, as we have seen, at the time of that decision, with Duncan (the mill manager) being over-ruled. The bickering did not stop at that point.

Indeed, the government officers who led the official enquires into the strike were critical of the local officials, refusing to see that their action was in the interests of public safety. Surprise was expressed that the Duncan's opinion should have been overruled, and the men sent to Suva; this had placed the government 'in an awkward position, and expense has been unnecessarily incurred'. The general opinion in Suva was that the local officials had 'lost their heads and nerve in circumstances where coolness and tact' would have settled the trouble. [27] Duncan, for his part, gloatingly reported that his 'actions in regard to the Peshawaris [had] general approval while that of the local Government officials is condemned.[28] Indeed, it is possible that the CSR was complicit in the outrageous decision to remove Brough from his posting.

* * *

The strikers were duly rounded up and sent to the Immigration Department depot and quarantine station on Nukulau Island, off Suva. A combination of circumstances made the upcoming court case one on which much would hang. The fact to stress at this point is that it was not a matter of CSR routinely charging workers under the 1891 Indenture Ordinance with causing a disturbance and refusing to go back to work. Had that been so, it would have been an open and shut case, given the frequency with which employers successfully prosecuted their labourers.[29] But the case was no longer strictly a CSR matter only. Although Brough had initially warned the strikers that they were in breach of the law for unlawful assembly—that is, leaving the plantation in such a large body to lodge their complaints—the main charge against them was assault. That meant that the government, and not the Company, was pressing the charges. What really raised the stakes was that the strikers had legal representation. The ten strikers arrested at Labasa had subscribed £1 each and engaged a local solicitor to represent them in court, who on the removal of the strikers to Suva, handed their affairs over to Crompton and Muspratt. Fenner, the manager of Nausori Mill, was somewhat dismissive, saying that 'the Coolies have paid Crompton the Lawyer £10 retaining fee to protect their interests but, as this is about all the money they can raise, the lawyer will not trouble himself too much about the matter'.[30] To the contrary, Crompton took up the strikers' cause, telling the authorities that he would recommend to the strikers to return to work if the government paid £21 to cover their costs.[31] The fact of adequate legal representation, combined with the overall gravity of the case, promised a court hearing of uncommon interest. To complicate an already difficult situation, the Governor was out of the Colony, having gone to Tonga without appointing an Acting Governor in his place.

The original legal issues of this dispute revolved around the arrest of the workers and the wounding of the men. As the legal arguments unfolded, much stress was placed on specific interpretations of sections of the Indenture Ordinance of 1891. The legal position enjoyed by the employers was backed to a certain extent by particular readings of the Ordinance. This was rarely challenged. It was not, however, a interpretation held by all in either the government or the CSR. An incident, cited as a precedent by Duncan, occurred when a number of Madrasis left the plantation and lodged a complaint at the government station. The Manager prosecuted the men on the grounds that they had illegally left the plantation, but Brough dismissed the case. In Duncan's opinion, this failure to 'enforce the law' had encouraged the present strikers in their protest.[32] Fenner, in contrast, saw this as an example of the hazards that employers ran in taking their labourers to court and having the case dismissed: under clause 223 of the 1891 Immigration Ordinance, he argued, leaving the plantation on Sunday was not illegal.[33] In the first of a series of unseemly squabbles between the two, Duncan told Fenner to 'refer to Part VIII of the Ordinance and read in conjunction with Section 223 to which you allude'.[34] On this basis, Duncan argued, workers were prohibited from leaving the plantation in a body, not leaving 'employment' or 'work' (which may be allowed given that the men were not required to work on Sunday). This gives some indication of the differing conceptions of the regulations governing the labour system.

The interpretation of the law pertaining to the validity of the indenture agreements also varied. Again, Duncan, considered that Brough had erred in listening to the complaints of the labourers and referring them to Suva:

> As far as I understand the Indian immigration Ordinance, all the evidence the Magistrate is entitled to call for in proof of indenture is the Indenture papers and they constitute prima facie evidence. Why Dr. Brough should have gone out of his way, as it were, to listen to a complaint or grievance alleged to have been perpetrated in India, and which, if at all existent, must have been put right in the depot at Calcutta, is utterly beyond my comprehension.[35]

Some Government officials were less certain, and admitted that there were possible challenges to such assumptions. The Indian Immigration Ordinance of 1891 covered the regulation of the indenture, but it also concerned with the rights and obligations in the relationship between employers and the government. Articles 54 and 55 are ambiguous about the nature of any agreement entered into by the labourer, and their wording was acknowledged as allowing a challenge to the validity of indenture. The fact that the strikers had legal representation is therefore of some importance in relation to their complaints of deception. A judicial report considered more fully the sort of approach such a challenge might take:

> It will no doubt be contended that the words in Section 55 'bound by such indenture' do not mean 'bound by such certificate of indenture' but refer to another contract therein specified and dealt with in Section 54. Further, it will in all probability be argued that 'receivable in evidence without further proof' means only *prima facie* evidence rebuttable on proof that no contract was entered into. [36]

The report provides further argument revolving around the meaning, in the context of legal precedent or specific phraseology, of certain clauses in this Ordinance - such as 'are hereby indentured', not 'were duly indentured'. In short, Duncan's interpretation, which would seem to have been widely shared, appears not to have been watertight. The Executive Council considered these legal matters on10 May, with a comment that the judicial report's author restrict his advice to normal legal matters and leave the interpretation of the Immigration Ordinance to those experienced with it.[37]

The lawyers' involvement heightened this atmosphere of uncertainty. Crompton and Muspratt informed the Executive Council that they would advise the strikers to return to work on certain conditions. In addition to their legal costs being met by the government, they wanted access to the strikers at Nukulau. They stipulated five other demands. The first was that the government drop the charges of assault. Second, no charge should be instituted against the men for riot, unlawful assembly or any other offence arising from the disturbance. Third, the wounded men should be compensated. Fourth, the CSR should find the men work as congenial to them as possible. And fifth, the men join the police force should the opportunity arise.[38]

The government agreed with some of the conditions, although not immediately and with some reservation. On 10th of May the Executive Council agreed to drop all charges 'provided they take up work quietly on the various plantations to which they will be distributed'.[39] The strikers were to be dispersed among the CSR's plantations (which met with Duncan's approval).[40] This option had already been aired among CSR managers. The other matters were not negotiable but compensation was offered to the wounded men 'as a matter of grace'. The provision of special jobs and eventual recruitment into the police force were not ruled out by the CSR, but deferred.[41]

The proposal to disperse the men and to drop charges was accepted by the lawyers. But the strikers were not so easily satisfied. On 11th May, Crompton visited Nukulau with his interpreter and the Agent General of Immigration to discuss the Government's proposal with the strikers. This caused immediate consternation. The strikers stuck to their original demand to do government work and now insisted on staying together. But a few wavered and when the visiting party departed, some of the 'ringleaders' chased the launch down to the end of the jetty, and promised they would try to persuade the men to accept the proposals.[42] The following day, the 120-ton launch *Ranadi* travelled to Nukulau with the Agent General of Immigration and the Inspector General of the Constabulary and a squad of police to embark the strikers designated for plantations at Lautoka and Ba. The strikers were argumentative and refused to muster. It was then decided to use force with the crews of the *Ranadi* and of two other vessels in the vicinity as back-up.[43]

The strikers at this time received their food; about twenty went into the barracks to eat and the remainder stayed outside. While they were eating, the constabulary locked the barrack doors and surrounded those who had remained outside. Some men, 'who were becoming very troublesome', were led by the police to the beach. The others followed them, but in general did not interfere with the police. The men shut inside the barracks were 'clamorous' but did not make a concerted effort to force the doors which, the AGI suggested, 'they doubtless could have done'. Although there was no major resistance, the strikers were agitated. Those designated for Labasa and Rewa were finally separated, and those who were to board the *Ranadi* for Lautoka were embarked. Those designated for Labasa, about twenty, were embarked on the steamer the *Clyde* which arrived at Nukulau soon after. Of the strikers who arrived from India on the *Wardha*, sixteen males and one female were sent to Rarawai plantations, five males were sent to Lautoka and two to Nausori mill. Of those who arrived on the *Fazilka*, fourteen males and one female were sent to Lautoka, four males sent to Rarawai, and one to Nausori.[44] The role of the two females noted in this document, and their involvement in the strike, is unrecorded. The twenty labourers who were returned to Labasa were distributed among the nine plantations associated with the mill.[45] The labourers were reported at all the locations to have returned to work peacefully and quietly, at least initially.

The dispersal of the group should have marked the end of the labour troubles, especially when the government eventually agreed that more congenial work would be found for the strikers. But Duncan, arguing that he had not received the instruction to put the returning strikers into special employment before they had arrived back at Labasa, assigned them field work 'till such time as they [prove] tractable and obedient'. He was instructed from Nausori to put the men on non-labouring jobs, and reprimanded for his vindictive attitude toward the returning strikers.[46] He remonstrated, saying that 'I never dreamed for a moment you that you would have acquiesced in such an arrangement as giving these people special jobs'. He then alluded to the labour management problem that would result:

> To have countermanded my orders the instant I got your letter would have been an extremely bad policy and nicely calculated to subvert any authority we still hold over the rest of our coolies, to say nothing of the Peshawaris themselves. Further, I submit it is unfair and unjust to turn out Madrassis or Calcutta from easy, well paid, or special jobs to make room for malcontents like the Peshawari. [47]

He was over-ruled by head office in Sydney, but did not accede graciously. He nevertheless had a point in stating that: 'It is difficult for me to understand what class of isolated work other than what we term special or easy work you allude to in connection with these projects, for within my knowledge, no such work exists'. Special work was reserved for the best of the labourers as one of the few rewards—in effect promotion—available in what was essentially a coercive labour system. It never occurred to Duncan that the strike would not have begun had the men been given non-labouring jobs, as they had been promised in India, in the first place.

The Labasa strike was an unprecedented occurrence in the history of Indian indenture in Fiji. It was the first sustained labour dispute of its kind. Until then, the plantation and colonial authorities had the measure of the *girmitiyas*. They had asserted their authority from the outset and had progressively rolled back workers' ability to resist through such measures as the 1891 Indenture Ordinance. Given the prevailing attitudes and practices of the white employers, Indian indenture in Fiji could never become a paternalistic system, depending instead on coercion at the workplace or the capricious application of the law. But such measures had the effect of suppressing the symptoms rather than removing the causes. Without going so far as to say that the system of labour control in Fiji was in equilibrium, there was nevertheless a certain balance in that each side knew its respective position within the power relationship. Management held the upper hand, and workers knew from often-painful experience that there was little redress.

The fragility of this 'balance', if it can be so described, was upset by the Punjabis. It is never a matter of unfettered control, even in the most oppressive of unfree labour systems, because masters have to 'accommodate', up to a point, worker's ideas of their own 'rights'. As Peter Kolchin points out, bondsmen had 'firmly developed—if never precisely articulated—notions of what constituted generally unacceptable systems of forced labor in which they were held.... [T]he very existence of such standards among them implied a tacit if unrecognised acceptance of their own unfreedom, of the idea that there was such a thing as an acceptable relationship within [a system of unfree labour].[48] This notion of 'rights' was violated when the Punjabis, despite earlier assurances, were assigned to do 'coolie' work at Labasa; and they objected strenuously.

The Europeans' perception that the Punjabis' reaction was attributable to their cultural characteristics was not a case of racial stereotyping. It is well recognised in the historiography of unfree labour that the nature of worker response is culturally conditioned. It is no accident that Akan slaves, who came from a highly militaristic society, were usually at the centre of slave revolts in Jamaica.[49] Closer to home, Clive Moore has explained the methods of response of Melanesian labourers on Queensland cane fields in terms of a 'counterculture of survival' and argues that 'their lack of obvious resistance or protest relates not only to the authoritarian character of the plantation system but also to their deliberate choice of methods of response. In short, they maintained Melanesian social equilibrium by depending on major inward-focussing Melanesian social mechanisms coming from their ethnic backgrounds to provide satisfactory balances in their lives. Their response was to mediate their working and private lives through their own beliefs, institutions, and forms of behaviour...'.[50] At the same time, certain responses seem universal. The Melanesians who had been kidnapped to Queensland were the labourers most prone to intractable behaviour,[51] a response that parallels the Punjabis' reaction at Labasa. Nevertheless, the Punjabis, with their proud dispositions, displayed far greater fortitude than their compatriots from the United Provinces and Madras. Part of the difficulty of the latter two groups stemmed from their diversity, which impeded a united front and a concerned response. But it is also clear that they lacked the inner strength and the social cohesiveness of the Punjabis. It does lead to speculation that a less oppressive system of indenture might have emerged in Fiji had significant numbers of Punjabis been recruited from the outset.

But neither is it a case of undiluted agency on the Punjabis' part. The other side of the equation is that they had room for manoeuvre: Fiji was simply not equipped to cope with an uprising of this scale and determination. The colony, in keeping with the British-model, was run on the cheap. There was no extensive state apparatus, much less one designed to suppress plantation revolts. There had never been a need for it. Once the matter became a purely legal issue, the adversarial system to British justice came into play and created further divisions among the European protagonists. The fact that the strikers received effective legal representation was also a stroke of good fortune: there were cases where derelict lawyers, such as Humphrey Berkeley, did nothing for their Indian clients beyond charging exorbitant fees.[52]The relative success of the Punjabis, then, had as much to do with the weakness in the system of power that confronted them as it did in their own sterling efforts.

Although the Labasa strike was the most serious and sustained protest in the course of Fiji Indian indenture, one is ultimately struck by the limited objectives of the strikers and the leniency of the colonial government's response. The latter, after an initial bout of irritation, had no real cause for concern. After all, the strike was conceived and conducted with no revolutionary purpose in mind; and it produced no revolutionary outcome. The strikers were neither protesting against the colonial government nor against the indenture system *per se*. The strikers' objections to field labour and low wages extended only as far as their application to themselves. They certainly made their point and were successful in so far as the state dropped criminal charges and exempted them from the field labour that was so much beneath their dignity—despite some rearguard action from Duncan. The government, in fact, was the final arbiter. By dispersing the strikers throughout the colony, the government achieved the triple objectives of reaffirming its authority, of demonstrating that it was not entirely the creature of the CSR, and of minimising what disruptive effect the Punjabis might still exert. This latter strategy of neutralisation and containment was especially important because the government depended on the sugar industry, and especially the CSR, for the bulk of its revenues. This was the vital interest that the government was defending—and economic one on which its own survival depended. There were other considerations. By the turn of the century, men like Totaram Sanadhya and Reverend John Burton were present in Fiji. The government could ill afford to adopt a niggardly attitude; the economy was improving, and the colonial secretariat was increasingly reluctant to let the CSR determine the conduct of industrial relations in the colony. And, above all, the Punjabis had a case.

Endnotes

1. Edited for publication by Doug Munro.

2. E.g., J.W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London, 1910); C.F. Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth, 1918); Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the export of Indian labour overseas, 1830-1920* (London, 1974); K.L. Gillion, *The Fiji Indians: challenge to European dominance, 1920-1940* (Canberra, 1977), ch.1; Ahmed Ali, *From Plantation to Politics: studies on Fiji Indians* (Suva, 1980), ch.1; Bruce Knapman, *Fiji's Economic History, 1874-1939: studies of capitalist colonial development* (Canberra, 1987), 12-13.

3. Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, 'Day to Day Resistance to Slavery', *Journal of Negro History*, 37 (1942), 388-419; Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American slavery and Russian serfdom* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 241-44; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven/London, 1985), esp. 28-35.

4. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 31.

5. Doug Munro, 'Patterns of Resistance and Accommodation', in Brij V. Lal, Doug Munro and Edward D. Beechert (eds.), *Plantation Workers: resistance and accommodation* (Honolulu, 1993), 20-21.

6. David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (Cambridge, 1995), 129.

7. Brij V. Lal, '"Nonresistance" on Fiji Plantations: the Fiji Indian experience, 1979-1920', in Lal, Munro and Beechert (eds), *Plantation Workers*, 187-216.

8. K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: a history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne, 1962), 48-49, 83, 88; It would be useful to know why plantation strikes were so numerous in parts of the Caribbean, such as British Guiana and Trinidad, by comparison with the Pacific.

9. Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983), 53.

10. Records of the Colonial Secretary's Office (hereafter CSO), National Archives of Fiji, Inspector of Immigration's report, 16 April 1907, Attachment C, no. 2161 of 1907 (hereinafter abbreviated to despatch number and year; in this case CSO 2161/07).

11. The following three paragraphs have been taken from CSO 2161/07, Attachment A, Memorandum of Complaints, 15 April 1907. In a couple of cases, however, testimony presented a few days earlier to the Inspector of Immigration has been included, to complete the picture.

12. In the imperial measurement of money, which Fiji abandoned in 1969, a shilling is the equivalent of ten cents (and twelve pennies make a shilling). A dollar equals ten shillings, and twenty shillings equal one pound sterling.

13. CSO 2161/07, Attachment D, Agent General for Immigration to Colonial Secretary, 13 May 1907.Records of the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company (hereafter CSR), Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, Series N142/2076, Labasa In-letter no. 552, Manager (Labasa) to General Manager (Sydney), 19 April 1907 (hereafter abbreviated to series

number, letter number and date; in this case CSR N142/2076, no. 552, 19 April 1907). The Labasa In-letters between July 1906 and July 1908 are missing, so we are lacking the Sydney General Manager's correspondence with Labasa during the period of the strike.

[14] CSO 2161/07, Attachment C, Inspector of Immigration's report, 16 April 1907.

[15] CSO 2161/07, Attachment b, Stipendiary Magistrate's memorandum, 19 April 1097.

[16] CSO 2231/07, Attachment I, Stipendiary Magistrate's report, 22 April 1907.

[17] CSO 2234/07, Attachment K, reports by Inspector General of Constabulary and Sergeant Samiosa; CSO 2161/07; Crompton & Muspratt to Governor, 29 April 1907; CSO 2234/07, Attachment K, Inspector General of Constabulary's report, ; CSR N142/2084, no. 156, 20 April 1907.

[18] CSO 2161/07, Attachment B, Stipendiary Magistrate's memorandum, 19 April 1907.

[19] CSR N142/2084, no. 542, 19 April 1907.

[20] CSO 2162/07, Attachment B, Stipendiary Magistrate's memorandum, 19 April 1907; CSR N142/2084, no. 156, 20 April 1907.

[21] Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 46-52; Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 50-54.

[22] CSO 2163/07, Attachment C, Inspector of Immigration's report, 16 April 1907.

[23] CSR N142/2084, no. 866, undated.

[24] CSO 2161/07, Attachment A, Memorandum of Complaints, 15 April 1907.

[25] CSO 2161/07, Attachment B, Stipendiary Magistrate's memo, 19 April 1907.

[26] Eugene D. Genovese, *In Red and Black: Marxian explorations in Southern and Afro-American history* (New York, 1979), 132.

[27] CSO 2161/07, Attachment D, Agent General of Immigration to Colonial Secretary, 13 May 1907.

[28] CSR N142/2084., no. 166, 13 May 1907.

[29] Shiu Prasad, *Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Suva, 1974), 23; Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (Suva, 1980), 52-54; Lal, '"Nonresistance"...', 201-11.

[30] CSR N214/2262, no. 870, 13 May 1907. Fenner may have regarded £10 as a paultry sum but it is the equivalent of at least 200 man days' work. This helps explain why indentured labourers were seldom able to hire lawyers to represent them in court: the price was usually beyond their reach.

[31] CSO 2161/07, Crompton and Muspratt to Colonial Secretary, 9 May 1907.

[32] CSR N142/1207, no. 542, 19 April 1907.

[33] CSR N142/2084, no. 542, 4 May 1907.

[34] CSR N142/2084, no. 162, 4 May 1907.

[35] CSR N142/2084, no. 542, 19 April 1907.

[36] CSO 2161/07, Judicial Report.

[37] CSO 2161/07, unidentified report relating to the Executive Council meeting of 10 May 1907.

[38] CSO 2161/07, Crompton & Muspratt to Colonial Secretary, 9 May 1907.

[39] CSO 2161/07, extract from minutes of Executive Council meeting, 10 May 1907.

[40] CSR N142/2084, no. 162, 4 May 1907.

[41] CSR N142/2084, no. 162, 4 May 1907.

[42] CSO 2161/07, Attachment D, Agent General of Immigration to Colonial Secretary, 13 May 1907.

[43] CSO 2161/07, Attachment D, Agent General of Immigration to Colonial Secretary, 13 May 1907.

[44] CSR N142/2084, no. 169, 27 May 1907.

[45] CSR N142/2084, no. 167, 18 May 1907.

[46] CSR N142/2084, no. 184, 18 May 1907.

[47] CSR N142/2084, no. 184, 16 July 1907.

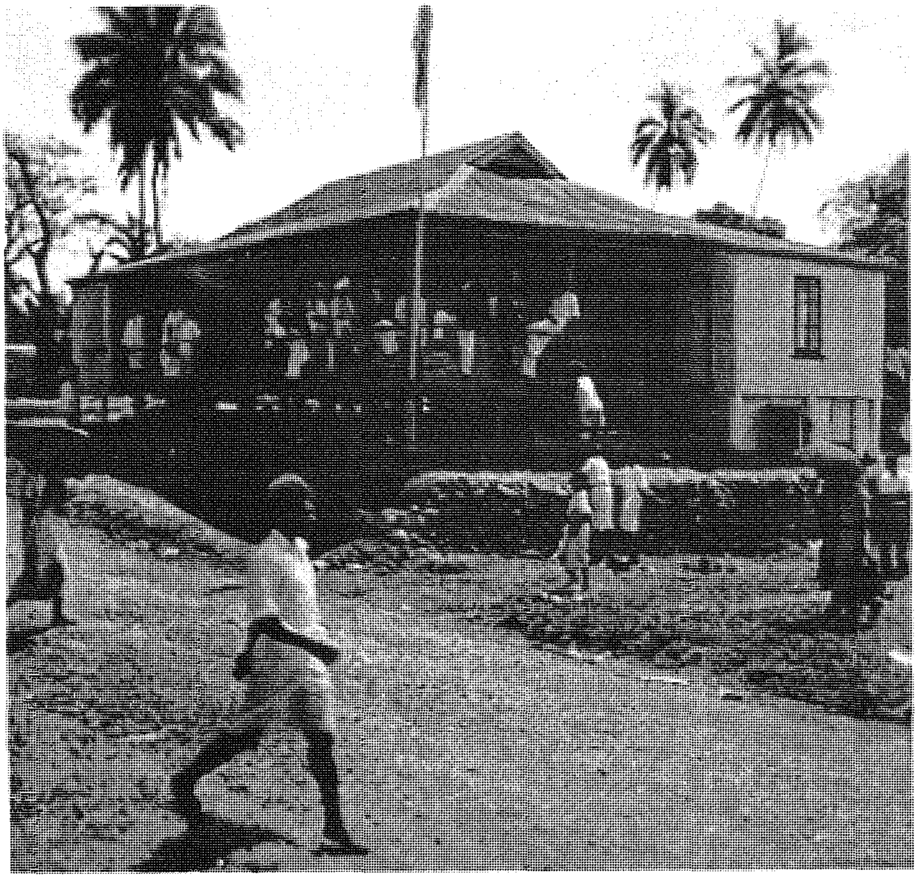
[48] Peter Kolchin, 'The Process of Confrontation: patterns of resistance to bondage in nineteenth-century Russia and the United States', *Journal of Social History,* 11:4 (1978), 479.

[49] Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery* (London, 1967), 276.

[50] Clive Moore, 'The Counterculture of Survival: Melanesians in the Mackay District of Queensland, 1865-1906', in Lal, Munro and Beechert (eds), *Plantation Workers,* 66-99 (quotation, 71).

[51] Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: a history of Solomon Islands labour migration, 1870-1914* (Melbourne, 1973), 25; Kay Saunders, *Workers in Bondage: the origins and bases of unfree labour in Queensland, 1824-1916* (Brisbane, 1982), 131.

[52] J.D. Kelly, 'Fiji Indians and the Law, 1912', in John Dunham Kelly and Uttra Kumari Singh (eds), *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and The Story of the Haunted Line* (Suva, 1991).



Mr Tulsi's store looked exactly like this quasi-Queenslander. People gathered on the verandah to discuss village affairs and resolve their problems.

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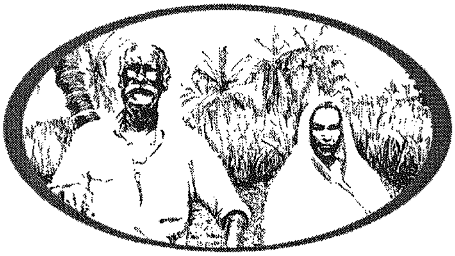
chapter 20



Mr Tulsi's Store

It is gone now. The place looks deserted and forlorn. All that remains of Mr Tulsi's store, at the side of the Seaqaqa Highway facing a small, overgrown creek, are gray planks of burnt wood and twisted corrugated iron scattered about. Once, the store was the heart of Tabia's village life. *Tulsi Ram and Sons: General Merchants,* the dust-caked 'Craven A' billboard proclaimed proudly. The only wooden and iron structure in the settlement of thatched houses, the shop was the village's symbol of progress. People were very proud of the building.

The store also kept the past alive. Girmitiyas used to gather there in the evening, smoke the huqqa and reminisce about *mulk,* their motherland, and fading memories of early experiences of Fiji. In the evenings once a month or so, they used to sit on the verandah wearing dhoti, kurta and pagri, sporting a week-long growth of beard, and sing *bhajans* or play *bujhauni,* the Indian game of riddles. Much later, men met there to discuss village affairs. Mr Tulsi's store was more than a shop: it was the nerve centre of the entire settlement.

Mr Tulsi was one of the few men in the village who could read and write

Hindi. As a young man, he wrote letters for the illiterate girmitiyas to their relatives in India, and helped them send small postal cheques. When letters arrived from India, girmitiyas would hug each other and cry with excitement as Mr Tulsi read their contents aloud. Mr Tulsi was the chairman of the local school committee and president of the village Ramayan mandali. He often spoke at marriages, festivals, and funerals. He was knowledgeable about Indian culture, and could quote an appropriate line from the *Ramayan* or the *Puranas* to underline a point or close an argument.

People feared Mr Tulsi for his ability to use his position, and turn other people's misfortune to advance his own interests. He did this mostly as the chairman of the local panchayat, a five-man council of community elders which mediated in petty civil disputes. This institution was a relic of village India resuscitated by the government after indenture to address the everyday problems in widely scattered Indian settlements, which had emerged haphazardly wherever Indians could lease land from the Fijians or the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. To forestall an administrative nightmare, the authorities adopted a reliable mechanism to maintain peace in the community, about whose internal affairs they otherwise cared little.

How the men were chosen to serve was not always clear. During girmit, they were handpicked by CSR overseers for their authority and firmness in dealing with workers, and their effectiveness in implementing company policy. After girmit, the district colonial officials chose them on the basis of their social and economic status in the community. In Tabia, Mr Tulsi was a natural choice, educated, wealthy, well connected. Other members were Udho, one of the few Indians from Labasa who had served in the Labour Corps during World War II, Jwala, a prosperous cane grower who owned the village's only Bedford truck, and Bansi and Sukhraj, from the adjacent villages of Laqere and Soisoi.

Panchayats derived their power from the moral authority of their members and the force of tradition, reinforced by the absence of other viable alternatives. For most village folk, the rituals and paraphernalia of European courts were alien and forbidding. They much preferred resolving disputes in a familiar, culturally sanctioned way. Panchayats dealt mostly with minor civil cases involving land boundary disputes, compensation for damage to crops caused by stray animals, family squabbles. The panchayat's decisions were rarely contested: it was a brave man, indeed, who challenged the authority of the acknowledged, socially powerful community elders. As the people put it, it was foolish to pick a fight with crocodiles while in water.

Panchayats also enforced community standards and values, even if their decisions were sometimes unfair or costly to the individuals concerned. Once a Hindu in Tabia village was accused of selling an old milch cow to a Muslim, causing huge outrage. Selling a cow to a Muslim, even if it was not for meat, was like sending your own mother to the gallows. The hapless man, Sumera, was hauled before the panchayat, found guilty, and fined. He was forced to shave his head in mourning, and give a *bhandhara*, a ceremonial feast, to the entire village in atonement. Sumera was penniless, saying that he had sold the cow to pay school fees for his five children. But the panchayat had spoken, and there was little Sumera or anyone else could do. Predictably, as so many had done before him, he turned to Mr Tulsi for money to give the feast.

On another occasion, people in the village were unhappy with the Education Department posting a Muslim teacher to the local Sanatani school. The school committee had not been consulted, and they were determined to reverse the decision at any cost. They approached the panchayat for advice. After a series of late night meetings, an insidious rumour spread that the Muslim teacher, Mr Jumessa, was making improper sexual advances on girls. He was accused of 'cutting', that is, winking at young girls in a sexually provocative, inviting way. Mr Jumessa denied the charge and protested his innocence before the panchayat. There was no proof and no witnesses, and in fact no truth to the allegations, but his reputation was ruined. He left the village at the end of the school term a humiliated man. It was said later that Mr Jumessa had left teaching altogether to become a truck driver.

Here is another story of a panchayat which sat in Tabia, at Mr Tulsi's store, thirty years ago. The panchayat was convened to resolve a dispute involving two brothers, Munna and Arjun. They were girmitiya Mangru's sons. Mangru had come to Fiji at the turn of the century, completed his term of five years working on the CSR plantation at Tuatua, on the outskirts of the mill town of Labasa, leased ten acres at Tabia sometime in the late 1920s and settled there. The land was registered in Arjun's name because the CSR gave cane contracts only on ten acre blocks owned by a single individual. But it was understood that seven acres belonged to Arjun and three to Munna. A few years later, Mangru had bought four acres across the river in Laqere and registered it in Munna's name, thus giving both his sons the same amount of land. The arrangement had worked well. The extended family lived on the main farm at Tabia, and ventured across the river whenever work was to be done there. Everything was done jointly. There was a single kitchen, work was shared, and grocery, clothes and other such necessities were purchased in bulk for the entire extended household. That was the way Mangru wanted things to be, the way he himself had grown up in India.

The joint family represented continuity with tradition, a source of solidarity and cohesion, and a bulwark against the outside world when the community was still young, and uncertain about its future. The pattern was beginning to fracture in some places. Sometimes, expanding families could not be accommodated on a single farm. Family friction pushed some people out. Sometimes people were attracted by better opportunities elsewhere, such as better schools or more productive or bigger plots of land. Arjun was proud that his extended family was still intact. He knew that things would change one day, but that prospect was remote to him. Arjun was an uncomplicated man of simple habits. Often his heart ruled his head. He could be stubborn and uncompromising. His extended family meant everything to him. He wanted to keep it that way as long as he could.

But change was inevitable. Mangru died. When he was alive, Mangru had always insisted that his sons should live together under one roof. His presence, and all that it represented – history, culture, tradition – was holding the family together, the main force which dissipated at his death. Not long after, Munna's wife died during childbirth, leaving behind several young children. She had long suffered from tuberculosis and merciless beating by her husband. Munna's savage violence distressed people, but there was nothing anyone could say or do: it was his own wife, not someone else's, that he was thrashing, Munna would retort when reproached. So, to those who knew the family the death was a relief rather than a tragedy.

A year later, Munna married a divorcee from Batinikama. His new wife was a short, fair-complexioned woman of strong will and even stronger temper. Mrs Munna was a modern woman. There was something about her that announced independence and self-confidence. Unlike Arjun's wife, or other women in the village for that matter, she refused to cover her head with *orhni*, shawl, in the presence of older men. She was determined not to remain a part of the extended family for long. She had not divorced her first husband to find herself embroiled in the machinations of another extended family. Munna said nothing. He seemed a different person now, with a new spring in his steps, and people wondered what hold his new wife had on him.

The panchayat sat on the wooden *charpai* in the verandah of Mr Tulsi's store. Mr Tulsi began the proceedings, his ample stomach parked comfortably on his knees. 'It is a simple matter, Arjun', Mr Tulsi said. 'Munna wants to sell his share in the land here and move to Laqere'. Munna wanted to be independent. 'Things are no longer the way they used to be', Mr Tulsi continued, with a touch of regret in his voice. 'Everyone wants to be independent these days. It's happening everywhere. It's the way of the future'. The other members nodded in agreement. 'It is good to resolve these problems amicably. After all, we are like brothers to each other', said Madho. Munna had come to the right place.

Arjun listened intently, his forehead furrowed even more deeply than usual. He was perplexed: why had Munna not discussed this with him directly? In the past they had been able to talk freely about family matters. What had changed between them that Munna had to go to outsiders? He looked at Munna with questioning eyes; Munna kept his head down.

'What you say is true, kaka', Arjun said after a long silence. 'Things are changing'. He had some inkling that things were awry in the family. He was vaguely aware that his *chotki,* Munna's wife, seemed unhappy. But small misunderstandings, common in every family, would be resolved; it was all a matter of time.

'Arjun, the problem is more serious than you think', Udho said. 'Chotki wants to leave as soon as things can be arranged. And the sooner the better'. Munna had told the panchayat that his wife felt she was on trial, and somehow always found wanting. If it was not her cooking, it was the way she talked (loudly) or the way she swept the *aangan,* the compound, or the amount of time she took washing clothes at the *kuan,* well. She could never win. She had married Munna, not the extended family, she kept telling anyone who would listen. She wanted to be the mistress of her own household, not a domestic help in someone else's. And she resented her own stepchildren continuing to look to Arjun's wife, their *badki amma,* for emotional comfort (because none was forthcoming from her).

Mrs Munna was unhappy for another reason as well. It was said that Munna's house was haunted by the ghost of his deceased wife. Strange wailing noises were heard at night, the sound of bangles, the swish of a dress, soft knocks on the bedroom door at odd hours. Someone always put extra salt in the curry and sugar in the tea, for which Mrs Munna was blamed. She felt that someone wanted her out of the house. There would be no peace for anyone until she left.

These complaints surprised Arjun. Still, he did not question them, accepting that he had largely ignored this private side of his extended family life. 'There is nothing I can do to stop Munna', he said, to no one in particular. But he needed time to raise money to buy out Munna's share. He asked for six months. He explained his predicament. Mangru's funeral had been an expensive affair, involving donations of money, cloth and a milch cow to the family priest. Things had to be done in the proper Hindu way. Building fees for the new school had to be paid in full, at the beginning of the school year, otherwise his children, four boys, would be refused admission. And he had to think of the expenses for the marriage of his only daughter, Munnakki - sweet raisin - to whom he was devoted. Marriage talks had already started with a family in Daku.

Arjun spoke clearly, straight from the heart. 'Bat to sach hai', Mr Tulsi said, what you say is true, 'but your plans don't suit Munna'. Then, after a bowl of yaqona, Mr Tulsi looked at Arjun and said, 'Munna and I have talked about it, and although it is too much, I will pay $1200 for the three acres. Of course, I will sell it back to you when you have the money. I don't need the land, as you well know, but I want to help out whenever I can. After all, we have always been like brothers, haven't we? There has always been trust between us'. Mr Tulsi's gesture drew approval from the panchayat: 'Sach hai, Sach hai'. 'It is true, it is true'. It was in fact true that the relationship between Mr Tulsi's and Arjun's families went a long way back. Mangru and Mr Tulsi's father Bhola were *jahajibhais*, ship mates, who had arrived in Fiji on the *SS Sangola* in 1908. They were indeed like blood brothers.

Every argument had been carefully rehearsed, every angle covered, Arjun realised slowly. How much *daru-murga*, eating and drinking, bribery, was involved, he wondered. He pleaded with the panchayat for a little more time. 'There you are, Arjun', Bansi responded with frowning eyes, 'thinking just of yourself and your own family. What about Munna and his plans for his own family? He, too, has young children to feed and educate and marry. He, too, wants a little bit of security and stability in his life. He is not asking for much, just what is his'. 'Arjun', Sukhraj said, 'as the older of the two, you should be more understanding'.

'No kaka', Arjun replied immediately, 'you people misunderstand me. Ask Munna if I have ever been unfair to him. He gets his share of rice from the farm. He always accompanies me to collect the cane money. Every purchase of everything, onions, potatoes, rice, flour, salt, everything, is accounted for. There is a docket for everything. He knows exactly how each penny in the house is spent. Isn't that true, Munna?'

Munna kept looking at the wooden floor of the verandah, his head bowed. There was nothing he could say, for Arjun had spoken the truth. Still, he wished he could tell his older brother the reason for the urgency, but there was no point; Arjun would not understand. Arjun was living in the past, hankering for a world whose time had passed. For Munna, the past was history. He wanted to be his own man on his own terms in his own house.

No one questioned Arjun's good intentions, Jwala reassured him even before Arjun had finished speaking, but Munna's wishes could not be ignored either. 'What can I do', Arjun said helplessly. 'I have no money. All I have is these obligations to meet'. 'Munna', Arjun said, looking straight at him, 'I give you my word. We'll sort something out, as we always have. Just give me some time to think things through'. Munna did not respond.

'Well, what about my suggestion?' Mr Tulsi asked again.

'Selling? That is out of the question'. Arjun was adamant, defiant. This was his father's land, and he would never let it pass into the hands of strangers. He would safeguard his father's bequest with his life. This was the land on which he was born; this was where he would be buried. 'You know what will happen to my cane contract if I part with the three acres, don't you?' They knew. CSR contracts were given out on ten acre blocks; anything less and the contract would be revoked. 'When that happens, what use will this land be? What crops will I grow? Peanuts and beans? Who will feed my children?'

'Well, how about a compromise', Mr Tulsi volunteered. He would pay Munna $1200 in return for the assignment of cane payment on the three acres. Arjun would have his land back as soon as the debt was paid. 'That way, Munna gets his money, you keep the land, and everybody wins'. It wasn't the ideal situation from his point of view, Mr Tulsi reminded the panchayat, but in the interest of neighbourly relations, he would do all he could to resolve the situation peacefully.

There was a trap and counter-argument at every turn. Assignment sounded fine in theory but was ruinous in practice. There was something deeply degrading about being beholden to someone, to live on someone's charity, especially someone like Mr Tulsi. Arjun knew that with him, he would never win, entering a vicious circle of deepening debt and degradation. Many in the village were indebted to Mr Tulsi, and other members of the panchayat, one way or another, some for decades; few had ever managed to extricate themselves. Arjun wasn't going to be one of them.

'I can't do anything right now', Arjun said. 'I have to think about it'.

'What is there to think about?' Mr Tulsi asked, showing anger and irritation for the first time in the proceedings. He had done all the thinking there was to do.

'This is family land', Arjun said firmly and with a tone of finality that took everyone by surprise. 'It has been in the family since Dada moved here. I won't let any outsider lay claim to an inch of it, even for one minute. Never'. Mr Tulsi knew that Arjun couldn't be moved.

'Well, that's your problem now', Mr Tulsi said, getting up from the wooden *charpai*. 'I have done my best. If something happens, don't blame me'. Still, disappointed as he was, he allowed Arjun a fortnight to see what he could do. Arjun left the meeting devastated. He had never imagined that his cherished world of family loyalty would collapse around him like this. He had bought some time, but sooner or later, he would have to face reality.

The cane harvesting season was about to start. As in the past, the cane committee had decided the order of harvesting, which depended on such things as the sweetness of the cane, the location of the field, the grower's track record. Shamsher would go first, then Ram Dayal and then Arjun. The order pleased Arjun because it would mean early cane payment. The committee had estimated his cane crop at around 140 tons, about half of which would be harvested during the first round and the remainder in the second.

The first day of harvesting went well. Two truckloads of about six tons each were sent to the mill, filling the quota for the day. After lunch, the gang harvested another ten for the next day. The rest would be cut next morning before sunrise. But that plan was disrupted when Mr Thompson, the sector CSR overseer, arrived at the farm early, looking agitated. Mr Tom, as everyone called him, was a young man in his 30s, slim, of medium height, and hot tempered. People feared him as he barked out orders in broken CSR Hindustani. The overseers were no longer the *mai-baap*, parents of the growers, as they had been during girmit; but they were still powerful enough to make or break the farmers.

'Arjun kahan baitho?' Mr Tom asked, surveying the harvested cane on the ground. 'Where is Arjun?' When Arjun arrived from the edge of the field where he had been feeding the cattle *kantaap*, green cane top, Mr Tom took him aside and talked to him for about five minutes, pointing to the cane and throwing up his hand often enough to suggest that something was amiss. Then he walked towards the gang which was heading to a shady spot under the mango tree. 'Ghare jao sab koi', he said. Go home everybody. 'Ganna kato khalas'. No more cane cutting.

Arjun was shaking and perspiring profusely as he walked home without saying a word to anybody. The whole plot, the ambush, became blindingly clear as he reflected on the events of the past few days. As he later found out, Munna and Mr Tulsi had gone to the CSR office at Tuatua to inform it of Munna's intention to sell his share to Mr Tulsi. The sale would breach the terms of the contract, and Mr Thompson had no alternative but to stop further harvesting until the matter of the lease was cleared.

The fear of losing his contract would bring Arjun to his knees, begging forgiveness for his effrontery, Mr Tulsi thought, teaching him a lesson that he and the village would remember for ever. Half the cane was still on the ground, and several tons lay harvested and drying in the sun. After five days, the CSR would refuse to take the cane; in any case, its weight and value would have declined, fetching a fraction of the normal price. Arjun would then surrender. Mr Tulsi would either get the assignment or buy the land outright. It was a trick he had tried many times before.

There was no other person in the village, or in the neighbouring settlements for that matter, who could lend such a large sum at such short notice. Going to the local Bank of New Zealand, the only commercial bank in town, was out of the question. Arjun was unlettered, and what he did not understand, he feared. He thought of friends and relatives whom he could approach, Ram Charan in Waiqele and Dulare in Naleba. They both offered to loan three hundred dollars each, without security and with minimal interest. Arjun was that kind of person: open and honest and dependable, inspiring trust. It was a touching gesture at a moment of great need, and Arjun wept with gratitude. Still, what they offered was not enough, and Arjun did not know others who could help.

Someone - perhaps it was Arjun's wife Dhanraji - suggested Sahadeo, across the river in Laqere. Arjun hadn't thought of him, for Sahadeo was not known as a money lender. He approached him without much hope, but miraculously, Sahadeo came through, offering to loan Arjun the entire $1200 at 15 per cent interest. No one ever knew why Sahadeo had done this. Perhaps it was because Sahadeo had seen Mr Tulsi ruin the lives of so many others in the village. Perhaps he wanted to set himself up as a rival moneylender. Perhaps he wanted to break Mr Tulsi's hold on the flow of rural credit. Perhaps he had political ambitions. Whatever the reason, Arjun was elated. Within days, the storm clouds on the horizon had lifted, saving Arjun's most precious possession, his land.

When the panchayat convened two weeks later, everyone thought the outcome a foregone conclusion. Mr Tulsi was confident. He had planned to tell Arjun that he would loan money to pay the school building fee as well as the marriage expenses. Mr Tulsi invited Arjun to sit on the wooden *charpai* facing him. Arjun was unshaven and haggard. He looked at each member of the panchayat one by one for what seemed a very long time, assessing, questioning, condemning.

Then, turning to Munna, Arjun broke down. 'Here', he said, 'I hope you will be happy now', as he handed him a paper bag full of notes which he had carried in a jute *jhori*, bag. 'From now on, Munna is dead for me'. With that, he walked down the steps of the verandah and left. He was no longer angry, just sad, drained, broken. He had endured much pain and poverty in his life, but Munna's behaviour, an act of treachery by his own brother, broke his heart. He resolved, as he walked back slowly, that he would never ever speak to Munna again.

As time passed, Arjun's wife and children pleaded with him to break his vow. Munna had been misled, they said, and had recognised the error of his ways. In any case, nothing had happened. The farm had remained in the family, and the debt had been paid. Those who had wished them ill were either gone or forgotten, whereas they had not only survived but prospered. The boys had done well at school and it was a matter of time before they landed good jobs in town.

Munna himself had gone deaf and blind. They said he was haunted by the past and what he had done. It was rumoured that he was crying at night, sometimes sobbing uncontrollably like a child. He wanted to atone for his mistakes, and make amends while he was still alive. There was nothing Munna wanted more than to touch his elder brother's feet and ask for forgiveness. Arjun listened to these pleas but his heart remained of stone. For him, there was no forgiveness, not after such betrayal. The only time Arjun 'saw' Munna was at his funeral. Munna had hung himself.

Diwali came a few months after the panchayat had sat. This is the joyous festival of lights, a kind of Thanksgiving. People pray to Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune. Firecrackers pierce the silence of the moonless *Ammavas* night. This year, there was no celebration in the Arjun household, just a small puja. But a greater tragedy struck Mr Tulsi. A wayward firecracker had landed in the cane field near the shop, starting a fire, a steady, dry southwest breeze fanning the flames into an unstoppable conflagration. In a matter of minutes, Mr Tulsi's shop, with all the records of credit and debt, was razed, as he ran about helpless and hysterical, crying for help. 'Bachao, bachao'. No one came. Punishment from the gods, people said later, or was it something less than divine intervention? It made no difference. People did not care.

Mr Tulsi never recovered. A few months later, unable to bear not only the loss but also the sudden strange indifference of people who had once looked up to him for help and advice, he moved to Seaqaqa, the new area over the mountain ranges being opened up for cane farming. The school committee bought Mr Tulsi's land to build additional classrooms to meet the villagers' increasing thirst for more and better education for their children. In time, the school buildings became the centre of village life in Tabia, its new symbol of progress and achievement.

chapter 21

Ben's Funeral

The phone rang around dinner time on a cold Canberra day. Kamla, my younger brother, spoke from Adelaide. He appeared cool and collected as usual. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, he said he had some sad news to convey. I waited expectantly. Ben, our older brother, has had a brain haemorrhage, he said. I was stunned, and wanted more information. We all knew that Ben wasn't well, but none of us quite knew what the problem was; certainly we had no idea of its seriousness. Kamla was as puzzled and anguished as I was. One of Kamla's doctor friends had told him that if Ben pulled through the next forty-eight hours, he might be all right. Otherwise...the thought went unspoken.

By now, my family had gathered around me, hushed. The tone of my conversation with Kamla had suggested that something was seriously wrong. They were as shocked as I was when I told them what had happened. Yogi was anxious, tearful. She knew from her studies that a brain haemorrhage could mean death, or perhaps worse, permanent brain damage. Either way, the situation was horrible. Helpless, she began to cry.

I, too, lost my composure and leaned on her shoulders. My wife Padma regained her balance to say that we will have to wait and see, just wait and see what unfolds, hinting that one of us might have to fly off to Fiji soon. Niraj, just eight years old, stood uncomprehending, bewildered, his innocent face stained with tears. The children were experiencing the first family tragedy in their young lives, and they were deeply distraught. That night, Niraj slept in our bed and I slept in his. Just before midnight, I noticed a slight flicker, a momentary dimness of light in the room. A premonition of some sort perhaps, or was my exhausted mind playing tricks?

The last time I saw Ben was in June 1992, when I had gone to Fiji to cover the general elections. As usually happened on these occasions, I had gone to Labasa for a day to see father. As my taxi stopped in the compound, where I had disembarked a hundred times in the past, father came out. He embraced me and kissed me on both cheeks, but asked me not to enter the living room of the main house, not yet. Something was going on. Mohan, my cousin, was sitting on the mat with a short, dark, shrunken-looking man, an *ojha*, a spirit man. A big bowl of yaqona and a carton of cigarettes were lying about in the room. Almost instinctively, I headed toward the kitchen. I asked Ben's wife, my *bhabhi*, what was up. This man had come to have a 'look' at Ben, she said. Obviously, some one had cast a spell on him, and the *ojha* was going to get to the root of the problem.

About half an hour later, Ben came out to meet me in the kitchen, where I sat sipping sweet light black tea. Hugging me, he began to cry as I hadn't seen him cry for as long as I could remember. In fact, never. He was very sick, he said to me, tired of life. That scene still haunts me, the sight of my older brother, sick, helpless, weeping. He seemed so completely alone and desperate. There were times, he said, when he felt like taking his life. He hoped he would go soon, with his dignity intact. I muttered some words of consolation, and enquired more about his illness.

He invited me into the living room, where I met the *ojha*. My first impressions were hostile. My pointed but polite questions revealed that he was from Bua or some such place, unemployed. His furtive glances, his reluctance to look me straight in the eye, suggested that he was very uncomfortable in my presence. So, what was the problem, I asked him. Well, someone had 'done something', he said unhelpfully. What, I asked. He didn't quite know, but he sensed something. Oh yes, I thought, but he was also getting money, gifts, bowls of free yaqona and cigarettes as well.

These bloody tricksters, they materialise out of nowhere, and like vultures swoop upon the gullible and desperate in their moments of need.

I didn't say much, out of respect for father and Ben, but both Mohan and the *ojha* knew what I thought of the whole thing. Another time, I would have skinned him alive.

Father was an uncomplicated, trusting kind of person who could be persuaded to believe in these things. But Ben? I never thought he believed in this humbug. Ben read my thoughts and seemed a bit embarrassed. But what could he do, he said. He had tried everything, even been to Suva to get the best medical advice, but nothing seemed to be working. So, like a drowning man, he was clutching at every passing straw. The doctors couldn't diagnose his illness, so in desperation, with father at his side, he turned for relief to the forces of the underworld. Ben was losing his eyesight, and eye specialists, even the best ones in the country, couldn't understand why. And he was losing his memory, too, becoming forgetful. That was why he had taken leave from his job at Vinod Patel's hardware store, afraid that momentary losses of concentration, more and more frequent, might land him in big trouble.

Next day, I saw my cousin Vijay, the (real) doctor, and asked him about Ben. He couldn't be sure, he said in his cautious medical tone, but all the symptoms – the failing eyesight, loss of memory, sudden attacks of anxiety – pointed to hypertension. I was perplexed. Hypertension? In Labasa? Ben? I now can't recall what I told Ben, but I do know that I warned him against relying on those bloody quacks. He agreed. I think I also said something to the effect that sometime soon, we would get him over to Australia for a proper medical checkup. The remainder of that morning we spent talking, wandering around the town, running into family members, having coffee. It was like old times between the two of us, relaxed, close, happy in each other's company. In the afternoon, we borrowed a friend's car and drove to the airport. Ben and father saw me off. It was an emotional farewell, with the usual promises of seeing each other again soon, the urgency now heightened by Ben's deteriorating condition. I stood sheltered in the dusty terminal as he drove away towards town in the yellow Datsun, leaving behind a cloud of red Waiqele dirt. That was the last I saw of Ben.

Ben had seen me off at that airport so many times in the past. I still remember vividly the first time I left Labasa. It was to go to the University of the South Pacific in 1971. Virtually the whole extended family from various parts of Vanua Levu had come to the airport in a hired bus to farewell me. Ben had cried then, for that was the first time any member of our family had ever left home. Suva, where I was going, was a strange town in a strange place, and I was so green. Three years later I left for Canada, and he was there then as well, crying for a younger brother going to a distant, alien land. Then to Australia, and later India and Hawaii. So many departures and so many arrivals and so many disruptions. Ben was always there, solid as a rock, standing by the dusty airport fence and waving me goodbye. And he was always there when I returned, ready with goat curry-and-rum parties that went long into the night.

Ben was three years older than me but that somehow seems not quite right. I always thought of him as much older, for the responsibility of educating and bringing us up had rested on him from an early age. Poor fellow, his childhood was truncated to serve the interest of his siblings. Ben was bright at school, but he was a bright boy in a family of bright boys. He passed his Entrance exam but didn't go to secondary school because father couldn't afford the school fees and the bus fares. Actually, that is not quite true. He did attend Labasa Secondary for two terms, but was forced to leave it in the third. After staying home for several weeks and helping on the farm, during which time he had missed valuable school work, father, at mother's persistent urging, asked Ben to return to school, just in time to sit the annual exams. But Ben refused. He would be humiliated, I vaguely remember him saying, knowing that almost certainly he would fail when all his friends, no brighter than him, would pass. I still think he made the wrong decision.

Soon afterwards, a new chapter opened in his life. Ben began work as a grocery hand at ND Rana, the general grocery store in Labasa. His salary was $4.00 a week (or was it a month?). Unable to afford bus fares from home and with no one else to stay with in town, Ben rented a small room at the back of the ND Rana warehouse, where he slept next to rotting onions and potatoes. It must have been a wretched time for him, but he didn't talk much about those dark days. It was all a learning experience, an apprenticeship, he said, and left it at that. Then, he joined Ashik Husain and Company, a hardware store, where he remained for a long time. He had picked up book keeping on the way and knew the nuts and bolts of the business very well, earning the trust and affection of his boss and his friends. Those were happy years for him, at work and at home: secure employment and a growing young family. In later years, he moved to other jobs, but by then I had left Labasa.

The hard lessons he learnt early in life shaped Ben's vision. He did not want any of his siblings to go through what he had experienced, insisting that we all should complete our education so that we could stand on our own two feet, as far away from the shadow of petty humiliations and poverty that had damaged the lives of our parents. He could easily have decided to go his own way, after he had got married and had his own family, leaving mum and dad to fend for themselves, or having one of us look after them. That, after all, was and still is the trend. But he stayed put while we travelled on. For that I am more grateful than I can ever put in words. His compassion, concern and generosity of mind and spirit are, for me, his enduring legacy.

Kamla, Sam and Rajen, my younger brothers, will, as they sometimes do, tell their own fun-filled stories about their growing up together in Tabia, or boarding in rat-infested houses in the town. They had more fun with Ben than I ever did. Fun is not a word that comes to mind when I think of Ben. After I left Labasa in 1971, I returned home only intermittently, pursuing education in a world that was as far removed from my siblings' as it could possibly be. Distance and different social and personal experiences increased the gulf between us. But later, especially in the last ten years, Ben and I had become close, not necessarily as brothers, perhaps more importantly as friends. We confided in each other about family matters. He trusted my judgement. I think he also took some pride in my accomplishments. To plant a tree and see it blossom had always given him a feeling of satisfaction. I wish I had told him more often how grateful I was to him, how much I loved him. I thought we had plenty of time, no need to hurry with plans for a big get-together of the family. Now those plans will remain merely as reminders of things never to be completed.

In Canberra, early next morning, Kamla rang again. Bad news bro, he said, simply; and I knew the end had come. My knees sagged and I had a lump in my throat. Of course, I will go, I told Kamla who himself was making arrangements to fly out of Sydney later in the day. I put the phone down and looked at my family now gathered around me. We held on to each other, and shared the dreadful news. Despite their comfortning presence, I felt alone, unsupported and helpless in an alien society, away from one's extended family. Uncharacteristically, Yogi took charge, and made my bookings. I would fly out of Canberra later in the day and, with Kamla, take the Qantas flight to Nadi that night.

I met Kamla at Sydney airport. We talked about Ben, but grief is personal, and airports, even at the best of times, magnify isolation and solitude. Among thousands of people, waiting for beloved ones to arrive from overseas, on their way to vacations, conferences, family reunions, with gaiety and laughter, movement and excitement, you stand alone, lost in thoughts of a world that has vanished.

Kamla told me what his doctor friend had said. If Ben had pulled through the next forty-eight hours, he said, he had planned to fly him over to Suva, get expert advice and the necessary medical insurance papers in order, and then fly him over to Australia. I was touched by his concern and amazed at his ability to think so clearly and strategically. It was at the airport that Kamla told me of the dream he had the previous night. Feeling that something was not quite right, he had rung Fiji to talk to someone in the family, perhaps Ben himself? He couldn't reach him, so had left a message for a reverse call. The phone did ring early in the morning, and woke Kamla from fitful sleep. It was a call from Labasa alright, relaying the news of Ben's death.

We reached Nadi late, past midnight. Since we had to take the early 7 am flight to Labasa, we took a taxi to Suva immediately. The driver appeared to be a speeding maniac, puffing like a chimney, his eyes red from lack of sleep and his dark, leathery skin cracked by excessive kava drinking. In Suva, we met Rajen and his family, and Kamal and Subhas, my nephews. It had fallen to Rajen, the only one of us then living in Suva, to make the travel arrangements and the 7 am flight was the only one available. Labasa had, for the first time, won the inter-district soccer competition, and a lot of its supporters from throughout Fiji were returning home for celebration on Saturday. We were lucky to get seats at all.

From the air, Labasa looked its usual self, a sleepy, shimmering little town surrounded by a sea of green cane fields and embraced by the snaky Qawa river. As soon as the plane landed we took a cab home. We had travelled this road so many times in the past that I knew its every corner and turn. On it, so many years ago, I had learned to drive in Ben's battered old maroon Cortina. In those days the roads were more treacherous because they were not tarsealed. A slight pull of the gravel around a bend and the car would land in a muddy ditch, as it did on several occasions, especially when we had a few bottles of beer under our belts. What fun, what agony.

Ben was not a patient teacher. He would get terribly cross when I did something silly, such as changing gears without pressing the clutch! How could one do so many things at once, pressing the clutch, changing gear, holding the steering wheel steady and looking ahead to avoid oncoming traffic, I would protest. But I learned through my mistakes and eventually got my licence on the second try. I looked after that damned car well, secretly hoping that my good deeds might earn me more opportunities to drive. As we passed the rivers I remembered how Ben and I had tried to learn to swim. And impromptu picnics at the beach which had to be abandoned because some Fijians threatened to beat us up for trespassing on their property. And fierce soccer matches in dry paddy fields. How father would fly into a rage and thrash us with chapki when he saw our injuries or found out about childish adventures.

Then we reached nine miles and turned onto the road leading towards home. I can't exactly recall what went through my mind. A tin shed had been erected and there were some close relatives and village folks sitting around. As we disembarked, father came forward, disconsolate. I couldn't save my son, he said to me, as if he were somehow personally responsible for Ben's death. Then, from the direction of the kitchen came the heart-rending wailing of women. My widowed sister-in-law was there, dishevelled, disoriented. Roshni and Reshmi, Ben's two daughters, and our eldest sister came forward, their eyes red and their faces anguished. Arvind, Praveen and Ravin, Ben's three sons, were sitting at the edge of the verandah, weeping. We all embraced in mutual anguish. Things will turn out all right, I remember saying. We are all together in this. We are a strong family. We'll take care of you. But words are empty at times like this. What can one say to a woman whose husband has died so unexpectedly, to young children whose father is no more?

Father told us what had happened. Ben had been out in the field, helping prepare a plot of land for planting rice. After about half an hour, he returned home, ate his breakfast and then complained of a severe headache. Suddenly, he began vomiting blood and soon afterwards collapsed into a coma. Immediately he was rushed off to the hospital, but it was all too late: Ben died at the hospital that night, without regaining consciousness. Just imagine a father's unfathomable agony about his son's condition, the waiting, the endless waiting for some news, any news from harassed nurses scurrying across the corridor, Ben lying unconscious in some impersonal hospital room, the terrible, merciless suddenness of it all. At least he went quickly, we consoled ourselves, no consolation at all. There is something jarringly unnatural about children going before their parents.

Later in the afternoon, father and I went to town to buy material needed for the cremation. He insisted that he and I do this together. He needed me by his side. We needed each other. Fortunately there are stores which specialise in these things. They know what is needed, in what quantities. Yes, twelve bottles of ghee will do, a dozen packets of camphor, five packets of incense. They had a standard list, and in no time, we had what we wanted. Then to buy fresh garments to clothe the body. It is such a strange, incongruous thing. There we were, father and I, buying new shoes, socks, shirt, tie and pants for Ben. Father was adamant: he was going to send his son off in the finest clothes. Only the best would do. Cost was of no consequence, he said, as tears rolled down his creased, unshaven face.

What must have gone through his heart as he bought all these things, I cannot say. I knew, as I watched him, that in a similar situation, I would have cracked. I looked at my illiterate father and felt for him from the bottom of my heart. He had endured so much grief in his life: death of his beloved girmitiya parents, loss of two children at birth, mother's death a decade ago, and now Ben's untimely departure. Poverty and the betrayal of friends and relatives. Yet, through it all, he had remained a tower of strength and reassurance to all of us. What courage of the heart amidst such wreckage and ruin.

The last time father bought clothes for Ben that I can remember was when Ben was getting married. That was in 1970. I remember that occasion well. It was the first time I was given what seemed a princely sum, I now can't recall how much, to buy myself a pair of trousers. I got myself tight, dark green terylene pants and a pair of black shoes, my very first. After Ben, I was the next in line for marriage in our family. As Ben's younger brother, I would sit with him in the *mandap* throughout the ceremony. Perhaps some girls from my school might be there. Who knew whose eyes would be on me! There had been such excitement then, such happiness at the prospects that lay in store for me. For my father, it was a son's wedding. He was walking in the clouds. Now, twenty years later, we were clothing Ben again but for a different purpose. And without the warm, comforting presence of my mother.

By late afternoon, when we returned from the town, a crowd had gathered at home. Families and friends and village people. I was struck by their spirit of community at a time like this. Like a well rehearsed play, everyone knew what to do. Since no fire could be lit at home until the body had been cremated, village people brought hot food, tea, bread and fruit to feed the bereaved family. They did not need to be asked: it was the way things were done. I had forgotten how tragedy in a village brings people together. People introduced themselves as they came and sat down in the shed, assessing me with sidelong glances, a stranger who was once one of them. How things had changed. Boys I had grown up with were now middle-aged men, though in my mind's eye, they remained frozen at a past moment. Children I had once terrorised as the school prefect were now householders, married with children of their own. These tiny tots came forward to shake my hand and called me grandfather (*aja*). Some village folk had moved away to other places, and perhaps a few had migrated to Viti Levu; but most were still there, darker, greyer, withered sons of the soil. I felt strangely uncomfortable among them.

In the evening, the village gathered to sing *bhajan*, simple rustic religious songs about man's purpose in life, the entanglements of *maya*, the illusory world, the indestructibility of the soul, the permanence of grief in human affairs, the importance of *bhakti*, devotion, the everlasting mercy of God, all intended to console the bereaved. We picked up the verses and joined in, to the accompaniment of harmonium and tabla and *dandtal*. Yaqona flowed in copious amounts. People in the village had drunk yaqona for as long as I could remember, but not in this quantity, surely. Now, I was told, many people had become addicted to this mildly narcotic drink, which can produce a soporific effect. As one fellow told me in a matter of fact way, there were some people in the village who secretly prayed for a tragedy like this, for then they could be assured of yaqona for a fortnight or more. I thought he was being cynical, but he had a point. Everything has a price, I suppose; and giving people yaqona was a small thing for their consoling company in our moment of emotional need. I am glad the people came. Their conversation and recollections of old times with Ben lightened the atmosphere, and helped me to reconnect emotionally with the place of my birth.

The next day began early, businesslike. A few people left for the cremation ground to prepare the funeral pyre from wood collected from the forest the previous day, and some of us left for the hospital to get the body. We waited outside the mortuary for about half an hour for two other bodies to be washed and dressed and taken away. Some delay was caused by one group which had bathed the body but had forgotten to bring the clothes. We ambled about and chatted across the street, waiting for our turn. Then we went into the morgue. There 'it' was, on a cold, grey stretcher. The eyes were closed but the mouth was slightly open and the forehead furrowed in pain. It must have been a difficult death. I broke down. Ben had aged considerably in the last five years, I noticed, the hair on his chest grown grey. I had forgotten that he was a big man, handsomely proportioned, fleshy. But no one talked of Ben, the man, now; they talked of 'the body', something cold and impersonal and distant. The body had to be washed and dressed, and we all took our turn. A job to be done, so businesslike.

I remembered the last time I had 'bathed' Ben. That was when he was getting married, and we had to perform the ritual of bathing and feeding him, because custom demands that on the day of his marriage, the groom should have all his needs taken care of. For that one special day in his life, he is the undisputed king of the castle. My day in the sun would come one day, hopefully in the not too distant a future, I dreamed. I recalled the gaiety of that moment: how the women of the family had taken turns to rub *haldi* (turmeric) on Ben, and tons of glistening oil too. I remembered how Ben had mingled with the crowd clad in his turmeric stained white tee shirt and *dhoti*, how mother had sung sad songs about losing her son to another soul.

And I remembered especially well how we had splashed him with buckets full of well water till he begged for mercy. Mother had to intervene to protect her soon-to-be-married son from our water treatment. It had all been so much fun then, so innocent.

An hour later, the body was ready. We placed it on a simple home-made bamboo-and-reed structure. This had been Ben's wish. He had told people that he did not want his body to be cooped up in a casket. He wanted to go to the funeral pyre in the traditional Hindu way. Perhaps he had seen the end coming. There was a time when caskets were commonly used; that was how we had brought mother's body home a decade earlier, I remember. But things have been changing in the last few years. Now people are going back to the traditional ways of cremation. Expense is part of the reason, but also I think a resurgence of interest in culture and tradition. We put the body on an open truck, with about a dozen people sitting around it, and left for home. We drove slowly, around twenty miles an hour. Cars and trucks coming from the opposite direction stopped or slowed down as a mark of respect for a man making his last journey. This was new in Labasa, and was very touching because it was so unexpected.

Hundreds of people had gathered at home by the time we arrived, women sitting in the shed and men ambling outside. Nearly all members of my extended family were there, some of whom I had not seen in more than two decades, or at least since mother's death a decade earlier. Inside the shed there was loud, unceasing wailing. The women of the family were almost hysterical with grief. There was not a single dry eye as far as I could see. I went around the crowd and greeted friends and relatives with a simple handshake. What was there to say?

Around midday, the pandit arrived. He was a youngish man, in fact had been Ben's classmate. What conjunction, saying final farewell to his classmate. He delivered his funeral oration with practised eloquence. A soul is the gift of God, eternal, indestructible. Death simply means the departure of the soul for another life, for Ben a better life. He was a good man, the pandit said, a dutiful son, a responsible brother, a devoted householder, a friend of many. Why he had to go so early, no one knows. God works in mysterious ways. We are all hostages to our karma, cogs in a cosmic wheel. Ben's former fellow workers brought a wreath, as did Roshni's classmates from Labasa College. This was something new. As I recalled, wreaths were associated with Christian funerals. Labasa was changing.

After an hour or so, it was time to leave for the cremation ground. A slow, sad journey, stopping periodically to light camphor along the route. The funeral pyre had been prepared earlier in the day. About a dozen coconuts had been slit in half and placed at the bottom of the pit, apparently to catch the ghee and keep the fire going. A truck load of wood had been carefully arranged. Whoever prepared the pyre had done it many times before. We placed the body on it. Then, as the pandit chanted some *shlokas*, sacred words, from a book covered in red cloth to wish the departed soul well on to its next journey, and after we observed a minute's silence, Arvind, Ben's eldest son, lit the pyre. Custom demands that only the eldest son perform the last funeral rites. That is why a son is an absolute must for all Hindu families. Arvind led the way, and we joined in, lighting the camphor and pouring the ghee. Within minutes, with a fast wind blowing, the pyre was alight, the heat getting increasingly intense. We moved away, and stood in silence in the shade of some pine trees, as flames, pure and purifying, leapt into the sky.

Half an hour later, people began to scatter and leave. We stayed on for an hour or so more, and then walked back home. As we walked across the Tabia school grounds, I remembered the great times we had there as children, arriving early in the morning for a game of soccer or *gulidanda* before classes began. I remembered, too, the house competitions, the compulsory midday siestas, the singing lessons, and the beatings by teachers, some of whom, such as Master Bhujang Rao, struck terror in our tiny hearts. This was the late 1950s and the 1960s. I remembered how Ben and I had to share our school lunch from the same aluminium *sispan*, and how he used to hate that. I was a nuisance to him, an embarrassment, in the way younger siblings can be, always saying the wrong things at the wrong time. There was no secondary school in Tabia then as there is now. Those who passed the dreaded Entrance exam went either to the Labasa Secondary or to the lesser option (as it seemed) of Sangam High.

Next morning, we went to the cemetery to complete the final rite, collecting bones and ashes for disposal in the river. Nothing much was left except bits and pieces of the upper parts of the body. Ultimately, all journeys, however grand or humble, end here, I thought. That funeral pyre is a great leveller of hierarchy and status and power and wealth, reducing all to ashes. How profound the ancient truths: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It was a deeply humbling experience to contemplate the impermanence of life. A whole vanished world flashes past your eyes in the blink of any eyelid. You think of all the things you should have done and said, of all the missed conversations and opportunities. You think of all the laughter and fights of your childhood years, the little secrets you shared, and little pranks you played on unsuspecting others, you think of the good times past, and how time moves on. So quickly.

After placing flowers and bones in the river, at exactly the same spot where we had placed mother's last remains, we trudged back home slowly. As we crossed the rice fields and passed the mango trees we used to invade during the fruiting season, we laughed and talked about the old days, telling stories of our pranks to children born much later. At night, village people came home to sing *bhajan* as they would for the next thirteen days, the traditional period of mourning, after which life would return to a semblance of normalcy.

The following day, Kamla and I had to leave Labasa to return to Australia. Saying goodbye is always a difficult thing, don't you think? But saying goodbye to your widowed sister-in-law and her orphaned young children is impossible. We embraced each other through tears, with promises to keep in touch. I left more conscious than ever of my new responsibilities and obligations, and diminished by Ben'sdeath. Another familiar, dependable signpost had gone from my life forever.

chapter 22

Sunrise on the Ganga

Sunrise on the Ganga. The romance of the idea, to see Hinduism's holiest river, to bathe in it, at the crack of a mist-shrouded dawn. I last saw Ganga twenty years ago when I first visited India. I had then bathed in the river and done puja for my girmitiya, indentured, grandfather. That had been my father's wish. I had brought back a bottle of Ganga water for him, which became one of his most precious possessions. He put it carefully alongside the green tin trunk which contained important family papers: lease for the family's land, birth certificates, a few religious texts wrapped in red cloth, old imperial coins and other relics of the past. My father, like many devout Hindus, believed that a drop of the Ganga on the lips of a deceased person would ensure a safe passage for the departed soul on its journey to the next world. Since my last trip, my father and mother and my two older brothers have died. I feel I need to do the pilgrimage for them as well. It is the right thing to do as the eldest male in the family now, whatever my own personal doubts and reservations.

This time, we are travelling with our children. At twenty one and fifteen, Yogi and Niraj would be making their own journeys of discovery. At first they are awkward and tentative, not knowing quite what to expect or what to say. But they are determined to be open minded. Their mature reaction catches me by surprise. They are enthralled by what they see. They look – or try to look – beyond the poverty and the squalor, the dust and the noise, and accept India for what it is, or appears to be: a confusing collage of contradictions and contrasts. Some things clearly offend their values. The widely accepted subordinate status of women is one. There are others: the institutionalised hierarchy and difference of the caste system, rampant religious fanaticism, disregard for the damage to the environment caused by rapid industrialisation, lack of civic consciousness, pollution of public places, the enormous gulf between the private fetish for personal cleanliness and total indifference to public squalor. They are astonished by all this, sometimes even outraged, but never judgmental. 'This is India', they say, only half in jest. It is their way of coming to terms with the realities of another culture whose contours they vaguely recognise, but of which they are not a part, and, what is more, do not acknowledge themselves to be a part.

For me, twenty years after my first encounter, some things remain the same, or have changed for the worse: the clogged roads have become impossible; greasing the palm is now an established way of life; the obtuseness and insolence of public servants has not changed; the pollution of urban areas has become a health hazard; and India, on the whole, has become less a cohesive nation committed to an overarching vision than a coalition of caste, communal and class interests, locked in various combinations of convenience, all devoted more to ensuring their own survival than to promoting national development. This fragmentation is, of course, not peculiar to India; it reflects the condition of many developing countries witnessing the resurgence of primordialism. These things do not perturb me as much as they did on my first encounter. I lack passion, my children chide me, and in a sense they are right: I am not as easily disturbed by India's poverty and pollution and corruption now as I was two decades ago. They are someone else's problem, in someone else's country. Resignation increases with age, you might say.

But some things are new, among them the resurgence of aggressive Hinduism. The ideological commitment to secularism, once invoked proudly as a mantra for India's future, has weakened unmistakeably. Bal Thackeray, the head of the fundamentalist Shiv Sena, is a household name in India. He is committed to making India a Hindu nation. His 'sevaks', workers, as members of the Bajrang Dal, the Sangh Parivar, the Hindu

Vishwa Parishad and other such organisations, disrupt meetings, terrorise members of other faiths, burn Christian churches, murder European missionaries, dig up cricket pitches to prevent Pakistanis playing on Indian (Hindu) soil. They try to impose upon the populace a moral code of conduct based upon a dogmatic reading of Hinduism.

This public, fanatical demonstration of faith in posters plastered on concrete walls, idols of numerous gods and goddesses displayed in cars, buses, shops, even government offices, is unsettling to one who is essentially non-religious. Perfectly reasonable people, western-educated, well-travelled and thoughtful, quietly endorse a Hindu identity for India. Hinduism will not solve India's problems, people say, but then, they continue, man does not live by bread alone. Peoples' minds are made up; it is useless trying to change them with facts. The alleged Chinese threat ever-present in the northeast and a nuclear Pakistan flexing its muscle in Kashmir, make it easy for the fundamentalists to enlist popular support for their causes.

Another noticeable change in the last two decades has been the impact of technology. Now, India's remotest villages have international telephone booths. The cultural revolution caused by the multi-channelled television has been enormous. Western news channels and soap operas of westernised Indian popular culture reach remote villages in unprecedented ways. A sad casualty of this has been the radio, in the past rural India's contact with the outside world and among the very best broadcast services in the world. The effervescence of popular culture has pushed India's classical culture and heritage further into the background. Tradition is for tourists, a vendor tells me.

The opening up of the Indian economy has brought changes and introduced goods, unthinkable two decades ago, into middle class homes. The ubiquitous Ambassador cars now jostle on the roads with a dozen other models with Korean and Japanese names. The craze for things 'phoren', so striking twenty years ago, has subsided, as modern electronic gadgets once found only in the west are no longer a novelty. Internal tourism has increased by leaps and bounds, with 'luxury' and 'deluxe' hotels sprouting everywhere. These labels should not be taken literally though. Often deluxe means nothing more than that the rooms have western-style toilets, as opposed to the squatting Indian style with water but without toilet paper. The provincial hotels, pricey, leave much to be desired in the quality of service and the standard of comfort they offer, but at least they are there.

Yogi and Niraj are fascinated by the relics of the past they see all around them, in caves, monuments, paintings, forts, castles and temples. Children of the modern electronic age, they are visibly moved by the sight of *maqbaras*, mausoleums. They are particularly taken with the 'Chand Bibi ka Mahal' in Ahmednagar in Maharastra. It stands high on a hill, silent, forlorn, unregarded, containing the remains of an emperor's wife and their young children, their ancient grave covered with green and red cloth. What romance, what chivalry. They visit Fatehpur Sikri, a haunting city of buildings, empty but for nesting pigeons, deserted after a few years when water ran out. And the Taj Mahal. Why didn't they learn about these monumental achievements of this ancient civilisation in school? What legacy will our contemporary civilization bequeath to future generations, they ask.

We travel to Bahraich, the district from which my indentured grandfather went to Fiji at the turn of this century. It is still at the back of beyond in a state still notorious for its economic backwardness and social stagnation, a symbol of everything that is holding India back. Caste politics is rampant. The local roads are lined with billboards announcing the dates of 'sammelans', conventions, of this or that caste or sub-caste. The Brahmins and Kshattriyas and other higher castes accuse the state government of pandering to the whims of the numerically dominant, block-voting lower castes. They want monuments erected to their cultural heroes as well. UP is bad, people say, but Bihar is worse, the name synonymous with lawlessness and criminality. People in UP get some satisfaction from not being at the absolute bottom of the Indian social and political pit.

We drive through the eastern parts of the state in a hired car in a comfort I could not afford twenty years ago. The alluvial plains, partly obscured by a thick fog, yellow with sarso flowers, stretch into the distance. The mango orchards are still there. There is still much idleness, people standing around, drinking tea, lighting small fires to keep themselves warm; the energy and purpose, the sense of things being on the move so evident in Maharastra or Haryana, are absent here. But there is some development, signs of small industries, especially brick works along the highway.

Our village in Bahraich hasn't changed much, with the exception of a few television antennas protruding from thatched roofs. The unpaved road leading to the village is still covered with raw cow dung and straw. Children are still running around half naked and barefoot. People still cover themselves in filthy rags against the cold. Some have found seasonal employment in far-away places like the Punjab. They have returned with new attitudes and styles, but they will leave permanently if they can. The older people who had welcomed me so generously have all gone, including Chotu kaka. Their absence is saddening, reminding me of so many others who have died in the last two decades, including members of my own family. I have difficulty establishing a rapport with the younger generation. I am a stranger among them. We have nothing to talk about except the weather and the crops. I feel slightly embarrassed at the dilapidated scene around me, and upset that the people feel sorry for themselves, hoping for handouts and for miracles to happen. We, the descendants of girmitiyas, of the same ancestral stock, have moved on, but these people are left behind, caught in the quagmire of destitution and desolation. There is so much opportunity, so much potential, so little of it realised.

My children are moved by the kaleidoscope of sounds, smells and sights they encounter, but for them this is essentially a strange place full of strange people. Their family genealogy, they tell me emphatically, begins in Fiji, not in this village. Still, they are happy to have made the journey, but enormously thankful for the fate which led their great grandfather to leave. I share their feeling. I embrace people in the village as we take leave after sipping syrupy red tea from a tin cup, knowing that this is my final farewell. It is too painful to tell the people gathered around me, but I know that I will not return to my grandfather's village again. The break is final.

Bahraich had been the highlight of my trip to India twenty years ago. This time around, it is our visit to the Ganga. Benares is cold in winter, this year wrapped in a heavy blanket of fog, *kohra,* disrupting traffic schedules and delaying air plane departures. Benares is the oldest continuous city on earth, our taxi driver tells us proudly, eternal, indestructible. Its narrow, crowded gullies are plastered with election posters and advertisements for everything from modern drugs to herbal cures for impotence, and crammed with tiny temples and small coves selling holy trinkets. The sacred and the profane, the profound and the mundane, hope and despair mingle in this sacred cradle of Hinduism.

The temples are disappointing. They are not really places of silent prayer and solitude and spiritual communion. They are more like busy fish markets. Religion is the main business here, and touts are everywhere. The way we dress and walk, our expensive-looking shoes, the backpacks we carry, seeking directions in accented Hindi, gives our foreign identity away. Worse than the touts are the pandyas, professional priests, who find easy victims among the credulous, the gullible and the innocent. They hassle and harass, pull you to their own temples for special divine benediction 'especially for you'.

We are up early, and take the waiting taxi to Dasashvameath Ghat, the main ghat, place of prayer and bathing, of Benares. The taxi squeezes through a maze of narrow, foggy streets, honking, overtaking cattle, rickshaws and people making their way to the river. Govind, our driver who doubles as our guide, has already made arrangements with a boat owner to take us on the water. Touting starts as soon as we get out of the car, but we are guided through a thickening crowd of people to the edge of the river. The water looks muddy grey in the misty early light, the soil slushy and full of rotting marigold flowers. Already people, devoted Hindus as well as tourists, are heading out in hired boats, cameras and candles in hand. There is much confusion and commotion. The boat man, an elderly man wearing dhoti and loose kurta and wrapped in a dirty white-brown shawl, buys the material needed for puja as we wait. Then we head out into the river.

Before too long, he stops the boat to pick up a pandya. This was not planned for, nor were we informed about it beforehand. I enquire, but the boatman is insistent: there can be no puja without a pandya; and he was getting us the best pandya there was, all especially for us. We have heard that before. There is no point arguing: what will be done will be done. The pandya is an elderly man, his forehead covered with holy sandalwood paste. He, too, is covered in clothes reeking of sweat and unwashed for days, perhaps weeks. His mouth, surrounded by yellow-white unkempt beard and stringy moustache, is red with betel nut juice, and his teeth black from years of chewing rough tobacco. I regard the man as an intruder on a private moment of special emotional and spiritual significance for me, and so say nothing to him. The pandya looks at me from the corner of his eyes, assessing, establishing my identity in his mind. He is eager to strike up a conversation. As we make our way to another ghat where we will have our dip in the water, he asks me in Hindi where I am from. The South? He guesses South India because of my darker skin. I nod in agreement, to the amusement of my children who have seen me play this game so many times. But like other touts, he senses I am also from overseas. Unable to contain his curiosity, he asks whether I have been living abroad for a while. Yes, in Europe, in Liverpool, I say. He nods appreciatively. He tells me he had suspected from the very beginning that I was from England, in fact from Liverpool. I didn't ask him how or why. I wonder what he would have said if I had told him I came from Australia.

The fog is still thick as our boat weaves its way through the water, past other boats and people on the bank having a dip. Niraj sights partially submerged carcasses of a couple of rotting cows on the way. He points them out to Yogi who quickly covers her face with a shawl and looks away. The thought of having a dip in the same water a couple of hundred metres downstream fills both of them with horror. The smell of incense wafts through the air. We see people on the banks sitting cross-legged, motionless in meditation. The pandya leans forward and in a voice barely above a whisper, talks to me about the importance of the ceremony we are about to perform. It has to be done right, he says; otherwise the souls of all the departed ones will not rest in peace. And particularly since I had come all the way from Liverpool, I should observe all the rituals and perform all the ceremonies. One must do it with a clean and compassionate heart, he says gently. I say nothing.

As we reach our bathing ghat, the pandya and the boat man disembark and head to the top of a flight of stairs. A couple of people have lit a small fire to keep themselves warm, and there is a chai wallah (tea stall) nearby. By now, Yogi and Niraj have decided to have a dip as well, completely of their own accord. They are adamant; having come this far, they will do what they think is the right thing to do. Yogi laughs out aloud as she sees the words on my bathers 'I am the boss'. How typical of dad, she says, always wanting to be the boss wherever he goes. Niraj and I go in first, making our way into the river through sinking, slushy mud. A couple of metres in, and we hold our noses with thumb and forefinger and take a dive. My body is almost numb with cold, mind completely preoccupied with the act of the moment. A few minutes and several dips later, we return to the boat, and Padma and Yogi take their turn. We change back into our dry clothes and head to the small fire at the top of the stairs. About fifteen minutes later, Padma and Yogi join us, as we head back to the boat with the pandya and the boatman.

The pandya performs the puja. After the preliminary invocations in Sanskrit which I don't understand, he asks me the names of our deceased parents. He repeats them and asks us to place small amounts of puja material into the fire after he calls out each name. We follow the instructions, as people do on occasions such as this without fully understanding the deeper meaning of what they are doing. At the beginning, I am self conscious, as other boats full of tourists pass us, gawking, clicking their cameras. But soon I am engrossed in the act, completely oblivious of external intrusions. The tiny yellow flame in the windless mist is strangely mesmerising. A once familiar but now vanished world flashes across my mind. I see the pictures of numerous gods and goddesses plastered on bamboo walls of our main house in Tabia, alongside the portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and famous film stars of my childhood years. I recall the tiresome regularity of pujas (*katha*) we used to perform at home. Our parents had their reasons, but we children used to look forward greedily to the end of what appeared an endless ceremony so that we could grab the fruits and other delicacies offered. We paid scant attention to all the wisdom and sage advice of the scriptures. The Sanskrit mantras, recited by the priest with such holy, practised fervour, meant nothing to us.

The flame reminded me of other, terrible, flames I had seen before: flames from funeral pyres of my own family: my parents and my two older brothers, one of whom had died just a few months before this trip. Each of the four cremations was vivid in my mind, and the way in which I had received news of the death, the rituals we had followed on each occasion, the anguish and pain the deaths had caused, how each funeral pyre was lit. I experienced each loss anew, and felt privileged and honoured to perform ceremonies for people who had meant so much to me.

After about twenty minutes, the pandya stopped, and asked me to make a gift (daan) to him. Giving gifts on occasions such as this is customary, but usually it is done at the end of the ceremony. I was perplexed. What sort of gift and how much? Oh, it depends, he said. People had given him fifty thousand rupees and more. Some had made donations of houses and other property. That I did not believe: this foul smelling man in dirty clothes could not be a millionaire, as he seemed to suggest. There was no way I could make that sort of donation. He looked at me and we haggled; twenty five thousand, fifteen thousand, ten. I looked at Padma who was visibly angry at being put in a situation like this. She felt it was an elaborate trap set up by the pandya and the boat man. She volunteered one hundred and one rupees. The pandya gave a little derisive laugh. 'Bahenji', sister, he said, 'you must be joking: what would that small amount fetch these days?' But why hadn't the amount been mentioned earlier? It was not good form to talk about these things at the beginning of a sacred journey, the pandya said. Unpropitious may be, but he had a greater hold on me now in the middle of a ceremony than he would have had at the beginning. Learned pandyas like him were rare and very expensive, he said, but he was being reasonable. When Padma refused, the pandya asked her to keep quiet; I was the one to decide, I was the head of the household, and I was performing puja for my parents, not hers. That was not true, but he had seen me hesitate, and pounced upon it.

I was most uncomfortable arguing like this in the middle of a ceremony which I had travelled this far to complete. I offered one thousand and one rupees. There was a certain symmetry about the sum, if nothing else. The pandya nodded his head and accepted immediately; from the look on his face, I knew that he recognised he had done very well: a thousand rupees for half an hour's work; and it was still just daybreak. I offered him five hundred rupees straight away, but he said that he would collect the full sum from the hotel later, fearing that five hundred was all that he might get. He then continued with the ceremony, but I was distracted and unable to pay attention. I knew my family was unhappy, even angry; they had been ambushed many times in the past few weeks, and their patience was running thin. But there was little else I could do.

As we headed back to the bank of the river, the pandya became all soft and solicitous. He talked gently about the importance of gifts. For gifts to have any meaning at all, they had to be given with a good, clean heart; gifts given grudgingly were not good, he said, as he cast a sideways glance at Padma. Yogi, still angry at the whole affair, pointedly looked away. *Gupt-daan,* gifts given in strict secrecy, should not be talked about. Specifically, I should not tell anyone how much I had promised to give him. I said nothing, which he took as consent.

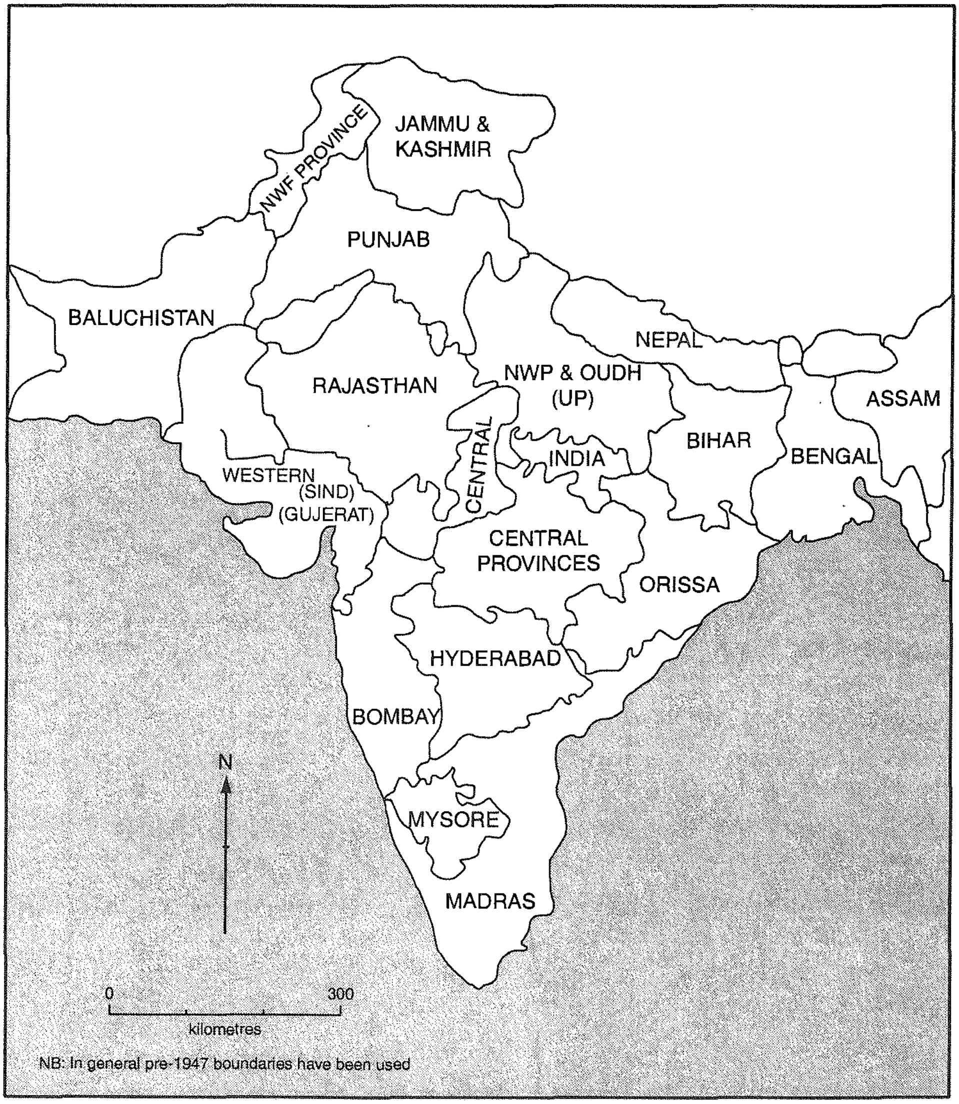
On our way back to the car, I exploded at Govind, accusing him of being a part of the ploy to defraud us, but he said he knew nothing about it. We believed him. In fact, he had asked the boatman to take us straight to the ghat; there had been no talk of a pandya. These people had given Benares a bad name, he said with disgust. Our reaction had unleashed something deep in Govind. The pandya who had accompanied us, he said, was a useless man, a drug addict, a rat. Doped all day, he would bathe in the Ganga at dawn every day, wash off his daily sins, and then prey on some unsuspecting person to indulge his habits. That was the way it was around here, with these people, he said. I said nothing.

At the hotel, I reported our misadventure to the manager, holding him partly responsible for what had happened; Govind was the hotel's driver. The Manager, OP Khanna, listened to our angry complaints. I felt used, ambushed, terrorised. I was adamant: I will pay the pandya nothing more than what Padma had offered: one hundred and one rupees. Khanna nodded, and asked the door boy to call the pandya in. He walked through the glass door hesitantly, suspecting that his ploy had gone awry.

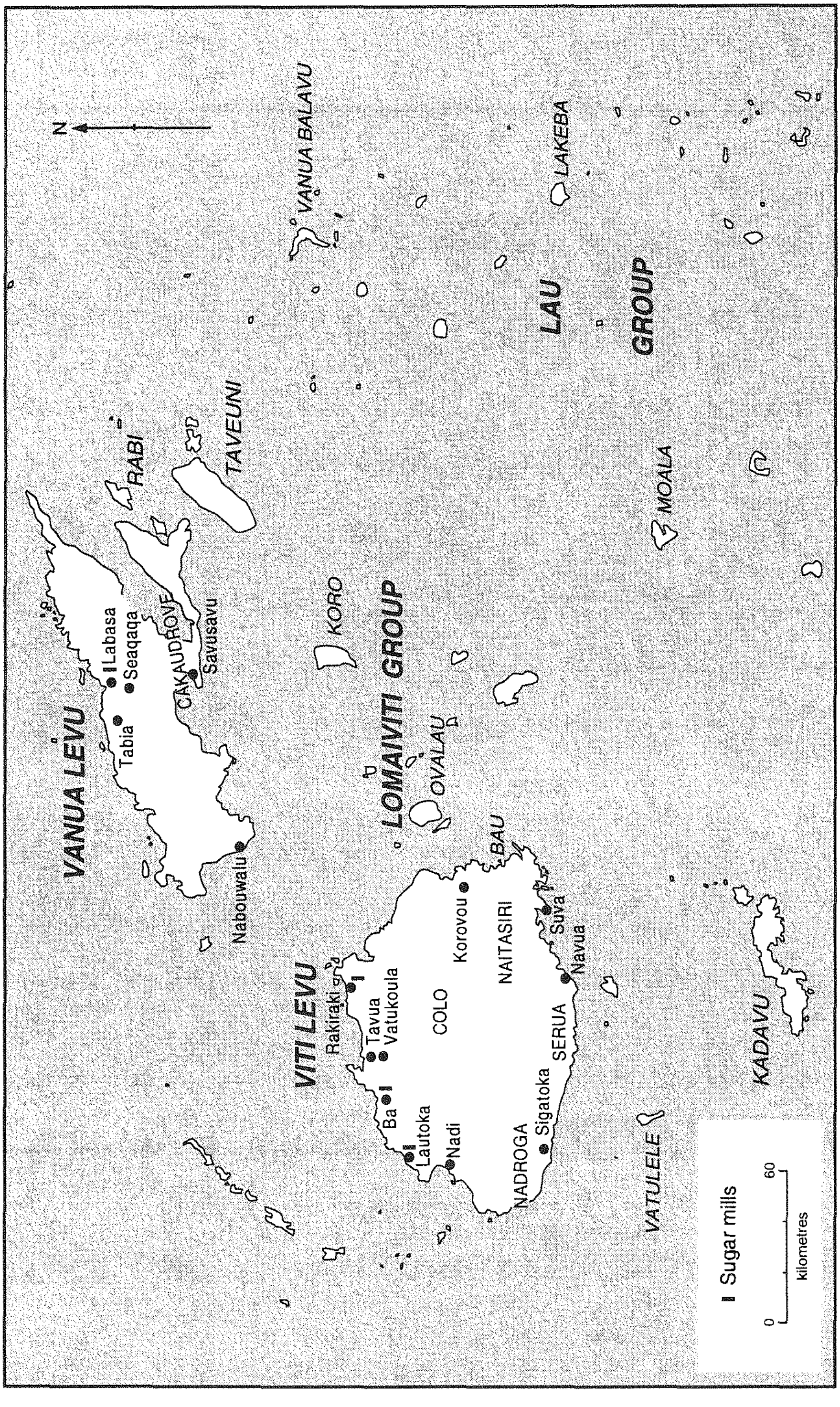
'How much do you want, pandya ji?' Khanna, asked in a sharp, prosecutorial voice. 'Fifty thousand rupees?' 'Saheb ki marzi', he said, it was entirely up to me. I could give fifty thousand, or five hundred thousand. He looked at me. I felt disgust: I did not expect to find fraudulence in men of cloth. 'I see', Khanna said, his face reddening visibly with rage. 'Here, take one hundred and one rupees and get out. Fast'. Pointing at the door with his finger shaking with anger, he said 'Get out, or I will have you put in'. He meant the gaol. These vultures, they give us all a bad a name, he said to no one in particular as he returned to his paper work. Govind, who had been watching all this from a safe distance, laughed heartily later when we went out. 'Sahib, aap ne unko khoob chutia banaya'. Sir, what a fool you made of the fellow. He was happy that for once, someone else other than the pandyas had got the upper hand.

Contemporary India is full of people like the pandya, the taxi drivers, the rickshaw pullers, the guides at tourist spots, the sellers of trinkets, people cutting corners, fleecing people, on the make in the quickest possible time. The froth and fluff of popular culture, cheap imitations of American television dramas, invade the screen. Another, perhaps idealised India of my youth and imagination is languishing in the background. I feel a stranger now, more so than twenty years ago.

My most enduring memory of this trip is my visit to the Ganga. That image of a small, flickering flame in a tiny earthen vessel, drifting away from us into the distance, gradually devoured by the mist, until it disappears from sight altogether, mingling with others as it makes its journey down the river out into the vast, open ocean. It is a metaphor for life itself, I suppose. But it also sums up the way I feel about my grandfather's land. There was no sunrise on the Ganga.


NWF PROVINCE
JAMMU & KASHMIR
PUNJAB
BALUCHISTAN
RAJASTHAN
NEPAL
NWP & OUDH (UP)
ASSAM
CENTRAL
INDIA
BIHAR
BENGAL
WESTERN
(SIND)
(GUJERAT)
CENTRAL PROVINCES
ORISSA
HYDERABAD
BOMBAY
N
MYSORE
MADRAS
0
300
kilometres
NB: In general pre-1947 boundaries have been used

MAP OF INDIA


N
VANUA LEVU
Labasa
Seaqaqa
Tabia
CAKAUDROVE
Savusavu
Nabouwalu
RABI
TAVEUNI
VANUA BALAVU
LAKEBA
LAU
GROUP
MOALA
KORO
LOMAIVITI GROUP
OVALAU
BAU
VITI LEVU
Rakiraki
Tavua
Vatukoula
Ba
Lautoka
Nadi
COLO
Korovou
NAITASIRI
Suva
Navua
SERUA
Sigatoka
NADROGA
VATULELE
KADAVU
Sugar mills
0
60
kilometres

MAP OF FIJI

appendix

Table 1: Fiji's Calcutta-embarked Migrants: Provinces of Origin

District	Number
Oudh	13,207
Central Provinces	2,802
North West Provinces	21,131
Bengal	150
Bihar	4,771
The Punjab	828
Western India	120
Rajasthan	733
Nepal	398
Madras	76
Overseas Colonies	640
Other Areas	81
Unknown	502

Table 2: Fiji's Calcutta-embarked Migrants: Districts of Origin

District	No.	District	No.	District	No.	District	No.
Don't Know	210	Bhandara	38	Partabgarh	894	Peshawar	23
Agra	549	Betul	4	Purnea	9	Bikaner	68
Aligarh	214	Bhagelkhand	1	24 Parganas	11	Jhangipur	1
Allahabad	1,218	Balaghat	39	British Guiana	79	Kunu	1
Azamgarh	1,716	Birbhum	7	Nawabgunj	72	Bheti	1
Basti	6,415	Bankura	12	Mucca	3	Kora Jahabad	1
Bareilly	255	Balasore	18	Lakhimpur	36	Kumaon	4
Benares	672	Bundelkhand	5	Baroda	13	Sangli	1
Bara Banki	769	Champaran	81	Ludhiana	21	Trinidad	1
Baharaich	750	Chatterpur	22	Patiala Estate	29	Tilakpur	51
Kanpur	583	Charkahari	12	Mallia Kota	3	Nawagaon	2
Etawah	282	Chittagong	3	Kangra	10	Balrampur	5
Fatehpur	364	Chanda	6	Howrah	6	Phultan	1
Fyzabad	2,329	Chindwara	8	Hoshiarpur	12	Ujjain	7
Gonda	3,589	Dumka	22	Patiala	28	Sahebganj	2
Gorakhpur	1,683	Dehra Dun	11	Karoli	31	Kutch	2
Jaunpur	1,188	Delhi	191	Nepal	398	Ayodhya	2
Jhansi	149	Dholpur	129	Sialkot	19	Hydergarh	4
Lucknow	613	Dinapur	1	Panna	33	Betiah	2
Mathura	262	Daua	1	Poona	8	Jamaica	18

District	No.	District	No.	District	No.	District	No.
Meerut	274	Demerara	15	Puri	25	Ori	44
Mirzapur	527	Datia	30	Roorki	1	Mymensingh	2
Muradabad	149	Etah	145	Rangpur	3	Jabalpur	165
Muzaffarnagar	57	Farrakhabad	265	Rewa	317	Santal Paraganas	4
Rae Bareli	1,087	Faridpur	6	Shahjehanpur	199	Gujranwala	4
Sultanpur	1,747	Gwalior	428	Singhbhum	3	Narsinghpur	44
Unao	556	Ganjam	62	Sylhet	5	Udaipur	20
Ghazipur	1,127	Garhwal	12	Sarguja	6	Maihar	21
Alipur	8	Gauhati	1	Sambalpur	199	Ramgarh	3
Bhagalpur	116	Hamirpur	138	Seoni	24	Ajayghar	3
Burdwan	21	Hazaribagh	142	Sitapur	362	Solapur	1
Calcutta	3	Hardoi	384	Sharanpur	67	Kisangarh	9
Cuttack	49	Hoogly	5	Nawashahar	5	Marwar	48
Darbhanga	305	Hyderabad	17	Rawalpindi	24	Tikamgarh	5
Gaya	765	Indore	24	Kusrwala	1	Tibet	1
Monghyr	273	Jalaun	95	Gurdaspur	17	Hazara	13
Patna	644	Jessore	5	Srinagar	3	Karachi	10
Shahabad	1,128	Jhind	77	Multan	1	Jhelum	6
Saran	351	Jammu	6	Lahore	16	Surat	17
Ajmer	64	Jhalwar	2	Oriya	3	Kabul	1
Bilaspur	177	Jalandhar	34	Gujerat	24	Khandawa	2
Damon	48	Jaipur	473	Ambarshawar	2	Bolonghyr	1
Hosangabad	63	Jodhpur	108	Ferozepur	17	Sonepur	12
Jabalpur	4	Kheri	48	Jhangsial	1	Palamau	8
Nagpur	21	Karnal	47	Dujaney	1	Fiji	227
Raipur	744	Khulna	2	Ahmedabad	27	Ratnagiri	1
Saugor	60	Kapurthala	5	Malwa	4	Berar	10
Gurgaon	154	Kotha	12	Panipat	1	Mauritius	23
Hissar	134	Kathiawar	1	Gaiwadi	4	Natal	200
Kamila	12	Lohardaga	5	Dacca	11	St Lucia	1
Rohtak	157	Lullutpur	7	Motjhari	42	Kashmir	6
Almora	26	Manbhum	6	Sagar	9	Surinam	26
Alwar	195	Mianapur	30	Arrah	282	Asgar	1
Aurangabad	5	Mainpuri	233	Bombay	24	Tonk	6
Ambala	41	Muzaffarpur	401	Bhagsu	1	Simla	2
Amritsar	34	Raigarh	14	Ranchi	11	Mysore	1
Budaon	199	Mandla	11	Murzdabad	9	Purulia	2
Banda	192	Malda	6	Chota Nagpur	3	Hardwar	1
Bijnor	56	Nabha	8	Kowlapur	2	Unknown	290
Ballia	429	Nainital	12	Deoghar	6		
Bulandshahr	219	Nadia	10	Madras	14		
Bhopal	73	Philbit	34	Chapra	160		

Table 3: Districts of Origin of South Indian Indentured Emigrants to Fiji 1903-16

	1903-7				1908-12				1913-16			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Male		Female	
District	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Chingleput	316	12.3	163	16.4	198	4.9	106	6.6	184	5.9	87	7.2
Chittoor	14	0.5	12	1.2	158	3.9	74	4.6	227	7.2	116	9.6
Coimbatore	111	4.3	19	1.9	110	2.7	30	1.9	109	3.5	24	2.8
Cuddapah	76	3.0	22	2.2	119	3.0	51	3.2	105	3.3	33	2.7
Ganjam	5	0.2	2	0.2	8	0.2	5	0.3	5	0.2	1	0.1
Godavari	120	4.7	56	5.7	230	5.7	146	9.1	163	5.2	125	10.3
Guntur	25	1.0	4	0.4	180	4.5	74	4.6	77	2.5	27	2.2
Hyderabad	108	4.2	1	0.1	138	3.4	29	1.8	171	5.5	38	3.1
Kistna	110	4.3	19	1.9	313	7.8	87	5.4	152	4.8	48	4.0
Madras	19	0.7	19	1.9	7	0.2	87	5.4	10	0.3	48	4.0
Malabar	141	5.5	31	3.1	137	3.4	152	9.4	109	3.5	84	6.9
Nellore	197	7.7	84	8.5	156	3.9	60	3.7	115	3.7	37	3.1
North Arcot	669	26.1	335	33.8	624	15.6	266	16.5	630	20.1	233	19.3
South Arcot	108	4.2	46	4.6	138	3.4	67	4.2	171	5.5	31	2.6
Salem	141	5.5	20	2.0	137	3.4	42	2.6	109	3.5	48	4.0
Tanjore	114	4.4	38	3.8	104	2.6	42	2.6	74	2.4	48	4.0
Trichinopoly	51	2.0	6	0.6	48	1.2	9	0.6	37	1.2	14	1.2
Vizagapatam	43	1.7	23	2.3	269	6.7	204	12.7	118	3.8	94	7.8
Other	196	7.6	91	9.2	927	23.2	79	4.9	570	18.2	73	6.0
Totals	2,564	100	991	100	4,001	100	1,610	100	3,136	100	1,209	100
Male & Female Totals			**3,555**				**5,611**				**4,345**	

Source: Lance Brennan, John McDonald and Ralph Shlomowitz, 'The Geographic and Social Origins of Indian Indentured Labourers in Mauritius, Natal, Fiji Guyana and Jamaica', in *South Asia*, vol. xxi, Special Issue (1998), 58-59.

Table 4: Numerical List of Ships and Date of Arrival

No	Name of Vessel	Year	Date of Arrival
1	Leonidas	1879	May 15
2	Berar	1882	June 29
3	Poonah I	1882	September 17
4	Poonah II	1883	June 19
5	Bayard	1883	August 20
6	Syria	1884	May 14
7	Howrah	1884	June 26
8	Pericles	1884	July 3
9	Newnham S.S.	1884	July 23
10	Naine	1885	April 30
11	Ganges I	1885	June 27
12	Boyne	1886	April 26
13	Bruce	1886	May 21
14	Hereford I	1888	April 24
15	Moy I	1889	May 3
16	Rhone I	1890	May 15
17	Allanshaw	1890	June 17
18	Danube	1891	June 15
19	Jamuna I	1891	June 27
20	British Peer	1892	April 23
21	Avon I	1892	May 5
22	Hereford II	1892	June 15
23	Moy II	1893	April 14
24	Jumna II	1893	May 23
25	Elms I	1894	April 20
26	Hereford III	1894	June 28
27	Vadala S.S.	1895	March 26
28	Virawa S.S. I	1895	April 26
29	Erne	1896	April 24
30	Elbe II	1896	June 13
31	Rhone II	1897	May 11
32	Clyde	1897	June 1
33	Moy III	1898	June 1
34	Avon II	1899	July 25
35	Ganges II	1899	September 3
36	GangesIII	1900	June 21
37	Elbe II	1900	July 26
38	Arno I	1900	July 23
39	Rhine	1900	August 30
40	Fazilka I	1901	March 28
41	Fultala I	1901	May 12
42	Fazilka II	1901	June 18
43	Virawa II	1902	April 26
44	Fazilka III	1902	June 20
45	Mersey	1903	June 13
46	Eble III	1903	August 5
47	Arno II	1903	September 4
48	Arno III	1904	May 3
49	Elms II	1904	July 30
50	Fultala II	1905	April 10
51	Virawa III	1905	July 17
52	Wardha I	1905	July 28
53	Fultala III	1905	August 17
54	Fazilka IV	1906	April 17
55	Fultala IV	1906	April 18
56	Wardha II	1906	June 28
57	Fazilka V	1907	January 28
58	Virawa IV	1907	March 23
59	Fazilka VI	1907	April 25
60	Sangola I	1908	March 18
61	Sangola II	1908	June 6
62	Sangola III	1909	February 1
63	Sangola IV	1909	April 21
64	Sangola V	1910	March 7
65	Santhia I	1910	April 22
66	Sangola VI	1910	June 5
67	Santhia II	1910	July 8
68	Mutlah I	1911	May 22
69	Sutlaj I	1911	June 25
70	Ganges IV	1911	July 22
71	Mutlah II	1911	August 18
72	Sutlej II	1911	October 4
73	Sutlej III	1912	April 27
74	Indus	1912	June 8
75	Ganges V	1912	July 18
76	GangesVI	1912	November 8
77	Ganges VII	1913	February 21
78	Sutlej IV	1913	April 11
79	Ganges VIII	1913	May 29
80	Ganges IX	1913	September 9
81	Chenab I	1914	March 24
82	Chenab II	1914	June 16
83	Mutlah III	1915	May 7
84	Ganges X	1915	June 21
85	Mutlah IV	1915	August 1
86	Chenab III	1916	September 1
87	Sutlej V	1916	November 11

Table 5: Number of Immigrants Arriving Each Year

Year	Freq	Year	Freq
1879	464	**1899**	930
1882	901	**1900**	2276
1883	990	**1901**	2388
1884	1970	**1902**	1554
1885	1247	**1903**	1221
1886	994	**1904**	1148
1888	538	**1905**	1405
1889	678	**1906**	2588
1890	1159	**1907**	759
1891	1026	**1908**	3176
1892	1515	**1909**	642
1893	776	**1910**	2249
1894	1076	**1911**	2235
1895	1420	**1912**	822
1896	1173	**1913**	1011
1897	1314	**1914**	1030
1898	561	**1915**	1391

Table 6: Plantations Where Indians Were Indentured (30 June 1913)

	Indentured		Free	
Plantation	Adults	Children	Adults	Children
BA				
Rarawai	637	105		
Vunisamaloa	81	17		
Navatu	63	8		
Koronubu A	112	17	9	
Koronubu B	110	13	3	1
Veisaru	141	20		
Navoli	126	22		
Varoko	142	25		
Tavua	147	28		
The Gap, Tagitagi	71	15		
Mataniqara	88	9		
Yalalevu	97	19		
Benai	60	10		
Korovuto	52	10		
Nabutola	50	4		

	Indentured		Free	
Plantation	Adults	Children	Adults	Children
Nasausau	28	7		
Naikubukubu	27	10		
Natawarau	99	30		
Tadravale	59	9		
Nabana	51	11		
Lautoka Tramline	39	4		
Vagia	74	5		
Rotoko	60	6		
Yaladro	50	5		
Balata	59	13		
Lautoka and Nadi				
Lautoka	575	130	137	
Lovu	155	22	3	
Drasa	136	16	4	
Vitogo	138	30	4	
Saweni	129	22		
Esivo	131	20		
Tovilavila	51	5		
Lautoka Exp. Farm	14	5		
Navo	67	13		
Natova	136	18		
Navakai	44	6		
Enamano	58	1		
Wasina	57	6		
Solovi	56	4		
Navo	69	17		
Qeleloa	60	9		
Tunalia	95	27		
Votualevu	80	21		
Wagadra	70	15	11	
Sikitura	56	15		
Miegunyah	77	15		
Malolo	90	25		
Lavuso	48	3		
Togo	33	7		
Naikorokoro	50	8		
Waloko	33	3	3	
Macuata				
Labasa	451	75		
Mataniwai	48	3		
Navua Levu	26	2		
Wailevu	49	8		
Tuatua	50	14		
Batanikama	79	12		
Nagigi	58	5	4	
Tamici	42	3	1	
Wainikoro	76	7		
Daku	69	10		
Laga Laga	70	13		
Nubu	28	8		
Na Leba	89	9	25	

Plantation	Indentured		Free	
	Adults	Children	Adults	Children
Coqueloa	106	14	7	
Na Tabucola	84	9		
Vuo	85	18		
Vunivutu	71	6		
Korowiri	84	14		
Koroiloma	16	2		
Cakaudrove				
Vuna	98	18		
Mt Veron	37	6		
Rabi	59	11		
Devo	17	6		
Vatu Ula	27	4		
Wainiqero	28	3		
Mua	31	4		
Qacavula	16	4		
Ardmore	15			
Nagasau	22	4		
Nabuono	11			
Selialevu	79	9		
Nakawadawadawa	10			
Vunilage	21			
Delaweni	32	2		
Udu	6			
Nabou	6			
Waikava	6			
Tuvamila	24	1		
Vunivasa	10			
Matei	8			
Waitavala	7			
Yalalo	19			
Nukudamu	14	3		
Navua				
Tamanua	596	133	49	24
Lobu	251	30	1	
Ruku-i-navua	177	22	1	
Raiwaqa	51	20		
Togaleka	156	28	7	4
Batinikia	65	7	6	2
Waidoi	114	14		
Yarawa	46	13		
Qaraniqio	98	4	3	
Taunovo	53	8		
Naloa	35	5		
Vakabalea	4			
Toko Toko	3			
Naboro	21			
Suva				
Lami	59	17	5	
Works Department	30	10		
Cemetery	6			
Nasinu	5	1		

Plantation	Indentured		Free	
	Adults	Children	Adults	Children
Samabula	10	1		
Nasinu Exp. Station	14	8		
Tamavua	24			
Veisari	15	1		
Naivoca	9			
Lau				
Mago	63	17		
Cicia	34	2		
Naitaba	22	6	1	
Lomaci	7			
Na Bavatu	11			
Muni	14			
Wainiyabia	6	2		
Nadroga				
Nadovi	121	20	13	1
Veivadravadra	152	24		
Lomawai	138	12	4	
Naqaqa	61	12		
Suva Savu	63	13		
Wareba	87	23		
Idiri	90	9		
Waica	13	1		
Maloqereqere	19	6		
Sana Sana	50	8		
Yalavu	133	11		
Olosara	50	9	17	
Uciwai	54	14		
Simu Sam	64	6	2	
Qere Qera	2			
Rasikula	8			
Kavanagasau	180	27		
Bua				
Wainunu	85	18	3	
Korovatu	6			
RA				
Penang	396	94	25	
Caboni	38	8		
Ellington	15	10		
Veileka	7	4		
Lomaiviti				
Mokogai	33	8		
Levuka Hospital	3			
Onivero	2			
Rewa				
Nausori	187	16		
Korociriciri	70	14		
Vucimaca	68	5		
Naitasiri	105	22		
Manaiweni	96	23		
Bau Levu	101	6	9	
Koronivia	68	17		

	Indentured		Free	
Plantation	Adults	Children	Adults	Children
Viti	79	12		
Uluicalia	62	10		
Verata	21	2		
Nakadi	15	4		
Navuso	81	6		
Navutoka	81	23		
Necalia	38	8		
Viria	92	9		
Nukumotu	19			
Davuilevu	35	4		
Vunivutu	23	6		
Burecagi	30	2		
Nukuvoca	27	4		
Naisegovou	99	15		
Neuma	35	13		
Naqarawalu	14	5		
Wainilumu	11	1		
Lakena	68	15		
Lau Lau	10	1		
Manoca	55	2		
Naitalasese	81	23	1	
Waila	27	5		
Naselai	62	8		
Veikau	29	2		
Drekenikelo	3	1		
Waisavu	22	4		
Wainiuraura	20			
Ravi Ravi	29	2		
Rewa Road	20	1		
Nabalawa	30			
Waitakala	16			
Waisa	12	1		
Naisogo	10	1		

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