

Kunti's cry: Indentured women on Fiji plantations

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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 modern 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

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Professor Doris Ladd and Ms. Caroline Hadfield for their helpful comments and advice. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Indian indentured women of Fiji.

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.

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 overseers. 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 rate 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 Indian female workers as 'mercenary' characters who were 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.

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. Montgomerie to Colonial Secretary, 8 January 1914, M.P. 8779/13.

Background

Indian indentured emigration to Fiji began in 1879 to provide a cheap and dependable labour supply to European-owned plantations. From 1879 to 1916, when indentured emigration finally ceased, over 60,000 indentured labourers were brought into Fiji. Of these, 45,000 originated in North India and the rest came from the south after the turn of the century. Of the North Indians, who form the subject of this study, 13,696 of the emigrants were females, 12,032 being classified as adults, i.e., over 11 years of age.⁷ 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. A large number of them migrated as individuals on their own, unaccompanied by any male or female relatives. However, 4,341 women (36.1 per cent of the female population) came as members of nuclear or extended families. 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 the 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 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

⁷ Information in this paragraph as also in the next, on the social background of the indentured women, is derived from my *Girmitiyas. The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: *Journal of Pacific History*, 1983), Chapter 4.

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.'⁸ 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.⁹

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'.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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 license 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

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁹ C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth: Privately published, 1918), Appendix, p. 6.

¹⁰ Walter Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1969), p. 73.

¹¹ Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (Suva: World University Service, 1981), p. 11.

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.¹² 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.¹³

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'.¹⁴ 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

¹² This is the subject of a separate article presently in preparation. Hence only the main conclusions, without supporting statistical and other evidence, are presented here.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *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 Gauerre (ed.), *Calcutta to Caroni. The East Indians of Trinidad* (Port of Spain: Longman, 1974).

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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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 'vengeful and regardless of life'.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ He presented his thesis diagrammatically (See Fig. 1):

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,

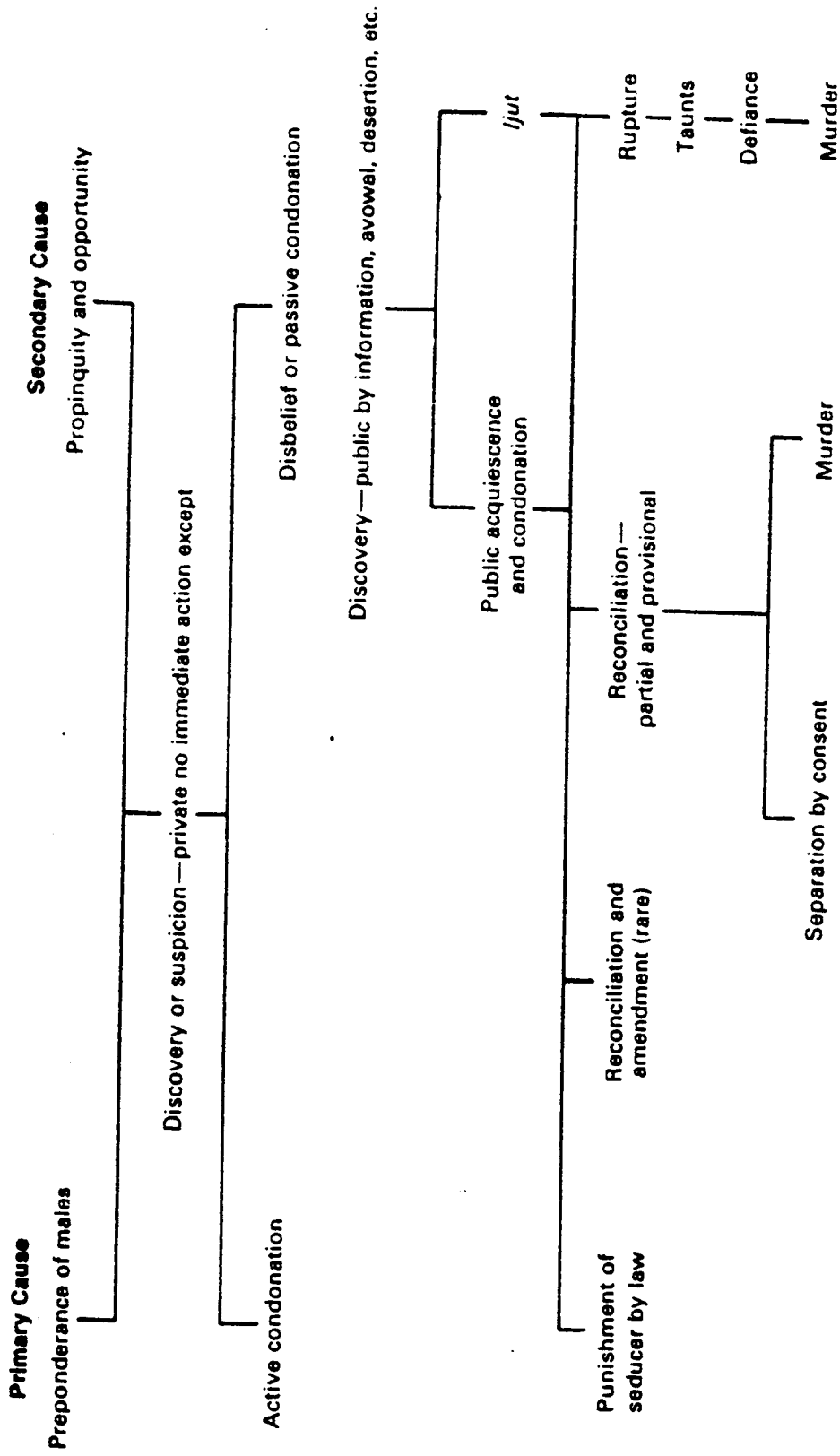
¹⁵ See fn. 12.

¹⁶ Naidu, *Violence of Indenture*, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

¹⁷ Quotes from *Fiji Annual Reports on Immigration* for these years.

¹⁸ Fiji Colonial Secretary Office (C.S.O.) files 5079/99.

Figure 1
Murder on Fiji Plantations



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.¹⁹

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'.²⁰

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 '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.²¹ 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.'²² 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

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ See Ordinance no. 1 of 1891, Part VII.

²² Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, *op. cit.*, p. 105; see also Gill, *Turn North-East at the Tombstone*, *op. cit.*, for more graphic descriptions.

neighbours, values 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.'²³

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.²⁴ 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,'²⁵ 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 or *marit*. 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.²⁶ 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.

²³ Ahmed Ali (ed.), *The Indenture Experience in Fiji* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1979), p. xx.

²⁴ C.S.O. 746/99.

²⁵ Ali, *The Indenture Experience*, *op. cit.*, p. xix.

²⁶ Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

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.²⁷ The Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), the major employer of Indian indentured labour, viewed the labourers as its private property. Invoking existing legislations, it sometimes forbade visits by 'free' (ex-indentured) husbands to their wives still on the plantations.²⁸ It even wanted its consent for the marriage of its indentured labourers. Some magistrates agreed,²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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'.³¹ 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.³²

Accused women refused to accept all responsibility for sex-related problems on the plantations. Russel 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.'³³ The 'preference' for

²⁷ C.S.O. 1050/86.

²⁸ C.S.O. 5730/97.

²⁹ C.S.O. 2941/97.

³⁰ C.S.O. 1317/97; C.S.O. 443/13; C.S.O. 2555/93, etc.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² C.S.O. 3453/08.

³³ C.S.O. 5079/99.

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'.³⁴

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.³⁵ 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

They were then classified as confirmed non-workers unable to earn a wage and as a result drifted into hospitals, gaols and prostitution houses. 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:

³⁴ See Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

³⁵ C.S.O. 589/89.

³⁶ *Fiji Annual Report on Immigration* (1885), p. 13.

³⁷ *Annual Report* (1887), p. 5.

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.³⁸

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.³⁹

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.⁴⁰ 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 1906.⁴¹ 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 1⁴² shows.

Table 1
Children of Indentured Parents Dying in the First Year of Birth

Year	Births	Deaths	Rate (Percentage)
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

³⁸ C.S.O. 589/89.

³⁹ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery. The Export of Indian Labour Abroad, 1830-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 204.

⁴⁰ *Annual Reports* (1887), p. 14; (1895), p. 11.

⁴¹ *Annual Report* (1906), p. 17.

⁴² *Annual Report* (1902), p. 18.

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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ CSR officials predictably disagreed, accusing the Indian mothers of 'deliberate neglect of their children in order to obtain time off work'.⁴⁵ 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.'⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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, atleast in the early years.⁴⁹ 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.

⁴³ *Annual Reports* (1890), p. 11; (1891), p. 32; (1898), p. 15; (1904), p. 17; (1906), p. 7.

⁴⁴ *Annual Reports* (1888), p. 5; (1889), p. 10; (1891), p. 12.

⁴⁵ C.S.O. 3121/93.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ C.S.O. 487/96.

⁴⁸ See C.S.O. 7395/10.

⁴⁹ *Annual Report* (1889), p. 10.

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.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹

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.⁵² 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

⁵⁰ C.S.O. 3121/93.

⁵¹ See the works of Gillion, Tinker and Ali cited above

⁵² *Annual Report* (1882), par. 41.

judge of the fair limits of the task work'.⁵³ Moreover, tasks were set on the basis of what a few *hand-picked* men could accomplish in a day's work.⁵⁴ Indentured workers complained bitterly and even struck work against over-tasking in the Rewa region in the 1880s,⁵⁵ 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.⁵⁶ 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'.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

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 2⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰

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'.⁶¹

⁵³ C.S.O. 1955/92.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*: *Annual Report* (1886), p. 15.

⁵⁵ C.S.O. 511/86.

⁵⁶ *Annual Report* (1885).

⁵⁷ *Annual Report* (1884), par. 44.

⁵⁸ *Indian Immigration Amendment Ordinance*, XVII (1887).

⁵⁹ 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.

⁶⁰ *Annual Report* (1912); p. 15.

⁶¹ C.S.O. 2777/95; *Annual Reports* (1893), p. 29; (1894), p. 9.

Table 2
Comparative Statements of Work, Absence and Earnings, 1893-1902

	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897	1898	1899	1900	1901	1902
MALES										
% 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										
% 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 incharge 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ The fact was that throughout the period of

⁴² C.S.O. 7/97.

⁴³ C.S.O. 3481/87.

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,⁶⁴ 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 made to wear, during their indenture on Fiji plantations.

⁶⁴ See Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, *op. cit.*, Ali, *Indenture Experience in Fiji*, *op. cit.*, and studies in Kay Saunders (ed.), *Patterns of Indenture in the British Empire* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).