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Fiji's Subaltern Women's Cry: "Women and Migration: Social and Psychological Repercussions of Migration".

This paper is a discussion on how the historical labour migration has played an influential role in the Social and Psychological Repercussions of Indentured Indian women Migrants. A country's present and future is heavily dependent on the type of past it had. This stands as the country's history which has a lot to say about its past; its burden remains and is passed on from generation to generation. With the help of postcolonial texts, this burden is kept alive. In Fiji, the history is heavily dominated by the indenture system and the labour migration of Indians. The Indians in Fiji had to live and work in extremely harsh conditions, yet by far the majority of these labourers made Fiji their home, even when they had an option of being repatriated to India at the end of their contracts. All these bittersweet experiences of the indentured labourers have been very carefully penned by proclaimed Fijian postcolonial writers. Till date, Indians in Fiji are living with the burden of their past and are constantly reminded about these twitching memoirs at various instances. The paper will deliberate on works by reflective on Fijian writers like, Brij V. Lal, Subramani, Vijay Mishra, and Ken Gillion to name a few who have kept an account of the details of historical labour migration of the Indians, particularly of Indian women. This paper, therefore, takes a critical look into history, patriarchy, and the social and psychological costs of subaltern indentured women to make aware the many facets of women migrants. The aim is to want the men to reconsider their negative notions about women and to also appreciate their contributions in the well-being of their societies, their families and the upbringing of the children. In this presentation, I shall make reference to three resilient and courageous women from Fiji's girmit indenture history experience: Kunti, Sukhrania and Narayani and listen to their laments.

I am of the belief that a large number of people in Fiji and in the Fijian diaspora are not familiar of many facets of Fiji's *girmit* history. This could be that the Indenture history is not a part of the syllabus in Fiji's schools and universities. Indenture evidence with data and statistics is in Fiji's National Archives or Museum and this literature is not widely available to the public.

The Governor General, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, the first governor of the colony (1875-80), after Fiji's cession to Britain on 10 October 1874, searched for a cheap, outside basis of plantation labour to increase commercial interests. This Indenture System, an inhumane system, or the Labour System or a New Kind of Slavery was introduced in Fiji in 1879 by Governor Gordon, in line with his native policy to protect the Fijian way of life and with his bid to establish Fiji as a viable economy. He believed that imported labour would protect the native population from the damaging effects of industrial agriculture (Gillion, 1962: 1-18). The first 'cargo' of 464 Indian immigrants arrived on the ship *Leonidas* in May 1879. The arrival of Indian labour together with the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company in 1880 ensured the economic slavery of the colony without prejudice to the Fijian

traditional hierarchical structures as perceived by Governor Gordon. Between 1879 and 1916, some 61,000 Indian *girmitiyas* were brought to Fiji under the agreement they called *girmit* (Lal, *Chalo Jahaji* 27). Of these almost 75% boarded their ship in Calcutta and the remainder in Madras. Amongst the immigrants from Calcutta there were 85.3% Hindus, 14.6% Muslims and 0.1% Christians. The Hindus were from a range of social groups; Brahmins and other high-ranking classes encompassed 16% of those who arrived in Fiji via Calcutta, the agricultural castes 31.3%, artisans 6.7%, low castes 31.2%.

Various factors contributed to the emigration of Indians including the lack of employment, extreme poverty, droughts and famines in India (Lal, 1983: 55, 62). Although these were some of the push factors that led many Indians to migrate to Fiji, others arrived under false propaganda. An Indian labourer named Totaram Sanadhya described in his book, *My 21 Years in Fiji,* how numerous Indians, like himself, were deceived and taken to Fiji: The arkati, recruiter, explained things to people there [in the half-way house]:

> Look brothers, the place you will work you will never have to suffer any sorrows. There will never be any problems there. You will eat a lot of bananas and a stomach-full of sugar cane, and play flutes [symbolic of Lord Krishna] in relaxation (1991:34).

The indenture contract was initially for five years, after which the labourer could return to India at his/her own expense. After a further five years of 'industrial residence', the labourer 'was entitled to a free return passage to India (Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 38). Under the indenture agreement, the wage for adult males was a minimum of one shilling a day and ninepennies for females (Lal, *Chalo Jahaji* 72). The day for the indentured labourers began at 4.00 a.m. or 5.00 a.m. with preparation for labour and often girmitiyas got back to their room in the evening or at night. Work was strenuous and vigour was exhausted not only by such hard work but also through weakening sicknesses, pitiable and inadequate food, and poor hygiene. These hazardous situations, merely added to downheartedness and struggle.

The girmit agreement specified that an individual had to toil nine hours or more on five successive days of every week, in addition five hours on Saturday and for each accomplished task, a man was paid a shilling, and a woman nine pence; adult was clarified as over fifteen years of age. The agreement also stated that the labourers could only come back home if the allocated chore is accomplished. It was the employer's accountability to establish what he reflected to be the equal of nine hours work. The benefit of the job was that it got completed what was sought within a specific time. In application it evidenced a far from acceptable organisation.

According to the Emigration Laws and Regulations of India, for every one hundred men, forty adult women were recruited. The patriarchal assumption held by the planters and employers was that

women were 'inferior workers' and 'childbearing of women workers' was an additional cost (Jolly: 122 and Luker: 361). As a consequence of the widespread acceptance that 'indenture was thus fundamentally unfriendly to maternity' (Luker: 361), fewer women were employed as labourers. Repercussions of the lop-sided ratio of women to men were experienced In Fiji. Because of disproportionate ratio, the competition for Indian women led to the erosion of caste restrictions and generated serious tension which often erupted in violence against unfaithful women and sometimes the loss of lives (Singh: 21). In a similar way, 'sexual jealousy', the term used by colonial official, was an outcome of the gender imbalance in Fiji and subsequently the cause of "an abnormal number of murders and kindred crimes among Indians" (Andrews and Pearson, 'Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji: 17). The colonisers attributed such crimes to the status of the labourers often referred to as "the dregs of Indian society" (Lal, *Chalo Jahaji* 46). Although Brij Lal contends that "the migrants came from all classes of rural North Indian society' (46), the authorities felt that it was necessary "to remind the Indians of their proper place in the colonial social hierarchy, a part of the ideological underpinning of European dominance" (46). Banally, Indian labourers described the indenture experience as *narak,* hell, conflicting to the official arrogance that the contract would offer material advantage to the workers "who were used to toiling from sunrise to sunset and ask as their rations only a few ounces of rice (Burton: 264).

The predicament of women during indenture was particularly appalling. In the *coolie* lines, barracks, many of them were subjected to domestic violence, rape and sexual assault by the European overseers, *sirdars,* their local counterparts and indentured men. They were also expected to work long hours in the plantations and faced wage cuts for low attendance during sickness and pregnancy (Lal: 51). In this light, the plight of the indentured Indian mother needs to be read as a historically specific category "framed by intersecting structures of race, class and gender" (Collins 231) – triple marginalization, a multi-factor patriarchy; private and public. Private Patriarchy is the exclusion of women from social life other than the household and the appropriation of their services by the patriarchs within the confines of the home. Public patriarchy, women are no longer excluded from the public arena, but subordinated within it. Anthropologist Margaret Jolly narrates Patricia Collin's description of motherhood to the depopulation discussion in Fiji and Vanuatu as she observes:

> women who do not fit within dominant cultural subject positions are at risk of being pathologised as "other" mothers on the basis of class, colour, ethnicity, race, sexual preference, education, employment, ordisability (178).

If indigenous Fijian mothers were "singled out as a major cause of depopulation and portrayed as the dead heart of the dying race" (Jolly, 'Other Mothers' 178) when juxtaposed with white women, then indentured Indian mothers were multiply 'othered' against indigenous Fijian and white women but also quite sharply contrasted with middle-class women from India.

In official papers, for example, the middle-class Indian woman is associated with qualities of chastity, honour (*izzat*), discipline and devotion while descriptions of indentured women spun around

immoralities like promiscuity and shame (Mishra: 60). Actually, it could be argued that the middle-class Indian woman was the extreme important yardstick for judging the morality of indentured women in Fiji. The campaigners against the indentured system, Charles Freer Andrews and William Pearson, representatives of the Government of India, draw our thoughts to this comparison:

> Those who have seen the Indian woman working in the fields in India with her little family playing near her, will realise the change when she is told to leave her family behind in the coolie lines. The provision of regulation 'fly-proof nurseries' is no compensation to her for the loss of the privilege of looking after her own children, and living her own life in her own natural way. She is not told, also, in the agreement that she will be compelled to work incessantly, day in day out, with no time to cook her own husband's meals or to look after her own children (Andrews and Pearson, 'Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji' 11).

Analogous to other activists of Indian nationalism, Andrews and Pearson validated imageries of women as mothers and wives connected with "the preservation of Indian traditions, culture and spirituality" (Narayan: 133). Explicitly, they expressed numerous apprehensions about the way indentured women were assumed to be stubbornly breaking codes of patriarchal morality and honour (*izzat*). Those who deviated from the 'norm' were evaded in community discourses. An excerpt from 'A Paper Written for the Acting Governor of Fiji' in 1916:

> The Hindu woman in this country [Fiji] is like a rudderless vessel with its mast broken drifting on to the rocks; or is like a canoe being hurled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand' (6).

The writers proclaim further: "She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so" (Andrews and Pearson: 6). This reinforcement of stereotypical perceptions of femininity resulted in implications for indentured motherhood since 'prostitute' and 'mother' tended 'to be seen as mutually exclusive' (Luker: 364). Vicki Luker proposes that:

> indentured women's indifference to childcare' (365) was presented as a typical feature of the 'woman as prostitute' label. In fact, one may assert furtherthat colonialism's 'misogynistic narrativisation' (Parry 36) of indentured Indian mothers as 'loose', 'ruthless' and 'uncaring' was misappropriated to hold them responsible for the bulk of the social and moral evils originating from this cruel system (Parry: 36 in Lal: 54).

It trails banally that after indenture the 'woman as prostitute' stereotype associated with indentured women disappeared from the colonial mind in Fiji and was exchanged with the opinion of Indian women as 'the world's best mothers' (Luker: 369). This maintained outlook overlapped with a change in context. As Shireen Lateef expresses "during indenture women had access to an autonomous income, meager though it was they were not economically dependent on their fathers, brothers or husbands" (5). After indenture, the inclination was to take away women from agricultural work and restrict them to the domestic sphere. As the status of indentured women changed from *girmit-wala* (indentured) to *khula* (free), they established into their new lives as lower middle-class women in Fiji and endeavored to regain the *izzat* (honour, self-respect) they had lost

during indenture. Establishments like the Arya Samaj, an association of prosperous and accomplished Fiji Indians and educators and missionaries from India and small women's groups such as the *Zanana* Women's League, the *Gujarati* Women's Association and the Indian Women's Society of Suva cultivated this spirit of reformism in the 1930s (Kelly: 195).

The indenture system ended on January 2, 1920. Nonetheless, a low-priced labour resource was essential in Fiji. Consequently, the colonial government enthused Indo-Fijians to stay in Fiji as free immigrants. From the 60,696 indentured labourers that came to Fiji, only 24,000 ultimately went back to India. Lal further explains on Indian settlement in Fiji:

> The majority stayed [in Fiji], trapped by the promise of a better life, dread of a long journey, the fear of rejection by family and friends of those who had broken caste taboos, and by the encouragement of a government keen to develop a local pool of labour supply. Time passed and memories of India faded as people formed new, cross-caste relationships and developed new attachments to their adopted homeland. With no immediate efforts by the colonial government to repatriate the laborers, Indo-Fijians adopted Fiji as their new homeland and began the long process of healing and uplifting a community that endured through the 37-year period of indenture in Fiji (1985).

Indentured women, in a patriarchal society, encountered all sorts of brutalization, fluctuating from hardship, disregard, mistreatment, ostracism, domination, suppression, abuse, disgrace and even discrimination, all of which originate from characteristics of the people's values and beliefs. Consequently, women raise their voices for such aspects of the culture that demoralize their welfare and liberation to be eliminated. They, hence, fight for equivalence and freedom in the male controlled society.

To realize this, historical literature turns out to be a significant ways for them to create awareness that women all through educational achievements want the same chances as men. Historical Literature has, therefore, established into a device used to reflect the plain practicalities of human lives, predominantly by the female writers like Ngozi Chuma-Udeh, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, and Anita Desai to name a few and many others concerning the socio-political, economic and divine realisms of the womenfolk. Since historical literature has come to be an unquestionable foundation of incentive for nationwide consciousness, it has come to exist as a portion of human life and existence, giving light, giving sense and giving explanation to man and his civilization as he contests and searches for an expected and appreciated future. In many cultures, for example, women are noticed but are unvoiced, not heard. They survive underneath the silhouettes of men form their parental homes to their matrimonial homes consequently, they are perceived as second-class citizens. They are customarily disregarded as their opinions are on no circumstance necessary before decisions are prepared even in matters that exactly involve them. In marital, matrimony suggestions are indicated to their fathers, or other male representatives of the family unit if there is no father. In

reality, women folk are regarded as ordinary items of necessity: housewives, child deliverers, give enjoyment or pleasure to men's sexual desire; and the severest of all, not being asked in the outcome making procedures and considered as nonentities in their cultures. The women as wives are to be submissive, conforming, thoughtless and docile but any challenge to these virtues attracts social scorn akin to British beliefs of their womenfolk in the Victorian era as seen in the poem *An Angel in the House* by Pat Coventry. So the visibly specified responsibilities for women are handed on to the girls as she grows up. As noted by Pam Morrison in her book *Literature and Feminism,* As soon as a girl is able to take care of herself, she begins supposing the responsibilities mapped out for her by the society: learn to cook, upkeep of the household, help with all the mother performs, and prepares for maturity and marriage (1993).

In line with this, Onwueme (2010) observes that:

> Through the ages and across cultures, women have been subjected to one form of suppression or another. This ranges from the physical, mental, spiritual, social, educational, economic, to the political. This can be traced to the cultural mores and ideologies of patriarchy which condemn women to subservient positions in the society (216).

Additionally, she emphasizes that every so often, spiritual principles are blended with social traditions to keep back women. She quotes Annie Ledere as stating that "nothing exists that has not been made by man—not thought, not language, not words" (216); and Roxanne Dumbar declares that:

> Humanity is generally conceived of from a totalising male perception, so that the female identity brings with it certain predefined sexual roles about what she may or may not do, rules that do not apply to the sexually unrestricted world of men (216).

This undoubtedly specifies the position that a woman, whatever her status, is created for marital and motherhood. Hence, a woman who determines by preference and does not adapt to the social customs is deemed as less than a perfect woman. The belief that a woman can be efficacious by way of confidence and individual determination is not acknowledged. A woman's social self-respect and status in the family are measured by her capacity to bear offspring, especially giving birth to boys as marital and motherhood turn out to be the only importance for her being and epitome as a woman (IJALEL 2 (6):143-149, 2013).

This section of my paper analyses and amalgamates findings from the existing literature on social and psychological determinants faced by bonded indentured women. Outcomes of this review exposed that social and psychological determinants of immigrant women is an outcome of several interrelating factors at social, cultural, and health care system levels.

Together with the non-existence of knowledge on Indo-Fijian immigrants, Indo-Fijian women constitute one of Fiji's most helpless groups, one that has suffered the maximum levels of marginalization not only because of their ethnicity but also their gender. The marginalization of Fiji's

Indian women has been recognized since the indentured period. The infrequent collection of literature on these women portrays them as docile, inferior, powerless, promiscuous, and victims of both physical and sexual violence. Understanding these women's dilemmas is actually challenging because as Indo-Fijian historian Brij Lal (1985) explains, their voices are "absent in the written records, where for the most part, their faces are shrouded by a veil of dishonour drawn by men".

Social oppression and violence have historically played out in varied and occasionally strange ways within Fiji's ethnic setting. An advanced commission waspaid to recruiters as the recruitment of women was demanding. Female workers were enticed to the embankment depot by deceitful and sly recruiters. Women were presumed to be ignorant and helpless and were stress-free victim for dishonest recruiters who on the ploy of proposing assistance, the recruiters took the women to the depots and thus deceived them into migrating. This was by no means true for all women. It seems like that many women were already detached from their families and homes before they were recruited for Fiji. It has also been advocated that many women intentionallyregistered for emigration as single women and signed up for indenture flouting the restraints of the tyrannical and patriarchal extended family where they were treated as indispensable slave.

The indenture work was back breaking, and overtasking created harsh working conditions but the women were tremendously hard working doing the same work as the males. One of the foremost social problems of the indenture system was the shortage of women. Sexual greediness sometimes headed to murder, suicide and other forms of violence in competing for women. Because there was strong competition for women, they were treated as chattels belonging to men and disrespected by the male labourers and the supervisors. Indentured women were allocated by overseers to men as prizes and sometimes they reserved the"best" women for themselves. Some indentured male labourers married with the intention to abandon their wives when they returned to India. In many cases such relationships became permanent. Women were treated and observed as "whores' and "loose women of bad character". It is established that the inequality of the sexes led to dissipation, polyandry and ferocity. It was the manipulation, disgrace and immorality of women, high rates of male suicide that were the conclusive impacts used to rally public support in India that eventually led to the abolition of indenture in 1916. Indian nationalist, Gokhale took up the cause of indentured labourers and necessitated the eradication of the indenture system. This became a chief subject for Indian nationalists in their tussle for independence. A public spectacle was women walking to their work site, with a sack on their heads, carrying their newborns, their lunch, and a hoe. Their day began at 4 a.m. when they awoke to prepare breakfast and lunch.

Men who could not get their own approach with women used violence against them. An instance is mentioned by a historian of a man who marred a woman's face by wounding her nose and cheek because she refused to live with him. A woman who was murdered by another man because she refused to

be enticed away from her husband. Men murdered or totally disfigured women who denied to live with them or to give them sexual favours. Nonetheless, women were used as blames for illuminating the violence of plantation life. It has been detailed that women chose one man against the other for more money and jewels, with the maximum bidder winning. Therefore, the blame fell on women for the general disrespect for the sacredness of marriage and the family by the indentured labourers. As the greater part of commentaries were mostly recorded by men, suffused with offensive comments about women making it very hard to measure with any correctness the notch of truth or inaccuracy of such statements. Few have worried to analyse indentured women's lives from a female viewpoint. In fact, some evidence advocates that men treated their wives as possessions to be bartered and hired out, predominantly to overseers, for material favours. Likewise, many men wholesaled their young daughters more than once to potential husbands which frequently led to life-threatening forms of violence when these men tried to assert what they regarded as their rightful property. Women had to cope not only with their male countrymen but also with the sexual advances of the young white unmarried overseer whom they sometimes could not decline.

Women were employed as indentured labourers in their own right. The control women attained in one small aspect of their life was miniscule paralleled with their total hopelessness. Men and women were rendered powerless by an institutional arrangement that was akin to slavery. Furthermore, the small measure of control women enjoyed over their personal lives during indenture was short-lived. The economic, political and social arrangements of indenture had led to the treatment and perception of women as "whores." This factor worked to the detriment of women in the long run as the family not only meant the re-imposition of traditional power relations between men and women but also that even more stringent controls were placed on women. This legacy is visible today in the stringent control of women's sexuality, behaviour and physical space. In general, as in India, during the indenture period, Indo-Fijian women were a less welcome addition to the family than males. Females were seen as problematic since they had to be protected and kept pure for the marriage market; a potential threat to family honour and more money will have to be spent on their weddings. Parents were generally reluctant to spend money on educating females because they believed that the rewards of their investment will be enjoyed by her conjugal family rather than her natal family. Parents attempted to marry their daughters off as soon as possible. Although dowry did not exist, daughters-in-law tended to be subjected to harsh treatment.

As for women labourers, they not only faced physical violence but sexual abuse. The disproportionate ratio of women to men made the indentured women easy targets for abuse by both their colonial masters and by indentured men. Between 1890 and 1919, it was reported that 68 indentured women were murdered in Fiji. According to Brij Lal (2001), sexual jealousy was perceived as the culprit behind the murders. Indian indentured women thus stood accused in the eyes of their own community as well as those of the official world, carrying the dual backpack of racism and sexism. The commonly

held, though empirically unsubstantiated, observation of them as morally lax, reckless individuals made the women an easy focus for hateful gossip. More seriously, it gave the sirdars (Indian foremen) and overseers the authorization to treat women with little esteem and to view them simply as entities of sexual fulfillment. Not astonishingly, the indentured women also became fitting victims for all the ill of the indentured system (198-199). The two-fold burden of being Indian and a female severely affected the lives of indentured women.

In terms of sexual category relations amongst the indentured labourers, women employed a marginal position. Their male counterparts held the women responsible for murders, suicides, and even the high infant death rate. Some indentured men regarded indentured women as a "temporary convenience to be discarded on returning to India" (Lal, 2004). Furthermore, men judged women's roles on the plantation in stereotypes. For instance, Brij Lal explains: Some men measured women in contrast to the ideal of Sita, the epitome of Hindu womanhood, who gave up entirety to go together with her husband, Lord Rama into banishment. The idyllic Indian woman accepted her fate without criticism, overestimated the virtues of motherhood, submitted to male authority, and above all, revered her husband. On the plantations, men pursued to reaffirm the patriarchal structure of rural Indian society. Thus, patriarchy was restored and operated amongst the Indian community in Fiji, which still exists today.

Now I shall take you to the cries of three indentured women. The first woman to listen to is Kunti's cry.

On 10 April 1913, Kunti, a female Indian indentured labourer, was directed alone to weed an inaccessible banana patch at Nadewa in Rewa, Fiji. Compulsory isolation was a common and very operative technique to deal with unruly workers. Kunti was being disciplined for her supposedly petulant conduct and for giving the plantation management a great deal of trouble. Later that afternoon, Overseer Cobcroft came on his normal round of review, caught hold of Kunti and made 'improper suggestions to her'. Kunti shrieked,wriggled herself free from Cobcroft, ran in the direction of the Wainibokasi River, a little distance away, and flung herself into the water. Kunti told the world she was saved from drowning by Jagdeo, a boy who chanced to be in a dinghy close by.

Her story was in mass-circulating Indian newspapers, the Bharat Mitra and the Allahabad Leader/and sparked off an unprecedentedly strong movement to stop the migration of Indian indentured labour altogether. According to historian, K.L. Gillion, the move to stop the humiliation of Indian women on colonial plantations enticed more backing among the Indian masses, than any other movement in modem Indian history, more even than the movement for independence. Even, although of lowly cobbler caste, Kunti was praised by the still caste- mindful Indian press for her courageousness, endurance and strength of mind, and her name amalgamated with the 'list of

honourable and brave ladies' in Indian history. Kunti's story was printed at a time of rising tension in India itself against the indenture system.

Keen to evade governmental humiliation and to turgid a delicate and possibly volatile problem, the Government of India wanted to reveal the inaccuracy of the story before it reaches a broader currency. The colonial government of Fiji obliged. The Migration Department re-opened its files and discovered invented irregularities in Kunti's earlier evidence. Destructive statements were extracted from witnesses, including one from Indian migrant S.M. Saraswati who disclaimed talking to Kunti or writing the story for newspaper. The Agent General of Immigration, Sydney Smith, suspected S. M. Sarawati's claims as false, and so decided that, in authorized communication with the Government of India, it would be 'better not to say whether or not Mr. Saraswati'sstatement was reliable'. But the ultimate growth upon which the Immigration Department rested its case was Kunti's alleged immoral character. It argued that Kunti had invented the complete incident in retaliation for the removal 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 sent the affirmed statement of Ramharak, Sundar Singh's successor as the sirdar and Kunti's merciless enemy. A. Montgomerie, the Agent General of Immigration in 1913, summed up the feelings of his department as well as of the planters with the subsequent far-reaching declaration:

> *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 labourerson a plantation. It is only by fair and just treatment that labourers, in this colony,can be worked.*

> It was stated that the overseer had simply exhibited his rage at Kunti because she had displayed slight interest in finishing the chore given to her, and there was no assault on her modesty. He also rejected the accusation that Kunti leapt into a whirling river. It was also alleged that Sujni and his wife, the two people whom Kunti contacted after the misfortune, had certainly not spoken of any attack on Kunti's modesty. Such assertions apparently prompted the Magistrate of Wainibokasi who terminated the accusations.

On 1 August 1913, *Bharat Mitra*, a Hindi daily printed from Calcutta, contained a story titled 'The wails of a woman'. The article was a individual description of an Indianindentured woman labourer in Fiji, by the name Kunti, who had been subjected to sexual mistreatment and several other types of prejudices. In the story, Kunti talking about her destiny stated:

> Reader, I am twenty years old now and have two daughters, one of whom is aged three and the other only one year. Alone my husband is unable to face or stand in the wayof the overseer or the Sardar. Now I am prepared to kill myself by drowning, giving upall love of the world, of my daughters and my husband, if my chastity is ever violated and I ask my Indian sisters never to commit the mistake of coming to this side or their condition too will be as miserable as mine. I pray also to the leaders of the country to put a stop to this bad system and earn the great merit of protecting helpless women fromoppression by saving them from the miseries caused by the contract.
>
> (Sd., I, Kunti, have given the impression of my right hand thumb).

In the end, the *Bharat Mitra* extravagantly acclaimed Kunti for her courage and resilient will. Yet she was still spoken of as a 'low class woman' born in the cobbler caste. The *Bharat Mitra* in its plea to the British government, also opened the superior issue, holding that 'it would be impossible to get on without putting an end to the indenture system'.

Kunti's case is but one of the few brought to light' (1913). Kunti's history kindled emotions in India, and the Anti-Indenture Emigration League which had its head office in Calcutta brought up the issue with the Governments of Bengal of India. Several Indian personalities, renowned amongst whom were men like Tej Bahadur Sapu, penned effectively to the Government of the United Provinces to perform an independent investigation into the accusations put together by Kunti.

Historians like Brij Lal have deduced the Kunti episode from the point of view of the wider working understanding of the Indian Indentured women in the Fijian plantations. He is of the view that the commodification of labour and its connections with a very intimidating administration of employment management was accountable for creating all the problems associated with the indentured. On the other hand, too often the colonial administrators and the planter lobby would designate the Indian Indentured women as of 'low caste and loose character'. For Kunti, it had been a prescribed 'trial by water' to prove her innocence, the drowning of women in water being seen as'penalty' for their obvious misbehavior of gender behaviour. Nonetheless, the prominence that was given to persecuted women like Kunti gave the activists and nationalists a strong moral opening to denounce colonial rule. Kunti had won at last. Two other indentured women who shared Kunti's courage and resilient spirit were Sukhrania and Naraini.

Sukhrania

On 9 June 1909, indentured woman and sex worker, Sukhrania, was cruelly assassinated in the cane fields in Navutoka estate by the man she lived with, Lachminarain. Witness, Rup Singh, had this to say about Sukhrania: 'I know Sukhrania. She was a prostitute. Anybody who went to her and

paid her money, she would lend herself to'. For Sukhrania, the act of giving herself to a man or marketing her sexual labour time involved choosing between sexual labour and plantation labour. As she decided for the former, she made a significant choice about the precise fashion in which her body would be commoditized for money. This choice challenged the patriarchal assumption that women should be pure among a multitude of other qualities. Sukhrania also disputed other stereotypical womanly qualities such as conformity and submission. For instance, when Lachminarain reprimanded her for not heeding to him, she responded: 'You are nothing to me. I can do as I like and please myself'. In this way, Sukhrania's self-assuredness and self-ruling, especially sexually self-directed nature juxtaposed directly with Lachminarain's patriarchal notions of ladylikeness and obedience.

Lachminarain's craving to exclusively own Sukhrania (physically, mentally, socially and sexually)—a patriarchal aspiration—was intensified by his rank as an indentured, coloured, labourer. In patriarchal terms, Sukhrania was the only 'property/commodity' Lachminarain could credibly 'own'. When she declined to let him influence her, Lachminarain's manliness was questioned. By this I mean that he was cognizant of other men's observations of Sukhrania and of him, and more notably, of the disgrace attached to sexual work. Therefore, when his friend Ramsewuk said, 'Your woman is a very bad woman, she is a prostitute', it is likely that Lachminarain later realized that his reply, 'I am too weak to kill her', mirrored badly on his manhood. By murdering Sukhrania, Lachminarain's patriarchal prestige was embodied. By shockingly disfiguring her, Lachminarain went a phase extra to instill in Sukhrania a lesson and to caution other women who decide on to follow her path of their catastrophic end. The district medical officer carrying out the autopsy expressed the natural history of her death. Sukhrania's scalp was shattered, and her brain was dislocated. She had a cut down the rear of her neck four inches into her back bone, a cut through her left cheek, a gash across the flip side of her right ankle opening up the ankle joint and a straight wound around the back six inches extended. The muscular tissues at the back of the right leg were not there and there was a injury half an inch stretched and half an inch deep-rooted at the limb. An infringement of this nature, particularly when the people alleged were indentured labourers, was not taken flippantly by the colonial government at the time. Some exceptions were made for European overseers, as Naraini's case which follows validates.

On 1 July 1909, Lachminarain was discovered guilty of assassinating Sukhrania and condemned to death. Sukhrania's story is retold here because it raised certain significant topics about prostitution, choice and possession of the female body in Fiji in the early 1900s.

Naraini

Upon learning she was expecting, eighteen-year-old Naraini entered the ship *S.S.Santhia* bound for Fiji in 1910. During the voyage, she dated a shipmate whom she later wedded in Fiji. Unfortunately,

as historian Ahmed Ali exposes, Naraini's husband was violent towards her, "In the *girmit* lines, indenture barrack, he deprived her of nourishment and beat her". Then on 16 August 1910, she gave birth to a premature child. Four days later, her child died. The medical report stated that the child had been crushed by a door but Naraini maintained that the child had been killed by her husband when he discovered that it was not his. Some six days after she had given birth, a European overseer, Bloomfield, said that Naraini should go to work even though according to the laws at the time, a woman was not permitted to work for three months after she had given birth to a child. It was said that Naraini challenged Bloomfield as she retorted: 'My child is dead. I will not go to work'. When he heard this, Bloomfield beat her so severely that she became unconscious and fell.

Dr John Halley, the District Medical Officer, inspected Naraini on August 30, he discovered eight big fresh open gashes on her body. Two and a half months after the attack, her injuries did not heal. On September 5, 1910, Dr Halley details the unpleasant case to Mr Leslie, the plantation manager. The issue, however, is not explored, nor any legal action taken till the official visit of the local superintendent of immigrants, Lord Paterson, on September 26. An inquiry ultimately is conducted. Muniram is caught and indicted. He primarily confesses to the charge as he was threatened by Bloomfield but is freed after informing the Police Inspector that Bloomfield is the real attacker. Investigations are made and testimony devastatingly pinpoints Bloomfield as the criminal. A license is issued for his arrest. On the evidence given by five women and two men who had observed the attack now give testimony against him. Bloomfield is indicted for assault with intention to cause severe physical damage. The court case is tried in the Supreme Court in Suva city on April 24, 1911. Despite the robust proof provided not only by Indian eyewitnesses but also by the hospital assistants and the District Medical Officer, unsurprisingly, the jury find Bloomfield not guilty and was freed. The Chief Justice, additionally, adds that he will acquit the suspect from the shame of cruelty in the circumstances. Naraini, however, was beaten so badly she sustained brain damage.

Although she was physically and psychologically abused by two different men, Naraini's story, in particular her refusal to work after the birth of her child, may be perceived as an attempt to confront a colonial patriarchy. In particular, she is remembered for the epiphanic moment when she refused to become the victim of another man, in this instance, a European man. Although she is beaten for this, her attempt to stand up to a man was extremely courageous, considering the harsh realities of indenture.

Amongst other issues, Naraini's ordeal in Fiji in 1910 raised concerns about the simul-taneous abuse of indentured women in the home (domestic sphere/indentured barracks) by Indian indentured men and in the work environment (public domain/ sugar plantations) by European men. It also exposed the failure of the colonial patriarchal legal system when prominent white males, in this case, Bloomfield, perpetrated crimes against indentured women. Two other issues raised here are a

woman's right to maternity or bereavement leave after the birth/death of a child and the abuse and murder of infants during the indenture period.

Indentured Indian woman, Naraini, is denied justice after she is severely beaten by overseer, Harold Bloomfield, when she refuses to go back to work after giving birth and losing her baby on a Colonial Sugar refining Company of Australia owned sugarcane estate in Fiji in 1910. The whole incident leaves Bloomfield relatively unscathed, but for Naraini life is never the same again. Oral evidence suggests that she became mentally deranged. At the time of the trial, some eight months after the assault, she is still seen in the hospital, weak and suffering from dysentery.

Her story had featured prominently in the Indian media in India and was picked up and highlighted by Sarojini Naidu. She was a prominent member of the Indian National Congress, which was leading a national movement in India to abolish Indian indenture system at the turn of the twentieth century.

Naraini had dared to challenge the injustice and brutality that the indentured Indian women had encountered in the plantation system not only in Fiji but also in all other indenture colonies. Naraini paid a heavy price for her stand. She died in obscurity somewhere in Fiji. Her story however, helped to mobilise millions of Indian women in India and eventually abolish the dreadful system of human trafficking of young Indian men, women, and children. The system was legally abolished in 1917, and all Indian Indenture, including those in Fiji, were abolished in 1920.

But even if there might have been some other viable reasons behind the empire's decision finally to abolish the indenture system (1916), many believed that it was the protest of the women against their exploitation that gave momentum to the movement against indenture.

I conclude by noting that the greatest achievement of the historian lies in the historian's ability to move beyond mere exposition of the social crimes against humanity to powerfully demonstrate through the lives of the indentured women the ways out of the degradation these humans find themselves. The notion mostly among the female folks is that the women have contributed immensely in various aspects of human development and sustenance. Unfortunately, in most societies and cultures, women are enslaved, subjugated, humiliated and dehumanised. The upheld distorted view of the indentured women was that women were not full human beings and the that the nature of women were not that of a full person. Women by nature were deficient, not to be trusted and to be looked down upon. It is a universal phenomenon that women are not given equal rights with men and this led to their being subjected to many inhuman treatments in the society. Women are made to play the second fiddle—inferior role—in the society: in the family, in social gatherings, in politics and in national issues and these gave birth to feminism—women's movement for liberation and equality. Feminist histories and ethnographers have begun on an often-uniting journey to reconstruct women to history and to 'regain women's lost voices'.

Discourses detailing the 'humanitarian efforts' of social and moral conditions of Indentured Women in Fiji and efforts to transplant valuesthat reinforced patriarchal morality as reflected in colonial, imperial and Indian nationalist discourses has simultaneously celebrated its struggle to improve the quality of life for indentured women in Fiji.

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