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## Undoing the 'Madwoman': A Minor History of Uselessness, Dementia and Indenture in Colonial Fiji

By Margaret Mishra<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article sets out to undo colonial constructions of the 'madwoman' in Fiji during the indenture period. It will critique how lunacy, or more specifically the condition of dementia, was sometimes presented as the colonial response to 'uselessness' in the sugarcane plantations. When archival fragments relating to an indentured woman named Dhurma, are retrieved and situated within a historical context they demonstrate how unproductivity was perceived as a signifier of an 'unsound mind' because it conflicted with the utilitarian logic of universal and individual economic advancement espoused by the British colonial administration. The article will also present brief accounts of other indentured women who were diagnosed with 'dementia' to illustrate how the 'useless madwoman' phenomena was not an isolated one. If the allegations of dementia presented here are reassessed in light of definitions of lunacy including the usage of this term in The English Lunacy Act of 1838, it may be possible to read against the dominant (male) voice in the asylum records and thus deconstruct murky projections of madness vis-a-vis colonialism.

*Keywords:* Women, indenture, dementia, Fiji, Dementia, Madwomen, Colonial history, uselessness

### Introduction

How should one read the blot of 'uselessness' smeared upon indentured Indian women who failed to satisfy the terms specified in the indenture agreement, *girmit*? Is it possible to undo the colonizer's correlation between 'unproductivity' in the sugar cane plantations in Fiji in the 1880s and the catchphrase 'unsound mind'? What apparatus can we use to unleash the imbecilic, female 'lunatic' trapped inside a multi-faceted memory of madness? This article grapples with these questions as it uncovers how one indentured Indian woman who was diagnosed with dementia in Fiji in the 1880s, Dhurma (Emigration Pass 2021), was simultaneously labelled by the British colonial authorities as an 'idiot' (CSO MP 2252/1884). This so-called 'demented' subject ambled in and out of history momentarily – she first entered the colonial records via the one page Emigration Pass prepared when she boarded the ship *Bayard* in Garden Reach, Calcutta, in 1883; then she graced the Colonial Secretary's Office correspondence relating to insane Indian immigrants in 1884 and 1885; and finally she was ejected from history's gaze when she returned to India in 1889. In the colonial records, Dhurma is branded as a subject of derision who deviated from colonially demarcated perceptions of normality and reason. But was she really 'mad' and did she pose a threat to society? Or was she confined in the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva in 1884 (CSO MP 2252/1884) to correct her 'laziness' and enforce the diagnosis of sanity? Is it possible

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to excavate other accounts of indentured women who matched the colonially constructed trope of the ‘useless madwoman’? To address these questions we turn to the apparatus of minor history.

Instead of passively accepting the colonial ‘master’s’ portrayal of Dhurma as a ‘lunatic’, this article chooses to interrogate the politics of representation underpinning the diagnosis of dementia by making ‘the miniscule grain of history visible’ (Guha 1987:137). The latter involves recovering events outside the dominant framework of (colonial and indenture) history that are dismissed because ‘they fall out of the purview of those in power’ (Gandhi 2015:409). In his essay ‘Chandra’s Death’, Ranajit Guha proposes that ‘a critical historiography can make up for this lacuna by bending closer to the ground in order to pick up the traces of a subaltern life in its passage through time’ (1987:138). Following Guha, Sudesh Mishra coined the phrase ‘minor history’ to describe ‘the small dramas that inhabit the lower depths in the guise of footnotes, fragments, anecdotes, digressions, fleeting testimonies, parenthesis, curious asides, affective depositions, and the like’ (Mishra 2012:5). These ‘quasi-events’, Mishra elaborates, ‘lie half-forgotten in the lower depths and are deemed to be minor because they have failed the test of significance inside the major event’ (2012:5). In a broad sense, the colonial exchanges relating to Dhurma may be likened to ‘quasi-events’ or ‘small dramas’ that are eclipsed by the major events of colonialism and indenture. They exist as stunted specks in the depths of mainstream history but when excavated, they can expose how colonial and patriarchal power structures permeated archival records and recollections of the past. If we scrutinize these specks closely, we will find para-textual evidence in Dhurma’s Emigration Pass, seemingly insignificant blobs that can complicate the colonial linkage between unproductivity and lunacy. A similar trend may be found in paratextual and archival extracts relating to two other indentured women in Fiji in the 1880s, Motowinie and Jaita. When these fragments are re-mediated through the contemporary gaze of the minor (feminist) historian, a counter narrative emerges – one that hinges on ‘the condition of contextuality’ (Guha 1987:138) and simultaneously contests historical accounts that ‘treated women according to masculine standards of significance’ (Mathews 1986:147). However, before we can ‘restore women to history and restore our history to women’ (Kelly-Gadol 1976:809), it is necessary to highlight how discourses of madness and colonization have intersected in the framing of the ‘insane’ (female) indentured laborer.

### **Discourses on Madness and Colonialism**

In ‘The Order of Discourse’ (1981), Michel Foucault contends that ‘in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality’ (52). Discourses on insanity and deviance – ‘a matter of interpretive judgement occurring in an established historical, cultural and situational context’ (Stuart and Pfuhl 1993:23-24) – have often overlapped. For example, the discipline of colonial psychiatry, which included the establishment of public lunatic asylums in the colonies, was developed to contain deviant behavior and went beyond the ‘medical gaze’ to discipline native peoples in a colonial world (Bhattacharyya 2013). In his book on India’s native-only lunatic asylums from 1857-1900, *Madness, Cannabis and Colonialism* (2000), James Mills argues that colonial asylums were created to impose control over dangerous Indians and to remove ‘the troublesome and the unproductive’ (179). Those who disrupted ‘the regimes and disciplines of work’ (Foucault 1969:274), like Dhurma, were sent to asylums ‘where their perceived aversion to labor would be further observed, recorded and utilized to reinforce the diagnosis of sanity’ (Mills

2000:179). Unsurprisingly, one of the difficulties associated with colonial records of mental illness in the 'asylum archive' is that they were unreliable and often the same diagnosis in two different asylums resulted in two sets of symptoms (Mills 2000:179). This discursive ambiguity is also evident in colonial discourses on dementia in the 1880s.

Dementia is now defined as 'a chronic or persistent disorder of the mental processes caused by brain disease or injury and marked by memory disorders, personality changes and impaired reasoning' (Oxford Dictionary Online). However, a trace of the etymology of the word 'dementia', reveals that it originated from the 'Latin prefix *de* (to depart)' and '*mens* (mind)', and was used broadly in the early 1800s to mean 'out of one's mind' or 'unsound mind' (Oxford Dictionary Online). In Paris in 1838, Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol offered the first medical classification of mental disease when he made a critical separation between dementia and amentia. He proposed that 'amentia (or idiocy) is not a disease, but a condition in which the intellectual faculties are never manifested; or have never developed sufficiently to enable the idiot to acquire knowledge' (Esquirol 1838:283). In contrast, dementia is 'a cerebral disease characterized by an impairment of sensibility, intelligence and will' (Esquirol 1838:283). But this distinction between amentia and dementia is not apparent in the terminology used by the colonizers in the late 1880s nor is it evident in the British Lunacy Acts. Instead, an essential criteria behind the diagnosis of dementia seemed to be the word 'useless'. In other words, because Dhurma, Motowinie and Jaita did not advance the 'end' expected of them, they were considered to be 'unserviceable', 'unprofitable' and 'ineffectual' (Macmillan Dictionary, Online) in the economic expansion of the colony (which is not to say that they were 'useless' in themselves). Thus 'uselessness' in the context of indenture meant deviating from the expected productivity threshold of a laborer. The paragraphs that follow sets out to establish a link between colonialism, indenture and lunacy. While its main focus is on Fiji, it will also make connections to the work of scholars writing on indentured women from a global perspective.

### **Colonialism, Indenture and Lunacy**

After Fiji was ceded to Britain on 10 October, 1874, the Governor General of the British Colonial Government, Arthur Gordon, introduced a cheap, external source of labor allegedly to protect and perpetuate the indigenous Fijian way of life in the villages (Lal 1992:4). From 1879 to 1919, forty-two ships making eighty-seven voyages transported some sixty thousand Indian indentured laborers to Fiji (Gillion 1958:1). Indians were recruited for a period of five years under the indenture agreement. At the end of the term, laborers could return to India at their own expense or renew their contracts for an additional five years. The policy of British officials in India, who were responsible for recruiting indentured laborers, 'stemmed from ideas of economic freedom' (Gillion 1958:54). Gillion adds: 'They were products of an age of individualism and laissez-faire and believed that it was the individual's right to sell his labor where he liked, since the prime object was the betterment of the individual and it would be more likely that this would be achieved if each were left free to pursue his own advancement' (1958:54). Underlying this view was the utilitarian logic that our actions should strive to maximize happiness for the greatest number of people. As Jeremy Bentham put it: 'We seek pleasure and the avoidance of pain, they govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think' (1907:1.1). Gordon's successor, William Des Voeux, reiterated the utilitarian standpoint in 1906 when he argued that 'a system cannot be condemned if it proves a benefit for the greatest majority' (In Gillion 1958:58). Aside from being 'universally beneficial', the welfare of each individual was equated with 'individual economic advancement'

(Gillion 1958:58). Although this policy focused on the utility principle, it did not take into consideration the social consequences of migration in relation to the 'Harm Principle' (in particular, the physical, social and mental pain arising from the indenture system). In the end, when the 'happiness' of the colonizer was juxtaposed against the 'happiness' of the indentured laborer, it was the colonizer who gained the maximum benefits from this logic.

During the voyage across the *kala-pani* (black water), it was reported that some *girmitiyas* developed serious mental distress (Leckie 2012:127). The loss of caste and an overall sense of dislocation affected many immigrants. In her doctoral dissertation titled 'Indian Women's Lives and Labor: The Indentureship Experience in Trinidad and Guyana 1845-1917', Sumita Chatterjee draws attention to the discomfort faced while crossing the *kala-pani*: 'the passage was fraught with physical discomfort of narrow confined spaces and mental dilemmas of going away to the unknown. For women, more so than the men, there was an added darkness to this "middle passage" which was especially alienating and threatening. Violence in the form of sexual abuse, rape, and suicide was not unknown on the ships' (Chatterjee 1997: 97). Indentured women laborers bound for Fiji shared a similar experience on the voyage from Calcutta to Fiji. Like other indentured women, their predicament was exacerbated upon their arrival in Fiji where they were subjected to squalid living conditions, lack of privacy, polyandry, rape and sexual assault by overseers, long hours of work on the plantations and wage cuts for low attendance during sickness and pregnancy (Lal, 1985:57). In *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*, indentured laborer, Totaram Sanadhya, recounts how an indentured woman named Narayani from the Navo plantation in Nadi, was forced by an overseer to return to work two or three days after she had given birth even though this was against the government law at the time. Narayani's response was: 'My child is dead. I will not go to work' (Sanadhya 1991:23-4). At this, 'the overseer beat her so much that she became unconscious and fell. A white police sub-inspector came, investigated and had the woman brought to hospital. The overseer was arrested' (Sanadhya 1991:23-4). Although the case reached the Supreme Court in Suva, the overseer was found not guilty by the Supreme Court and was freed (Sanadhya 1991:44). However, the consequence for Narayani was grim. Sanadhya recounts: 'This poor woman was beaten so badly that her head was damaged, and up until today she remains deranged' (1991:23-4). This account of Narayani's plight, retold by Sanadhya, highlights the physical abuse women were subjected to on the sugarcane plantations during indenture.

Another factor that contributed significantly to the social and mental stress experienced by women laborers during the indenture period was the disproportionate number of men to women. The ratio of forty adult women to one hundred adult men was generally adhered to as per the requirement of the Emigration Laws and Regulations of India. In their 1916 'Report on Indentured Labor', Charles Freer Andrews and William Pearson argued that this disproportion between the sexes was 'mostly responsible for the abnormal number of murders and kindred crimes among Indians' (17). The official term used to describe the motive for many of these murders was 'sexual jealousy' (Andrews and Pearson 1916:17). From 1885-1920 the majority of the two hundred and thirty murders that took place, were on the account of 'sexual jealousy' (Report: Population of Male and Female Migrants, 1898:9). Sexual jealousy was also identified as the primary cause of suicide among indentured laborers in Fiji (Lal 1992:44).

The exploitative circumstances outlined above incited a series of militant resistances in Fiji. Many of these vocal, public, and sometimes violent, contestations were led by women. In the years between the late 1800s and early 1900s, indentured women workers established a forum called the Indian Women's Committee where they could collectively challenge their multiple oppressions (Mishra, M. 2008:39). Shiasta Shameem narrates how this Committee, colloquially

known as ‘the Women’s Gang’, led a series of protests against the physical, sexual and economic exploitation of indentured women in the cane belts of Fiji (Shameem 1990:274). These resistances arose out of women’s marginalized statuses as laborers, mothers and wives. The most common form of resistance involved physically confronting men who sexually violated indentured women and beating them up. Sometimes the punishment entailed pinning the overseer down and taking turns at urinating on him, or walking over him until he excreted (Naidu 1980:19). Tactics like violence, humiliation and degradation, that indentured women were incessantly exposed to, were consciously employed, in the reverse, to lay bare the impact of male violence. This method of resistance not only furthered a mutual dependence among women but also involved drawing indentured men into the ‘orbit of plantation resistance’ (Shameem 1990:274). Thus the activism of indentured women in the early 1900s could not be separated from a partnership with men who shared, to borrow an expression from postcolonial theorists, ‘the experience of the politics of oppression and repression’ (Ashcroft et al 1995:250). Indentured women workers also led strikes and riots in Suva, Rewa and Navua during the 1920s to protest against the high cost of living and low wages (Shameem 1990:337-339 and Mishra, M. 2008:39). In this sense, to borrow the words of Chatterjee, ‘The female worker was not a voiceless victim or object of recasting, but negotiated the differing terrains of patriarchal norms at levels of resistance and even coalition’ (1997:10).

As a consequence of the dismal working and living conditions outlined above and the numerous attempts by indentured laborers to resist their exploitation, it is no surprise that some indentured laborers developed mental disorders. Fiji’s Colonial Secretary and Chief Medical Officer, Dr. William MacGregor, commented in 1884: ‘Fiji is a great sufferer from the arrival of insane and incurable persons’ (CSO MP 86/1884). MacGregor proceeded to play a critical part in introducing lunacy legislation in Fiji and was instrumental in establishing the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva in 1884 (Leckie 2012:123). Like the other colonies, lunacy legislation in Fiji was modelled closely on the British system and as a result the management practices and philosophies guiding the treatment of the insane were rooted in British experience (Swartz 1996:3). While this was evident in the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva, a significant difference between Fiji and some of the other colonies, was that indentured laborers shared the same asylum with Europeans, indigenous Fijians and other Pacific islanders. However, the ‘wards were demarcated according to gender and race’ and ‘the quality of accommodation was different’ (Leckie 2005:318).

Prior to 1920, ‘almost all of the Indo-Fijian patients in the asylum were *Girmitiyas*. Some were mentally ill before recruitment to Fiji; others found their mental state deteriorated during the voyage or was induced by the severe conditions on Fiji’s plantations’ (Leckie 2012:125). Fiji’s Governor from 1880-1885, William Des Voeux, concluded in his exchange with the secretary to the Government of India in 1885 that these ‘lunatics’ should be returned to India because ‘for India the cost of taking proper care of such patients would probably be much less than here, while residence in their own country would in such cases increase the probability of a restoration to health’ (CSO MP 2886/1885). Although insanity could have resulted from the social turmoil as a consequence of indenture, and this is evident in Narayani’s story and reports of patients at the Public Lunatic Asylum with severe disorders discussed in Jacqueline Leckie’s work (2005 & 2012), it is also arguable that this label may have been prematurely imposed upon indentured subjects who failed to meet the expected productivity threshold due to physical inability or a conscious refusal to work. It is this diagnosis of uselessness and dementia that the article will now interrogate through the plight of Dhurma.

## Dhurma – The ‘Idiot’

Dhurma, the daughter of one Meetoo, soundlessly slips into Fiji’s colonial/indenture records on 1 June, 1883, as she prepares to board the ship *Bayard* from depot 1160 in Garden Reach, Calcutta (E-Pass 2021). The regulations at the time stipulated that the indentured laborers should be examined by the Resident Depot Medical Officer, the Depot Surgeon and the Surgeon-Superintendent prior to the departure of the ship. One can only assume that Dhurma underwent all the required medical assessments before it was verified that she was ‘a fit Subject for Emigration’ and ‘free from all bodily and mental disease’ (E-Pass 2021). This endorsement appears on her Emigration Pass below.

**WOMAN. 2021**

Ship's Name *Bayard*  
 Ship No. *445* Fiji Emigration Agency  
 Calcutta, the *1 June* 1883.

Depot No. *1160*  
 Name *Dhurma*  
 Caste *Bojomon*  
 Father's name *Meetoo*  
 Sex *Female*  
 Age *36*  
 Zillah *Cawnpore*  
 Pargannah or Thanna *Sikindra*  
 Village *Koschitta*  
 Occupation *Laborer*  
 Name of next-of-kin *Barrickrai son Koschitta*  
 If married, to whom *No*  
 Height *5-11*  
 Marks *Scars right arm*

Certified that I have examined and passed the above-named as a fit Subject for Emigration, and that she is free from all bodily and mental disease, and has been Vaccinated.

*[Signature]* Surgeon-Superintendent. *[Signature]* Depot-Surgeon.

I hereby certify that the woman above described (whom I have engaged as a laborer on the part of the Government of Fiji, where she has expressed a willingness to proceed to work for hire) has appeared before me and the Protector of Emigrants, who has explained to her all matters concerning her duties as an Emigrant, according to Section XXXVIII of Indian Emigration Act No. VII. of 1871.

*[Signature]* Protector of Emigrants, Calcutta. *[Signature]* Govt. Emigration Agent for Fiji.

W & A. H. Roberts and Co., Printers, Calcutta—No. 46—S-33.

In the E-Pass, Dhurma is uniquely assigned the number 2021 to confirm her status as an indentured laborer bound for Fiji. The E-Pass contained ‘comprehensive data on the demographic character of the indentured laborers’ (Lal 2004:30) and was sent to Fiji in the custody of the Surgeon-Superintendent of the ship. This one page document – a text of history in itself – presents a snapshot of the personal circumstance of this thirty-six year old woman from the city of Kanpur (formerly Cawnpore) in Uttar Pradesh (E-Pass 2021).

Although the only visual portrait offered of Dhurma is that she was four feet eleven inches tall and had a scar on her left shin (Emigration Pass 2021), the E-Pass highlights social markers that may enhance our rereading of Dhurma's plight. For instance, it reveals that Dhurma belonged to the Brahmin caste, the caste of priests and teachers and the highest ranking of the four social classes in India (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). Kenneth Gillion explains that 'the Emigration Agencies naturally preferred the agricultural castes because they were accustomed to manual labor and less likely to become dissatisfied when put to work on a plantation' (1958:98). In fact, certain classes, like the Brahmins, were altogether refused emigration because they were not used to manual labor, although some slipped through the recruitment process (Gillion 1958:98). Another important detail in Dhurma's E-Pass relates to her marital status. While she is listed as 'unmarried' when she departed Calcutta, her son Barickrai, is named as her 'next-of-kin' from the village of Koochetta in India (E-Pass 2021). Indeed one may infer that she was a widow or 'a runaway or deserted wife' (Gillion 1958:110). In her article on 'Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago', Rhoda Reddock explains how 'Brahmin widows and those of other twice-born castes who, in spite of certain possible escapes suffered the stigma of impurity, were forbidden to remarry and were forced to live miserable lives in the homes of their in-laws. As a result of this, Brahmin widows comprised a large proportion of those migrating' (Reddock 2008:41). Perhaps this logic could be applied to the case of Dhurma.

After nearly two and a half months at sea, the *Bayard* arrived in the port of Suva with four hundred and ninety four Indians from Calcutta on board, including Dhurma. The date of arrival was 20 August, 1883 (E-Pass 2012). Following a short quarantine period in Nukulau, Dhurma was allotted to the CSR Company in Vuci Maca in Nausori (CSO 1423/1885). Sometime after her arrival in Fiji, the word 'Rejected' mysteriously appears on the right hand side of her E-Pass, scrawled in freely in pencil. The rest of the Pass, which was filled in by the Surgeon Superintendent of the *Bayard*, is written in black pen. It can be suggested here that 'Rejected' functions as the 'paratext' or 'the undecided zone between the inside and the outside' (Genette 1991:261). In his 'Introduction to the Paratext', Gerard Genette contends: 'One does not know if one should consider that they [the paratext] belong to the text or not, but in any case they surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to represent it' (1991:261). For Philippe Lejeune, the paratext is 'the fringe of the printed text which, in reality controls the whole reading' (Lejeune 1975:45). When 'Rejected' is scrolled in by the Agent General or the Colonial Secretary at some point after Dhurma's arrival in Fiji (which means that it functions as the 'belated paratext' or the text that appears later than the original text in the E-Pass), it is implied that she is already refused and branded as 'useless' by the colonial authorities. But this opinion, which is restated in the Plantation Register for 1883, is canceled out when the following entry appears next to Dhurma's name: '~~Rejected~~. Reexamined'. The E-Pass however, remains unchanged.

The records in the Colonial Secretary's Office reveal that after a medical reassessment, Dhurma was contracted to work at the Vuci Maca plantation in Nausori. However in April, 1884, the Manager of the Nausori Mill, James Roberston presented the following grievance to the Acting Agent General of Immigration: 'Dhurma No. 2021 who came to the estate on 24 November 1883 has earned £1.3.1. This woman is not right in her mind and only works when she chooses' (CSO MP 668:1884).

100  
Colonial Sugar Refining Company  
Nausori Mill. 22 April 1884  
1884

To the,  
Acting Agent General,  
of Immigration,  
Suva.

Sir,  
In reply to yours No 344 - 84, dated  
15<sup>th</sup> Inst., I have the honor to state  
that our manager at Buce Maesi,  
writes as follows:-  
"Dhurma No 2021 who came on the  
Estate on the 24 Nov 1883 has earned  
£1. 3. 1. This woman is set right  
in her mind, and only works when she  
chooses".

I have the honor to be,  
Sir,  
Your most obedt. Servant,  
James Robertson

After Robertson's complaint was lodged, Dhurma was admitted to the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva. It is at this point that a colonially sanctioned shift in her status from an indentured laborer to a rejected laborer/'lunatic' takes place. The latter portrayal is reinforced on 13 September, 1884, when the Acting Agent General of Immigration forwarded a list of seven 'Indian Lunatics' to the Agent General with the recommendation that they be sent back to India with the Medical Officer, Dr. Corney (CSO MP 2517/1883). Dhurma appears on this list with the comment 'mentally unsound' next to her name.

B-201)

— Agent General Immigration  
 forwarding list of Indian Quakers  
 recommended they be sent back  
 to India with Mr. Boney

Date 13 Sept. 1884  
 Rec 21 " 1884  
 Ans

---

See R.B. minute

§ forwarded to the Agent General

§ 21 of B.

Returned to Col. 21/10/84

26/10/84

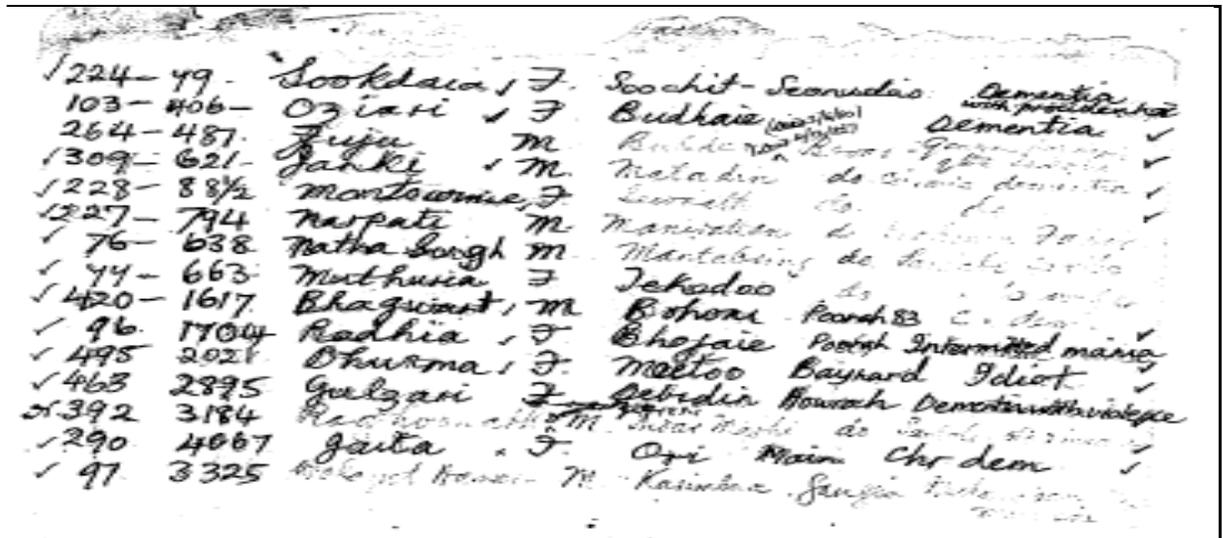
		<u>See "Bonyard" 1883</u>		
1878	434	Gursh	22	M
2021	495	Dhurma	36	F

Handwritten notes in the right margin: "permanently disabled" and "to satisfy records".

By October 1884, Dhurma is still among the eight indentured laborers in the asylum. Like many of them, she was pronounced ‘insane’ since her arrival in Fiji (CSO MP 1432/1885). Jacqueline Leckie states that some asylum records for Dhurma ‘cited an inability or refusal to work’ (2012:130). While it is not clear when Dhurma was discharged from the Public Lunatic Asylum, the colonial records suggest that she did not return to India on the *Boyne* in 1886 with the eight decrepit and ‘insane’ Indians as recommended by the Acting Agent General of Immigration. In fact, Dhurma did not depart Fiji until 14 May, 1889, on the *Moy* (Plantation Register). Thus we can infer that she completed a five year indenture contract. Although the clause under the Indian Ordinance Act clearly stated that ‘permanently disabled’ immigrants may be returned to India (CSO MP 2517/1883), one possibility could be that Dhurma was unable to obtain the medical certificate necessary for her deportation because she could not prove that she had an ‘unsound mind’. The second possibility may be that she chose to conform to the requirements of the indenture contract to avoid being sent back to India after an initial period of resistance. In any case, the colonizer’s notion of ‘insanity’ during the indenture period was certainly questionable. In the words of Sudesh Mishra: ‘the presence of the sane in a table listing the insane testifies to the

madness inherent within colonial reason. To be precise, it pertains to the lunacy of a utilitarian correlation between work, physical health and insanity' (Mishra, S. 2012:15).

In the 1884 list of Indian lunatics in the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva, Dhurma is bestowed another mark – the mark of an 'idiot' (CSO MP 1432/1884).



Following old English law, 'an idiot was one who has been without reasoning or understanding from birth, as distinguished from a lunatic, who became that way' (Online Etymology Dictionary). The manner in which Dhurma is described as both an 'idiot' and a 'lunatic' is contradictory on the one hand but on the other hand draws attention to the ambiguous use of such terms during the colonial period. We are then confronted with the following question: 'If Dhurma was an 'idiot' and/or a 'lunatic' who lacked the aptitude to reason either from birth or later in life (a sign of either amentia or dementia), how could she possibly possess the ability to 'choose' when to work and when not to?' Choice implies a degree of rational deliberation and free will. Intentionally is also a critical factor here. If Dhurma was indentured to the Vuci Maca plantation and completed a five year term as a laborer in Fiji (even if she only worked when she chose to), it would be difficult to argue that she had a condition where her intellectual faculties were never manifested or 'a cerebral disease characterized by an impairment of sensibility, intelligence and will' (Esquirol 1838:283). Thus the allegation that Dhurma lacked the ability to reason may be turned upside down here and 'undone'. One may argue further that her refusal to work may be described in the words of James Mills as 'politically transgressive' (Mills 2000:178). Dhurma may have been 'idle' or (physically) 'incapable' (Mills 2000:179) but she wasn't without reasoning or a 'lunatic'. It seems, as Sudesh Mishra stresses, that 'for colonial reason... the exercise of choice in the matter of work is a clear symptom of madness' (2012:13).

To further evaluate Dhurma's status as a 'lunatic', it is useful to refer to The English Lunacy Act of 1858. The Act states: 'The word 'lunatic', as used in this Act shall mean every person found by due course of law to be of unsound mind and incapable of managing his affairs' (The English Lunacy Act of 1858 in Bhattacharyya 2013:35). In other words, 'a person who is suffering from lunatic symptoms who is still capable of "managing his own affairs" would still have rights. It is only when he is unable to prove his 'social usefulness' that he is labelled a "lunatic"' (Bhattacharyya 2013: 36). But what did it mean to be 'socially useful' during this period? Did this entail exhibiting 'the quality of utility and practical worth'? (Merriam Webster

Dictionary Online). Or was social usefulness synonymous with economic usefulness and labor productivity? As this distinction is not explained in the Act, the existing shroud over the recruit with the 'unsound mind' remains. What can be deduced however, it that there was definite correlation between an unsound mind and the lack of desire for individual economic advancement.

As the prevention of economic losses was a guiding factor for the British colonial administration in Fiji and more generally, persons who were not contributing to economic productivity and expansion were required to conform to these requirements or return to India. Once labeled a lunatic, 'the presumption was that the person in question continued to be of unsound mind until the contrary is shown with the onus being on those who assert it to prove that he was of sound mind' (The English Lunacy Act in Bhattacharyya 2013:37). Since Dhurma did not return to India until after the completion of a five year indenture term, it is possible to deduce that the 'diagnosis of sanity' was reinforced following a short period in the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva. Another possibility would be that she was eventually left alone by the authorities to work when she chose to for the five year term. Whatever the case may be, Dhurma's 'refusal to work' from 1883 to 1884 (at least) may be read on the one hand as a 'self-regulating vice' or a defective trait of character that resulted in harm (Mills Harm Principle) to the agent herself and to some extent the economic interests of the colonial administration. Yet, given that her deviant behavior was not a threat to society, perhaps this 'self-harm' could be read as a reaction to a colonially constructed system of indentured labor that triggered harm to Dhurma. In this sense, Dhurma's 'inaction' which is distinct from 'insanity' may be interpreted as a form of resistance towards a system that set out to exploit her.

### **Other 'Useless' 'Madwomen' in Fiji during Indenture**

The above account of Dhurma, the alleged 'madwoman' in the sugarcane plantation, does not exist in isolation. There are other examples of indentured women in Fiji in the 1880s whose synonymous categorization as 'useless' and 'lunatics' is worth drawing attention to. The case of sixty year old Koolmantia (E-Pass 4801) is an excellent illustration of the easy slippage between these categories. Koolmantia arrived in Fiji on the Ship *Main* on 16 February, 1885, and was allocated to the Rewa Sugar Plantation in Koronivia. The same year she appears in an exchange titled 'With Regard to Useless Indian Migrants' (CSO MP 742/1885). On the second page of the same correspondence, she is listed under the sub-heading 'Insane Indian Migrants' (CSO MP 742/1885). In the documents relating to Koolmantia, she is classified as 'useless' and a 'lunatic' yet she does not seem to display any symptoms of a mental disorder. Her case exemplifies the frequent conflation between the terms 'useless' and 'lunatic' as a means of dismissing anyone who was not contributing to economic productivity in the colony and furthering the utilitarian logic of individual economic advancement. Finally, the authorities declare that sixty year old Koolmantia who should not have been recruited by the Emigration Agent in Calcutta in the first place because of her age, is 'blind and unfit for service in the colony' (CSO MP 742/1885). Upon production of a 'medical certificate of inability' (CSO MP 1429/1885) she is sent back to India on 7 November, 1885.

The case of twenty-two year old Motowinie who arrived in Fiji on the *Berar* on 29 June, 1882 (CSO MP 1423/1885), draws attention to another unsteady categorization of lunacy. Motowinie's E-Pass number 887½ is unusual because of the inclusion of ½ after the number 887. It appears to be an error that has been duplicated in all colonial correspondence relating to her. In any case, these correspondences highlight that Motowinie was 'insane upon arrival' and suffered

from ‘chronic dementia’ (CSO MP 668/1884). However, in the document titled ‘With Reference to Insane Indian Immigrants’ (CSO MP 1423/1885), we learn that Motowinie was sent to work at the Deuba plantation. It is stated that her gross earnings in Fiji totaled 2.17.9. In addition to this, it is noted that she ‘earns over £30 by prostitution in Suva’ (CSO MP 1423/1885). While there is no record of her being admitted to the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva, Motowinie is sent back to India on the *Boyne* in 1886 with the ‘8 Decrepit and Insane Indian Immigrants’ (CSO MP 997/1886). Yet she could not really be classified as ‘economically useless’ and was able to earn a living either through plantation work or prostitution. It would be difficult to argue that she was ‘incapable of managing her affairs’ (The English Lunacy Act of 1858 in Bhattacharyya 2013:35) if she made a conscious decision to travel to Suva to sell her sexual labor. In this sense it may be suggested that Motowinie was portrayed as exhibiting a sexual excess, thus conforming to the colonial stereotype of the ‘sexually loose’ indentured Indian woman, which is also evident in Jaita’s account below.

Jaita arrived in the Port of Suva on 30 April, 1885, on the ship *Main*. Her E-Pass revealed that she hailed from Akbapur in the district of Basti in Uttar Pradesh and belonged to the *Thakur* caste (4957). The *Thakurs* made up the landowner caste (Gillion 1958: 98) and Jaita’s E-Pass identified her as a *Thakurani* (Queen of the *Thakurs*). Unlike Dhurma and Motowinie, Jaita was unallocated to a plantation. However, she still enters Fiji’s indenture history via the one-page E-Pass and other colonial records that present her as a potential laborer and simultaneously brand her as an ‘imbecile’ and ‘lunatic’. When the paratext ‘imbecile’ is penciled in at the top of Jaita’s E-Pass, next to the number 4957, she is derogatorily branded as ‘stupid’ or an ‘idiot’ (Oxford Dictionary Online). From French *imbécile* and Latin *imbecillus*, the root origin of the word imbecile is ‘weak’ or ‘weak minded’ (Merriam Webster Dictionary Online). In the sixteenth century, it was used to refer to a ‘physically weak’ person (Oxford Dictionary Online). Although no longer in technical use now, as this definition is considered offensive, an imbecile was ‘a person of the second order in a former and discarded classification of mental retardation, above the level of idiocy, having a mental age of seven or eight years and an intelligence quotient of 25 to 50’ (Dictionary.com Online). In other words, a ‘person affected with moderate mental retardation’ or ‘an intellectually disabled person’ (Merriam Webster Dictionary Online).

In the minutes of the Quarterly Meeting of Visitors at the Public Lunatic Asylum in September 1885, Jaita was one of the fourteen patients in the Asylum. It was noted that she suffered from ‘chronic dementia’ (CSO MP 1423/1885). The following entry appeared alongside her name in the minutes of the Public Lunatic Asylum, ‘Jaita. Female. Indian. Admitted under an order of B. G. Corney Esquire Acting Agent General for Immigration. Medical Certificate B. G. Corney Esqf. M.R.G.S. W. M. Gregor Esquire. M. D. Admitted 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1885’ (CSO MP 2600/1885). Three days after Jaita is admitted to the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva, several exchanges take place between the Emigration Agent Calcutta, the Agent General of Immigration and the Emigration Agent for Fiji with regard to Indian Emigrants who developed insanity after their dispatch from India. In the final letter, The Emigration Agent for Fiji writes: ‘Sir, I had the honor to state with reference to my letter No. 502/619 of the 11<sup>th</sup> April 1885 that the Protector of Emigrants informs me that the Government of Bengal is pressing him for a Report regarding the seven Indian Emigrants who developed insanity after their dispatch from India’ (CSO MP 2700/1885). He continues, ‘Speaking specifically of the woman, Jaita, who was dispatched by myself in the *Main*, I can safely say that it is impossible [emphasis by the Agent General of Emigration] that she should have been insane while she was in the depot for a period of 28 days.

Had she even been weak-minded, it must have been detected in the course of the numerous examinations she underwent (CSO MP 2700/1885).

One could suggest that Jaita's alleged categorization as an 'imbecile' could be read in terms of physical weakness rather than mental illness. It is possible that Jaita, the Queen of the *Thakurs* (*Thakurani*), was unaccustomed to manual labor and thus rejected this form of work. *Thakur*, from Sanskrit *Thakurra*, means 'idol or deity' and was used as a title of respect (Encyclopedia.com). The common practice was for *Thakurs* to employ *Halvahas* to till the land. 'A *Thakur* always needed *Halvahas* because, as an upper caste, he was not supposed to till his land himself. In fact, touching the handle of the plough was a sacrilege that would require atonement' (Prasad 2017:np). As an upper-caste Hindu, Jaita's imbecilic state may be linked to the fact that she was unfamiliar with manual labor and possibly had not engaged in such work prior to coming to Fiji. Gillion writes in relation to the *Thakurs* and the Brahmins: 'These high-castes were not supposed to work on the land with their own hands' (1958:99). Physical weakness combined with lack of knowledge with regards to tilling the land or downright refusal to work based on status/caste may have contributed to the colonizer's categorization of Jaita as an 'imbecile'.

The second belated paratext on Jaita's E-Pass – 'everybody', which is penciled in next to 'If married, to whom' – was blank in the original version of the E-Pass. The context of indenture, in particular, the disproportionate rate of men to women in the coolie lines, is a critical factor here. During this period, colonial and Indian officials were concerned with the eroding moral status of the so-called 'simple, ignorant, coolie woman' (Andrews and Pearson 1916:11). The coolie woman was often juxtaposed against the 'contemporary Victorian ideal' (Chatterjee, 1997:41) and the middle-class Indian woman who was identified with virtues of chastity, honor (*izzat*), discipline and devotion. In comparison, descriptions of indentured women pivoted around vices like promiscuity and shame (Mishra, M. 2012:60). In this sense, Victorian and middle-class Indian women were the benchmark for assessing morality among indentured women in Fiji. Jaita deviated from that benchmark and was looked down upon as she was equated with sexual promiscuity. It is also likely that Jaita turned to prostitution to survive during the one year she resided in Fiji as a 'lunatic' who was not a laborer (aside from the time spent in the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva). Perhaps, like Motowinie she chose to trade one form of oppression (indentured work) for another (sexual work). In May 1886, Jaita returned to India on the *Boyne* with Motowinie (CSO MP 997/1886). *The General Register for Immigrants* recorded next to Jaita's name 'Unalloted, Lunatic, 30 years, returned Boyne, 1886'.

### **The 'Madwoman' Undone**

This article has attempted to interrogate and undo the historically fixed trope of the 'useless' indentured 'madwoman' in Fiji in the 1880s. It began by highlighting how constructions of 'madness' during indenture were shaped by the convergence of discourses of Western medical psychology and British Colonial ideology that emphasized racial and social control. Women who deviated from colonial/patriarchal norms during a time of individual economic advancement and universal benefits for the greatest number of people were deemed 'useless' and 'unproductive'. In some cases, the category of 'uselessness' was coupled with allegations of 'dementia' or an 'unsound mind'. It is important to stress that the article does not dispute that some indentured women developed cerebral diseases like dementia as a consequence of the difficult passage across the *kala-pani* and/or the appalling working and living conditions in Fiji. However its central concern has been to contest murky allegations of 'dementia' couched around notions of

unproductivity and sexual deviance, for example, the way the 'madwoman' was sometimes synonymously labeled an 'idiot', 'imbecile' and 'prostitute' in official exchanges. On the basis of the diagnosis of 'dementia', women like Dhurma and Jaita were sent to the Public Lunatic Asylum to cultivate and reinforce the diagnosis of 'sanity'. In this sense, the category of 'the unsound mind' was employed by the colonial authorities to discipline Dhurma who was deemed economically 'useless' in the expansion of the colony because she did not meet the productivity threshold expected of her in the sugarcane plantations. Yet it would be difficult to argue that she was 'socially useless' or incapable of managing their own affairs. Aversion to work, for whatever reason including caste and upbringing, should be read as aversion to work, not lunacy. Moreover, if we situate the plight of the so-called 'madwoman' within the context of women's resistance that was taking place in the sugarcane plantations in Fiji in the late 1800s and early 1900s, then perhaps one could suggest that Dhurma was rebelling against a system that oppressed her by choosing when to work and by rejecting the type of work that was imposed upon her. Jaita and in particular, Motowinie, responded to their oppression by deciding what type of work to engage in, thus highlighting their preference for sexual labor over plantation labor. Thus, when the figure of the 'useless 'madwoman' is excavated and scrutinized carefully via the apparatus of minor and feminist history, women like Dhurma, Jaita and Motowinie may finally be granted a space in history that is not stifled by the colonizer's multi-faceted construction of madness.

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