

# **‘Bending Closer to the Ground’: Girmit as Minor History**

Sudesh Mishra

This essay begins with a set of questions. What happens to indenture history when those subject to its logic describe it from their own perspective by coining a new term? What are we to make of an insane Indian woman whom history notices, and admits into the archive, only because she breaches the mental and spatial regulations of those responsible for making history? Is it possible to grapple with a history where the breaking of wind by a prisoner at 8pm constitutes a punishable offence and is duly recorded? ‘The ordinary apparatus of historiography’, writes Ranajit Guha, ‘is most at ease when made to operate on those larger phenomena which visibly stick out of the debris of the past’ and ‘tends to ignore the small drama and fine detail of social existence, especially at its lower depths’ (138). My questions do not relate to the ordinary apparatus of historiography. They concern those phenomena that 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. To answer them we have to descend into the lower depths of indenture history.

Minor history is not defined by the absence of momentous events; it is characterized, rather, by the presence of quasi-events, or events whose eventful status is in dispute, inside the theatre of major history. It is made up of small dramas that inhabit the lower depths in the guise of footnotes, fragments, anecdotes, digressions, fleeting testimonies, parentheses, curious asides, affective depositions, and the like. They form the strange detritus employed in the large-scale drama of history, but remain slightly at odds with and aloof from the series driving the main plot. Hence they are excluded in the very act of inclusion. Seen as so many bumps on the road, they are not expected to alter the course of the journey or the intended destination. Yet they exist as part of the road and in cross-purposeful relation to it. Sometimes, too, they wait dumbly in archival crypts, and, when summoned, turn into spectres or the becoming-bodies of possible events.<sup>1</sup> The marginalia of history, since they lack the eventfulness proper to serial events that link up to form the major story, operate like subconscious entities, interrupting the series in its inexorable pursuit of an argument. Quasi-events fall below the bar of the main narrative by dint of their questionable relevance as events proper, and their most obvious exemplar

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida describes the spectre as ‘becoming-body’ with ‘neither soul nor body, and both one and the other’ (6).



is the footnote. A footnote has the potential to lead a thought astray, but, if not posited at the bottom of the argument, brings into view the stray thought in all its privation. Banished to an area below the bar, to the hinterland of the thesis proper, it remains tantalizingly in touch with the argument, tempting it with wayward thoughts, contrary assertions and radical departures. The footnote is the dangerous supplement that may not enter the upper text in some primal and untamed condition precisely because it will upend the narrative integrity of the text proper.<sup>2</sup> A footnote of this type is the exception generated by the argument as a condition of its own possibility. As an exception it is included in the text. Yet it is excluded in the moment of inclusion in order for the narrative to safeguard its unity. The exception, in short, constitutes the norm in the figure of an excluded inclusion just as the footnote is a textual fragment banished from the text in which it is included.<sup>3</sup> The exception demonstrates how the argument (as norm or law or rule) is constituted in relation to it, but it also evinces the potential of a becoming-event that vexes the rule without usurping it. My point is that historical exceptions have the habit of throwing open unusual vistas into what we think we know of history. They violate the rule, and this violation plays a part in constituting the rule in the first instance, without assuming its place. The rule is displaced, yes, but not replaced. Indeed, exceptions succeed in complicating prior assumptions and received norms by opening up an arena for small interventions. In their difference from canonical accounts in which they figure, minor histories act as supplements that haunt, and therefore put off, the self-presence of dominant histories. 'Hegemony', writes Derrida, 'organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony' (37). By deferring the self-presence of big dramas, exceptions decline to let the norm settle into anything resembling the normative. They do not so much attempt to summon up the peculiar in our experience of the commonplace, as disclose the dynamic of calibrated events on which momentous histories are founded. In the sliding scale of eventfulness, certain details, by dint of being small dramas or quasi-events or exceptions, lack the eventfulness proper to the narrative series, with the result that they fall below the radar even when recorded. Although noted, they are seldom noteworthy. To invoke the quasi-event as an exception is to listen to history murmuring in the minor key against its own striving for plenitude and finality. Minor history is 'under-voiced', or, which is the same thing, delivered *sotto voce* in the midst of the clamorous conversation. It is only possible to hear it by 'bending closer to the ground' (Guha 138). A newfound intimacy with the ground has the potential to restore to history what it includes but barely registers

---

2 In his 'Introduction' to Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Leo Bersani remarks that 'footnotes play the role of the psychoanalytic unconscious in this work' but that 'the material of the footnotes will be allowed into the text proper—into the quite proper text—only if its sexual components are expunged' (xiv).

3 My argument on the exception is derived from Giorgio Agamben's philosophical account of it (see Agamben, *passim*).



on its Richter scale of significant events. Toni Morrison once described pasts that fall through the cracks of history as disremembered pasts to be invoked through acts of 'rememory', by which she means the mind's potential to have a memory of memory itself (Morrison 118, 215). Minor history involves such acts of rememory.

## Girit as Exception

The exception that murmurs to us first is the twice-stressed noun, girit, for so long misheard by history. A common error of dominant scholarship has been to treat indenture and girit as peas in a pod. Girit is held to be 'agreement' in a vulgarly distorted form. Indenture, understood as a legal compact between consenting parties, is made synonymous with girit, a neologism employed by plantation workers to refer to a time of non-agreement. Whether girit was a deliberate coinage or an error of tongue, or what M.K. Gandhi once called 'a corrupt form of the English agreement' (136) bears little relation to its status as a sign embodying an intention that is sharply at odds with indenture.<sup>4</sup> The latter cannot be decoupled from the complex and interwoven intentions of its far-flung administrators. These include governors, secretaries of states, colonial secretaries, medical and police officers, prison superintendents, stipendiary magistrates, emigration agents, protectors, ships' captains, planters, managers, inspectors, overseers, and the like. The intentions of these officials are usually expressed in non-affective prose where sensory categories are excised as a stylistic rule of thumb. Classical historiography, as historians know only too well, apes this logic by employing the same ruse of objectivity and dispassion with minimal reference to *suggestio falsi* (or 'misrepresentation committed') or *suppressio veri* (or 'representation omitted').<sup>5</sup> Objectivity, it has been said, is a ruse directed at the disempowered (Fanon 37). One set of official intentions are weighed up and ranked against another in a series to mount an argument concerning the event proper. Regardless of the force or sagacity of the insights, it is clear that the historian's intentions are implicated in an official view of the event under discussion. Acts and intentions not upholding the series converging on the event proper are admitted as exceptions or quasi-events in the lower strata of the narrative. In the case of girit, there is an added urgency to negate its condition of exception by making it swappable with agreement. The upshot is that a subaltern sign brimming with the intentions and affects of giritiyyas is fatally compromised. Elsewhere I have argued that girit breaks away from

---

4 Intention is not the material fallacy of presence, but rather its ghost generated in and by writing: it refers to the absent presence or present absence of authorial drives.

5 Perry Anderson reflects on the distinction between the two types of distortion in an essay on Andreas Hillgruber (see Anderson 180).



its root noun, agreement, in all three linguistics senses—semantic, acoustic and graphic—and returns to historiography those dimensions of social experience it renounces, namely affects, humours and passions.<sup>6</sup> Giritmit contradicts the drift towards a future positive that defined the collective intentions of workers who signed up (see Mishra, ‘Time and Giritmit’). It is of course impossible to separate the dreams and dramas of the recruits from the fantasies and manipulations of various agents and officials in any account of such a drift. All we can say with certitude is that, instead of a time that lived up to the agreement in deed form, the recruits encountered a time to which they had not agreed. Giritmit as a sign of non-agreement relates to indenture as the exception relates to the rule in the paradox of an excluded inclusion. What is lost in eliminating the distinction between giritmit and agreement is the affective history of a non-agreement. It is precisely this distinction that restores giritmit to its proper place as a quarrel inside and against indenture in its sanctioned form. Giritmit is a foreign body within indenture history. It signifies the betrayal of a positive aspiration in the traumatic time of non-agreement. It speaks not in the disciplined monotone of history, but in the erratic and affective polyphony of the witness. This witness, the giritmitiya, is born, as the name implies, in giritmit, and only understands one genre, the *gawa* or testimony.

It is evident that historiography is not resistant to the genre of the testimony. However, it includes testimonies within its system of representation on the condition that they are purged of affects, humours and passions. It is this sleight-of-hand that results in giritmit’s correlation with agreement. As a sign of a time of non-agreement, however, giritmit exists as an exception inside the rule precisely because it is an affective noun that resists the disciplinary protocols of history. This affective aspect is best exemplified in its chameleon-like capacity to mutate into the verb form ‘to suffer’. Perhaps the most important attestant to giritmit in the context of Fiji was a young man of seventeen who shipped on Jumna II in 1893. His name was Totaram Sanadhya. Sanadhya left behind two invaluable accounts of the coolie pratha (system), *Fiji Men Mere Ikkis Varsh* (*My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*) and ‘Bhut Len Ki Katha’ (‘The Story of the Haunted Line’). The second text, although short, affords an exceedingly rich account of the time of non-agreement, and I should like to focus mostly on it. But let me first illustrate my point regarding the workers’ intentions by citing a fragment from *Ikkis Varsh*:

The arkati explained things to the people there [in the halfway house]:  
‘Look, brothers, the place where you will work you will never have to

---

<sup>6</sup> Michel de Certeau comments insightfully on the part played by ‘positivist scientificity’ of the nineteenth century in the expulsion of humours and passions (25-27).



suffer any sorrows. There will never be any kind of problems there. You will eat a lot of bananas and a stomach-full of sugar cane, and play flutes in relaxation'. (Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years* 34)

In this excerpt the arkatī's fantasy projects a Hindu idyll associated with the flute-playing Krishna. The fantasy is consolidated in a subsequent paragraph by the recruiter's reference to the 'heaven' of Fiji (*My Twenty-One Years* 34). It is not difficult to imagine how this picture might have worked on the minds of illiterate peasants, many of whom were poor and internally displaced, to effect an enchantment. If it is universally true, as has been claimed, that a large proportion of recruits believed that they were duped into signing up, it is because the time of girit was not the object of their intentions.<sup>7</sup> The general trend of the recruits towards a future positive, in a nutshell, transcended the diverse causal reasons adduced by history for their departure. Once sentenced to systemic drudgery in the colony, however, the penny dropped. The imagined future time of agreement turned into the present and actual time of non-agreement. 'Bhut Len Ki Katha' forms a compelling testimony to an experiential time of shipwreck and disenchantment.

Sanadhya's account, it is critical to note, is inseparable from the intentions of his ghost scribe and translators. One would not want to underestimate the role played by his mediators in this regard. Yet, just as girit attests to the existence of life-worlds that no longer exist, so the translated text attests to the presence of an irreducible voice that evades the act of translation. It is this voice that I seek to comprehend in the account that follows. 'Bhut Len Ki Katha' begins with an explanation of how the author, under instruction from an overseer, becomes the sole resident of a coolie line capable of housing seventy two adult recruits. Rat-infested, mosquito-ridden and smothered in overgrown weeds, the line, it turns out, is haunted by the ghosts of dead indigenous workers and shunned by the living. The possessed line becomes a spatial metonym for a time of non-agreement. It is situated between two worlds and two times, that is to say, between the worlds of the living and the dead and between the times of agreement and counter-agreement. Signifying an intermediate zone of non-agreement in which the worker is cut off from tangible and meaningful forms of human intercourse, the line can only be peopled by the living dead. In keeping with this in-between logic, Sanadhya finds himself suspended between two terrors. There is the terror of the supernatural on one hand and the fear of violating the overseer's injunction on the other. In the end he decides he has a better prospect of warding off the first evil. "'We will see when the ghost comes'", he declares to a compatriot, "He is the ghost of the line and I am the Company's ghost'" (Sanadhya, 'Haunted Line' 108). If the ghost of the line is

---

<sup>7</sup> John D. Kelly, for instance, comments that 'the conviction that the recruitment was a "dirty trick", a sham, that recruiters lied and deceived, seems to have been near universal among the Fiji labourers' (see Kelly 28).



one type of revenant, that of a dead worker returning to the world of the living, then the ghost of the Company is another, that of the living worker entering the world of the dead. Both represent the living dead subject to the regulated, and therefore inhuman, time of girmity.

It could be argued that the entire testimony revolves around Sanadhya's ordeal to be rid of his alienated and spectral condition, reinforced at every turn by scenes of hunger, violence and misery, to the point that he tries to end his own life. Ghostliness, and this appears to be the suggestion, is the potential state of beings whose life-worlds are degraded to a level devoid even of simple forms of social intercourse. Prior to arriving at this extreme stage, which may be described as the limit-point of the human, Sanadhya attempts to reclaim his agency as a cultural, religious and biopolitical subject. He cuts down the grass, cleans up the room and takes to intoning verses from the Gita. In a short while, he wins over an audience of listeners and becomes known as the 'exorciser of the haunted line' ('Haunted Line' 109). On a Sunday, reprieved from regulated drudgery, he goes for a stroll and comes across girmityas singing ballads and songs of devotion, reciting the Ramayana, strumming the tanpura and wrestling on the ground, but even these communal forms of activity fail to offset the many scenes of deprivation, abuse, estrangement and dejection. He sees famished workers abasing themselves before a sirdar; a friend is manhandled by an overseer and his tulsi beads desecrated; and a woman washing rags by a stream, made distraught by her severance from loved ones, including a three-year old child, is filled with thoughts of death (109-10). 'Oh Sister', laments another, 'how will we be able to endure five years of girmity' (110). Indeed, witnessing the plight of girmitya women, Sanadhya's sense of outrage, which is bound up with patriarchal assumptions about honour and chastity, intensifies. Finally, it erupts in the form of the direct address to a legendary, anthropomorphised India:

'Alas, Bharat, you are old and timid and unable to see though you have eyes. Your knowledge and wisdom no longer count for anything. You have become heartless. ... You seem to have lost your manly strength: don't you have any concern for your self-respect? ... Is there any other place like you whose women are enslaved and sent overseas? No, no, no other would be prepared to endure such an indignity.' (109)

The intriguing aspect to this polemic is that it is directed at Bharat and not at the India of the British Raj. The suggestion is that Indians, lacking in real agency, have become humiliated bystanders to their own history. Far from active producers of ethical knowledge and defenders of *satitva*, they silently collaborate in the shipment of women-as-commodities. In a tone alternating between chastisement and contempt, the exemplary witness turns his feelings of betrayal into a rousing call-to-arms.



The straw that breaks the camel's back is precisely the issue of agency. Sanadhya discovers that he cannot exercise even the minimal agency reserved for social subjects. The analogy with ghosts becomes even more apt in this context, in that apparitions too lack agency. The story, in any case, unfolds as follows. Several workers pay the author a visit and he provides them with a meal, thus observing a standard rule of propriety while upholding a cultural practice that equates guests with gods. 'Atithi devo bhavah', as Taittiriya Upanishad has it. However, in exercising this modest right to hospitality, he ends up consuming a whole week's allowance, contravenes the overseer's ban on sharing rations, and is reduced within days to animalistic hunger. 'What a country this is', he exclaims, 'where sharing food is an offence punishable by imprisonment' (108). Racked by the hunger pangs of bare life<sup>8</sup> (and a nervous empathy for rats ensues from this recognition of a shared existence), Sanadhya becomes increasingly exposed to a life-world devoid of simple forms of care and concern. Cut off from human sociality, and subject to the alienating demands of the body, he begins to hallucinate. He imagines he is back in his village and cared for by his mother. "'Come, let me feed you'", she says. Then, lifting me up by one hand and brushing off dust from my hair with another, she takes me inside and gives me food. I drink from my old water bowl and buttermilk from the same old earthen pot. I am surrounded by my childhood friends. One of them asks: "Where have you been all this time". I reply, "Fiji" (110). A spellbinding proper name at the outset of the journey, 'Fiji' here shatters the spell, the mirage vanishes, and the author is returned to the haunted line, alone and unfed. Sanadhya's every attempt to find food ends in defeat. When he uses bitter irony in an attempt to alert the overseer to his condition, he is sent to the hospital for treatment. Worried, he seeks out a fellow Brahmin, but his host, in keeping with the remorseless logic of girit, leaves him by the door and goes off to dine alone. Finally, he runs into some workers drinking cane juice inside the mill, and is offered a cup, but the chemist comes by, seizes the vessel and throws him out. In desperation he decides to end his life on the third night. His plans are interrupted by a knock on the door. The visitors turn out to be four hungry itaukei men, not ghosts as he imagines, returning to their village after a funeral service. One of them, Sam, happens to be a survivor of the sickness that killed the eight indigenous workers. His visitors ask for food, but Sanadhya has none to offer. To his wonder, the men find scraps of rice in a pot from his last meal, and partake of it. They then depart only to return after a couple of hours, accompanied by four others, bearing gifts of sweet potato, yam and vegetables. These they prepare and serve to the giritiya on a plaintain leaf. It is of utmost significance that this gesture of care and concern comes from free men unrelated to the time of girit. Unlike

---

8 'Bare life' here denotes the enforced and artificial reduction to the state of *zoe* and not *zoe* as the condition of animal 'givenness' in nature. I would like to thank members of my Suva Reading Group, and in particular Maebh Long and Russell Smith, for provoking a vibrant discussion around this distinction.



coolie workers, and this is the key point, free men are able to exercise their cultural agency and simple right to hospitality. The living dead resident of bhut len, cut off from agency and sociality in the time of non-agreement, has his life affirmed by non-ghosts and gains insight into what it means to be human again. 'Soon it was daylight', he writes, 'and the beginning of a new life for me' (112). 'Bhut Len Ki Katha' affords a valuable lesson on the figure of the exception. Just as a ghost is an exception to the living social being and its history is the restive and spectral history of solitude, so girmit is an exception to indenture, and its history is the drama of living death played out in a time of non-agreement.

## The Insane Exception

It is the figure of the exception that allows madness to enter history, and along with it the mad subject. The locus of reason, it has been argued, is also the locus of unreason (Foucault, *Madness* 77). Insanity is the exception that resides inside the body of sanity. The whole economy of sanity comes to light with the eruption of its constitutive other, the included excluded, dwelling like our proverbial footnote inside the argument from which it is barred. Sanity is not merely an abstract figure of reason; it is reason's projection and manifestation in built spaces, ranked tables, laws of crime and punishment, social conventions, speech proprieties, sartorial customs, protocols of taste and decency, work schedules, logical modes of argumentation, and so on. It involves the perception of an underlying system that results from the habituation of norms. In identifying the exception within itself, reason admits to a constitutive kinship with madness. When the insane exception is invoked, say in the faux pas or slip of tongue, sanity causes itself to be maddened by voicing, and therefore subsuming, the very quantities it purports to exclude. What lies revealed is a structure of constitutive complicity.

On 29 October 1881, an Indian woman wanders into history by infringing the codes of colonial reason. Her deviant ways render her a figure of exception inside the norm, and therefore newsworthy.<sup>9</sup> Her name is Sookdaie, father's name Soochit, but we are not to know that yet. She is said to loiter around Suva without regard to its socio-spatial arrangement and in a condition of semi-nudity. She will not be confined to the Immigration Depot. Destitute, she is accompanied by a child and 'daily squats ... in the front verandah of the principal hotel hoping no doubt to excite pity and exact Baksheesh' (*The Suva Times*, 29 October 1881). The woman deviates from the order of colonial reason

---

9 Michel Foucault makes a similar point when he observes how minor items 'make the transition from the familiar to the remarkable, the everyday to the historical' by taking on the characteristics of the "'singular", "curious", "extraordinary", unique, or very nearly so, in the memory of man' (see Foucault, *I, Pierre Rivière...* 204).



with regard to space, dress and work. She usurps the central arenas of the new township, offends against sartorial codes of decency, and, in not utilizing her labour power, breaches the main reason for her presence in the colony. For colonial reason, as exemplified in another case, the exercise of choice in the matter of work is a clear symptom of madness.<sup>10</sup> A week later, Sookdaie receives a second notice in the newspaper:

This poor woman ... takes up her position in the most public place possible and gives vent to her lamentation in songs of the most heartrending strains. Strains which not only affect herself to tears but which cannot but affect others. Unfortunately, we cannot tell the burden of her ditty. It is in Coolie or some kindred tongue. Nor can we tell whether she sings to us for pity, or at us in derision. (The Suva Times, 5 November 1881)

Madness is at once affective, capable of possessing the sane and insane alike, and mystifying as a figure of an exception. It moves in that uncanny arena of floating ambivalence where self-pity and derision are conjoined to the point that one cannot tell them apart. A resemblance is forged between two unlikely terms: pity and derision.<sup>11</sup> Ambivalence, being at one with madness, invades the very seat of rationality. Colonial reason fails to decipher the mad song that affects it because it cannot fully grasp the unreason within itself, the enigma of its own insanity producing sanity. Just as indenture is productive of girit, so the sanity of regulated coolie traffic is productive of the insane vagabond. The call goes out to establish an institution, an indigent hospital, to house this figure of exception, this signifier of trauma, whose outrageous presence compels reason to look itself in the mirror. Five months later, now referred to as 'a disgrace to our civilisation' (The Suva Times, 11 March 1882), Sookdaie is still on the loose. Once again, she is a deeply ambivalent figure, reproaching the authorities and bringing shame to the residents. On this occasion, however, she takes over the most powerful edifice of colonial authority:

Of late she has taken up quarters in the Supreme Court verandah and rouses the echoes of her eloquence, now during the night, now at early dawn, as she harangues all and sundry, while she parades the verandah from end to end. (The Suva Times, 11 March 1882)

It is at the site of law that reason turns its abstract logic into material policy; it determines what constitutes crime and therefore punishment, sanctity and therefore blasphemy, sanity and therefore derangement, norm and therefore

---

10 One CSR Company Manager wrote to the Acting Agent General of Immigration in 1884 complaining about a woman named Dhurma who 'is not right in her mind, and only works when she chooses' (CSO MP 241/1886).

11 Michel Foucault comments that the madman 'groups all signs together and leads them with a resemblance that never ceases to proliferate' (Order of Things 49).



abnormality. The mad woman making pronouncements from the verandah of the Supreme Court illustrates the following axiom. Seizing the place of law, the outlaw attests to the lawlessness of a law that engenders it as such; similarly, seizing the place of reason, unreason points to the madness of the reason that gives rise to it. By occupying the place of law, Sookdaie testifies soulfully to the madness at the heart of colonial reason.

Sookdaie's transgressions are noted in *The Suva Times* on a fourth occasion on 27 May 1882, and on 27 September 1883, Governor Des Voeux alerts the Government of India to the presence of coolie lunatics in Fiji.<sup>12</sup> Predictably there is some disagreement on whether the recruits were of unsound mind prior to their departure or after arrival in the colony.<sup>13</sup> By 1884 the anonymous madwoman, most likely responsible for the establishment of the Public Lunatic Asylum in Suva, is listed on an inventory of insane immigrants, and enters history as a proper name and a pass number—79. In the remarks column of the list, it is commented that the woman 'wanders about the town seemingly without restraint',<sup>14</sup> but the comment is crossed out because she is now an inmate of the asylum. The footnote that erupts inside the colonial order, and threatens to send it insane, is incarcerated and returned to its proper place below the bar. The only other contender for the role, Oziari (or Ozeeari as she appears in her Woman's Pass),<sup>15</sup> is confirmed to have died on 2 June 1880, the year before Sookdaie becomes a public nuisance.<sup>16</sup> There is another telling item. The lunatic is said to wander about Suva with her child and Sookdaie's Emigration Pass registers that she is the mother of Pass 87 or five-year old Ramsomjh.<sup>17</sup> Mother and child are by caste Bania and hail from the village of Dholpur in the zillah of Sultanpur. It is of course rare to find members of the trading caste among the indentured emigrants, and one is left to wonder what might have led the twenty-four year old to undertake the voyage.<sup>18</sup> Widows, we know, were often driven out by their families in nineteenth century North India and there is a possibility that Sookdaie and Ramsomjh were victims of this practice. Guha, for instance, observes that 'the largest group of female outcastes was made up ... by Hindu widows ostracized for defying the controls exercised on their sexuality by the local patriarchs' (Guha 158). If so, then colonial and patriarchal reason, as

---

12 CSO MP 241/1886.

13 Both the Surgeon Superintendent and the Depot Surgeon had to certify that the recruit was 'free from all bodily and mental disease'. Obviously there is a lacuna between certification and fact, but it is improbable that recruits of unsound mind travelled on the *Leonidas*. As a result of the widespread hostility in Fiji towards the idea of coolie migrants, Robert Mitchell had taken pains to handpick the recruits at the behest of Sir Arthur Gordon.

14 CSO MP 1432/1885.

15 E/Pass 406 (*Leonidas*).

16 CSO MP 1432/1885.

17 E/Pass 87 (*Leonidas*).

18 In his milestone study, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*, Brij Lal does not list banias in the nine caste groups of female migrants to Fiji (see Lal 140).



manifested in caste-based practices, unite in producing this figure of an insane exception. To be sure, the harder colonial reason attempts to pin down the madness it begets the more illogical becomes its logic. In one list, for instance, recruits diagnosed with dementia, chronic dementia, mania, idiocy and insanity are included alongside a Brahmin fakir, a Panjabi scribe, his wife, and a Muslim munshi.<sup>19</sup> We know from other sources that the fakir, Narpati, the scribe, Natha Sing and his wife, Muthuria, although unfit for work, were of sound mind.<sup>20</sup> Taxonomy, as Michel Foucault has argued, operates by positing identities and differences within the ambit of the table.<sup>21</sup> In terms of our example, the system would function through identifying similarities between different forms of madness and vice versa. The presence, therefore, 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 sanity. It is not for nothing that Natha Singh and Narpati are described as 'useless' in one revealing dispatch.<sup>22</sup> By 1884, unhinged by the madness it begets, colonial reason decides to return the mad to the geographical point of pre-diagnosis. In the month of May, 1886, eight 'decrepit and insane' recruits considered 'incurable and fit to undergo the voyage', are shipped to India on the Boyne.<sup>23</sup> Sookdaie is not among them. One could attempt several inferences here, but that would hardly be the point. The point is that she is worthy of history only when she sends colonial reason into a state of panic with her transgressions. The moment she is interned in an institution to which she gives birth, Sookdaie forfeits her exceptional status and no longer merits notice. Even before she dies, she is dead to history.

## Coda

A month after the Boyne hauls anchor with its depressing cargo, the Colonial Secretary receives a letter from the Visiting Justice recommending the application of twenty lashes to 'an incorrigible idler' by the name of Deen Mahomet. Attached to the letter is a tabulated list of offences with the corresponding punishment in a dialectical system of cause and effect. In the list of offences, which includes malingering, refusal to work and disorderly conduct, is 'breaking wind in Native gaol at 8pm'.<sup>24</sup> For this offence, the prisoner is put on three days of reduced diet. Punishment, we know, is 'a technique for the coercion of individuals' insofar as the body is trained into accepting a form of docility in the acquisition of

---

19 CSO MP 1432/1885.

20 CSO MP 241/1886.

21 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp.71-72.

22 CSO MP 241/1886.

23 CSO MP 997/1886.

24 CSO MP 1325/1886.



new habits and attitudes (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 131). But what is the precise offensive value of this offence? Is it the body's involuntary rebellion against the cellular solitude and regimented monotony of the penal system? Mahomet's wind violates some penal code, and subversively so, and is read as an intentional act that can be brought under control. Not content to discipline physical gestures and mental habits, penal discipline seeks admission into the prisoner's digestive economy, to take hold of those flatulent spaces over which he has little or no hold. Is Deen Mahomet's offensive volition present in an involuntary act of the body? Or does the act tell us something about the coercive intentions of a paranoid reason that must find offence everywhere and mete out punishment through targeted redress? The fact is everything outside will, law, obedience, reason and system; it emanates from the body but the body exercises no control over it; it has the subversive force of sudden laughter, and is equal to it; and it relates to both penal and biological regimes as the exception relates to the rule. Grumbling in the lower depths of Deen Mohamet's anatomy is nothing less than minor history.

*Sudesh Mishra was educated in Fiji and Australia. He is the author of Diaspora Criticism (2006) and is putting together a series of papers on minor history. He is a Professor in the School of Language, Arts and Media, University of the South Pacific.*

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the staff of the National Archives of Fiji for their kind and prompt assistance.

## Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homer Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998.

Anderson, Perry. *A Zone of Engagement*. London: Verso, 1992.

Bersani, Leo. 'Introduction'. *Civilization and Its Discontents*, by Sigmund Freud. London: Penguin, 2002. vii-xxii.

Certeau, Michel de. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995.



- Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, London: Penguin, 1991.
- . *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. London: Routledge, 1971.
- . *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London: Routledge, 1974.
- . 'Tales of a Murder'. In *I, Pierre Rivière....* Ed Michel Foucault. Trans. Frank Jellinek. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1975.
- Gandhi, M.K. *Gandhi's Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Washington DC: Public Affairs, 1948.
- Guha, Ranajit. 'Chandra's Death'. *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1987. 135-165.
- Kelly, John D. *A Politics of Virtue: Hinduism, Sexuality and Countercolonial Discourse in Fiji*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.
- Lal, Brij. *Giritiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*. Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Sciences, 2004.
- Mishra, Sudesh. 'Time and Girit.' *Social Text* (23.1) 2005: 15-36.
- Mishra, Vijay. 'The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorising the Indian Diaspora.' *Textual Practice* 10.3 (1996): 421-447.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. London: Vintage, 1997.
- Sanadhya, Totaram. *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*. Trans. J.D. Kelly and U.K. Singh. Suva: Fiji Museum, 1991.
- . 'The Story of the Haunted Line.' Trans. B. Lal and B. Shineberg. *The Journal of Pacific History* 26.1 (1991): 107-112.
- Tinker, Hugh. *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920*. London: Oxford UP, 1974.