

Mawlee's Murder: A Minor Historical Event

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In memory of Joytika, light.

I

The purpose of this article is to recover a minor historical event – the event of murder. On Tuesday, March 11, 1890, eighteen year old Mawlee was brutally killed at the Rarawai Plantation in Ba, Fiji. After an interval of six to eight weeks, this crime was reported locally in *The Fiji Times* ('Murder in Fiji', 1890: 6) and internationally in *The Advertiser* ('Dreadful Murder at Fiji', 1890: 7) and *Auckland Star* ('Murder at Fiji: A Dreadful Affair', 1890: 5). The publication of these stories coincided with the death sentence meted out to indentured labourer, Dhunnoo, by the Supreme Court in Nausori. On May 5, the Court heard that the accused and deceased were living together as man and wife until Mawlee left Dhunnoo to live with indentured labourer, Badloo. Then on March 11 as Mawlee was returning from work carrying a bundle of firewood, a hoe and a billycan (a metal pot used to carry food), she was confronted by Dhunnoo and dragged into the cane. An eye-witness recounted:

She clasped her hands and implored him not to kill her, saying that she would go and live again with him. The accused then struck her a blow on the hands, severing one completely at the wrist and severing the other all but the skin; he then struck her two blows on the throat, almost cutting her head from the body, only leaving it hanging by a small piece of skin. ('Dreadful Murder at Fiji', 1890: 7)

The deliberate use of the adjective 'dreadful' in the newspaper headlines in *The Advertiser* and *Auckland Star* forewarns readers that this act of 'wife or woman murder by an Indian immigrant' ('Report: Population of Male and Female Indian Immigrants', 1898: 9) was more distressing than those that occurred frequently from 1879 to 1920. Its dreadfulness, in addition to the deliberate, unlawful act of killing that had taken place, is uncovered in the shocking revelation at the end of the accounts. After Mawlee was mutilated and murdered we are told that Dhunnoo picked up the billycan she was carrying and 'by its means drank some of her blood' ('Dreadful Murder at Fiji', 1890: 7).

Although the event of Mawlee's murder was publicised locally and internationally, newspaper conceptions of this event failed to provide a voice for the subjects and a context for the crime. In some ways, the pronouncement of Dhunnoo's death sentence and the act of drinking human blood are accorded prominence over the actual event – that is, the brutal murder and mutilation of an eighteen year old woman in the cane belts in Fiji. Mawlee's voicelessness is particularly disconcerting. What is required here, to borrow the words of Ranajit Guha, is 'a critical historiography [that] 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). Sudesh Mishra's more

recent description of 'minor history' as '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' (2012: 5), is a fitting starting point for this discussion. Mawlee's murder was indeed a 'small drama' - one so small that it did not figure in the mainstream historical scholarship on indenture. Indeed, this absence may have been fostered by the patriarchal assumption that women had no historical significance (Waldijk, 1995: 14). Following Guha and Mishra, this article draws on archival fragments to recover personal, miniscule, details about the primary subjects that were excluded from newspaper conceptions of this event. These include death records, emigration passes, court proceedings and manuscripts from the Colonial Secretary's Office. The article's intent simultaneously intersects with the feminist challenge 'to restore women to history and to restore our history to women' (Kelly-Gadol, 1976: 809).

II: The Context

After Fiji's cession to Britain on October 10, 1874, the Governor General of the British colonial government, Sir Arthur Gordon, introduced a cheap, external source of labour allegedly to protect and perpetuate the indigenous Fijian way of life in the villages (Lal, 1992: 4). Indians were recruited for a period of five years under the indenture agreement. At the end of this term, labourers could either return to India at their own expense or renew their contracts for an additional five years. From 1879 to 1919, forty-two ships making eighty-seven voyages brought some sixty thousand Indian indentured labourers to Fiji (Gillion, 1962: 1). A ratio of forty adult women to one hundred adult men was followed as per the requirement of the Emigration laws and regulations of India. This disproportion between the sexes, Charles Freer Andrews and William Pearson argued in their 1916 'Report on Indentured Labour', was 'mostly responsible for the abnormal number of murders and kindred crimes among Indians' (17).

Andrews and Pearson were also troubled by the eroding moral status of indentured women in Fiji. In the 1916 Report, they juxtaposed virtues expected of middle-class Indian women like chastity, honour (*ijut*), discipline and devotion against vices associated with indentured women like promiscuity and shame (17). Their findings were disseminated in Fiji and throughout the world. When the Indian public learnt in January 1917 that the indentured system would not be abolished for five more years, prominent middle-class women took to the streets and began pleading before 'immense audiences for the honour of their sisters in Fiji' ('Ladies Urge Cancellation of Indentures', 1919: 13). Driven by a similar agenda, Australian and New Zealand women united to form the Australasian Committee of Inquiry into the Social and Moral Conditions of Indentured Women in Fiji in 1918. While this Committee largely furthered patriarchal constructions of morality and femininity, it simultaneously played a critical role in advancing women's health concerns (see Mishra, 2012: 57-70).

At the same time, indentured women established their own committee where they could voice their grievances against the poor living conditions, physical and sexual violence, long hours of work on the plantations, and wage cuts for low attendance during sickness and pregnancy (Lal, 1992: 57). The Indian Women's 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). Given the harsh conditions they were subjected to,

indentured women's resistances to their marginalised statuses as labourers, mothers and wives were often radical and militant. In some situations, Indian and European men who violated women were confronted and physically punished (see Naidu, 1980). In other instances, indentured women challenged their 'multiple oppressions' by organising strikes and riots. For example, the strikes that took place in Suva, Rewa and Navua in the 1920s to petition against the high wages and escalating food prices ('Commission to Enquire into Cost of Living', 1920: 7). What was particularly striking about the activism of women during the indenture period was that their resistances were fostered by intersections with national, regional and global networks and historical circumstances (see Mishra, 2008: 39-56).

III: The Subjects

My attempt to situate Mawlee and Dhunnoo's pasts within the context of indenture briefly described above, begins at the end – with their death records. As indentured, colonised subjects, their roots are traceable through the one-line, handwritten entries in the 'Death Register of Indian Emigrants for 1890-1904'. These records or legacies of the British Empire confirm that Mawlee, the twenty-first death for the year 1890, was murdered on March 11 at the Rarawai Plantation in Ba. Dhunnoo, death number 182, from the same plantation was hanged for murder in Suva on April 17 ('Death Register of Indian Emigrants 1890-1904'). These brief entries are critical because they provide us with the Emigration Pass (E-Pass) numbers for Mawlee and Dhunnoo, thus enabling the retrieval of these Passes from the Fiji National Archives in Suva. The E-Pass, historian Brij Lal, explains: 'is the only document that contains comprehensive data on the demographic character of the indentured labourers' (2004: 30). This record, sent to Fiji in the custody of the Surgeon Superintendent of the ship, contains the following information: the name of the ship, departure and arrival dates, the migrant's depot number, gender, name, caste, father's name, age and district of origin. During the indenture period, the E-Pass was important because it allowed Indian and colonial governments 'to facilitate communication between the labourers in the colonies and their kin in India' (Lal, 2004: 30).

Mawlee's E-Pass states that she was fourteen years old and had a scar on her left knee when she boarded the ship, *Boyne*, bound for Fiji on February 11, 1886 (Number 5986). She was accompanied by her mother and two younger brothers. The passenger list for the *Boyne's* 1886 voyage from Calcutta to Fiji does not include Siveraj, Mawlee's father. Perhaps Mawlee's mother, like numerous other indentured women who migrated under the 'single mother' category, was escaping from a domestic quarrel or economic hardship. It is also possible that she was lured or kidnapped by an unscrupulous recruiter who promised her 'an abundant supply of food and relaxed working conditions' (Lateef, 1987: 2). While we can only speculate why she came to Fiji, we can through the E-Pass trace Mawlee's family's origins. They came from the district or *zila* of Ghazipur in the village of Goranu in Uttar Pradesh, formerly known as the United Provinces (Emigration Pass 5986). Historian Kenneth Gillion notes that: 'The majority of the Indians who went to Fiji under the indentured labour system embarked from Calcutta, and had been recruited in the United Provinces, especially in the densely populated and very poor north-eastern districts' (1962: 4). While there are economic explanations for this trend of migration in impoverished districts, Lal argues that there was a 'long tradition and popularity of colonial emigration in these regions' (2004: 81) in comparison to other parts of India. It is therefore no surprise that Dhunnoo was from the district of Shahabad in the village of Kasiza, also in Uttar Pradesh (Emigration Pass

5657). His E-Pass reveals that, like Mawlee, he was a passenger on the *Boyne*. When the Pass was prepared, he was twenty-six years old, five feet three inches tall and had a pock-marked face (almost certainly from an outbreak of measles) (Emigration Pass 5657).

Archival documents do not indicate where Mawlee and Dhunnoo actually met. Some possibilities include: the holding depot at Garden Reach in Calcutta, during the journey on the *Boyne*, or later at the Rarawai Plantation in Ba, Fiji, where they were stationed. The holding depot where indentured labourers were housed for weeks before they boarded a ship was one of the first spaces where the social and physical impact of the indenture agreement was felt. Parbattie Ramsarran describes the holding depots as: 'social spaces governed by powerful and unrelenting colonial apparatus' (2008: 17). Here Indians were subjected to a full medical examination to certify whether they were fit enough to survive the two month journey by boat and ten years of manual labour. The depots were also spaces where inter-caste relationships between labourers were initiated. While Ramsarran suggests that social unions among men and women took place in these spaces sometimes leading to 'depot marriages' (2008: 18), Brij Lal disputes this claim arguing that the notion of depot marriages was 'greatly exaggerated' (2004: 162). However, while Lal's research shows that most families migrated as family units, in some circumstances, temporary liaisons that took place in the depots later became formalised as marriages.

The probability of Mawlee and Dhunnoo meeting on the *Boyne* between 11 February and 26 April 1886 was quite high. When this Nourse Line sailing ship (often referred to as 'The *Hoodoo Ship*' because of the numerous mishaps that occurred on board), departed Calcutta, five hundred and thirty seven passengers were on board. Eight passengers died during the voyage (The Indian Immigrant Ship List, 2012). The journey across the *kala pani* or black water marked the further disintegration of social structures like the caste system. In these crowded conditions on the ships, Indians were compelled to eat together and share living spaces and toilet facilities. What was striking about this experience was that amidst this site of disruption and dislocation, new relationships were formed, in particular, 'the bond of *jahajibhai* (ship mates)' (Lal, 2012: 29). Lal's contention that 'the *jahaji*'s treated each other like blood kin with all the obligations and responsibilities that such a relationship entailed' (Lal, 2012: 29) may be a contributing factor in the union of Mawlee and Dhunnoo.

IV: The Marriage Agreement, *Ijut* and Sexual Jealousy

A few months after the *Boyne*'s arrival in Fiji on 26 April, 1886, Mawlee's mother became gravely ill and approached her *jahaji*, Dhunnoo, to marry her daughter. In his sworn testimony, Dhunnoo stated: 'The woman [Mawlee] was young. She was made over to me by her mother when she died. I took care of her for four years' ('Colonial Secretary's Office Minute Paper', 5079, 1898: 8). When fourteen year old Mawlee was 'made over' to Dhunnoo, this agreement signified the transference of 'ownership' from her family (mother) to Dhunnoo. Following the patriarchal tradition of arranged marriages, once a woman marries, it is assumed that her husband has complete control over her. The 'arranged' marriage between fourteen year old Mawlee and Dhunnoo was acceptable during the time it occurred. William Crooke comments on the rural Indian, nineteenth century tradition of marrying girls at a young age: 'Between 10 and 14, nearly nine-tenths of the female populations pass into the married state but considerably more than one

half of the males remain unmarried' (Crooke, 1896: 48). Although it is not clear whether a transaction involving the customary payment of a bride price and the return payment of *dowry* was involved, court proceedings state that Dhunnoo gifted Mawlee jewelry, a possible dowry, when she went to live with him ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890: 10).

Dhunnoo and Mawlee's union, like many of the marriages that took place in Fiji before 1895, fell under the category of 'customary marriage' which was distinct from a legal or registered marriage (*marit*). In a letter to the Agent General in Fiji in 1898, the Governor stated: 'The number of coolies living together and who were married under the Indian Marriage Ordinance of 1892 is very small, probably not more than 20%. The remainder of those cohabiting together had no legal redress if the woman was enticed away' ('Report: Population of Male and Female Indian Migrants', 1898: 7). A consequence of this somewhat ambiguous definition of marriage – the situation was exacerbated by the extremely low ratio of women to men – was that a discontented woman could easily terminate a 'marriage' and enter a new relationship quite quickly. It is said that this was the primary cause of 'frequent murderous assaults on women' ('Report: Population of Male and Female Indian Migrants', 1898: 9). The official term used to describe the motive for these murders was 'sexual jealousy' ('Report: Population of Male and Female Indian Migrants', 1898: 9). Between 1885 and 1920, the majority of the two hundred and thirty murders that took place were on account of 'sexual jealousy' ('Report: Population of Male and Female Indian Migrants', 1898: 9).

Court proceedings from the 'Regnia versus Dhunnoo' murder trial that took place on March 25, 1890, at the Magistrate's Court in Nausori revealed that Mawlee left Dhunnoo to live with indentured labourer, Badloo, some four weeks before she was murdered. Badloo recollected: 'Mawlee came to me six times and Dhunnoo came and took her away. I was afraid. I went to live in the upper lines but she came to me again there' ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890: 12). Badloo's testimony suggests that Mawlee's assertive and sexually autonomous nature contrasted with Dhunnoo's patriarchal conceptions of femininity and submission. In more specific terms, Mawlee's decision to leave Dhunnoo for Badloo contradicted the patriarchal assumption that women should be chaste amongst a host of other virtues. It is possible to argue further that as Mawlee transgressed the patriarchally constructed boundaries of sexual behaviour within 'marriage', she unsettled binaries of 'honour' and 'shame' that operated to regulate female sexuality throughout the indenture period in Fiji. In a letter to the Governor in 1898, the Agent General explained: 'There is a principle comparable to our 'honour' and called '*ijut*' in Hindustani, for which, in the abstract, Indians have a profound respect, and which, as a fact, has great influence on their actions' ('Report: Population of Male and Female Immigrants', 1890). When an indentured woman exhibited infidelity and this was discovered and proven, the Agent General concluded that 'the matter ends by a sudden blow, followed by blind and mad hacking and mutilation' ('Report: Population of Male and Female Indian Immigrants', 1898: 2).

The interlocking relationship between the patriarchal notion of proprietariness, *ijut* and sexual jealousy is striking in this case. Badloo's testimony captures the confrontation that took place a few days before Mawlee was murdered: 'Dhunnoo came and told me that I was to give up all the woman's jewellery which he had given her. I told the woman to take it off and she gave it all to him and he took it away and sold it' ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890: 13). In this act of exchange where the 'gift' is returned, Mawlee is silent. It is Dhunnoo who approaches Badloo to

demand the return of the jewellery. This altercation takes place in a public space and there are witnesses. In his discussion of *ijut*, the Agent General elaborates: 'publicity as a rule is an essential quality' ('Report: Population of Male and Female Indian Immigrants', 1898: 2). Dhunnoo's attempt to publically reconcile his differences with Mawlee and Badloo fails as he returns to the upper lines later the same day and threatens to murder Mawlee. The aim of this act (within a patriarchal context) may have been to restore his 'honour'. However, *ijut* is not a concept that can be detached from the lived realities of the Indian male labourer. I want to argue here that *ijut* is an outcome of the repressive conditions created by the indenture agreement. It is impossible to simply transfer the Indian notion of *ijut* to the Fiji indenture context as it is inseparable from, and determined by, the lived experiences of Indians, in this case, the Indian male colonial subject. In a similar way, notions of shame commonly associated with indentured women like Mawlee cannot be divorced from the harsh living and working conditions and the high incidence of sexual violence against women prevalent during the indenture period. It is within this context-specific framework that we situate the event of Mawlee's murder.

V: The Event

On the morning of Tuesday, March 11, 1890, Mawlee was living with Badloo in the Upper Lines at the Rarawai Plantation in Ba. The morning ritual for indentured women usually entailed waking up at three in the morning to prepare a meal for the husband and/or family before setting off into the fields to work (Pillai, 2004: 23). After a long day of toiling in the fields, indentured women would return home to prepare the evening meal. Mawlee left the Upper Lines early on the morning of March 11 carrying a small bundle which included a billycan and hoe ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890). As she was returning from the plantation in the early afternoon carrying firewood for the evening meal and the now empty billycan, the primary eye-witness and fellow *jhaji* on the *Boyne*, Sachnee, described the events that took place:

We were returning from work – about one o'clock. He [Dhunnoo] was in the bush, close by a creek. We were on the Railway track near the bridge over the creek. The prisoner had a knife with which he struck Mawlee... a weeding knife. She had put up her hands and he cut her hands off. She fell back, he cut her throat with the knife. I saw him do that. ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890)

As Mawlee is mutilated, the act of cutting and disfiguring her body may be read as an attempt to ensure that she is no longer aesthetically or sexually desirable to other men. To some extent it can also be argued that women's reproductive and sexual capacities are seen as commodities that men can own and control through the use or threat of violence (Rude, 1999: 13). The punishment for Mawlee's infidelity is mutilation and murder. When he slits her throat, Dhunnoo reasserts his ownership over Mawlee.

While Mawlee is being killed, Sachnee cries out to Saupharia (the secondary eye-witness) a few chains behind. When Saupharia joins her, Dhunnoo has rushed back into the cane carrying the knife with him. In her statement, Saupharia reveals an interesting detail about the knife that was used to kill Mawlee. She says: 'It was not a knife supplied for working. It was one he [Dhunnoo] had bought himself and had given to Mawlee when she was living with him. When she left him, he took the knife from her. I know that was the same knife' ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890). As he killed Mawlee with the gift she was forced to return, Dhunnoo affirmed his ownership of

the material possessions given to her and simultaneously set out to reclaim a sense of proprietorship he believed he had over her. We can suggest further that Dhunnoo's desire to possess Mawlee was exacerbated by his status as an indentured labourer. In patriarchal terms, Mawlee was the only 'property' he could realistically own. When she refused to let him own and manipulate her, Dhunnoo mutilated and murdered her in an attempt to publically vindicate his *ijut*.

VI: The Event within the Event

Mawlee's murder was similar to other mutilation style murders that took place during the indenture period in Fiji. For instance, in May 1901, 'a coolie in the Rewa district, actuated by jealousy, murdered two women. He cut off his wife's head with one sweep of his knife' ('Jealousy and Murder', 1901: 2). On June 9, 1909, indentured labourer, Sukhrania was brutally murdered and mutilated in the cane fields in Navutoka Estate by the man she lived with because she left him for another man. The postmortem revealed that Sukhrania's scalp was fragmented, her brain was dislodged, she had a cut across the back of her neck four inches long, a wound across the back of her right ankle and a wound half an inch long and half an inch deep at the extremity ('Sukhrania', 1909: 2). In a later incident, which took place on Saturday, January 3, 1913, an Indian man attacked a woman with a cane knife and severed her head from her body ('Murder in Fiji', 1914: 16). The question that needs to be addressed here is: Why was Mawlee's murder more 'eventful' than these murders? In the paragraphs that follow, I argue that the event of Mawlee's murder was deemed 'eventful' by the news media because of the act that followed – 'the event within the event'. When Dhunnoo picked up Mawlee's billycan and drank some of her blood, it was this aspect of her murder that shocked the world. The transgressive nature of the act contributed to the newsworthiness of the event primarily because it violated the fundamental principles of a Christian worldview which was prominent in the West during this period.

To understand the event within the event, it is necessary to re-examine Dhunnoo's Emigration Pass. The pass informs us that Dhunnoo (and Mawlee) belonged to the *chamar* caste (Emigration Pass, Number 5986 and 5657). Hoff and Pandey explain that following the strict stratification of Indian society according to caste, 'individuals are invested with different social status and social meaning' (2003: 3). According to this stratification, the four main castes include: *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas/Thakurs* (rulers and warriors), *Vasihyas* (traders) and *Shudras* (servile labourers). The *chamar* were considered 'too low' to be included in the above categorisation and were branded as 'untouchables' (Hoff and Pandey, 2003: 2). As skin or leather workers, their profession required them to handle dead animals. The discovery that Dhunnoo was of the *chamar* class – a class relegated to occupations associated with 'organic waste, filth, ritual pollution, death or evil spirits' (Deliege, 1999: 25) – could explain why the act of killing and the sight of blood did not perturb him. But to kill and drink the blood of an eighteen year old woman is a shocking deed. This deed requires a further context.

Shyam Sah argues that the *chamar* were dreaded for their association with magic and many believed that they were 'exorcist-magicians in whose attendance the ghosts served' (2008: 197). While they are often represented as superstitious, the *chamar* are also portrayed as religious. Many are Hindus and worship deities and gods, including mother Goddesses or *Devis*. With this information we can establish a broad link between the event within the event and the ritual act of

(human and animal) blood sacrifice to Hindu Goddesses (*Devis*). Sah contextualises this act: 'drinking the blood of the victim has been a feature of Goddess worship, particularly in medieval tantric manifestation' (2008: 198). Some Goddesses in India who are worshipped with blood include *Kesai Khati*, *Sivaduti*, *Guari*, *Kamakyha*, *Gundadabbe*, *Durga* and *Kali* (Kinsley, 1986: 143). Underlying the religious ritual of blood sacrifice is the belief that the power of the Goddess must be renewed with blood. If we follow this line of thought, the event within the event may be interpreted as the final act of human sacrifice to a *Devi*. For Dhunnoo, the consummation of Mawlee's blood may have signified the destruction of 'evil' (associated with infidelity). Also, to rephrase David Kinsley's argument, through the act of ritual sacrifice, the perpetrator (Dhunnoo) may obtain victory over his enemies (Mawlee and Dhunnoo) (1986: 143). While these reasons are speculative, I wish to stress that the event within the event should be read as a patriarchal attempt to silence, threaten and punish women for transgressing the boundaries of 'appropriate' feminine behaviour and virtues.

VII: Restoring Women to History

When Dhunnoo was charged with the murder of eighteen year old Mawlee and condemned to death in April 1890, only three of the four assessors found him guilty ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890: 14). The fourth assessor was uncertain that he had committed the murder because a heavy shower fell at 2.00pm, just before Mawlee's body was retrieved by an engine driver on his way to the mill. The shower washed much of the evidence away from the scene of the crime ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890: 14). This included the billy-can with Mawlee's blood in it. There was also some dispute between the two eye-witnesses, Sachnee and Saupharia, about the colour of the clothes the murderer was wearing ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890: 12). While these particulars initially casted some doubt on Dhunnoo's culpability, before he was hanged he made a full confession. His last words were: 'The woman would not live with me so I killed her' ('Regnia vs Dhunnoo Murder', 1890).

We will never know the entire story surrounding Mawlee's murder and her relationship with Dhunnoo (and Badloo) but we have come closer to reconstructing the event of her death. Mawlee was murdered because of her sex but also as a consequence of a host of other interlocking variables. An understanding of the context of indenture – for instance, the ratio of men to women and how this is linked to the reclamation of *ijut*, the general dreariness of plantation life, and demographical information about Mawlee and Dhunnoo – has enabled us to 'bend closer to the ground' (Guha, 1987: 138 and Mishra, 2012: 5) to recover the tragic story of an eighteen year old subaltern woman who defied patriarchal attempts to contain her behaviour and sexuality.

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