

The Suspicious Death of Depot Baby 7480: 'Maternal Negligence' in Colonial Fiji

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WHAT SHOULD WE MAKE OF THE UNNAMED INDIAN INFANT FROM THE NUKULAU Island Depot in Fiji who rouses the attention of the colonial record-keepers on 17 July 1889, as a consequence of the 'suspicious circumstances' surrounding her death (CSO, 'Reporting the Death')? How much do we really know about the mother of depot baby 7480 and how did her indentured status and interlocking variables such as ethnicity, caste and colonialism trickle down to her daughter? What response should we offer to the allegation by British Colonial Secretary A. R. Coates that the infant's death was the result of neglect, 'probably intentional on the mother's part' (CSO, 'Reporting the Death')? This article grapples with these questions as it sets out to recover a series of anecdotal fragments for history. These comprise birth and death records, emigration passes, annual reports, witness testimonies and minute papers from The National Archives of Fiji. When these forgotten relics are retrieved and reevaluated, a discursive pattern emerges; one that exposes how the transference of blame onto indentured women for 'maternal negligence' was strategic and not accidental. Thus, it becomes possible to argue that 'doublespeak' or the process of distorting language for political purposes, originating from George Orwell's 'doublethink' (Orwell), was used by colonial and patriarchal authorities in Fiji to obfuscate the 'truth'. Political economist and media analyst Edward Herman elaborates on the function of this term: 'What is really important in the world of doublespeak is the ability to lie, whether knowingly or unconsciously and to get away with it; and the

ability to use lies to choose and shape facts selectively, blocking out those that don't fit an agenda or program' (3). Following Herman, this article will scrutinise how the British colonisers employed techniques such as repetition, exaggeration and omission to portray indentured women like Bachni as irresponsible, detached and uncaring mothers. By placing women under a spotlight and exaggerating or even fabricating their 'failure' as mothers, the authorities were able to conveniently distance themselves from the social and moral consequences of the indenture experience. In other examples of 'maternal neglect' (see CSO, 'With Reference to a Coolie Girl'), the mother was singled out as the cause of child abuse and death even when contradictory evidence was presented alongside the concluding remarks. The case of the death of Bachni's infant is striking because it highlights how discursively constructed signifiers of 'maternal neglect', intended to evoke distrust and shock towards indentured Indian mothers, rested largely on wobbly allegations designed to camouflage the flaws of the indentured system and protect the interests of the colonisers. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to undo the charge of maternal neglect inflicted upon Bachni and her sisters.

The 'dominant' account of the death of Bachni's depot baby captured in the correspondence between the Superintendent of Police and the Colonial Secretary in 'Reporting the Death', is currently positioned in Fiji's colonial history as a 'quasi-event' or an 'event whose eventful status is in dispute, inside the theatre of major history' (Mishra, Sudesh 5). In other words, while the occurrence of the infant's death is documented in the official records, its inclusion is simply a means to an end. Falling well below the category of an 'actual' event, the narrative of Bachni's daughter presently exists in Fiji's colonial records as 'an event within an event' or a stimulant for the main event of colonialism. On the one hand, this semi-sensationalised side-occurrence cannot assume an elevated status in the realm of colonial history, yet on the other hand, it is a precondition for a narrative of power. Following this logic, the dominant male 'Self' and creator of the 'monotonous yet fractured narratives of colonial pacification and ordering' (Nicole 6) is parasitic on the subordinate female 'Other' to expand manifestations of supremacy and dominance. One of the challenges for the historian today is to transform these 'quasi-events' currently entangled in colonialism's intentional ambiguity into events in their own right. The discipline most fitting for this purpose is 'minor history'. Minor historians stress the need to bend 'closer to the ground in order to pick up the traces of a subaltern life in its passage through time' (Guha 138). The field of minor history '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' can also foster the retrieval of anecdotal fragments 'slightly at odds with and aloof from the series driving the main plot' (Mishra, Sudesh 5). This critical historiography further converges with the discipline of feminist history as it aims to correct the 'erasures and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculine history' (Mohanty 34) and

includes postcolonialism's discussion on the experience of migration, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender and place (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2).

The Mothers of Indenture

After Fiji's cession to Britain on 10 October 1874, the Governor General, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, sought a cheap, external source of plantation labour to expand commercial interests. The administration's solution to recruit workers from India was underpinned by the impulse to protect indigenous Fijians' traditional way of life by restricting their engagement in plantation employment. Between the years 1879 and 1919, some 60,000 Indians were brought to Fiji under the agreement they called *girit* (Lal, *Chalo Jahaji* 27). The indenture contract was initially for five years, after which time the labourer could return to India at his/her own expense. After a further five years of 'industrial residence', the labourer 'was entitled to a free return passage to India (Lal, *Giritiyas*, 38). Under the indenture agreement, the wage for adult males was a minimum of one shilling a day and nine pennies for females (Lal, *Chalo Jahaji* 72). As per the Emigration Laws and Regulations of India, forty adult women were recruited for every one hundred men. The patriarchal assumption held by the planters and employers was that women were 'inferior workers' and 'childbearing of women workers' was an additional cost (Jolly, 'The Forgotten Woman' 122 and Luker, 'A Tale of Two Mothers' 361). As a consequence of the widespread acceptance that 'indenture was thus fundamentally inimical to maternity' (Luker, 'A Tale of Two Mothers' 361), fewer women were employed as labourers. Repercussions of the disproportionate ratio of women to men were experienced throughout the colonies. In Trinidad for example, 'competition for Indian women led to the erosion of caste restrictions and generated serious tension which often erupted in violence against unfaithful women and sometimes the loss of lives' (Singh 21). In a similar way, 'sexual jealousy' (the term used by colonial officials) was an outcome of the gender imbalance in Fiji and subsequently the cause of 'an abnormal number of murders and kindred crimes among Indians' (Andrews and Pearson, 'Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji' 17). The colonisers attributed such crimes to the status of the labourers often referred to as 'the dregs of Indian society' (Lal, *Chalo Jahaji* 46). Although Brij Lal contends that 'the migrants came from all strata of rural North Indian society' (*Chalo Jahaji* 46), the authorities felt that it was necessary 'to remind the Indians of their proper place in the colonial social hierarchy, a part of the ideological underpinning of European dominance' (46). Unsurprisingly, Indian labourers described the indenture experience as *narak* (hell), contrary to the official attitude that the contract would offer material benefit to the workers 'who were used to toiling from sunrise to sunset and ask as their rations only a few ounces of rice' (Burton 264).

The predicament of women during indenture was particularly appalling. In the *coolie* lines (barracks), many of them were subjected to domestic violence, rape and sexual assault by the European overseers, *sirdars* (their local counterparts) and indentured men. They were also expected to work long hours in the plantations and faced wage cuts for low attendance during sickness and pregnancy (Lal, *Chalo Jahagi* 51). In this light, the plight of the indentured Indian mother needs to be read as a historically specific category 'framed by intersecting structures of race, class and gender' (Collins 231). Anthropologist Margaret Jolly relates Patricia Collins' definition of motherhood to the depopulation debate in Fiji and Vanuatu as she observes: 'women who do not fit within dominant cultural subject positions are at risk of being pathologised as "other" mothers on the basis of class, colour, ethnicity, race, sexual preference, education, employment, or disability' (178). If indigenous Fijian mothers were 'singled out as a major cause of depopulation and portrayed as the dead heart of the dying race' (Jolly, 'Other Mothers' 178) when juxtaposed with white women, then indentured Indian mothers were multiply 'othered' against indigenous Fijian and white women but also quite sharply contrasted with middle-class women from India. In official documents, for example, the middle-class Indian woman is associated with virtues of chastity, honour (*izzat*), discipline and devotion while descriptions of indentured women pivoted around vices like promiscuity and shame (Mishra, Margaret 60). In fact, it could be argued that the middle-class Indian woman was the most significant benchmark for assessing the morality of indentured women in Fiji. Charles Freer Andrews and William Pearson, campaigners against the indentured system and representatives of the Government of India, draw attention to this comparison:

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

Like other advocates of Indian nationalism, Andrews and Pearson upheld essentialist images of women as mothers and wives associated with 'the preservation of Indian traditions, culture and spirituality' (Narayan 133). In particular, they raised numerous concerns about the way indentured women were perceived to be relentlessly breaching codes of patriarchal morality and honour (*izzat*). Those who deviated from the 'norm' were shunned in public discourses. This is reflected in an excerpt from 'A Paper Written for the Acting Governor of

Fiji' in 1916: 'The Hindu woman in this country [Fiji] is like a rudderless vessel with its mast broken drifting on to the rocks; or is like a canoe being hurled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand' (6). The authors contend further: 'She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so' (Andrews and Pearson, 'A Paper Written for the Acting Governor of Fiji' 6). This reinforcement of stereotypical perceptions of femininity resulted in implications for indentured motherhood since 'prostitute' and 'mother' tended 'to be seen as mutually exclusive' (Luker, 'A Tale of Two Mothers' 364). Vicki Luker suggests that 'indentured women's indifference to childcare' (365) was presented as a characteristic of the 'woman as prostitute' label. In fact, one may assert further that colonialism's 'misogynistic narrativisation' (Parry 36) of indentured Indian mothers as 'loose', 'ruthless' and 'uncaring' was appropriated to hold them accountable for the majority of the social and moral problems emanating from this oppressive system (Lal, *Broken Waves* 54). It follows quite predictably that after indenture the 'woman as prostitute' stereotype associated with indentured women disappeared from the colonial imagination in Fiji and was replaced with the perception of Indian women as 'the world's best mothers' (Luker 369). Indeed this shift in attitude overlapped with a change in context. As Shireen Lateef points out, 'during indenture women had access to an independent income, meager though it was they were not economically dependent on their fathers, brothers or husbands' (5). After indenture, the tendency was to withdraw women from agricultural work and confine them to the domestic sphere. As the status of indentured women changed from *girmitt-wala* (indentured) to *khula* (free), they settled into their new lives as lower middle-class women in Fiji and attempted to reclaim the *izzat* (honour, self-respect) they had lost during indenture. Organisations like the Arya Samaj, an alliance of wealthy and educated Fiji Indians and teachers and missionaries from India (Kelly 195) and small pockets of women's organizations such as the *Zanana* Women's League, the *Gujarati* Women's Association and the Indian Women's Society of Suva cultivated this spirit of reformism in the 1930s (Kelly 195).

Infants and Children

In his summary of the Annual Reports on Indian Immigration for the period 1890 to 1900, Glenn Fowler reveals an alarming death rate of 15 percent for infants and 10 percent for children per annum (283). While children commonly died from dysentery, bronchitis and bronchopneumonia, infants 'more commonly fell to asthenia (or want of strength), marasmus (progressive wasting attributable to defective feeding), rickets, convulsions, debility, malnutrition, premature birth, tetanus, neonatorum, enteritis and congenital syphilis' (284). Kenneth Gillion provides a context for these statistics as he explains: 'When their mothers were put to work the infants were either carried into the fields or put into "flyridden nurseries", usually the two end cubicles of a line with the partition removed, in the

charge of old women. After they reached the toddling age the children were allowed to run wild, no schooling being provided, and at the age of fifteen, sometimes earlier, they went to work' (Gillion 108). It is also interesting to observe from the Annual Reports on Indian Immigration to Fiji for the years 1890 to 1895 that of the 140 Indians under the age of ten who died, 82 (or 58.57 per cent) were female (Fowler 284). Fowler's interpretation of these statistics suggests that 'the chief reason for this imbalance is that girls were, on the whole, not as highly valued, seen as a burden, and thus tended to be breast-fed for a shorter period of time' (281). As a result of their 'superior nurturing', boys were breast-fed longer thus reducing their chance of contracting diarrhoea infection (Fowler 281). This brief discussion on the death rates of infants and children during indenture cannot be separated from a broader historical context. The relationship Gillion establishes between the death rates of indentured Indians (including the children and infants of labourers) and the market conditions within the sugar industry is particularly revealing. He disclosed that falling sugar prices in the middle of the 1880s and the early 1890s 'had important repercussions on the treatment of the Indian immigrants and the government's administration of the indentured labour system' (Gillion 106). Thus, there was a 'marked deterioration' in the treatment of indentured Indian labourers after 1884 (Gillion 79 and Fowler 276). Planters were not properly supervised and the working conditions of labourers were seldom monitored. This led to the exploitation of workers and an increase in infectious diseases (directly linked to poor living and sanitary conditions and the consumption of contaminated food) such as dysentery, anemia and diarrhea (Fowler 279). When a connection is established between undernourishment, callous over-tasking, inadequate medical care (Fowler 284) and the experience of indenture, it becomes possible to hold the colonial Government accountable for the high death rates. It is within this historical framework that the story of Bachni's depot baby is excavated and re-written.

Bachni's Past

When twenty-five year old Bachni was issued an Emigration Pass (E-Pass) on 22 February 1889, at the Depot in Garden Reach, Calcutta, she was assigned a unique number, 7480 (which she shared with her unnamed daughter). It is this four digit code that grants her entry into Fiji's history. The E-Pass, verified by the Surgeon Superintendent, the Depot Surgeon, the Emigration Agent for Fiji and the Protector of Emigrants, registers demographic data on all the indentured labourers including 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. This one page document (per migrant) enabled Indian and colonial governments 'to facilitate communication between the labourers in the colonies and their kin in India' (Lal, *Girmitiyas* 30). For the minor historian, the recovery of personal particulars about the indentured subject can help to shape an intimate

portrait of the past. Bachni's E-Pass reveals that she was the daughter of one Munoo from the Raebareli district in Uttar Pradesh (E-Pass, Bachni). She belonged to the *Kori* caste, a caste of traditional weavers. The Pass vaguely describes Bachni's physical stature and height: she was four feet nine inches tall and could be distinguished by a scar on her left temple. While there is an elongated dash beside the specification 'If married, name of husband' (E-Pass, Bachni), the E-Passes of Bachni's children, six year old Rookmunia (E-Pass, Rookmunia) and twelve month old Sriprasad (E-Pass, Sriprasad) identify indentured labourer, Debi Singh as their father. Thirty-year-old Debi Singh was the son of Rakhm Singh from Janpur in Uttar Pradesh (E-Pass, Debi Singh). He belonged to the *Thakur* caste from the Rajput clan (Lal, *Girmitiyas* 111).

Although Debi and Bachni travelled to Fiji under the 'Mother, Father, Children' (MFC) category neither is acknowledged as the husband or wife on the other's E-Pass. Of course it is possible that they were not legally married but travelled to Fiji as a family. There is also a chance that Debi and Bachni met and married in the depot at Garden Reach in Calcutta. Lal offers the following explanation with regard to families of mixed district origins: 'A large number of unions were formed in the district depots. Alone and vulnerable, the recruits may have decided to get married—no doubt encouraged by the recruiter—to provide each other with company and support' (Lal, *Girmitiyas* 160). This argument may be used to explain why Bachni, who was six months pregnant when she boarded the ship, *Moy*, began a relationship with Debi Singh at the depot in Garden Reach, Calcutta. In addition to providing her with company and security on the voyage, Debi Singh's official designation as Rookmunia and Sriprasad's father (as per *The General Register* of 1889) implied that he would assume some responsibility for their safety. The pressing question though is: why would a pregnant woman with a twelve month old toddler and a six year old child register to work as an indentured labourer in a foreign country? Assuming Bachni was not married to Debi prior to their encounter in the depot, one can speculate that she may have immigrated to Fiji to escape from domestic hardships or she was tricked into emigrating by a recruiter (Lal, *Girmitiyas* 143).

The journey from Calcutta to Fiji took approximately twelve weeks across the *kala pani* (dark ocean / black water). The conditions were cramped and often unhygienic. 'Most of the eighty-seven voyages were uneventful registering a mortality rate of about one percent. Death occurred mostly from measles, whooping cough and other minor illnesses' (Lal, *Chalo Jahagi* 141). Although the *Moy* reported only one death during the voyage—the loss of one adult male from bronchitis—after she arrived in Fiji on Thursday 2 May 1889 at 11.00am, the Chief Medical Officer placed all the passengers (three hundred and seventy men, one hundred and sixty three women, seventy two boys and seventy girls) in the quarantine station at Nukulau Island in consequence of a late whooping cough

outbreak (CSO, 'Reporting Arrival'). The Agent General reported that the ratio of women to men (adults) was high on this voyage—44:17—and that the ratio of children to adults was excessively high—26:69 (CSO, 'Reporting Arrival'). Lal notes that during the years 1879, 1889, 1915 and 1916, the number of females to 100 males exceeded 50; 'the highest ever was in 1879—53.5' (*Girmitiyas* 135). He further stipulates that 'this perhaps was the result of enthusiasm and diligence of Fiji's first Emigration Agent in Calcutta, who wanted to create a favourable impression in Fiji' (135). Bachni gave birth to a baby girl on 5 June 1889, just over a month after her arrival at the Nukulau Island Depot (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). Five weeks later (11 July 1889), the infant's death was documented. It was not until 16 August 1889, that the passengers were released from quarantine (CSO, 'Reporting Arrival') and Bachni, Debi, Rookmunia and Sriprasad were transferred to the Colonial Sugar Refinery in Nausori. Some two years later, Debi Singh died of dysentery (Death Register 1891). On 10 August 1899, Bachni returned to India with Sriprasad and Rookmunia after completing two indenture contracts in Fiji (General Register 1889).

The Dominant Account of the Death of the Depot Baby

The Death Register of 1889 states against entry number 8: 'Born Fiji (Nukulau), dr of 7480, died at Nukulau of'. Although this ambiguity surrounding the death of 'number 8' (Bachni's infant) seems odd alongside the precise entries that precede and follow it, Fowler notes that this gap (sometimes in the form of a question mark or the qualifier 'unknown') was not uncommon in the Annual Reports on Indian Immigration and the Death Registers (274). Five days after the infant's death is vaguely marked in the Death Register, an internal investigation is mounted and Bachni's unnamed daughter, previously a statistic recognised only by the sentence fragments confirming her birth and death, becomes the subject of the Colonial Secretary's Office Minute Paper titled 'Reporting the Death of an Infant Under Suspicious Circumstances' (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). On the first page of the document, Coates sums up the findings of the inquiry: 'The child died on the morning of 11th July and evidently from appearance from the want of proper nourishment and from neglect probably intentional on the mother's part' (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). He then constructs a scenario of maternal neglect based on his observations and selected witness testimonies. It is important to note that these are not first-hand testimonies but third-person accounts narrated by the Colonial Secretary. Coates stresses in his exchanges with the Superintendent of Police that Bachni should be held accountable for the infant's death because she did not report the infant 'as ailing either to the nurses or the hospital administrator', nor did she 'apply for a bottle from the hospital' (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). It was not until he went to the lines on 10 July that Coates found the child 'extremely emaciated and apparently dying. On its mouth there were marks and sores' (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). When he questioned Bachni, she said that

she did not have enough milk to give the child. He opposed Bachni's testimony by reporting that two indentured women, Somaria and Lalari, said: 'She did not intend the child to live or words to that effect. They also said that she would not suckle the child but gave her milk to her son, a child of fourteen or fifteen months' (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). To justify the scars on the infant's face, Coates alludes to a statement by Bachni's daughter, Rookmunia, to the effect that her mother struck the child with her hand a day or two before it died (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). After several exchanges with the Superintendent of Police, he confirms that Bachni is guilty of 'killing' her daughter but because of the absence of medical evidence, charges could not be laid against her (CSO, 'Reporting the Death').

Aside from the lack of medical proof, colonial official Isploef pardons Bachni for the infant's alleged death in the following way: 'This is a very painful case but perhaps no good would result from prosecuting the concerned woman particularly as she has another infant (son) of fourteen or fifteen months' (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). Here Bachni is exempted from any form of punishment because of the maternal duty expected of her by patriarchal society—to reproduce labour by nurturing the male infant who will become a prospective worker in the colony. The superintendent of police carefully qualifies 'infant' with '(son)' to draw attention to this. In doing so, he alludes to the cultural preference of investing in the boy child. In 'The Nowhere Children: Patriarchy and the Role of Girls in India's Rural Economy', Uma Kambhampati and Raji Rajan explain that 'parents will invest in each child in such a way as to maximise the expected wealth of the entire family and this may mean greater investment in some children' (5). Bachni's choice to offer her breast milk to her son (Sriprasad) and not to her new-born daughter (as per the reported speech of Somaria and Lalari) may be explained in this way: 'because women are out-marriers, parents can expect little from their daughters after marriage, whereas sons will remain at home. Any investment in boys therefore helps to maximise household lifetime utility whereas investment in girls leaks out to other households' (Kambhampati and Rajan, 5). Following this line of thought and in view of the depositions presented by Coates, Bachni may be accused of favouring Sriprasad by privileging his life over that of her infant daughter (as per Indian, traditional culture and values). Thus, the female infant's demise may be read as a side-effect of Bachni's adherence to patriarchal mores that required women to give preference to the boy child. However, the accusation by the colonisers that Bachni willfully neglected her daughter and thus contributed directly to her death is a rather unsteady one. What is especially striking in the 'dominant account' of the infant's death is the complete omission of witness testimonies by Bachni and Ramessur and the partial oversight of Rookmunia's statement. The omission of the mother's testimony is particularly disconcerting. This is where the notion of colonial (and patriarchal) doublespeak is at its most jarring. The truth about the death of Bachni's daughter is blocked out because it thwarts the agenda of the British colonisers. When attention is paid to

the seemingly 'miniscule details' hurriedly appended at the end of the Minute Papers, a counter-narrative emerges.

What Really Happened to the Depot Baby? Colonial Negligence and the Negative Upshot

According to the doctrine in ethics of doing and allowing or killing and letting die, 'an agent is responsible for or relevant to a bad upshot—such as a death or injury—in the sense that he [or she] could have prevented it' (Howard-Snyder). The relationship between the agent and the upshot (end result) rests on whether the agent is positively or negatively relevant to the upshot (Howard-Snyder). In the CSO Minute Paper 'Reporting the Death', Bachni is depicted as the agent who is 'positively relevant' to the 'bad upshot' (her daughter's death). However, after a close reading of several witness testimonies it seems that the narrative of the alleged killing is dictated by the dominant colonial interpretation of how Bachni's daughter died. This interpretation is clouded by the coloniser's ability to use lies to choose and shape facts selectively in line with the art of doublespeak. To put this differently, colonial biases are privileged over Bachni's version of what transpired. To reverse these biases, it is necessary to quote Bachni's statement in full:

During my stay at Nukulau, I gave birth to a female child. From the very first instance the infant was very delicate and as I had to suckle another child of fifteen months, I had not sufficient milk for both. I applied to Mr Coates for a feeding bottle and milk but he only gave me milk and a teat. And as I had no bottle, I could not very well feed the child. From constantly sucking the teat, the child got a sore around and about the mouth that was the only sore the child had at the time of its death. I never struck the child or in any way harmed it. The only way I can account for its death is that I had not sufficient milk to give it. (CSO, 'Reporting the Death')

In the excerpt above, Bachni affirms that she took the necessary action to request nourishment for the infant by applying for a feeding bottle. This vital piece of information is omitted from Coates' summary of the case, thus depicting how deliberate omission becomes a trait of doublespeak. Indentured labourer, Ramessur, who used to serve milk to the women at Nukulau, confirmed that Bachni collected milk for the baby on a regular basis (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). In fact, it is important to note here that the Annual Reports on Indian Immigration throughout the 1890s highlighted that 'the supply of milk is still insufficient on the majority of the estates' (Fowler 284). This could be another factor that contributed to the condition of marasmus or 'progressive wasting attributable to defective feeding' (Fowler 284) resulting in the death of Bachni's infant. Ramessur explains

further: 'When the child was born it was very delicate—the nurse and the mother were always on bad terms as the mother used to complain that the nurse did not give her proper nourishment and that her child would die if not properly cared for. I don't believe the woman killed her child as she always seemed to look after it' (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). The dispute that existed between the mother and the nurse is also exemplified in the words of Bachni's seven year old daughter, Rookmunia: 'I remember when my mother had a baby in the depot and remember when the child died. I never told anyone in the depot that I saw my mother beat the child, the nurse tried to make me say so' (CSO, 'Reporting the Death'). It is important here to highlight that during this period 'the hospitals were run by people who had hardly any knowledge of medicine, and qualified medical doctors were difficult to come by, especially for immigrants' (Naidu 41). Furthermore, there was no real nursing (Gillion 106). The first-hand accounts by Bachni, Ramessur and Rookmunia discredit the claim that Bachni was a negligent mother and further discredit the suggestion that she contributed positively to the negative upshot (her daughter's death). Rather, I wish to argue that the initiators and enforcers of the system of indenture, the colonial government, officials and even the nurse, are positively relevant to the negative upshot.

The action of implementing the indenture system led to various consequences that gave rise to the infant's death. The first positively relevant upshot was the long hours of work expected of female labourers who were also wives and mothers. The morning ritual for indentured women entailed waking up at three o'clock in the morning to prepare a meal for the husband and/or family before setting off into the fields to work. After a long day of toiling in the fields, women would return home to prepare the evening meal (Kumar 2004). If the majority of their labour time was spent in the sugar cane plantations to further the coloniser's quest for economic expansion and to 'obtain maximum production at minimum cost' (Fowler 282), how could indentured women possibly meet the patriarchally prescribed requirements of motherhood imposed upon them by the colonisers? Isn't it deeply unjust to simply transport romanticised notions of motherhood expected of white and middle-class Indian women onto indentured women whose time with their children was snatched by the colonisers in exchange for a meagre wage? In the words of Fowler: 'One wonders how an Indian mother could be expected to pay round-the-clock attention to a baby or small child when she spent most of her time completing grueling tasks in the field' (284).

A second upshot would be the poor living arrangements. Lal argues that women 'were blamed for the abnormally high infant mortality rates in the 1890s. The colonial officials thought them devoid of maternal instincts' (Lal, *Girmitiyas* 30). The Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Hirsche, responded to this allegation in the following way: 'In truth, not maternal negligence but the appalling sanitary conditions on the plantations, inadequate supply of clean water, the absence of nursery facilities

in the lines and the requirements of daily field labour for women with infants, lay at the root of the problem' (Lal, *Girmitiyas* 55). Andrews and Pearson enforced this view as they asserted: 'one unsatisfactory feature remains—the very high death-rate among infants. But this will never be put right as long as the mother is forced by the very law of indenture to neglect her own children' (Andrews and Pearson 47). If we return to the doctrine of doing and allowing, it becomes possible to argue that the agent is not Bachni (although Bachni is discursively constructed as the agent in the colonial records) but the colonisers, and that they are positively relevant to the upshot. It would be quite difficult to prove that Bachni was even negatively relevant to the upshot in view of the harsh circumstances of indenture outlined in the introduction to this article. Thus we can say that it is colonial negligence (masked through doublespeak) and not maternal negligence that killed Bachni's child.

Bachni's Sisters

The manner in which Bachni is portrayed by the colonial authorities for neglecting her infant is not an isolated 'quasi event' within the main event of colonialism. Indentured women were often portrayed as maternally negligent in the colonial records from the 1800s until the end of the indenture system in 1920. Although they were rarely charged or imprisoned by the authorities for neglecting their children, Bachni and her indentured 'sisters' were represented as positively relevant to the negative upshot (the death or abuse of their children). The following examples, through brief, highlight how these dominant accounts were used to obfuscate the truth. For instance, on 24 May 1890 the Agent General presented the case of the 'little coolie girl' with 'a most notorious character' to the Superintendent of Police (CSO, 'With Reference to a Coolie Girl'). 'I had this girl examined under the provision on the Contagious Disease Ordinance and she having been found to be suffering from venereal disease was sent to the Suva Hospital on the 30th of April. Since then I have had enquires made and it appears although I can get no direct evidence to support it, that she has had carnal connection with a good number of men' (CSO, 'With Reference to a Coolie Girl'). The Agent General's portrait of a sexually deviant girl under thirteen years of age is extended as he purposely stresses that her mother, Nasiban, was 'a noted prostitute' (CSO, 'With Reference to a Coolie Girl'). Throughout this correspondence, he emphasises the need to punish the mother for 'indiscriminately prostituting' and 'willfully neglecting' her daughter (CSO, 'With Reference to a Coolie Girl'). The mother's excessive labour time (from dusk to dawn), the disproportionate ratio of women to men and the fact that girls were being married off by their parents at twelve or thirteen as a consequence of cultural traditions and the harsh conditions of indenture are critical factors that are disregarded here. In a separate case, the death of the three year old female child (Brijpalee) on 2 August 1898 at the Navatu plantation was attributed to

'playing with matches while alone' (CSO, 'Death by Burning'). Although there was some dispute over whether the mother or the nurse was responsible for the child's death, charges were not laid against them due to lack of evidence (CSO, 3196/1898). In her testimony, Brijpalee's mother, Shakuri states: 'There was no matches near. I did not hear anybody say the child had matches' (CSO, 3196/1898). On 24 January 1989, the death of child of Belasi No. 13852 due to bronchitis was recorded (CSO, 'Death Certificate of'). The Chief Medical Officer stressed, 'this is the second death within a week and both due, without doubt, due to neglect on the part of the mother' (CSO, Death Certificate of'. If Bachni, Nasiban, Shakuri and Belasi were 'forced by the very law of indenture to neglect their own children' (Andrews and Pearson 47), how could they possibly be blamed for 'maternal negligence'? Perhaps they 'allowed' their children to die by not standing up to the colonisers but they cannot really be accused of 'killing' their children. The real charge of neglect lies with the coloniser and not the mothers of indenture.

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