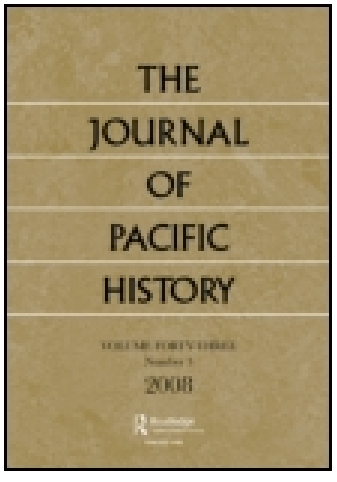

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Indentured Identities: resistance and accommodation in plantation-era Fiji

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'Reflections'. Bainimarama did not practise what he preached, and so backing him did not make sense. All the things he accused the Qarase government of doing, he was doing himself: cronyism, lack of transparency in governance, manipulation of the judicial system for the benefit of family and regime supporters, corruption. Bainimarama, Green writes,

> is not interested in advice or assistance unless it is to sustain him in power or to implement his agenda in its entirety. He is uncomfortable with the clash of ideas, negotiation and compromise, all critical elements of effectively functioning democracies. He is not interested in expert opinion if it does not conform to his understanding of the way things should be. (p. 270)

As the popular saying goes, it was 'his way or the highway'.

Any quibbles? Yes: the book does not have an index, which makes the search for relevant sections or issues in a hurry difficult. But this is a minor fault. Michael Green has written a valuable book. His account will ring true to anyone who has followed recent events in Fiji closely. The book will have a long shelf life. It is a great pity that Michael died so prematurely.

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Indentured Identities: resistance and accommodation in plantation-era Fiji. By Farzana Gounder. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011. xvii+345pp., maps, figures, tables, notes, bibliog., index. ISBN 978-90-272-2655-6. €105.00, US$158.00.

Farzana Gounder's purpose in this book is to understand how Indian indentured labourers reconstructed their experiences of *girmit* (the indenture system) through their own life narratives. Her qualitative study reveals a complex array of meanings, identities and agencies in seven life narratives recorded as interviews in Fiji Hindi by the Fiji Broadcasting Commission in the 1960s and 1970s. Gounder's fine-grained analysis provides new insights into how *girmitya* (indentured labourers) choose to be remembered as victims or agents (or both) and how they reconstruct and represent their experience of *girmit*.

The book weaves together the sociolinguistic analyses of Labov (high-point analysis of narratives) and Bamberg (positioning analysis) into what the author calls 'narrativization analysis'. Through this theoretical lens Gounder examines how the seven *girmitya* 'perform' their narratives. Their performativity is assessed in terms of how they negotiate their 'self' in relation to their audience and how they choose to be perceived within the 'master narratives' of indenture.

Gounder's analysis reveals, as expected, a common experience of indenture. All the recollections evoke pride, pain, hunger, resignation, laughter, survival and relief. Individually, however, each narrator projects a very distinct subjectivity. For instance, Jasoda Ramdin and Ram Dulhari construct indenture as the *narak* (hell) of master narratives. Gabriel Aiyappa glosses over the more brutal elements and focuses on the bonds of brotherhood that were created in the Indian depots. Ram Sundar Maharaj's narration also lacks the hardship of indenture. Her *girmit* was a time of bonding – a community affair. Meanwhile, Ram Rattan Mishar's narration consists solely of 'event narratives', while Guldhari Maharaj's is made up entirely of 'habitual narratives' about the everyday routine of growing up on the plantations.

One of the more striking narrators is Ghori Gosai, who claims to be 143 years old at the time of the interview. After defending his claim, he sets out to represent himself as a pious man dedicated to leading and protecting other *girmitya*. He tells of his leading role in an Indian underground movement before embarking for Fiji and of playing a prominent mediating function on the journey across the Kala Pani ('black water', the sea). He speaks of his role in Fiji in organising religious plays and finally of his appointment as *sirdar* (foreman of a work gang) to replace the previous evil incumbent. In each sub-narrative, Gosai projects himself as his own agent who sets out to establish a new order: his own.

His multiple identities and agencies as liberator, cook, security guard, pundit, counsellor, *sirdar* and labourer constitute a discursive challenge in three significant ways. First, Gosai challenges the stereotyped

hierarchy of the *girmit* plantation and shows how individuals with initiative and leadership could subvert this hierarchy. Second, Gosai's agency works as a counter-narrative to the other six narrators, who are all more measured in depicting their own acts of self-determination. And third, Gounder argues that this narrative disrupts the master narratives that portray *girmitiya* as illiterate, leaderless victims.

Gounder's sample includes three women, and she signals a marked difference between men's and women's life narratives. For the men, the narrator-as-character is the individual protagonist, and the narrations emphasise masculinity and resistance. For the women, the protagonist is part of a collective, and the emphasis is on suffering and/or accommodation. The focus on 'motherhood' is striking in a way that questions the near absence of this central element of *girmit* life from existing studies. Through the voices of women labourers, Gounder reconstructs a reality of indenture that is not only about task-work, cooking and sleeping in the cramped lines. It is also about human interaction, raising children and family life.

Gounder claims to make two significant contributions to new knowledge. The first is that a range of narrative genres are at play in any one narration. The current emphasis on incident-based 'event narratives' is restrictive because it conceals a host of 'habitual narratives' that can better reflect the everydayness of *girmit* life, particularly for women. The second is that through their own voices, *girmitya* construct identities and agencies that reject victimhood. They also show that narrativised performativity cannot be typified.

Documenting and demonstrating the complexities of *girmit* is a task that historians have fulfilled for a long time. It is therefore surprising to read Gounder's assertion that historians are the authors of master narratives that homogenise the identities of *girmitya* into one-dimensional characters and confine their agencies to victimhood. Gounder cites Ali, Lal, Gillion, Naidu, Tinker and Shameem as key perpetrators. Most are reproached for painting a 'grim picture' of indenture. Among others, Lal is held responsible of depicting *girmitiya* as 'powerless and isolated' and 'illiterate and leaderless'. This will raise a few eyebrows among those who know Lal's work and the substantial contribution that he has made in highlighting the many complexities of indenture.

In my view Gounder overstates the academic constructions of narrow master narratives. Decolonisation may have produced an image of *girmitya* as victims of colonial and capitalist oppression, but most scholars, including Lal, have since moved on to question such representations. Vijay Mishra, Subramani, Sudesh Mishra, John Kelly, Martha Kaplan and Margaret Mishra are among the scholars who are arduously working to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the *girmit* experience and to expand our reading of it. Furthermore, discourses have multiple origins and authors. They become dominant over time for a multitude of reasons. To pin their existence and persistence on a handful of historians is erroneous and underestimates the intricacies of discursive processes.

Hence Gounder's research does not run counter to other *girmit* studies, as she claims. Rather, her book complements existing studies and adds another layer. More specifically it calls on scholars to be more attentive to the fluctuations of identities and agencies presented in narrations. It does so by proposing a useful mechanism to measure relative agency in which, for instance, a subject-as-narrator may position herself as a victim in one context but take a more agentive position in another.

Historians will dispute Gounder's claim that these few interviews are *all* that represent over a million individuals who went to far-flung colonies to serve under indenture. Surely *girmitya* left many other traces of their passage through time. Furthermore a discussion about the role that these narratives could play in nation-building would have been useful. In light of Fiji's troubled postcolonial history, the absence of references to Indigenous Fijians in the narratives and in Gounder's analysis is puzzling.

In spite of these minor shortcomings, Gounder offers significant historiographical insights, not least because none of these radio documentaries has been used by previous researchers. These oral accounts provide authenticity in a context where *girmitya* did not write and surviving records were mostly written about or for them by company or government officials. Gounder also reminds historians of the great insights that other disciplines offer in enlarging our reading of history. The book will be of significant interest to scholars of Fiji and Pacific history, oral and cultural historians, literary theorists with an interest in narrative and discourse analysis, specialists of Indian indenture studies and linguists. The linguistic jargon rarely gets in the way of the prose, which makes the book very readable. With this book the wider Hindi-speaking and English-speaking public has a good reason to take renewed interest in this important period of Fiji's history.

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