

# Unveiling stereotypes about Fiji's girmitiya women

*Margaret Mishra*

**Margaret Mishra** is Senior Lecturer, The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper pays homage to the late Professor, Brij Lal, for the critical role he played in debunking colonial and patriarchal myths about Fiji's Indian indentured (girmitiya) women. From as early as 1985, Lal critiqued the way the British administrators wielded power over displaced female labourers by misrepresenting them in internal and external exchanges. My specific focus here is on the way he deconstructed colonial and patriarchal tropes associated with indentured women such as their alleged immorality and promiscuousness, 'sexual jealousy', 'maternal negligence' and madness, by situating these constructs within a specific historical context. With these interventions as the foundation for this paper, I will illustrate how my own interdisciplinary investigations in the interconnecting fields of gender, indenture, subaltern studies and minor history have attempted to address Lal's concern that girmitiya women's perspectives were absent in the historical records.

## **KEYWORDS**

indenture, women, immorality, sexual jealousy, maternal negligence, madness

## INTRODUCTIONS AND INTERSECTIONS

I first met Brij Lal at the ‘International Scientific Conference on New Perspectives on Indentured Labour’ in December 2011 in Mauritius. Over the course of four days, and during the return plane trip from Mauritius via Réunion Island to Sydney, I discussed my passion for the archives and research interests with him. With these conversations still in my mind, I would like to pay tribute to the late historian by acknowledging the significant contribution he made to the intersecting fields of gender, sexuality, violence, colonialism and indenture in Fiji. This critical reflection will relate four themes – women’s immorality, sexual jealousy, maternal negligence and madness – to three articles authored by Lal, namely, ‘Kunti’s cry: Indentured women on Fiji’s plantations’ (1985a), ‘Veil of dishonour: Sexual jealousy and suicide on Fiji plantations’ (1985b) and ‘A most callous indifference: Sukhdei’s story’ (2019). As I do this, I hope to demonstrate how Lal’s work converges with my own attempts to recover the voices of grimitiya women for history. The overlap in our scholarship is best described in the following line: ‘The women’s perspective is absent in the written records where, for the most part, their faces are shrouded by a veil of dishonour drawn by men’ (1985b: 142). I will begin with one of Lal’s earliest attempts to draw girmitiya women into the arena of history.

## WOMEN’S SEXUAL IMMORALITY AND KUNTI’S CRY

A letter titled ‘The cry of an Indian woman from Fiji’ was printed in two Hindi language newspapers, the *Leader* on 10 April and 13 August 1913 and the *Bharat Mitra* on 8 May 1914 (Gupta 2015). It was written by a missionary with the *Arya Samaj*, S.M. Saraswati, in the house of indentured labourer and priest Totaram Sanadhya,

although the missionary later denied composing it. Kunti's plight was then retold by Sanadhya to journalist, Benarsidas Chaturvedi, after his return to India in 1914. Six years before it appeared in *My twenty-one-years in the Fiji Islands and the haunted lines* (translated and edited by John Kelly and Uttra Singh in 1991), Lal's article on Kunti was published in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*. The latter account began with a two-page overview of how a female Indian indentured labourer named Kunti was sent alone to weed an isolated banana patch at Nadewa in Rewa on 10 April 1913. When the overseer, Cobcroft, came to check on her in the afternoon, it was alleged that he made 'improper suggestions' to her. Kunti managed to escape by plunging into the Wainibokasi river and 'told the world' that she was 'saved from drowning by Jagdeo, a boy who happened to be in a dinghy nearby' (Lal 1985a: 55). The incident infuriated the Indian public and incited the nationalists to lobby for the abolition of the system.

Lal's article is critical because it positioned Kunti's testimony within an intersecting nexus of 'power, gender violence and abuse on plantations' (Vahed 2017: 74) and simultaneously contested colonial/patriarchal myths about indentured women. He argued against the 'widely held, though empirically unsupported, perception' of indentured women as 'morally lax, profligate individuals' (Lal 1985a: 58). Such perceptions, Lal contended further, 'gave the sirdars and overseers the licence to treat the women with little respect, and to view them simply as objects of sexual gratification' (1985a: 58). As he carefully unpacked false assumptions about suicide and murder rates, prostitution, infant mortality and plantation work with the support of statistics from the archives, Lal liberated indentured women from the shackles of colonial and patriarchal labels like prostitute, negligent mother, bad wife and mad woman.

Although the contents of Kunti's letter and Lal's historicization of her ordeal has been the subject of numerous scholarly papers including Karen Ray's 'Kunti, Lakshmi and the

“Ladies”: Women’s Labour and the Abolition of Indentured Emigration from India’ (1996) and Rajsekhar Basu’s ‘Kunti’s cry: Responses in India to the Cause of Emigrant Women, Fiji 1913–16’ (2020), I argue that the late historian left a stone unturned because he did not interrogate the claim made by the Acting Colonial Secretary, A. Montgomerie, in 1913 that ‘the whole statement was a fabrication’ (CSOMP 8779/1913 cit. Mishra, M. 2008: 45). This prompted some scholars to revisit the original source and comb through the finer details of Kunti’s cry. In ‘Concerning an Axiom that Flutters like a Door Hinge or Butterfly’, Sudesh Mishra presents a philosophical unpacking of ‘lies’ and ‘truths’ as he asserts that the ‘sexualized body of the coolie woman ... formed the battleground in the high-stakes war waged between colonialists and nationalists; “truth” and “lie” become indistinguishable as a consequence of the rhetorical weaponry deployed by both sides’ (Mishra, S. 2008). While Kunti’s place in the tussle between the colonialists’ desire to retain the indenture system and the nationalists’ quest to end it is critical, my interest lies in her expression of personal agency.

In ‘The emergence of feminism in Fiji’ (Mishra, M. 2008), I re-examine Kunti’s alleged assault via a feminist lens by homing in on an investigation by the Inspector of Immigrants, R. R. Backhouse, in 1913. His enquiry revealed that Kunti was in a polyandrous sexual relationship with the sirdar at the Neuma lines, Sundar Singh. While her husband, Jal, was in gaol for nine months, she spent most of her time ‘pottering around Sundar Singh’s house and field’ (CSOMP 8779/1913 cit. Mishra, M. 2008: 45). Under Singh’s supervision, Kunti (and Jal) worked reduced hours but always received full pay. In 1912, for example, she earned as much as one pound and three pence (CSOMP 8779/1913 cit. Mishra, M. 2008: 45). After the sirdar’s dismissal, Kunti and Jal were compelled to complete the tasks assigned to them by the next sirdar, Ramharak. This resulted in ‘troublesome’ behaviour such as feigning illness and refusal to work. When her final attempt to

leave the plantation by having her indenture commuted was rejected, the assault allegations were publicized. Within this context, I argue that Kunti

*manipulated her sexuality to procure the object of her desire, Sundar Singh. In return for sexual favours, Kunti's exploitation as a woman labourer was, to a small extent, abated. As her working conditions changed and she was forced to work long hours on the plantation for a meagre wage, Kunti set out to punish the system (and the men) who were responsible for this action.* (Mishra, M. 2008: 45)

My retelling of Kunti's narrative aims to capture her demonstration of agency, in particular her capacity to act within her own interests. Instead of re-casting her as a passive victim of colonialism and patriarchy, I propose that Kunti concocted the story of her assault in conjunction with the Indian nationalists in Fiji and India, and in doing so, she joined the fight to abolish the system that was the source of her oppression. Her testimony in CSOMP 8779/1913 is laced with traces of deliberate defiance and resistance.

## **'MATERNAL NEGLIGENCE' AND DEPOT BABY 7480**

Another colonial catchphrase discussed in 'Kunti's cry' (Lal 1985a) is 'maternal negligence'. When a child or infant died between the years 1879 and 1919, blame for their death was almost always attributed to the mother, often before an official investigation was carried out. Lal challenged this position by illustrating that in the majority of the cases, the high death rates among Indian infants and children in Fiji was the result of poor sanitation and living conditions. He asserted,

*instead of examining conditions in plantation life and work that contributed to the high figures, the immigration officials turned to the familiar terrain, this time*

*blaming indentured parents for their 'carelessness, indifference and ignorance' which, they suggested were the major causes of infant deaths. (1985a: 67)*

Ralph Shlomowitz (1986), Vicki Luker (1997 and 2005) and Glenn Fowler (2012) similarly interrogated the category of the maternally negligent Indian parent, which in the majority of the cases, was the mother.

Inspired by this line of thought and by the discipline of 'minor history' theorized by Sudesh Mishra (2012) and Ann Stoler (2009), I took apart the charge of maternal negligence placed upon an indentured woman named Bachini in 'The suspicious death of depot baby 7480: "Maternal negligence in colonial Fiji"' (Mishra 2016). When a female infant died at the Nukulau depot on 17 July 1889 of an unnamed cause, the British Colonial Secretary, A. R. Coates alleged that the 'child died on the morning of 11th July and evidently from neglect probably intentional on the mother's part' (CSOMP 1997/1889 cit. Mishra 2016). Coates stressed 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' (CSOMP 1997/1889 cit. Mishra 2016). When questioned, Bachni replied that she did not have enough milk to give the child. Coates dismissed her response and went on to accuse her of striking her child a day or two before she died (which in his opinion justified the scars on the infant's face). He concluded that Bachni was guilty of 'killing' her daughter but because of the absence of medical evidence, charges could not be laid against her (CSOMP 1997/1889 cit. Mishra 2016). After close scrutiny of Bachni's statement in Coates's report, it is clear that she did not have adequate milk to feed her daughter and 14-month-old son. She had applied to Coates for a bottle and milk but was only given milk and a teat. Her infant developed sores around her mouth from constantly sucking the teat. The milkman

at Nukulau, Ramessur, confirmed that Bachni collected milk for her baby on a regular basis. Through a close scrutiny of first-hand accounts by Bachni and Ramessur, I shift the blame for Depot Baby 7480's death from the mother to the colonial government, official and medical staff. I conclude the article with the words of Dr Hirsche cited in Lal (2004),

*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. (p. 55)*

## **THE VEIL OF DISHONOUR AND SEXUAL JEALOUSY TROPE**

Another common colonial catchphrase in Fiji's indenture archives is 'sexual jealousy'. Lal (1985a, 1985b) dismantles the way the sexual jealousy trope was used by the colonizers to hold girmitiya women accountable for suicide and murder. While he conceded that the disproportionate ratio of women to men (forty to a hundred) sometimes contributed to suspicion and distrust among couples, Lal argued that the latter was 'only one among several factors responsible for the disturbance of the "collective conscience" of the plantation' (1985a, 1985b). The emotional toll of displacement, isolation and loneliness sometimes combined with the brutality of overseers and sirdars impacted on one's decision to take their own life or that of another. Lal refuted the assertion made by W.E. Russell (Immigration Inspector of Labasa) that the woman is always at fault when her husband or paramour commits murder by drawing attention again to the living conditions that impacted on family life and privacy among couples. As he dismantled the coloniser's easy association between sexual jealousy, adultery, infidelity or desertion and murder, Lal also asserted:

*An important part of the problem was that the indentured women in Fiji were expected by Indian men to follow the age-old ideals of Indian womanhood: silent acceptance of fate, glorification of motherhood and virginity, deference to male authority and, above all, worship of the husband. (1985b: 141)*

In ‘Mawlee’s murder: A minor historical event’ (Mishra 2013), I scrutinize the sexual jealousy trope in relation to the horrific killing of 18-year-old Mawlee at the Rarawai plantation in Ba, Fiji, on 11 March 1890. The court proceedings from the murder trial that took place on 25 March 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. I argued that Mawlee’s decision to leave Dhunnoo for Badloo contradicted the patriarchal assumption that women should be chaste amongst a host of other virtues. In doing so, Mawlee transgressed the patriarchally constructed boundaries of sexual behaviour within ‘marriage’, by unsettling binaries of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ that were used 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’ (CSOMP 5079/1898 cit. Mishra 2013). 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’ (CSOMP 5079/1898 cit. Mishra 2013). In ‘Mawlee’s murder’, I contend that the notion of *ijut* or *izzat* was exacerbated by the conditions associated with indenture. It is impossible to simply transfer the Indian notion of ‘honour’ 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, and following Lal (1985a, 1985b), I illustrate how notions of ‘shame’ cast upon indentured



women like Mawlee could not be divorced from the harsh living and working conditions and the high incidence of sexual violence against women prevalent during the indenture period.

## **SUKHDEI/NARAINI: IMAGINATIVE RECONSTRUCTION AND 'MADNESS'**

More than thirty years after 'Kunti's cry' and 'Veil of Dishonour' were published, Lal penned 'A Most Callous Indifference: Sukhdei's Story' (2019). Using 'imaginative reconstruction' and drawing on a 'lifetime's knowledge of the indenture experience', he navigated his way through the 'partial' and 'fragmentary' archival records by recounting the tragic life and death experience of an indentured woman he called 'Sukhdei' (2019). The account begins with these lines:

*There is a spot on the banks of the Sigatoka River a few chains from Ram Sami's village shop that men avoid and try not to walk past at night. Many say they have seen the figure of a frail woman with fraying white hair and dressed in funeral-white clothes wondering aimlessly at various times of the night, lost. Some swear they have heard soft wailing noises at odd hours, and others recall the fragrance of scents sprinkled on dead bodies during funeral ceremonies to keep the stench of death at bay. A mango tree stands forlornly in overgrown para grass. Some old timers remember this as the place where a deranged woman drowned herself. That is all they remember about her and about the remote past of their forebears. The woman's name was Sukhdei (Lal 2019: 64).*

In 2012, Sudesh Mishra wrote about a woman with the same name who came to Fiji on the first indenture ship, the *Leonidas* in 1879. Using the apparatus of 'minor history', he argued that 'her deviant ways render her a figure of exception inside the norm, and therefore newsworthy' (Mishra 2012). Jacqueline Leckie, in *Colonizing madness: Asylum and community in Fiji* (2020), elaborates

on Sukhdei's manic state, characterized by compulsive sexual behaviour and violence, as she cites the Public Lunatic Asylum case files (89). But I soon realized that Lal was not referring to the same Sukhdei (E-Pass 79) who wandered the streets of Suva in the 1880s with her young son Ramsomj (E-Pass 87), singing sad songs (Mishra 2012; Leckie 2020). Who then is this mysterious woman?

I began scouring the Public Lunatic Asylum records for a 'deranged' woman called Sukhdei but could not find her. What became clear to me as Sukhdei's narrative unfolded, was that it resembled the ordeal of another tragic figure in Fiji's indenture history, Naraini. When she came to Fiji on the *S. S. Santhia* in 1910, 18-year-old Naraini was pregnant (Mishra, M. 2008: 43; Ali 1980: 93; Sanadhya 1991: 44). She was pregnant at the time. During the journey, she courted a shipmate whom she later married in Fiji. Naraini testified that the union was a violent one and also claimed that her husband deprived her of food while she was pregnant (Ali 1980: 93). Then on 16 August 1910, she gave birth to a premature child infant who died four days later. Naraini said that her son had been killed by her husband when he discovered that it was not his. Six days after she had given birth, a European overseer, Bloomfield, said that she should go to work even though according to the laws at the time, a woman was not permitted to work for three months after she had given birth to a child. It was said that Naraini challenged Bloomfield as she retorted: 'My child is dead. I will not go to work' (Sanadhya 1991: 44). When he heard this, Bloomfield beat her so severely that she became unconscious and fell. He was arrested and the case reached the Supreme Court in Suva City. Unsurprisingly, Bloomfield was found not guilty by the Supreme Court and was freed. Naraini, however, was beaten so badly she sustained brain damage. Although she was physically and psychologically abused by two different men, I argue in 'The emergence of feminism in Fiji' (Mishra, M. 2008) that Naraini's story, in particular, her refusal to work after the birth of her child,

may be perceived as an attempt to confront a colonial patriarchy. In particular, she is remembered for the epiphanic moment when she refused to become the victim of another man, in this instance, a European man. Amongst other issues, Naraini's ordeal in Fiji in 1910 raised concerns about the simultaneous abuse of indentured women in the home (domestic sphere/indentured barracks) by Indian indentured men and in the work environment (public domain/sugar plantations) by European men. It also exposed the failure of the colonial (patriarchal) legal system when prominent (white) males (in this case, Bloomfield) perpetrated crimes against indentured women.

I was initially puzzled by Lal's choice to use Sukhdei's name when it seemed like Naraini's narrative was dominant. Moreover, the conclusion of the creative reconstruction does not correspond with the historical details pertaining to Naraini or Sukhdei. Yet, 'A Most Callous Indifference' paints a powerful picture of the intricate connection between gender, indenture, madness and colonization. Lal leaves his readers with an eloquently written, heart-wrenching ending that I would like to cite in full:

*And Sukhdei? What a lovely name: giver of happiness. But happiness was not her lot. Hers was a truncated life lived in suffering and on sufferance in a faraway land to which she had come in such hope and anticipation, all dashed so soon. She spent the rest of days as a physically disabled, mentally deranged vagrant around Sigatoka. One day, her body was found floating in the Sigatoka River. Her death was noticed and talked about for years by people who believed she continued to haunt the Tuva district long after she was gone. Her grave is unmarked. Was her death an accident (unknown for a people new to water)? A suicide, a conscious act to end a damaged life drained of dignity and meaning? Or was she deliberately despatched to save the conscience of fellow Indians who had witnessed the violent attack on her but chose to remain silent or, worse still, accept a bribe to cover the tracks of the perpetrators, a constant reminder of their callousness and cowardice? No one really knew. Sukhdei remained a mystery in death as she had been in life. (Lal 2019: 64)*

In the end, it did not really matter whether Sukhdei was Naraini or Montowinie, Jaita or Dhurma (see Mishra 2018) because she embodied ‘a composite picture’ (Lal 2019: 63) of the so-called ‘madwoman’ in the sugar-cane plantation.

## DRAWING GIRMITIYA WOMEN INTO HISTORY

This homage to the late Professor Brij Lal celebrates the way he boldly confronted the colonial administrators and Indian men for their misogynistic and stereotypical portrayal of grimitiya women in Fiji in the written records. Instead of accepting colonial and patriarchal constructs of women as ‘prostitutes’, ‘maternally negligent’, bad wives, and instigators of sexual jealousy resulting in murder and suicide, Lal drew on the data in the colonial archives to dispel falsehoods about his/our people. His early interventions paved the way for other scholars in the area to reinforce his arguments via individual stories in the archives. As I commemorate Lal’s legacy here, I hope to continue treading down the path of bringing grimitiya women from the margins to the centre of history by emphasizing their expression of agency.

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