

Review Articles

In the Wake of the *Leonidas*

reflections on Indo-Fijian indenture historiography

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Abstract

The historiography of Indo-Fijian indenture came into its own with the publication of Ken Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants* in 1962. A work of 'balanced' scholarship, it contrasts with the more 'emotional' *A New System of Slavery* (1974) by Hugh Tinker, which places greater stress on the iniquities of the indenture system. These two texts set the terms of discussion when the centenary of the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in Fiji, in 1979, gave impetus to further study by historians from the University of the South Pacific, notably Ahmed Ali, Vijay Naidu and Brij V Lal. This article evaluates the ongoing state of scholarship and asks why the momentum has not been maintained.

Keywords

Fiji; historiography; indenture; Indians; Indo-Fijians; plantations

NEW ZEALAND OBSERVED 1940 as a centenary, Australia marked a bicentenary in 1988, and 1992 was remembered with flourishes as the Columbus quincentenary. Temporal markers such as these are celebrated and, additionally, they serve to provide the impetus for historical research. That is what happened in Fiji in 1979 with the centenary of the arrival, on the *Leonidas*, of the first 463 Indian indentured labourers (*girmitiya*) to Fiji. The centenary celebrations included a round of festivities and commemorations, as well as special issues of newspapers. Not only this, though. There was also a flowering of historical and creative writing on the Indo-Fijian indenture experience. The 125th anniversary of *girit* in 2004 saw a minor flourish, mostly in the form of reprints of books from the previous generation, but nothing to compare with the veritable cascade of enthusiasm and scholarship that marked 1979. This recent crop of publications, however, does provide a pretext for reflection on the state of indenture studies in Fiji.

Some 61,000 *girmitiya* arrived in Fiji between 1879 and 1916. They were a tiny proportion of the 1.2 million or so other Indians who, between 1834 and 1916, went on contracts of indenture to places as far apart as the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, Natal and East Africa. But in a small country, 61,000 is still an appreciable total and their legacy has been considerable. Two features stand out. First, there was a significant minority of women, reflecting the regulation that there had to be 40 female for every 100 male *girmitiya* (in other words, a 28 per cent female component). Secondly, the *girmitiya* had settlement rights and the majority took up permanent residence in Fiji. This, in part, reflected another regulation—that they were entitled to repatriation at government expense only after living a further five years in Fiji. Most of the ex-*girmitiya* could not afford the cost of a voyage home when their term of indenture had expired, and after a further five years they had adjusted to Fiji. So settle they did, forming a ‘separate but unequal’ segment of the population. The separateness was partly their own choice and partly a function of deliberate government policy. Left to fend for themselves, the post-indenture Indians had to establish schools for their children. Politically, they attempted to regain their respect (*iqzqat*) following the hell (*narak*) of plantation life by seeking political equality and (unsuccessfully) demanding a common roll voting system, secure in the knowledge that they would outnumber Fijians and

Europeans in a matter of decades. Fiji became a so-called plural society, and in some respects the literature, with separate major studies of rural Indians (Mayer 1961) and rural Fijians (Belshaw 1964), reflects this lack of inter-racial integration. The anthropologist Adrian Mayer also published a short book *Indians in Fiji*, which contained two chapters on the indenture period (1963:13–32). With impending decolonisation in the late 1960s, political parties were racially defined, and there was soon a literature on the politics of race (e.g. Norton 1977; Mamak 1978). In the same way, there were separate studies of indentured Indian plantation workers and their Melanesian counterparts with, respectively, Ken Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (1962) and Owen Parnaby's *Britain and the Labor Trade in the Southwest Pacific* (1965a). The dichotomy in the literature was underlined with the appearance in 1973 of Peter Corris's monograph on the labour migration of indentured Solomon Islanders, some 8,000 of whom worked in Fiji but generally not alongside their Indian counterparts (Corris 1973).

The *girmitiya* were vital to the sugar industry, which was under the monopsonist influence of the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company (CSR). That in itself was critical, because the colonial government depended on the sugar industry, and therefore the CSR, for its solvency and thus had incentive to ignore abuse of the workforce. Plantation workers are always most at risk in operations facing severe profitability constraints, as was the CSR from the mid-1880s. In any case, indenture is an explicitly coercive arrangement: a worker binds himself to an employer for a lengthy period in return for a wage and other stipulated conditions. In the case of Indians to Fiji, the initial period of indenture was five years; a further five years under indenture entitled the worker to a free return passage, but most took the former option. They were provided with wretchedly appointed accommodation (known as 'the lines') and the wage was nominally a shilling a day for men and nine pence for women. But this was eroded by various means and it was not until 1908, or 28 years after the arrival of the first batch of workers on the *Leonidas*, that *girmitiya* earned their full shilling a day as a matter of routine. Indenture ostensibly set out mutual rights and obligations between worker and employer but in reality provided criminal punishment for breach of contract by workers. Employers were under the gentler provisions of civil law, hence the indenture

system's sometimes being called the penal contract system. The purpose of indentured service was twofold. In providing for a fixed term of service it stabilised the workforce by preventing a high turnover, and at the same time the *penal* sanctions placed in employers' hands a blunt instrument of discipline. Add to this the dominance of a large plantation company, a succession of governors who hesitated to oppose the CSR even had they wanted to, a less than impartial colonial judiciary, and a general tenor in white society of contempt towards *girmitiya*, and the ingredients are in place for a harsh and oppressive variant of the indenture system.

The severity of Indo-Fijian indenture has attracted the most attention, from contemporaries as well as from later historians. From the early years of the twentieth century, the Indian indenture system as a whole came under severe criticism from missionaries, humanitarian groups (Garnham 1918) and activists in the Indian nationalist movement. The investigations carried out by the pro-Indian nationalist activists CF Andrews and William Pearson caused an uproar in India, as did the earlier account by the ex-*girmitiya* Totaram Sanadhya, *My Twenty Years in Fiji* (Andrews 1918; Andrews & Pearson 1918; Sanadhya 1991). Closer to home, the Methodist missionaries JW Burton and Richard Piper provided critiques (Burton 1909, 1910; Gillion 1962:174), which, disgracefully, their own church disowned in order to allay criticism within Fiji. Apart from two substantial official reports ([Sanderson Committee] 1910; McNeill & Lal 1915), the shortcoming of this corpus of denunciatory literature as historical source material is not so much its partisan outlook as its impressionistic nature: while accurately conveying the strength of feeling against indenture and the entrenched abuses of the system, it is characterised by too much sweeping assertion and too few substantiating data. But it did contribute to the ending of the Indian indenture system by Britain, who was concerned with the larger question that opposition to overseas indenture was eroding the loyalty of Indians to the Empire (Yarwood 1968). The system was terminated in 1916 and in Fiji the remaining contracts of indenture were cancelled on 1 January 1920. It was indeed the end of an era; but incredibly, after all the tumult and shouting of the previous decade, the final erasure of Indo-Fijian indenture was barely mentioned by the *Fiji Times*.

Historians were slow to take up the subject—not surprisingly, given that Fiji is among those generally dismissed as small and remote (for which read trivial) places and, more importantly, because Pacific Islands history did not become a distinct academic specialisation until the early 1950s. Sizeable works on the Indian indenture system as a whole had emerged by the 1950s; but they had little or nothing to say about Fiji (Kondapi 1951; Cumpston 1953). The occasional Master's thesis looked at Fiji (e.g. Colaco 1957) and there were accounts of the extension of Indian indenture to Fiji during Sir Arthur Gordon's governorship (Cumpston 1956; Legge 1958:167–8). The latter grouping represented a lingering expression of the once-dominant high politics thrust of Pacific Islands historiography, with its concentration on the workings of empire. An account of the Indian indenture system in Fiji as a functioning whole, and how the workers fared within it, was still needed.

The decisive historiographical breakthrough came in 1962 with the publication of Ken Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (Gillion 1962). Finally the Indians were being followed on to the plantations rather than simply regarded as a political and administrative issue, although they were still that. More than just a case study, *Fiji's Indian Migrants* was the first systematic treatment of its subject; it deals with the origins and background of the indentured Indians, their recruitment, conveyance and employment, the regulation of the system in Fiji and its eventual abolition. A work of careful scholarship and sober judgement, more than forty years later *Fiji's Indian Migrants* deservedly remains one of the more enduring works of Pacific history. Perhaps Gillion was too successful in the short term, in the sense that the seeming comprehensiveness of his findings gave the impression that everything worth saying had been said. Certainly, there was surprisingly little work on Indo-Fijian indenture over the next dozen years and what there was either endorsed or elaborated upon his findings. The Sydney-based Sri Lankan anthropologist Chandra Jayawardena confirmed Gillion's conclusion that the caste system disintegrated under the pressures of plantation life; in Jayawardena's words, caste was 'emaciated to its bare logical skeleton' (1971:118). Andrew Thornley's 1974 journal article (derived from his MA thesis) on the lack of success of the Methodist Church's proselytising efforts among Indo-Fijians broke new ground on the religious side while falling into the Gillion groove on the political side (Thornley 1974).

Shiu Prasad's oral history of indentured labourers drew heavily on Gillion for contextualising information (1974). There was also the posthumously published account of an overseer's experiences, the evocative *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* by Walter Gill (1970). Like Totaram Sanadhya's *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*, it is the only one of its kind.

It took until 1974 before Gillion was challenged with Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery* (1974). This book was not specifically about Fiji; rather, it was the first volume of Tinker's trilogy on the overseas Indians. Tinker was amply qualified for the task having a long-standing academic interest in the Indian diaspora that stemmed from wartime service in Burma with the British Army. He spoke fluent Hindi; he had visited all the major places of Indian habitation, apart from Fiji; and he empathised with the Indians' predicaments in their far-flung abodes. But in a project of such scale there are trade-offs, and most obviously Tinker's documentary research was largely confined to Mauritius, the British colony that received by far the largest number of Indian indentured labourers. The underlying argument of *A New System of Slavery* is suggested by its title, namely that indenture differed from chattel slavery only in that it involved temporary servitude rather than being a permanent condition. Otherwise, indenture was an unmitigated disaster for those caught in its coils.

The differences between *Fiji's Indian Migrants* and *A New System of Slavery* were grounded less in their sources and more in authorial outlook and personality. Tinker was of activist disposition. On three occasions he stood unsuccessfully for the British parliament as a Liberal candidate, and in the early 1970s, as Director of the Institute of Race Relations in London, he stirred up controversy by attempting to transform the in-house journal *Race Relations* from a tame academic outlet to a crusading magazine. Gillion, by contrast, was a scholar's scholar. Touchy, introverted and aloof, he presents a striking contrast to his adversary, and their differences are reflected in their work.¹

Accordingly, the 'Tinker thesis', and the manner in which he expressed it, ran counter to what one of Gillion's reviewers called his '[m]oral detachment and balance' (Legge 1963:267). Gillion by no means under-estimated the evils of the indenture system, but he was also quick to point out that, on the whole, it was an improvement on what the Indians experienced at home and that, by

and large, those who remained in Fiji were somewhat better off than they would have been in their homeland. But such was the caution with which Gillion expressed himself it seemed to another reviewer that his judgements were ‘given with such reservations that only by a careful reading can one be satisfied that they are not contradictory’ (Parnaby 1965b:244). Tinker agreed, saying that Gillion was ‘perhaps a little too concerned with “balance”, and sometimes holds back from the most searching probe into the sordid . . .’ (Tinker 1974:407). The latter claim has no foundation. But Gillion’s desire to be fair to everyone—his ‘imaginative sympathy with the diverse points of view of his subjects, whether Indians, Fijian planters or officials, the Colonial Office or India Office official’ (Legge 1963:267)—suggested to some an indifference to the suffering inseparable from plantation life and labour, while his depiction of CSR as a good citizen rather than the ogre of legend raised eyebrows (Gillion 1962:97–8). Nor did Gillion do himself any favours with his dismissive review of *A New System of Slavery*, in which he conveyed an impression of callous disregard for the *girmitya*:

The book is deliberately moralistic in tone. ‘Balance’ is explicitly rejected for an emotional denunciation of the [indenture] system as the successor of the African slave trade. Yes, the Indian labourers did suffer on the plantations in Fiji (for five years); so do most people of India, most immigrants to new lands, most newcomers to industrial discipline, the poor generally. Tinker’s standpoint is not as original as he seems to think; he is far from the first to recognise the iniquity of the system . . . Moreover, there is page after page of straight reporting of official views, often taken from one source, belying the author’s claim to be concerned with ordinary people, not the leaders. The book is certainly not a people’s history, nor does it show much anthropological sophistication or historical perspective. In 1974 it is no longer good enough to simply turn imperialist history on its head. (Gillion 1974:140)

That brought differences and resentments into the open and others were to take up Tinker’s cause when the 1979 centenary celebrations of *gimit* got under way.

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There had never been anything like it on the local historiographic scene. The centenary celebrations brought forth a surge of writing on the Indo-Fijian experience, some of it literary, some of it historical and some of it on the indenture experience. People already working on the topic received impetus, and others joined in for the occasion. The Fiji government issued a publication styled a 'souvenir booklet', *Girmit: a centenary anthology* (Government of Fiji 1979) and the 1979 volume of this journal was a special issue on Indo-Fijians. It included a substantial contribution by a young USP Economics lecturer, Wadan Narsey, on 'Monopoly capital, white racism and superprofits in Fiji: a case study of CSR' (1979:66–146), which was informed by neo-Marxist underdevelopment theory. Two important anthologies were published overseas. *Rama's Banishment* (Mishra 1979) comprised academic essays from diverse disciplines on aspects of the Indian presence in Fiji, including the indenture period. *The Indo-Fijian Experience*, edited by a USP academic (Subramani 1979), was largely given over to fiction and poetry but also included historical material on indenture. A contributor to both volumes was Ahmed Ali, who at the time was also a USP academic, but these were by no means his only publications. His collection of essays, *Plantation to Politics*, included a long opening chapter on the indenture experience, 'In the "Lines" and the "Free", 1879–1919' (Ali 1980:1–42). He also edited a collection of interviews, subtitled *The indenture experience in Fiji*, from two dozen surviving *girmitiya*, who had arrived between 1900 and 1915 (Ali 1979). Ali's substantial introduction, which is influenced by Tinker's indenture-as-slavery thesis, had the merits of extensive archival research and comparisons with the Caribbean. But the meat of the book is the interviews, which Ali saw as the real means of reaching the heart of the indenture experience. The interviews themselves are unstructured and there is no indication of follow-up questioning (which at any rate was impossible when interviewees became emotional). No contextual information on the interviewees is provided and no attempt is made to verify and corroborate, except at one point to say that the oral evidence 'harmonizes' with the secondary literature. Far from challenging the documentary record, the oral testimony is a garnish that either supplements or complements the archival evidence; and Ali's use of it calls to mind the stricture that the devotees of oral history, having 'discovered their particular piece of the proletarian past, . . . are

too eager to publish it in its raw, original unprocessed state, as if that is all to historical investigation' (Cannadine 1989:191).

Too late for the centenary year but based on research conducted during the 1970s was Vijay Naidu's *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (1980). It was a remarkable achievement considering the circumstances. In late 1973, two of Ahmed Ali's undergraduate students at USP, Vijay Naidu and Rajend Prakash, spent two months tramping the countryside of north and northwest Viti Levu in search of surviving *girmitiya*, and in the event they interviewed twelve of them. Given the difficulties that I encountered in teaching oral history courses at USP some twenty years later, especially in ensuring that students maintained an adequate rate of progress (Munro 1999), I can only marvel at the initiative and resolve of Naidu and Prakash; and Naidu does say that '[t]he enormity of what we set out to do strikes me now—two inexperienced second year undergraduate students doing field research for the first time and speaking to their elders about a past that must have been most painful for them to recall' (2004:vii). During the 1970s, Naidu converted his undergraduate essay into a small book. In the process he conducted considerable extra research among contemporary printed sources, compiling useful statistical tables relating to suicide and plantation offences. It was a commendable piece of empirical research, demonstrating the extent to which *girmitiya* were subjected to violence in various guises, and it remains Naidu's most significant publication.

Two intellectual influences on Ali and Naidu were the complementary notions of the plantations being a 'total institution' and the 'new system of slavery'. Both theses were seductive in the anti-colonialist context of Fiji in the 1970s. They provided an enticing explanatory framework but one that was unduly restrictive and that served to preclude other ways of thinking about the indentured servitude. There is no such thing as a *total* institution. To put it another way, the elements of coercion and control that are integral to plantation life and labour are never unfettered, meaning that resistance and worker agency have to be factored into the equation rather than being written out of it.

The stand-off between Tinker and Gillion had some strange repercussions in the works of Fiji-based historians of Indo-Fijian indenture. Tinker had little to say about Fiji, so by default Gillion was heavily quarried for the empirical

detail lacking in *A New System of Slavery*. But the really strange thing about the Tinker–Gillion debate, if that is what it can be called, is that they were in agreement on the fundamental point that indenture was harsh, oppressive and exploitative. So what was the fuss about and why were positions so polarised, especially when the historians all endorsed more or less the entirely negative images of the indenture experience as expressed by Ali and Naidu’s informants? But Gillion’s sober style, not to mention his criticisms of Tinker, seems to have been deceptive and he incurred the disapprobation of local scholars. His second book, on Fiji Indians between 1920 and 1946 (Gillion 1977), was abusively reviewed by Ali, who alleged that Gillion’s ‘familiarity with official records and their tenor’ is not matched by a knowledge of Indo-Fijians or informed by an appreciation of the works of Franz Fanon, VS Naipaul and Hugh Tinker (Ali 1978:173). Fighting words of that sort invite further commentary. One topic on which both Ali and Gillion wrote was the 1920 strike, and Gillion’s account is superior (Ali 1980:43–72; Gillion 1977:18–46).

For his part, Naidu misrepresented Gillion in saying:

Some writers like Gillion and Shiu Prasad suggest that under indenture all was not bad, as the labourers were better fed and had facilities like hospitals and housing that were not available to them in India. From my own discussions with ex-indentured labourers, the conclusion that I can draw is that the conditions here in Fiji were so different from those in India that comparisons do not make sense. (Naidu 1980:32; 2004:35)

It is worth quoting what Gillion actually said:

It was not only the drudgery but the unaccustomed impersonal treatment on most plantations that made for unhappiness. In India every man had his place in the social order, but in Fiji immigrants felt that they were looked upon as sugar-producing machines. To a man with a wife and family, who had belonged to a middle or high caste in India, his new life was a miserable one, at best that of a well-treated animal—fed, looked after if sick, driven to work, and given a ‘stable’ (Andrews), or a ‘kennel’ (Burton), to live in. It is true, of course, that conditions in the factories and on the plantations in India were as bad, if not worse. To a labourer who had known hunger, had slept in the open or in a mud hovel, and had encountered little but abuse and ill-

treatment from his betters, a plantation in Fiji was an improvement. But while the conditions in Fiji cannot properly be viewed in the light of the social conscience, working conditions, and anthropological knowledge of the mid-twentieth century, it must be remembered that they were regarded as deplorable by the more sensitive men *at the time*, including Christian missionaries, a few of the Fiji Government's own officials and at least one surviving inspector of immigrants interviewed by the writer. It was not without reason that the Indians called their life on plantations in Fiji 'narak', which means 'hell'. (Gillion 1962:128–9)

Another USP graduate working on indentured labourers was Brij V Lal, who had also contributed to both *Rama's Banishment* and Ali's *Girmit* (1979). Himself the grandson of a *girmitya*, Lal's choice of subject stemmed directly from personal relevance and an engagement with his own roots. In 1980 he submitted to the Australian National University a PhD thesis, a condensed version of which was published in 1983 as *Girmitiyas: the origins of the Fiji Indians* (Lal 1983). To be precise, his work concerned the 45,000 or so migrants from North India, not only the places of origin but their social and economic backgrounds, and with separate chapters on women and family migration and structure. The thesis was supervised by Gillion and it fleshed out and elaborated on a theme that Gillion had explored more than two decades earlier in a journal article (Gillion 1956). Lal's *Girmitiyas* was the first computer analysis of a segment of the Pacific Islands labour trade, or at least the first such *published* study, because two postgraduate students at James Cook University, Clive Moore and Patricia Mercer, had also used computer analysis for their theses on the labour trade in Melanesians to Queensland (later published as Moore 1985; Mercer 1995; see also Munro 1998). Since then, Dorothy Shineberg has used computer analysis for her study of New Hebrideans to New Caledonia (1999). Despite some use of songs and folklore, Lal's was a more overtly a statistical study than those of Moore, Mercer and Shineberg. The raw data from the Emigration Passes were entered on to code sheets and fed into a computer. The results were analysed against archival sources and the secondary literature and a number of derogatory stereotypes of the emigrants were put to rest. It emerged that the *girmitya* were of varied social backgrounds (just under 22 per cent came from the lower classes) and caste origins and that emigration to Fiji was an extension of an existing movement of internal wage

labour. He confirmed that this worker mobility within India was a result of the 'push' of rural poverty and dislocation, especially when famine stalked the land. In examining the recruitment process, Lal concluded that it was sometimes based on fraud but that the extent of this fraud had been exaggerated. So the contexts are those of economic hardship and social mobility and the pervasive themes are agency and participation by choice (see Munro 2000:1–23). The one problem is that Lal, who was influenced by prevailing notions of indigenous agency, may have overestimated the extent to which the emigrants exercised unhindered choice in the recruitment process and thus underplayed the extent of deception (see Carter 1996:45).

Lal's *Girmitiyas* was immediately recognised as groundbreaking in methodology and conclusions, but Lal himself was dissatisfied with the possibilities of quantification: it helped answer the structural questions of what happened but had less utility in answering the causal question of why it happened the way it did. He returned to 'straight' qualitative history and during the mid-1980s he took up the causal questions in a series of papers. Noticeably, the theme of agency receded when he followed the *girmitiya* on to the plantations. In a general essay he painted a depressing portrait of exploitation and ill-treatment that involved over-tasking, the complicity of *sirdar* (Indian foremen), the instability of family life, suicides, lack of legal protection, government indifference, non- or partial-payment of wages, ill-health and high mortality (Lal 1984:126–58). He also wrote on particular aspects of indenture, be it worker resistance, the position of women or the reasons for suicide.² They are revisionary in the true sense of the word. Instead of overt worker resistance, Lal argued, the strategy for survival against overwhelming odds was outward compliance, that is 'nonresistance'. His essay on women shows that the previous focus on their allegedly immoral character was not only wrong but served to divert attention from conditions on plantations. Elaborating on the theme, he showed that suicides were not caused by sexual jealousy among male workers but, rather, by the breakdown of 'integrative institutions' on the plantations.³ *Girmitiya* women were the victims rather than the cause of many of the ills on plantations and they bore the brunt of oppression from men, whether European or Indian.

One conclusion to emerge implicitly from the work of both Naidu and Lal is that the oppression on plantations was significantly increased by Indians heaping misery upon other Indians. But both authors tend to shrink from the implications of their own findings. Another point that never seems to have been taken up is the fact that the informants of both Ali and Naidu all arrived after 1900—in fact, almost two-thirds of the 60,553 *qirmitiya* arrived between 1901 and 1916 (Gillion 1962:212–4)—when conditions were slowly improving. And still they—and other participants, such as Walter Gill—portray plantation life and labour in the direst terms. So what was it like in the earlier decades? Be that as it may, Lal's work has made an impact in ways that the writings of Ali and Naidu have not. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and his computer analysis served as a model for a similar exercise with regard to Natal (Bhana 1991:xi; see also Shlomowitz 1992/93). His work on women and the causes of suicide has been used in Ronald Hyam's study of sexuality and empire (1989:94, 112n), while the essay on 'nonresistance' has inspired significant work on issues of resistance and accommodation on plantations (Lal, Munro & Beechert 1993).

The next major contributor to the historiography of Indo-Fijian indenture was Ralph Shlomowitz, a Chicago-school economist who has provided quantitative analyses of the economic and demographic aspects of the Pacific Islands labour trade (see Munro 1994/95). He turned his attention to Fiji and provided what remains the only comparative study of the Melanesian and Indian segments of the indentured workforce (Shlomowitz 1985).⁴ One conclusion was that the high death rate on plantations was due not only to ill-treatment but more particularly to the epidemiological factor. In other words, workers coming from benign disease environments were at risk from a new range of viruses against which their body systems had little or no immunity (Curtin 2002; Shlomowitz 1990). Emigrant workers were particularly vulnerable in the first year and especially the initial six months of service, after which the mortality rates tapered off as workers became acclimatised to their new disease environment. The epidemiological factor also explains the differential mortality between Melanesian and Indian workers: the latter came from a more hostile disease environment and thus had greater immunity to the respiratory and gastro-intestinal diseases to which so many succumbed. As Shlomowitz

demonstrates, this had a bearing on the relative costs of Indian and Melanesian labour. It had been supposed that the cost of a Melanesian worker at £3 per year was significantly less than that of an Indian worker, whose shilling a day translates into roughly £15 per year and whose conveyance costs were far higher. But the Indians came on five-year contracts as against the Melanesians' three-year ones, meaning that recruitment and conveyance costs were spread over a longer period of service, and a higher proportion survived the duration of their contracts. At the end of their contracts, a smaller proportion of Indians was repatriated, which represented a further saving. Instead of being provided with rations, the Indians' food came out of their wages (which in any case were routinely eroded for non-completion of the daily task). To complete the equation, Indians suffered a lower mortality rate, which saved on replacement costs to the employers. Seen in this light, Indian labour was the more cost efficient option despite higher wages: they were initially more expensive but ultimately cheaper. To put it another way, wages constitute only one component of the overall cost of labour. Some of Lal's Honours students have written on issues of health, sickness and mortality among *girmitya*, and their work has been published in *Chalo Jabaji*, but unfortunately without reference to Shlomowitz's work (Lal 2000:273–336), to which, it appears, they neither were directed nor found their own way.

In the last 25 years considerable additional research has added to the picture and in some cases altered the contours. Michael Moynagh's excellent study of the sugar industry (1981) has resoundingly superseded the commissioned history of the CSR, although the latter is still a useful mine of detail (Moynagh 1981; Lowndes 1956). USP undergraduate Gyannendra Prasad has continued the oral history tradition by reproducing with minimal commentary the transcript of an interview with an ex-indentured labourer (1985:75–102). The economist Bruce Knapman has written memorably on the *girmitya* experience in his spirited rebuttal of the relevance of neo-Marxist underdevelopment theory to colonial Fiji (1987:12–13). In a quite different vein, Jeff Siegel wrote a magnificent study of plantation languages in Fiji, incorporating both Hindi and Melanesian speakers (1987). Also on the comparative front, 'Atu Bain demolished the notion of a protective Fijian labour policy by demonstrating illicit use and abuse of the regulations and statutes (1988). Meanwhile, the

edited collection *Labour in the South Pacific* included sections on Indo-Fijian indentured labourers, including a chapter on *girmitiya* women by Shaista Shameem, who tried too hard to be different. For example, she disputes Lal's view that the erosion of 'integrative institutions' lay behind many of the ills of plantation life and argues instead that in many instances women accepted this breakdown because it gave them more autonomy. But in neither her chapter nor the thesis from which it derives does she provide supporting evidence (Shameem 1990a:153; 1990b:257). One turns with relief to the anthropologist John Kelly's sophisticated accounts of gender issues on plantations (1990, 1991). Kelly also put us in his debt by co-editing the first English translation of Totaram Sanadhya's writings (Sanadhya 1991). Work of a different sort includes Satya Colpani's biography of her father, Sir Sathi Narain, and Morven Sidal's biography of the Methodist lady missionary Hannah Dudley, both of which have chapters on the plantation regime (Colpani 1996:7–22; Sidal 1997:21–33). Yet another sort of work came out of Flinders University with valuable quantification of the geographical and social origins of hitherto ignored South Indian labourers (Brennan, McDonald & Shlomowitz 1992, 1998). Another important empirical study is Judith Bennett's article on the health problems of Japanese labourers in Fiji and Queensland (Bennett 2001). As well as having an all-too-rare comparative dimension, it provides a timely reminder that the Asian indentured workforce in Fiji was not entirely confined to Indians (see also Gillion 1962:77). Brij Lal's collection of documents relating to the *gimit* experience (Lal 1998) and also *Chalo Jabaji*, in which his work and a sampling of work by his Honours students is conveniently collected between single covers (Lal 2000), also appeared in this period.

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As the 125th anniversary of the arrival of the first *girmitiya*, 2004 did not, in publishing terms, match the efforts of the centenary. One new book was published (in Auckland, Prasad 2004) to mark the occasion:

· Rajendra Prasad, *Tears in Paradise: a personal and historical journey, 1879– 2004*

There was also a book of essays (published in Canberra, Lal 2004), on the overall Indo-Fijian experience and not confined to the indenture period, some 'straight' history but most in the form of 'faction', which may be defined as 'lived, factual experience rendered through a quasi-fictional approach' (Lal 2003:45).

- Brij V Lal (ed.), *Bittersweet: the Indo-Fijian experience*

There has been a 'collection of writing commemorating the 125th anniversary of Indian presence in the South Pacific . . . a record of memories of those who remember Fiji from outside', which was actually published in June 2005:

- Kavita Nandan (ed.), *Stolen Worlds: Fijian fragments*

And three books were reprinted (one in Suva, two in Lautoka, 2004):

- Ahmed Ali, *Girmit: Indian indenture experience in Fiji*, with a new preface and two new concluding chapters
- Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*, with a new preface and epilogue
- Brij V Lal, *Girmitiyas: the origins of Fiji's Indians*, with a new preface and an introduction by Clem Seecharan

The implications are cause for concern. Almost half of Rajendra Prasad's *Tears in Paradise* deals with the indenture period but the book's super-charged, high octane emotional content, in both matter and manner, leaves Tinker looking tame and makes one positively yearn for Gillion's oft-scorned 'balance'. It brings to mind Brij Lal's warning that 'Hindsight should not hound history nor the present prosecute the past. Nor is it wise to press a complex and contested past into a serviceable ideology to fight contemporary battles, however depressing the present might be' (Lal 2004b:4). All the same, *Tears in Paradise* is the only new single-authored volume of any substance on the Indo-Fijian indenture experience to emerge in 2004, and its author is not an academic. Where have all the academics gone? Their contribution is a trio of

reprinted works representing research from the 1970s, and *Bittersweet* and *Stolen Worlds*, collections of memoirs and personal narratives of latter-day descendants, more concerned with identity and representation than with historiography. Yet arguably, if any book should have been reprinted it is Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants*.

One might indeed ask why no new research for the 125th anniversary emerged out of USP, which is the place best located for its accomplishment. One could point to the highly politicised environment that is present-day Fiji, which USP reflects, as a distraction at best and an impediment at worst to a significant and sustained research record across the University (see Lal 2001:102–3). Pertinent also may be the matter of a reward system where advancement lies less in teaching and publication and more in the assumption of administrative responsibility. It is increasingly the case that institutional 'service' of this sort all-too-readily translates into disservice to students as well as being a hindrance in making a contribution to one's discipline through significant published output. This anomaly is by no means unique to USP among academic institutions, of course.

But the problem, I think, is deeper seated, and that is the shallowness of historical consciousness in Fiji.⁵ It is almost as though anything that happened before the coups of 1987 is ancient history and without meaning or relevance to contemporary concerns. Some would even say that the 2000 disturbance establishes the boundary between ancient and contemporary history in Fiji; pre-1987 is almost imponderable. Also, there is a tendency for poetry and reminiscence, some of it self-regarding and narcissistic, to get passed off as a substitute for solid academic work. Whatever the case, the end result is the same: History has long had diminishing priority at USP and promising students have been drawn to other disciplines and professions. Not a single new local historian is in sight. Meanwhile, Ali, Naidu and Lal have moved on and the local contribution to the historiography of Indo-Fijian indenture is marking time and starting to look grey-haired. Ali has been in politics and the senior public service for the past two decades.⁶ Naidu spent a dozen years as a university administrator, which may give some clue to why his reading on the comparative Caribbean aspects of indenture has not kept pace with the more recent monograph literature (eg. Look Lai, 1993; Mangru 1996) and instead is

marking time with George Beckford (1979) and Walter Rodney (1981). Brij Lal alone has been able to combine the roles of academic and activist—and his roles as historian and history maker (as a member of the Constitution Review Committee) have sometimes been one and the same—but his voluminous published output has included little in recent years on the Indo-Fijian indenture experience—an exception being his contextualising introduction to *Bittersweet*. He has moved on and left the field to others—except that there is no one to fill the breach.

In the absence of new researchers coming through to replace the previous cohort, the ‘solution’ has been to republish older texts. It is an unsatisfactory solution but better than the alternative of nothing at all. That is why one should not, for example, take the otherwise justifiable attitude that Vijay Naidu’s *The Violence of Indenture*, as a young man’s book and a product of the 1970s, should have been left there. Its republication at an affordable price will help raise consciousness and knowledge of a crucial part of Fiji’s history, and we should be grateful to the Fiji Institute of Applied Studies for taking the commercial risk. In his moving foreword to the reprinted version of Lal’s *Girmitiyas* (also published by FIAS) Clem Seecharan speaks of the baleful and depriving effects of ‘historical darkness’ (2004), a point well worth heeding. For that reason, and more, the regret remains that none of three—Ali, Naidu or Lal—wrote a substantial foreword to his republished book relating the context in which he wrote and discussing his findings in the light of later historiographic developments. Naidu attempts this but gets diverted into denunciations of colonialism and ‘the rape of democracy’ in Fiji.

Others may see the situation differently and perhaps point to the different political contexts of 1979 and the present time. In 1979 it was still possible to talk realistically about a multicultural Fiji. Moreover, Indo-Fijians formed an absolute majority of the population and the National Federation Party was an appreciable force (and nearly assumed government in 1977). By 2004, Indo-Fijians are more marginalised than ever and those with the opportunity, voting with their feet, are creating a brain drain that Fiji can ill afford. Those who have emigrated include the very academics and professionals whose departure makes more intelligible the limited celebration of the 125th anniversary of *giriti*. One could also point to another direct outcome of the

1987 coups—namely, the tendency for Pacific historians to move out of the nineteenth century to tackle more contemporary issues. In this changed context, where priorities have been reordered, one would not expect as much research on Indo-Fijian indenture. But why so *little*?

Yet the Indo-Fijian indenture experience continues to resonate in contemporary attitudes and it makes sense to have an informed appreciation of what it was all about. It is by no means the only conceivable historical subject worthy of study; but it is still an important one. Let's hope that the next 25 years bring forth exciting new work and that Fiji-based historians recapture that first fine rapture that led to a flowering of scholarship for the centenary of indenture. There is a journal article just waiting to be written on Henry Anson, the Protector of Labourers during the 1880s whose zealous, if tactless, efforts on behalf of his charges was his downfall. At another level, there is scope for a comparison of working conditions between different plantations and different decades. Most of all, there is a pressing need for comparisons with other plantation areas, and not simply those that employed East Indians, along the lines suggested by Peter Kolchin (1987), Carol MacLennan (1995) and Richard Allen (1995, 1999, 2001). Such work should not be a comparison of historiographies but rather a proper comparison of histories based on archival research. In short, there is life to be lived and history to be written—and rewritten. 'And of course why not?' said the great Australian historian WK Hancock, 'for each generation must both examine the sources more deeply and re-examine the concepts that serve to elucidate the sources; this necessary process is marred only when the aftercomers show themselves ungenerous and ungrateful toward the pioneers' (1954:76).

Notes

I am sincerely grateful to the anonymous referee for perceptive commentary and candid criticism. The honest articulation of critique that stems from genuine engagement with another's work is always appreciated.

¹ The great personal tragedy in Tinker's life was the death of his son David in the Falklands War in 1982. Later that year, Tinker published a compilation of his son's letters and poems, *A Message from the Falklands*, which has become an anti-war classic (Tinker 1982). Hugh Tinker died in 2000. A revealing obituary of Ken Gillion is provided by Lal (1993).

- ² These essays are most readily consulted in *Chalo Jabaji*, Lal's collected essays on Indo-Fijian indenture (Lal 2000:167–238).
- ³ Until commencing work on the history of suicide in New Zealand, which is my current research interest, I never quite appreciated just how sophisticated Lal's own work on suicide is. His careful tabulations of suicides by caste, time-span and geographic origins are exemplary, as is his attention to cultural nuances (Lal 2000:215–38; cf. Gillion 1962:127–8).
- ⁴ Shlomowitz has, like Lal, put together a selection of his essays, published under the title *Mortality and Migration in the Modern World* (Shlomowitz 1996), but it excludes Shlomowitz 1986.
- ⁵ There have been visual documentaries on indenture but I am not in a position to assess these. In 2004, the Australia Broadcasting Corporation issued a CD entitled *Sweet Sorrow: a documentary on indentured Indian labour in Fiji*, but its circulation within Fiji would be limited. There is also the fijigirmit.org website which, at the time of writing, needs to be substantially developed. It will be interesting to see how indenture, and history generally, continue to be presented in Fiji by means other than the written word.
- ⁶ We record with regret the untimely death of Ahmed Ali while this issue was in preparation. *Ed.*

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