

# Violence of Indenture in Fiji

The discrimination, violence and intimidation Indo-Fijians suffered in the wake of Fiji's coups are well known; that they have suffered in these ways for so long rather less so. Vijay Naidu's book is a timely reminder of this and is, therefore, a valuable resource for people who want to better understand the full weight of injustice Indo-Fijians continue to bear by having fuller knowledge of the tragic history they have endured."

William Sutherland,  
Australian National University,  
Canberra

"Unlike the word slavery, indenture is a much more neutral term. However, in practice slavery and indenture possessed many common features, as Professor Naidu's 1980 study of Fiji's indenture system demonstrated most clearly for the first time. His record of this often-neglected aspect of Fiji's history helped consolidate the basis for the then emerging Indo-Fijian identity..... Twenty-five years later, as Fiji continues to struggle for a sense of national identity, this re-publication of *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* is a timely reminder of a past that began the process of uniting and indigenizing one of Fiji's most important migrant communities."

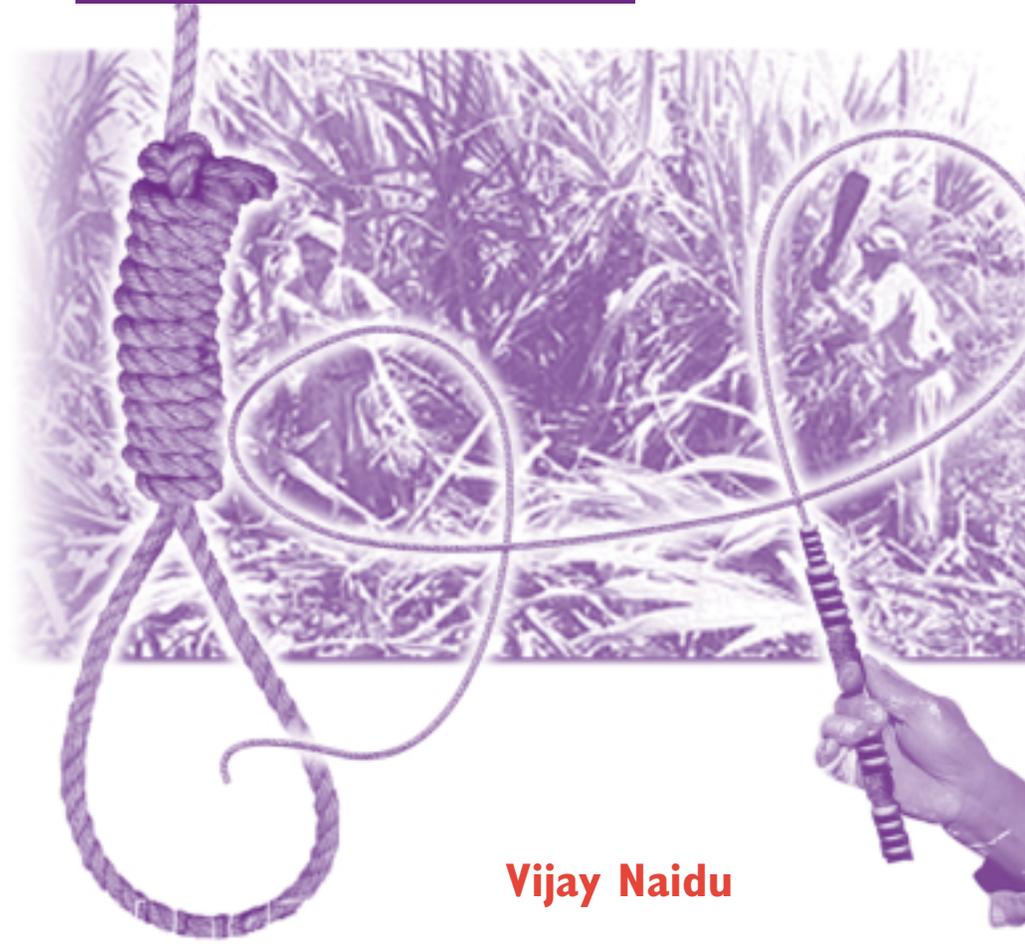
Robbie Robertson  
Professor of Development Studies  
Pacific Institute for Advanced Studies in Development &  
Governance  
University of the South Pacific

Vijay Naidu is Professor of Development Studies at the Victoria University of Wellington. Prior to this he was the Professor of Development Studies at the University of the South Pacific. During his long academic career, he has held numerous positions at the University of the South Pacific, including that of the Headship of the School of Social and Economic Development, and Pro-Vice Chancellorship.

Violence of Indenture in Fiji

Vijay Naidu

FIAS



Vijay Naidu

# The Violence of Indenture in Fiji

*Vijay Naidu*

Fiji Institute of Applied Studies

Lautoka  
Published by Fiji Institute of Applied Studies,  
P O Box 7580,  
Lautoka.  
Phone: 665 2595  
Fax: 665 2596  
email: [fias@connect.com.fj](mailto:fias@connect.com.fj)  
website: <http://www.fijianstudies.org>

Printed in Fiji

Cover design: InfoTech

Word-processing, Layout, Design: Pac.Ed

This book was initially published in 1980 by *World University Service* in association with the School of Social and Economic Development, University of the South Pacific, Laucala Campus.

© **Vijay Naidu** 2004

This work is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission.

#### **USP Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Naidu, Vijay

The violence of indenture in Fiji / Vijay Naidu.  
– [Lautoka, Fiji] : Fiji Institute of Applied  
Studies, 2004.

p. ; cm.

ISBN 982-301-024-2

1. East Indians--Employment--Fiji--  
History 2. Contract labor--Fiji--History 3.  
Working class--Fiji--History I. Title.

DU600.N33 2004

996.11

This book is dedicated to  
Chinapaiya Chalan (Thambi)  
who enriched my life by his stories  
of the Girit,  
and  
to all other Giritiyas

## Contents

Preface	.....	vii
Labourer's Lament by Raymond Pillai	.....	xv
Preface to the 1980 Edition	.....	xvii
1 Indians to Save the Fijians?	.....	1
2 The Indenture System: Cheap Asiatic Labour, Whores of Capitalism	.....	7
3 Recruitment: Push, Pull or Deception?	.....	15
4 The Journey: Sail, Steam and Blood Brotherhood	.....	27
5 The Plantations: From Human Beings to Agricultural Implements	.....	33
6 Violence: Murder, Rape and Suicide	.....	47
7 Conclusion: The Heritage	.....	83
Epilogue	.....	87
Notes	.....	91
References and Sources	.....	97

## *Preface*

The re-issue of this book, as one of a handful of publications that will be part of the events organised to mark the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the introduction of bonded Indian labour to Fiji, required a re-reading of the manuscript I had written 25 years ago. Many thoughts passed through my mind, accompanied by a range of emotions, as I undertook this exercise. Some of my thoughts and feelings were captured (prophetically) in Raymond Pillay's 1974 poem, 'Labourer's Lament', reproduced in full after the Preface: feelings of gratitude to our ancestors for their sacrifices, to indigenous Fijians for their accommodation of the new migrants and their Fiji-born descendants, and to Fiji for providing the conditions that enabled liberation from an oppressive past. Despite our liberation, we remain victims of history, as a landless community in a still largely agrarian society, and as the political *bete noir* in the complex ethnic politics of post-colonial Fiji.

My thoughts and feelings transport me back to my undergraduate years at USP, and the genesis of the book. My friend and fellow student, Rajend Prakash, and I had spent a two months in late 1973 bus-sing and walking to many farms in the Ba and Lautoka regions in search of surviving *Girmityas* – former Indentured Indian labourers - most of whom were living in relatively humble homes in joint family households. The 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. I am humbled by their willingness to share their difficult past with two rather naïve and obtrusive youngsters. It is now a little over 30 years since; their faces have grown vague, but their demeanour and sense of dignity in their last years of life remain with me.

When this study was conducted there were four significant published sources relating to Indian Indentured labourers and their descendants. These were Gillion, Mayer, Ali and Jawardena. Since then historians, anthropologists and literary persons have contributed to our knowledge of Indian migration to Fiji and the social transformation of

both the country and the migrants and their descendants. Prominent among them is Brij Lal, a contemporary in the class of 1971 at the University of the South Pacific in Suva who is the foremost authority on Indian Indentured labour in Fiji and Fiji's history. My own very modest undergraduate research took inspiration from the publication of Shiu Prasad's final year undergraduate research paper, 'Indentured Workers in Fiji' (1974). Wadan Narsey's 'Monopoly Capital, White racism and Superprofits: A case study of CSR' (1979), and Moy-nagh's 'Brown or White: A History of the Fiji Sugar Industry 1873-1973' (1981), were to follow. Another undergraduate research paper, this time by Rajesh Chandra, researched the post-Indenture settlement and establishment of communities in Maro, Nadroga (1980).

My thoughts go to Ahmed Ali, my supervisor who encouraged me to do the fieldwork relying on oral traditions as a method to supplement and even challenge written documents. Unbeknown to me at that time, that a parallel study using similar research method was being conducted by Malama Meleisea amongst the surviving Solomon Island plantation labourers in Samoa. Published later as 'O Tama Uli, Melanesians in Western Samoa' (1980), it provides interesting points of comparison with the working and living conditions of the labourers and the perceptions of Samoans towards them.

As 'harlots of the empire', young able bodied Indian men and women were shipped to establish and work in plantations in several British, French and Dutch tropical colonies under the Indentured Labour System (Cohen, 1995; Tinker, 1974). Their descendants are to be found today in the Caribbean region in Guyana, Surinam, Trinidad, Grenada, Jamaica, St Vincent, Martinique, St Lucia and Barbados; in South Africa, Kenya and Uganda; in Mauritius and Seychelles; in Malaysia and Sri Lanka; and in Fiji. Their contemporary conditions have depended on the specific historical, demographic, economic and political circumstances. In all these countries, racism and the politics of ethnicity have been persistent offshoots of colonialism which have dogged post-colonial reconstruction. The expulsion of all 'Asians' from Uganda by Idi Amin three decades ago was the most overt expression of this. However, stereotypical and racist attitudes towards citizens of Indian origins are commonplace in many parts of the

world. Inherent in the persistence of racist attitudes and practices are stereotypical notions and social structures left behind by dominant colonial whites (see Rodney, 1981).

Colonialism was based on coercion and violence manifested in the administrative order enforced by the colonial state. The form this social violence took was overt, covert and latent. It was overtly expressed in the pacification of 'rebellion' and the suppression of protest movements, the execution of 'ring leaders', the incarceration of those who broke the law usually applied in extremely biased ways, and the deportation and exile of other 'trouble makers'. Colonial social violence extended to the maintenance of segregation between the 'races' and 'colour bar' to exclude blacks from educational institutions, occupations reserved for whites, and other opportunities for social mobility that would improve the life chances of those at the bottom of the colonial pile. Fiji was no exception. In the plantations all forms of social violence found fertile ground.

The total institution of the plantation was prison-like and gave those in power considerable scope to openly coerce the labourers in their charge. Overtasking, sexual abuse and violence including rape and murder, violent assaults and killings as well as suicides, were common. For breaches of the labour contract such as the failure to complete tasks, Indian labourers were prosecuted, convicted, jailed and their contracts extended.

There are numerous gaps and weakness in the study that reflect my inexperience as a researcher and my level of awareness and knowledge at that time. Especially glaring in this regard was my uncritical acceptance of the view expressed in official documentary sources and the oral accounts of my male informants that women took advantage of their smaller number. Their alleged infidelity in changing relationship from one man to the next as a significant cause of violence was largely taken as a given. This interpretation has the hallmark of 'blaming the victims'. Shaista Shameem's (1990), 'Sugar and Spice: wealth accumulation and the labour of Indian women in Fiji, 1879-1930' provides a useful counter to the view expressed in this book (also see Kelly, 1990).

During the period of indenture and up to the Second World War, Fijis autochthonous people were subjected to an iniquitous and highly regulated regime of 'indirect rule' backed by penal sanctions. They were compelled by the 'native' and subsequently Fijian regulations to stay in their neo-traditional villages and continue as subjects of their chiefs presided over by the big white chief, the colony's Governor, whose 'boss' was the Queen at the top of the hierarchy of the chiefly system (Clammer, 1975; Nayacakalou, 1975)). While ethnic Fijians were never completely isolated from the emerging modern economic sector, their role in it was mediated by the colonial state and their chiefs. The rationale for very gradual change for the indigenes was that a too rapid transformation would lead to their demise as a 'race'. This is ironical as Sir Arthur Gordon was not mindful of the use of other Pacific islanders, especially from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. In the 1880s, these labourers were to die 'like flies' (Gillion, 1962). Ethnic Fijian labourers were allowed to work for specific periods of time and to return to their villagers on completion of their contract (see Emberson-Bain, 1994). They were also used as scab labour to undermine industrial action by Indian workers.

Colonial authorities, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company and colonial whites regarded the industrial disputes as political even though on each occasion from the 1920s to the 1960s there was a genuine economic basis for the workers' protestation (Ali, 1980; Howard and Durutalo, 1987; Sutherland 1992). There was a conflation of economic issues with the demand of an emergent Indian and Indo-Fijian professional class for political equality with the whites. The latter portrayed themselves as the 'protectors' of indigenous interests and paramountcy as they sought to preserve their privileges as the dominant minority. Together with indigenous Fijian chiefs, they opposed demands for 'common roll' and democracy for fear of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of Indian and Indo-Fijian voters (Gillion, 1977; Ali, 1980).

A source of considerable fear on the part of the whites was the possibility of the black or coloured 'races' making common cause against the oppressive colonial order. For this reason dissident ethnic Fijians were firmly suppressed. The most well known of these was

Apolosi Ra Nawai, the founder of the widely supported Viti Kabani which sought to wrestle control of trade in indigenous produce from European, Chinese and Indian middlemen. He was deported to Rotuma and New Zealand and eventually died in exile in Yacata. However, the nature of colonialism, with its intimate ties with the big business sector dominated by whites resulted in the watershed event of 1959 when major industrial unrest precipitated retaliatory violence by Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian workers. The industrial action of the Wholesale and Retail General Workers' Union was a land-mark event in the history of coloured working people of Fiji. The colonial authorities brought out the riot police and the Fiji military to regain control of Suva (Sutherland 1992; Naidu, 1989).

Social oppression and violence have historically played out in diverse and sometimes peculiar ways within Fiji's ethnic landscape. From the late 1870s to the 1960s, Indians and Indo-Fijians were both the primary objects of institutionalised or structural violence, as evidenced by their disproportionate numbers incarcerated in colonial jails. From the 1970s onwards, young ethnic Fijian males have predominated among Fiji's prison population. Their predicament is seen by many as the indirect outcome of being held back from participating in the mainstream economy by policies designed to maintain the 'Fijian way of life'.

Without the requisite knowledge and skills for fully participating as workers and entrepreneurs, young ethnic Fijians from disadvantaged backgrounds have tended to engage in crime. Burglaries, robbery with violence, home invasion and day-light attacks on business premises have become commonplace; Indo-Fijians are most often the victims of crimes against property and person. The fact that those who perpetrated the first military coups of 1987 against the democratically elected government of Dr Timoci Bavadra were heroised rather than punished is viewed by some as having effectively licensed law-breaking by ethnic Fijians (Griffen, 1997).

Ethnic Fijians from a range of backgrounds supported George Speight's putsch and the military coup of May 2000, but some promi-

nent Indo-Fijian business figures are widely suspected to have financed the coup effort (Robertson and Sutherland, 2001).

Besides the rape of democracy, the May 2000 overthrow of the Chaudhry government saw gross violations of the human rights of the members of the democratically elected government in the 56 days they were held hostage by Speight and the rebel soldiers. The actual coup, the overthrow of the President and the attempted abrogation of the Constitution were acts of the Fiji Military Force. Such expressions of extra-legal behaviour by an ethnically exclusive Fijian military renowned for its United Nations peace-keeping role internationally, are explainable by the military's historical role as the ultimate custodian of ethnic Fijian chiefly hegemony. Factionalism in this hegemonic bloc contributed to the mutiny in November 2000 and has seen an on-going schism amongst ethnic Fijians. Indigenous Fijian soldiers became the pawns in this chiefly struggle. Eight lost their lives.

At the broader inter-ethnic level, however, the land question and the continued uncertainty over land leases, is most unsettling for tenant farmers who happen to be predominantly Indo-Fijian. Overtly threatening and often illegal seizures of family homes and farms, especially as the events in Zimbabwe unfolded and were publicised in the Fiji media, became quite common in the post-2000 period. In May that year, between 300 and 500 Indo-Fijian families were internally displaced as a result of home invasions, looting and beatings, with two reported cases of rape. The Fiji police were implicated in the plunder and transportation of the carcass of a cow and taro from a farm in Muaniweni to the hostage takers in the Parliamentary Complex.

The state in Fiji since the first military coup in 1987 has been largely ethnicised and has become the bulwark of insitutionalised racism. While most Indo-Fijians are supportive of government's affirmative action programmes for disadvantaged indigenous Fijians, they perceive the benefits of the openly discriminatory provisions of these programmes largely accruing to a relatively well-to-do indigenous middle class and elite. Indo-Fijians find themselves discriminated against by the state on several fronts - in their access to land, soft loans, education, and employment and promotion in the public service.

There are many manifestations of gender-based social violence in Fiji's society at large. No less than their ethnic Fijian counterparts, many Indo-Fijian males habitually beat their wives and children. Every so often, the cane knife is used to brutally kill a wife and even children, in a manner distinctly reminiscent of our Indenture past. Likewise, suicides remain a common occurrence amongst Indo-Fijians, both male and female, although ethnic Fijian suicide rates have been on the rise. A number of male Indo-Fijian suicides in the late 1990s to 2002 have been linked to the non-renewal of farm leases.

While some state officials prefer to see the massive out-migration of Fiji citizens, especially Indo-Fijians since 1987, and further heightened after the 2000 coup, as a movement to 'greener pastures', 'push-factors' in Fiji have been a primary cause. Today there are Indo-Fijian diasporas in Britain, Canada, Australia, the United States and New Zealand. In many of these countries there are other twice migrant people of Indentured ancestry from Africa, the West Indies and elsewhere.

The 125th anniversary reprint of this book provides another currently available resource for Fiji readers and those abroad who seek to understand the history of their country and the social consequences of a plantation economy on Indian Indentured labourers. It is vital that those who have been born in an era when social circumstances have been kinder to them, read about Fiji's past to appreciate the nature of colonialism and the place of immigrant labour within it. The exploitation of Melanesian and Indian labourers for sugar profits was the life blood of the colonial economy. The slave crop, sugar cane, continues to be the backbone of the agricultural sector even though it has fallen on hard times now.

Without an understanding of this history that contributed to the enormous transformation of Fiji society, we would not be able to begin to comprehend the inter-dependence of Fiji's people.

I would like to express my appreciation to Dr Ganesh Chand and the Fiji Institute of Applied Studies (FIAS) for the initiative in seeking to publish this volume as part of the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Girit. My gratitude to Claire Slatter for her comments on this preface and

my abiding indebtedness to all who helped in the publication of the original book. In this regard I remember especially Shamima Ali, who originally translated Sanadhya's 'My 21 Years in the Fiji Islands' and who continues to work tirelessly against domestic violence and for women's rights; Rajendra Prakash, currently in Brisbane; Dr Ahmed Ali who is a Senator in Fiji's Parliament and Professor Ramesh Thakur, now Senior Vice Rector at the United Nations University in Tokyo.

Vijay Naidu  
8 June, 2005.  
Wellington,  
Aotearoa/New Zealand.