



Accidental Deaths on Fiji Plantations, 1879-1916

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Disease caused the majority of the deaths among Indian indentured workers in Fiji, especially diarrhoea and dysentery (see Fowler and Duncan, this volume). In this paper, I look at deaths caused by accidents. In so doing, I seek to add to the existing literature dealing with death on Fiji plantations. An analysis of accidental death is absent from that literature. It will be shown here that accidental deaths were themselves an important aspect of the indenture experience and that an understanding of accidental deaths also leads to a more complete understanding of the totality of the indenture experience.

The bulk of the primary evidence presented below is drawn from three main sources, *The Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants 1879-1922*, *The*

Register of Deaths of Indian Immigrants by Plantation 1879-1922, and the *Annual Reports on Indian Immigration*. The two death registers provide a record of the deaths of Indian immigrants, both indentured and free, within the range of years specified. In both registers, deaths are listed individually and accompanied by details of the deceased's name, registration number, sex, age, the name of vessel on which they were transported to Fiji, the plantation on which they worked, their employers, the dates of arrival in Fiji and of death, and the cause of death.

The death registers were carefully vetted and the full details of accidental deaths between 1879 and 1916 recorded. It should be noted that a degree of error was unavoidable in the recording process. In some places the ink has faded to such an extent, or the original recorder's writing is so illegible, as to make entries unreadable. Where possible the accidental deaths recorded in the registers were cross-checked with the accidental deaths list in the *Annual Reports*. As a result, the data presented here is representative of the vast majority of accidental deaths.

The *Annual Reports* represent the other main original source of information. They began in 1879 and continued throughout the entire period of Indian immigration to Fiji. Until 1882 the reports were written by hand and contained only rudimentary information on a few aspects of Indian immigration. After 1885, however, they were printed in a semi-standardised form and contained qualitative as well as quantitative information on many aspects of Indian immigration including mortality and accidental death. The information in the reports increased in volume and detail with time. For example, beginning in 1898, the reports included brief descriptions of the nature of a random selection of accidental deaths occurring in each year.

The nature of the information on mortality presented in the *Annual Reports* has largely determined the form of the analysis presented here. That information was used as a comparative measure for the data collected from the death registers. For example, figures in the *Annual Reports* relating to the relative proportion between the sexes and between age groups of immigrants and immigrant children on plantations, were used as benchmarks against which mortality patterns within separate categories of accidental death were identified. The completeness of the analysis presented below is affected by some problems concerning the availability of the *Annual Reports* and the information presented in them. The reports for the years 1880, 1881, 1883, 1894, 1912 and 1915 are missing and those for 1910, 1911, 1913 and 1914 have been reproduced in the microfilms without important statistical tables relating to mortality that were included in the

originals. Further, across all the reports there are inconsistencies in the nature and the form in which data are presented.

The average yearly number of deaths from all causes was 250.5, while the average yearly number of deaths by accident was 9.2. This means that between 1879 and 1916 accidental deaths accounted for, on average, 3.7 per cent of the total annual number of deaths of the indentured immigrants and their children. When the fairly small number of yearly accidental deaths is coupled with the number of separate plantations in different areas of Fiji, comparisons between type of death and other variables like employer, plantation, and district, reveal little statistically meaningful information.¹ Deaths varied so widely in their causes that they generally defy the identification of meaningful patterns. On the other hand, where statistical patterns do not exist, they gain added significance precisely because of that wide variation. Moreover, illuminating information can be gained by taking each type of accidental death in turn and comparing the age, sex and in some cases the year of death of those who lost their lives as a result of that type of accident.

Table 1 displays the total number of deaths amongst indentured immigrants and their children caused by different categories of accident between 1879 and 1916.

Table 1
Number of Deaths of Indentured Immigrants and
Their Children by Type of Accident, 1879-1916

Cause	Adults		Children		Infants		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Drowning ²	105	33	3	5	10	3	159
Burns and Shock from burns	5	12	7	10	2	5	41
Mill Accidents	26	1	nil	nil	nil	nil	27
Unspecified accidents	7	1	1	1	6	3	19
Train/tram accidents	15	2	nil	1	nil	nil	18
Overlaying	nil	nil	1	nil	11	5	17
Accidents Involving Crushing	12	1	1	1	nil	nil	18
Opium Poisoning	8	5	nil	nil	1	nil	14
Struck by Lightning	7	2	nil	nil	nil	nil	9
Animal related Accidents	5	nil	1	nil	nil	nil	6
TOTAL	190	57	14	18	30	16	325

Drowning was by far the most common cause of accidental death. More adults males were drowned than adult females, the number of deaths being 105 and 33 respectively. Throughout the period of indenture, however, there were on average approximately 30 females in every 100 indentured

adults. Given this ratio it becomes clear that, proportionally, adult men and women were drowned in approximately equal numbers. The same appears true among children and infants, classified here as non-adults. Between 1879 and 1916 thirteen male and eight female non-adults were drowned. The disparity in numbers is hardly significant when it is considered that from about 1890 onwards the proportion of non-adult females to non-adult males in the plantation population remained fairly constant, deviating only slightly above and below an approximate average of 91.5 non-adult females for every 100 non-adult males.³

It is unsurprising that drowning was the cause of almost half of the deaths. The sugar cane plantations on which most of the immigrants were employed were, as Gillion writes, 'on the flats of the river valleys and plains'. It was an alien environment for the majority of immigrants who had come from the 'flat and dusty plains' of landlocked areas of India.⁴ For many, rivers, lakes and the sea must have been unfamiliar and treacherous. Many entries in the death registers include brief details of 'drowned while crossing Ba River', 'drowned whilst fording' or 'drowned in creek'. Perhaps most telling, though, is a brief description in the 1899 *Annual Report* of an incident in which five immigrants, two men, two women, and a child, drowned. The cutter which was transporting them from Ba to Rewa capsized and although all the Indians aboard lost their lives, the Fijian crew, presumably familiar with the sea, were able to get to shore.⁵

After drowning, the next most common cause of death was burns or shock due to burns received. Most remarkable about accidental burn-related deaths was the disproportionate number of fatalities between the sexes. Between 1879 and 1916, twelve adult females died from this cause as compared to just five males. When this ratio is adjusted to allow for the numerical disparity between the sexes, it emerges that proportionally eight times as many indentured adult females died from burns than males. Since males were exposed to greater dangers than females, working with mill machinery, animals, and cane railways, it can reasonably be deduced that most burn-related deaths were not work-related but occurred in the domestic sphere.

The *Annual Reports* merely noted the occurrence of accidental deaths by burning without elaborating on the circumstances of those deaths. It seems fairly certain, though, that most burn-related accidents probably occurred around the cooking fire. While three single men who lived together in the same room could share cooking tasks, men who were living with women required the latter to do all cooking-related chores. As Burton noted in *The Fiji of Today*, 'Indian domestic economy is different from ours. The husband

does the marketing and takes charge of all the cash. He decides the bill of fare and allows his wife to do the cooking'.⁶ This division of labour is confirmed by the description of a typical Sunday scene in the lines by Totaram Sanadhya, an Indian indentured immigrant, who wrote of his experiences in Fiji: 'women [were] busy everywhere. Some were washing up their cooking vessels and utensils, some were busy in the preparation of food'⁷

Even in their limited free time, then, women were kept busy with cooking and related tasks. Failure by women to fulfill their set roles as preparers of food could provoke a violent reaction from their male companion. One indentured man who murdered his wife confessed that:

I told her to make tea. She refused. I told her again to make the food as I had not had any for three days. She refused and said I will not make tea as I do not want to. She said if you want a drink of tea drink my water (urine). I told her again to prepare my food and she again refused. I told her to go inside the room. She did not go but caught me by the privates. I then got angry and I had a knife in my hand and struck her about four times with a knife and then left to come down and report at the police station.⁸

Women ultimately had little choice in taking on the role of the cook and the extra physical demands that it entailed. Already burdened with the constant fatigue symptomatic of indentured life, they had to cook around open fires set in the same tiny room in which they lived with their families.⁹ Most likely, it was the combined factors of fatigue and cramped conditions which caused fatal accidents.

Table 2
Deaths Due to Burn-Related Accidents, 1879-1916

Age Group in Years	Number of Deaths by sex 1879-1916	
	Male	Female
Infants (<1 year old)	2	5
2	2	1
3	2	1
4	2	1
5	nil	2
6	nil	2
7	nil	nil
8	nil	nil
9	nil	2
10	1	nil

A significant number of non-adults also died from burn-related accidents. Table 2 provides a profile of the number of deaths by burning in

each non-adult age group between 1879 and 1916.

Ten girls, seven boys, five female infants and two male infants died from burn-related injuries during indenture. Contemporary histories of giriti give little insight into plantation life as experienced by children. Two sentences from *Fiji's Indian Migrants* sum up the depth of analysis into the subject:

While their mothers were at work the infants were either carried into the fields or put into fly-ridden 'nurseries', usually the two end cubicle of a line with the partition removed, in the charge of old women. After they reached the toddling stage the children were allowed to run wild, no schooling being provided, and at the age of fifteen, sometimes older, they went to work.¹⁰

The statistics on burn-related fatalities reveal a little more about children's experience. Although the *Annual Reports* contain one account of a child being burnt to death in a hut,¹¹ it is likely that most infants and younger children were burned whilst their mothers were cooking. In the case of older children, especially girls, it may well have been that they were given the responsibility of preparing the evening meal while their mothers were away working in the cane fields. The potential for tragedy when unsupervised children came into close proximity with fire needs no elaboration.

Accidental death by overlaying claimed a greater number of infant lives than did burn-related injuries. Figures relating to overlaying emphasise all that has previously been written about the conditions under which the giritiyas lived. During the indenture period seventeen infants, ranging from newborns to six months old, died from asphyxia, after being accidentally overlain during the night by their mothers. Rooms in the lines contained three bunks and were allocated to three single men or to a man, a woman and not more than two children.¹² In the absence of cots, infants had to sleep with their mothers. The infants suffocated beneath the body of their mothers who were probably too fatigued to be awakened by their babies' feeble struggling.

An analysis of the frequency of accidental death by overlaying by year reveals an interesting pattern. For each of the years 1884, 1891, 1896, 1899, 1903, 1907, 1908, 1909, and 1911 a single fatality from overlaying was recorded. Most of those deaths occurred on different plantations in different areas of Fiji. However, a spate of deaths by overlaying occurred between 1913 and 1915. In 1913 there were three deaths, in 1914 four and in 1915 one. Significantly, all the eight deaths in those three years occurred on plantations in the Navua district owned by the United Fiji Sugar Company.

The frequency of death by this cause on these plantations was significant enough to be mentioned in the 1914 *Annual Report*, though no explanation was offered. In the absence of any direct evidence it may be surmised that living and working conditions must have been particularly bad on those plantations in order for so many deaths to occur.

Work-related activities also contributed to accidental deaths. Accidents took place in mills, while carrying logs and other heavy equipment, working on trains or tramways, and working with animals. Between 1879 and 1916, twenty-seven deaths were recorded in the first category, fifteen in the second, eighteen in the third and six in the last. Most of those who died were male adults, with only five adult female deaths being recorded across all four categories. This simple statistic emphasises the nature of the division of labour on plantations. While men on the larger plantations at least had the opportunity of a break in the monotony of indenture by engaging in different work, women were relegated to the fields (or domestic service) for their entire five years of service.

The first two recorded fatal mill accidents were at the Colonial Sugar Refining Company's (CSR) Nausori mill in 1884. Nausori, CSR's first mill in Fiji, commenced production in 1882. In following years mills were built in the other main areas of cane production. From 1884 until 1916 the number of annual fatalities due to mill accidents fluctuated. However, the majority of deaths occurred at the Nausori and Rarawai mills before the turn of the century and at the Lautoka and Labasa mills after 1900.

The mill was a dangerous place. Massive shredders devoured cane fed to them by conveyor belts called 'cane carriers'; large iron rollers squeezed the juice from the cane fibre; and huge boilers were required for the purification process.¹³ In an environment filled with moving machinery, it is little wonder that accidents happened. It seems, though, that the element of danger in mill work was increased by the loose, baggy clothing worn by indentured labourers. The *Annual Reports* contain references to immigrants being drawn into the machinery after their clothing got caught. For example, the only woman to die as a result of a mill accident 'was taking food to her husband, and passed under some running machinery; it is supposed that her veil flew up and got caught in it'.¹⁴ The report for 1899 tells of a 'man climbing up to oil some machinery (not his duty) and getting his clothes caught',¹⁵ and in 1906 'an immigrant attending on a 'shredder' endeavoured to clear a pulley with his hand, his shirt got caught, and he was drawn in, sustaining fatal injuries'.

Another significant cause of death was crush injuries. The death registers record seven deaths as the result of being crushed beneath large

pieces of timber. One man sustained a fractured skull when he was struck by a log thrown down by the men carrying it.¹⁶ At CSR's Lautoka plantation in 1904, 'an indentured male immigrant died from effects of abdominal contusion, caused by a heavy log slipping from the truck on to which it was being unloaded'.¹⁷ Another tragic case was the accidental death of a 'Madrasi immigrant, one of a gang carrying a heavy log of timber, [who] failed to let go of the log when ordered owing probably to his not understanding the order, and was crushed by the falling log'.¹⁸ The circumstance surrounding the accident suggests that the language barrier was also factor in causing some accidents.

Many difficulties were caused by the language barrier between Europeans and Indians. Historians have viewed the language difficulties as a potential cause of violence, both by girmitiya on their white overseers, and by overseers on their labourers.¹⁹ Very few overseers were ever fluent in Hindustani, relying on their *sirdars* (foremen) to communicate with the labourers²⁰ or improvised with what Burton termed 'Overseer's Speech'.²¹ Yet 'Overseer's Speech' was only 'serviceable where no degree of exactness [was] required', otherwise it could 'sound like a foreign language ... to the coolie'.²² While immigrants from northern India had 'few language problems and quickly adapted themselves to a Fiji version of Hindustanti',²³ the same was not true for immigrants who came from the south. They 'spoke entirely different languages, and often could not understand what their overseers said'.²⁴ Language difficulties were probably a factor in causing more accidents than the single one documented in the *Annual Reports*.

Work with horses and mules could also be dangerous. In the early years of indenture many ploughing tasks were done by men and women unassisted, but in later years horses and mules were used.²⁵ Certainly by 1915 horses and mules played a major part both in plantation work and also apparently in the lives of the labourers who were responsible for the animals. In their 1915 report to the Indian Government on the conditions of Indian indenture labour in four British colonies, including Fiji, J. McNeill and Chimman Lal wrote:

In this colony much of the labour done by hand in other countries is done by using horses or mules, and to the ordinary observer the whole operations seems much more highly organised. We have seen some excellent examples of Indian ploughing but were unfortunately unable to witness any of the ploughing matches which employers organise. These matches add no little zest to the life of these labourers, some of them have been known to rig up a bed in the stall above their teams so that neither by accident, nor design

could the fitness of these animals to compete be endangered. The employment of horses renders cutting a much larger percentage of the total manual labour than in sugar plantation in the West Indies.²⁶

From the first recorded animal-related death in 1895 until 1916, approximately five men were killed in various accidents which involved being kicked or dragged by the animals they were tending. But sometime animals were also blamed for deaths which had other causes, including violence by those in authority. A case in the 1906 *Annual Report* illustrates this point:

And indentured immigrant employed as a mule-driver on Esivo plantation, Lautoka, was kicked by an overseer while sitting and in the act of preferring some request. Afterwards he complained of pain and was conveyed in a cane-truck to hospital, eight miles distant; it was shown that a rib was fractured and the liver ruptured. The overseer, a European, was charged with manslaughter, but was found not guilty by a jury—evidence being given for the defence that the deceased had fallen from a mule earlier in the day on which the assault had occurred, and the injuries, it was shown, might have resulted from a kick from a mule.²⁷

The final category of work-related accidental deaths involved the mill tramline system. In Fiji harvesting of the sugar cane, a period called 'the crush', began in June or July and ended in December.²⁸ Once cut, the highly perishable cane had to be transported as quickly as possible from the fields to the mill for processing. On plantations which were near waterways, boats and punts were used. However, on most plantations cane was loaded on to trains which then hauled their laden trucks to the nearest mill. The mill tramline system consisted of a light railway of 2ft. gauge and was 'located according to practical grades and the distribution of good cane lands'.²⁹ During the crush, portable temporary lines were laid up the valleys and in the fields where the cane was being cut, in order to hasten their delivery.³⁰

During the indenture period, about eighteen labourers were killed in train accidents of whom all were men, apart from one girl and one woman. At least twelve of these deaths occurred during the crushing season between June and December, many of the rest occurring in May, when the tramline was being repaired for the harvest season. It seems that accidents occurred in two main ways, either in the handling of cane-trucks or through the derailment of trucks on which immigrants were riding. In the former class, the *Annual Reports* describe one 'immigrant employed late at

night removing cane-trucks from field to tramline [who] was run over by a truck which left the line'.³¹ Another man in Wainikoro was killed 'while attempting to couple an empty cane-truck to a train while yet in motion'.³²

Work on the railways inevitably involved labourers riding the cane trucks. At least half the deaths on the tramline occurred when immigrants were crushed as trucks on which they had been riding were derailed. In 1910 five indentured men and three free immigrants were killed in this way, causing concerned comment in the 1910 *Annual Report*:

In one case, by derailment of a train of trucks, three Indians were killed; and at the inquiry it was proved that the accident occurred through the unexplained movement of the points while the train was passing. It is apparent that there is a necessity for strict investigation in such cases, and for the adoption of precautions which will have the effect of preventing such accidents in future.³³

But accidents did not diminish. The very next year, four indentured immigrants were killed while riding trains, and concern was reiterated in the *Annual Report*:

The danger to immigrants being transported to and from their work by train in ordinary cane-trucks has been proved by the evidence given at the investigations held by magistrates in these cases, and steps have been taken to require employers to provide special trucks for the purpose of transporting immigrants when this is necessary.³⁴

Whatever steps were taken to ensure the provision of special trucks they were ineffectual, because accidental deaths on the railway continued. Four men were killed in 1912, one in 1913, and one in 1916.

The last category of accidental deaths to be examined here relates to opium poisoning. The death registers report that fourteen people died from 'opium poisoning' or 'opium overdose'.³⁵ The earliest recorded death by opium was of an infant in 1899. The rest of the victims were adults, eight men and five women. Interestingly, all the adult deaths occurred between 1903 and 1913. In the absence of any direct evidence, it is reasonable to assume that opium was prescribed to the immigrants by the plantation hospitals to alleviate the symptoms of disease and the pain of injury.³⁶ The only substantial clue as to the source of the drug comes from the fact that one immigrant who committed suicide by opium overdose was a servant at the hospital.³⁷ Presumably he acquired some of the drug that was on hand for prescription. Why the immigrants overdosed is uncertain. Perhaps

deaths occurred because the sick simply did not understand how much of the drug they were supposed to take. The language barrier may have prevented a precise understanding of safe dosage. Alternatively, opium would have provided temporary relief from the physical and mental pains of plantation life and it may have been a craving for that relief which caused some to overdose.

Between 1879 and 1916 accidental deaths on the Fiji plantations claimed approximately 325 Indian lives. While these deaths were tragic in their own right, they reveal much about the indenture experience as a whole. They highlight how alien an environment Fiji was to newly arrived immigrants; they reinforce notions of the division of plantation and domestic labour between men and women and between adults and children; they emphasise the poverty of life in the lines; they confirm the power imbalance between labourers and the overseers, and they show that language difficulties could have fatal results. An analysis of accidental death, then, offers a new angle from which to view the hardships, dangers and injustices with which immigrant men, women and children had to cope. Ultimately, the investigation of accidental death on plantations brings new meaning to Gillion's conclusion that it 'was not without reason that the Indians called their life on the plantations in Fiji *'Narak'*, which means 'hell'.³⁸

Endnotes

1. In 1886 there were already about 27 separate plantations, in 1916 there were over 200. These plantations were divided between approximately 11 separate districts.
2. There was some variation in the way in which death by drowning is described in the registers. Entries appeared in four general formats, 'suicidal drowning', 'accidentally drowned', 'drowned' and 'drowned—no evidence to suggest whether accidental or homicidal'. Only the first category was omitted in the data presented here.
3. This figure remained steady only from about 1890 onwards. Before that time the ratio of females to males was lower. In 1885 when figures are first available, there were only 66 non-adult females to every 100 non-adult males, but the disparity decreased rapidly in the ensuing five years, and given the number of deaths concerned the margin of error is negligible. See *Annual Reports, 1885-1916*.
4. KL Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants. A history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne: Oxford, 1962), p. 103.
5. *Annual Report, (1899)*, p. 18.
6. John W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1910), p. 292.
7. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 122. Totaram Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and The Story of the Haunted Line* (Suva: Fiji Museum, 1991), p. 119.
8. Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years*, p. 169.
9. Gillion, *Fiji Indian Migrants*, p. 105.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
11. *Annual Report, (1906)*, p.19.
12. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.105.
13. J.M. Dixon, 'Sugar Milling by CSR', in A.G. Lowndes (ed.), *South Pacific Enterprise: The Colonial Sugar Refining Company Limited* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1956), p.139.
14. *Annual Report, (1899)*, p.18.
15. *Annual Report, (1899)*, p.18.
16. *Annual Report, (1899)*, p.18.
17. *Annual Report, (1904)*, p.634.
18. *Annual Report, (1908)*, p.20.
19. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.112; Brij V. Lal, 'Labouring Men and Nothing More: Some problems of Indian indenture in Fiji', in Kay Saunders (ed), *Indentured Labour in the British Empire* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p.139.
20. Lal, 'Labouring Men and Nothing More', p.140.
21. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1910), p.289.

22. Ibid., p. 289.
23. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 128.
24. Ibid., p. 128.
25. Ibid., p. 109
26. J. McNeill and Lal Chimman, *Report to the government of India on the conditions of Indian Indentured Labour in Four British Colonies*, 1915, p. 252. A copy of this document is available in the Noel Butlin Archives in Canberra. The file number is z303, F4.0, Folder 1, document 8.
27. Annual Report, (1906), p.19.
28. A.G. Lowndes, 'The Sugar Industry of Fiji', in Lowndes, (ed.), *South Pacific Enterprise* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1956), p.78.
29. Dixon, 'Sugar Milling by CSR', in Lowndes, p. 135.
30. Lowndes, 'The Sugar Industry of Fiji', p.77.
31. *Annual Report*, (1909), p. 19.
32. *Annual Report*, (1911), p. 15.
33. *Annual Report*, (1910), p. 13.
34. *Annual Report*, (1911), p. 15.
35. Suicide by opium poisoning was specifically recorded as such in the death registers. This is assumed here that entries in the death registers of 'opium poisoning' and 'opium overdose' had the same meaning.
36. James R. Rush, *Opium to Java: Revenue Farming and Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Indonesia, 1860-1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp.34-35.
37. *Annual Report*, (1909), p. 19.
38. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p.129.