

Naraini's Story

Jane Harvey

In July 1910 Naraini, a twenty-four year old Indian indentured woman, was allotted to the Nasavusavu Estate in Nadroga, run by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR).¹ While her background and the circumstances that led her to Fiji are not known, it does seem that she was married and perhaps had indentured herself to follow her husband. She was pregnant on arrival and was told by the overseer that she was not to work but would receive rations for the duration of the pregnancy. On Tuesday, August 16 she gave birth, prematurely, to a child which died four days later. When she later came to give evidence in court she stated, 'my husband was cruel to me, having beaten me before my confinement', claiming that he himself had killed the child.² The details of exactly what happened are difficult to ascertain but it is clear that Naraini's marriage and home life were marred by violence. On Saturday August 20, the day her child died, Harold Bloomfield, the estate overseer, told Naraini that she was to go to work on

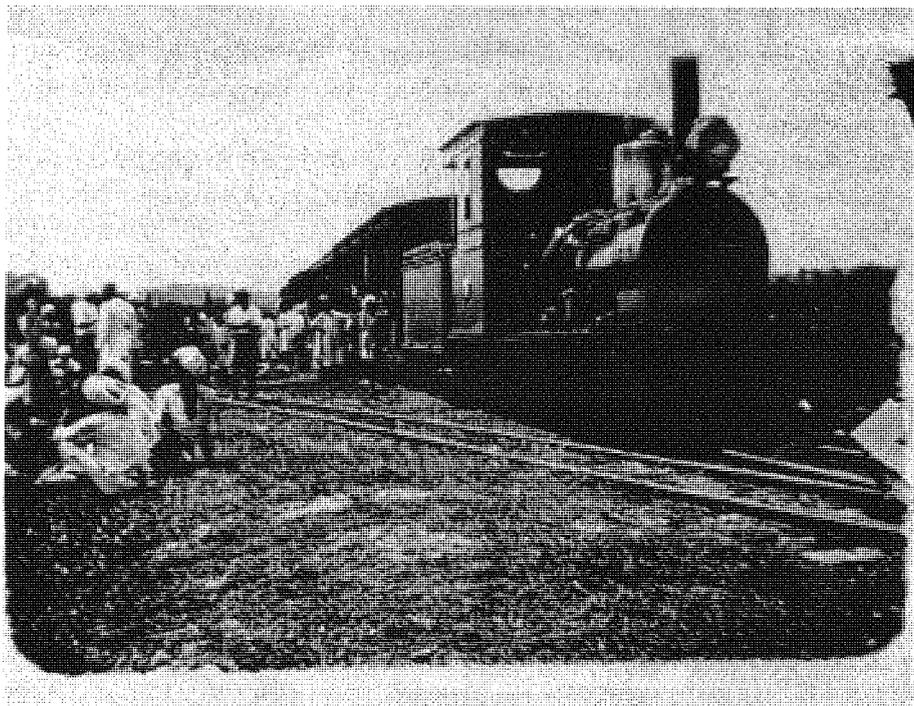
Monday. Bloomfield later denied this and recounted a different version of events:

I complained to Naraini that her person and clothes smelt. She said 'what can I do? I have no money and no other clothes'. I said 'haven't you any soap'. She said 'No'. I said 'get some from your husband'. She said 'he is in hospital at present and if he were here would not do so'. She asked me to give her work. I asked if she was capable of it. She said 'yes'.³

According to Muniram, the women's *sirdar* who witnessed this exchange, Naraini did not ask to go to work. In any case, it seems highly unlikely that a woman in her distressed and weakened state would have done so. Early Monday morning, just two days after the death of her child and only six days after having given birth, Naraini set about her task of breaking stones with a hammer. After working for a few hours in the hot sun she stopped and sat down, too weak to continue. The *sirdar* approached Naraini and told her to return to work before the overseer saw her and so she made a futile attempt to continue working. When Bloomfield visited Naraini, he demanded to know why she was not working. The *sirdar* claimed that he told the overseer that the woman was very sick 'and bleeding from her private parts, and couldn't stand up to work'.⁴ Hearing this, Bloomfield walked over to Naraini, kicked her and asked her why she was unable to work. She said to him 'I can't do this work, it is too heavy for me, give me some other work'.⁵ It seems that Bloomfield had difficulty understanding what she was saying, partly because she was crying but also because he did not understand Hindustani. He asked another worker what Naraini had said and then proceeded to assault her, picking her up by the hair and dropping her on a heap of stones several times, kicking her and beating her with a stick. According to the *sirdar*, Mr Allman, the junior overseer, while not participating in the assault, simply stood by and did not do or say anything.

After Bloomfield stopped beating Naraini, he asked her to wipe the blood from her face and ordered her to go to the Nagaga hospital. Kaliram, an Indian male who had been working near Naraini on the tramline, was told to go with her and was given a note for the hospital attendant. Accounts differ as to how far away the hospital was, but the District Medical Officer later claimed that it was approximately five miles away. Bloomfield did not order Naraini to be carried on a stretcher, but expected her to walk to the hospital. He later claimed that both he and Allman 'saw them walking for two or three chains in the direction of the hospital'.⁶ Kaliram, however, stated that Naraini was unconscious and he had to carry her on his back to the hospital. According to the hospital attendant, Albert

Whitaker, she had arrived at the hospital in a collapsed state, 'suffering from contusion and injuries to back, shoulder and buttocks - punctured wounds and clean cut wound on back. She was severely wounded. I thought there was danger to her life on admission'.⁷



CSR train on the Savusavu line at Nadroga. Naraini was working on the construction of this line when she was attacked by Bloomfield.

Photograph by Robert Green and reproduced courtesy of A.D. Weir.

Despite the extensive injuries, Bloomfield made no mention of the assault in the letter which he sent with Kaliram to the hospital attendant. Rather, he claimed that Naraini was 'apparently incapable or else damn lazy'.⁸ He wanted to know 'if she is physically capable of work and if so how much'.⁹ Whitaker was outraged and asked Bloomfield 'since when did you receive instructions to put women to work 5 days after confinement?'¹⁰ Bloomfield's response is illuminating.

Whitaker: I don't understand your chit.

Bloomfield: The woman's child being dead I believe she is legally liable for work. She asked for work herself and I asked her if she was sick or ill and she said no . . . The die [mid wife] who was with her told me her child was born quite normally and that the woman was all right. What is her sickness? If I was not right in sending the woman to work, please say what I should have done according to the Ordinance.¹¹

As the Agent General of Immigration noted, 'the callous indifference to the suffering of this woman strewn in Bloomfield's notes is unmistakable'.¹²

On the plantation Bloomfield set about covering his tracks by ensuring that someone else would take the blame. Eventually, Muniram, the *sirdar*, was told to assume the blame after he was paid £2 and assured that Bloomfield would also pay the fine. All the witnesses were instructed by Bloomfield that, if asked any questions about the matter, they were to say that the *sirdar* beat the woman, not the sahib. Kaliram said that he was 'sent for daily by sahib and told if I said anything I would be shot'.¹³ Bloomfield did not report the incident to either the manager of the estate or the police.

The incident would have passed unnoticed had it not been for a visit by Dr John Halley, the District Medical Officer, to the hospital at Nagaga on August 30. He claimed that the woman was not shown to him in the usual way. After making his inspection, he asked if there were anymore patients to see, to which Whitaker said yes, hesitantly.¹⁴ When he examined Naraini, he found eight 'large raw open wounds' on her body.¹⁵ Halley said the facts pointed 'to a degree of brutality that can hardly be conceived by any man in his right senses'.¹⁶ He claimed Naraini's recent confinement made the wounds more dangerous, retarding recovery. Two and a half months after the assault, her wounds had still not healed.

On September 5, 1910 Dr Halley reported the incident to the plantation manager, Mr Leslie. The matter, however, was not really investigated, nor any action taken until the visit of the resident inspectors of immigrants, Lord and Pateson, on September 26. Muniram had been kept in charge of the women's gang, despite his implication in the assault of Naraini, and the occurrence was not reported to police by the plantation manager. According to the Colonial Secretary this showed 'a want of appreciation of serious responsibility in dealing with a case that obviously demanded public enquiry'.¹⁷

When an investigation finally took place, Muniram was arrested and charged. He initially admitted guilt but was released after telling the Police Inspector that Bloomfield was the actual culprit. What prompted the *sirdar* to change his story is unclear. According to the resident inspectors,

Muniram was 'instructed' to persuade the other immigrants to back up his story should they be questioned about it.¹⁸ Enquiries were made and evidence identifying Bloomfield as the offender was impressive. A warrant was issued for his arrest. Five women and two men who had witnessed the assault but had said nothing out of fear of Bloomfield, now gave evidence against him. The case was tried in the Supreme Court on April 24 1911, with Bloomfield charged for wounding with intent to do grievous bodily harm and unlawful wounding. Despite the strong evidence, given not only by Indian witnesses but by the hospital attendant and the District Medical Officer, the jury found Bloomfield not guilty, though they did attach a rider to their verdict 'that the conduct of the overseer in putting a woman in her condition at such a heavy task was callous in the extreme'. The Chief Justice, however, 'added that he would exonerate the accused from the stigma of callousness in the circumstances'.¹⁹

The government retained a strong suspicion, based on the available evidence, that Bloomfield was in fact guilty of assaulting Naraini. Therefore, despite the acquittal, officials were not prepared to simply let the matter lie. As the Colonial Secretary wrote in a letter to the manager of CSR, 'Mr Bloomfield was acquitted, but in spite of that fact the Government cannot escape the conviction that he is not a fit person to continue in charge of indentured labour'.²⁰ They had reached this conclusion on the basis of evidence adduced at the trial: his callous conduct in putting a woman to work only six days after she had given birth, his cruelty in not having her carried on a stretcher to the hospital in spite of her serious condition, his neglecting to inform the hospital attendant that she had been assaulted, his indifference to her condition, and his neglect in not reporting the occurrence. The CSR was notified that if Bloomfield continued to be employed, no Indian labour would be allotted to the estate on which he was in charge.

The government was adamant. When they discovered that Mr Dawson, the manager of the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company, proposed to employ Bloomfield as a clerk and eventually as an overseer, officials quickly notified him that the decision made concerning the employment of Bloomfield would not be rescinded. Discovering that his instructions had been ignored, and that Bloomfield had been employed as an overseer at Tamanua in Navua for two weeks, the Agent General warned that 'the application of the VSF Coy Ltd for allotment of 200 Indian immigrants in 1912 will be cancelled and no immigrants will be allotted to Tamunua'.²¹ unless Bloomfield was removed from the field. The threat worked, and Bloomfield was confined to office work.

The whole incident seems to have left Bloomfield relatively unscathed, but for Naraini life was never the same again. Her ultimate fate is unknown – oral evidence suggests that she became mentally deranged – but we do know that her recovery was painfully slow. At the time of the trial, some eight months after the assault, she was still in hospital, weak and suffering from dysentery. One can only imagine the emotional and psychological condition of this young woman, who had lost her new-born child in awful circumstances, been sent to work and then subjected to a savage attack.

Naraini's case provides a shocking indictment of the plantation system and demonstrates the gulf that existed between rhetoric and reality. On paper, the welfare of female indentured workers may have been protected, but it seems that the overseers and plantation managers who were directly responsible for the treatment of Indian immigrants were actually subject to few controls. The merciless beating that Naraini suffered is disturbing, but equally alarming is the fact that a woman in her physical condition was expected to work at all. Her case highlights the way that racist and sexist beliefs sanctioned and excused the unsympathetic treatment which indentured Indian women received. Furthermore, it shows that the provisions specifically designed to protect women who were pregnant or had recently given birth were not always observed and that few effective measures were in place to enforce such initiatives. Naraini's story also gives a sense of the practical difficulties that immigrants seeking redress faced.

While ordinances specified that no employer was to require an indentured immigrant to perform work which he or she was physically unfit for, it seems that to a large extent overseers alone were responsible for deciding who was capable of working.²² Bloomfield was indignant that he was justified in putting Naraini to work. The letters which he sent to the hospital attendant on the day of the assault indicate that he believed Naraini was physically fine because he had been told that there was no complication with the birth. In his eyes, child-birth did not equate with 'sickness' and accordingly no special treatment was required. Furthermore, Naraini's child was dead and, as she had no child to care for, maternity leave was no longer an entitlement. Bloomfield's action, in sending Naraini to work breaking stones so soon after giving birth, displays a disturbing inability or unwillingness to appreciate the physical and emotional stress that Naraini was facing.

The fate of indentured workers was determined to some extent by the character and temperament of those few individuals who were immediately in charge of them and who were employed by the companies that ran the plantations. Bloomfield did not have a good reputation for his

treatment of immigrants. Indeed, Inspectors Pateson and Lord, who had formerly been overseers with Bloomfield at Labasa and who had helped conduct the investigation against him, claimed that, knowing his disposition, they believed he had been involved in the assault on Naraini. He was also subsequently prosecuted for kicking a pot of boiling dal (lentils) over an indentured labourer and for giving excessive tasks to nine others. Each case was dismissed. The Agent General thought that some of the blame for the treatment of Naraini lay with the CSR for 'employing [Bloomfield] at all'.²³ He also believed that keeping a check on the behaviour of the overseers was the responsibility of the plantation managers, but recognised that this supervisory role was not always carried out. Placing such reliance on employers to ensure that immigrants were treated fairly was an error. The companies which employed overseers who were notorious for their gross ill-treatment of indentured workers, rarely took steps to have them removed. This is hardly surprising, however, for the concerns of the plantation managers did not lie with the Indian immigrants but with the quest for profits.

In contrast, at least on this occasion, the colonial government showed a genuine interest in the welfare of the indentured workers. Naraini's case attracted a great deal of public interest. It could be argued that the case left the government with little choice but to take action against Bloomfield, such was the horrendous nature of the crime. But the case also demonstrates the ease with which overseers could cover up their abusive treatment of workers in their charge and escape the consequences of their actions. Bloomfield had little difficulty in bribing and threatening those Indians who had witnessed the assault. It was a problem of which the government was aware. The *Annual Report* for 1900 noted:

Complaints made to the Police and Inspectors, where visible marks of injury were shown, could not be prosecuted or, if prosecuted were dismissed for want of evidence to support complaints, witnesses named being reluctant to depose.

Bloomfield was further protected by his employer and colleagues, who refused to report the matter to the police. Allman, the junior overseer who had witnessed the attack, supported Bloomfield even when giving evidence in court. The ties of social affinity that existed between Europeans on plantations were undoubtedly strong and worked to constrain people from speaking out against their colleagues.²⁴

Interestingly no complaints of violence were filed by females. Rather than indicating an absence of attack on women, this suggests the weak

position of indentured women within the plantation system. Seeking redress was fraught with difficulties. Sergeant Mason, who worked at the Police Station in Labasa, outlined the situation in a letter to the Superintendent of Police in Suva:

It is a usual thing for Indians to come to the police station between the hours of 9 & 12 at night to complain of the treatment they get on some of the plantations. When asked why they are so late they say they have to wait till dark as the *sirdars* watch them and will not let them go. This is when they have been beaten during the day and if the overseers hear that they have been to the police station they get their money cut and also get heavy tasks to perform and most likely another thrashing. . . Sergt would like to know if he can take proceedings against the overseers for preventing the people from coming to the police station with their grievance as it is almost an everyday occurrence.²⁵

Making a report was difficult because indentured immigrants were not free to leave the estate without permission, and an overseer who had beaten his workers was not about to grant them leave so that they could file a complaint against him. If a report was made, it involved the risk of further violence and the withholding of wages and rations. It was hardly deemed wise to report an overseer under whom you were contracted to work for five years. Practical considerations may have discouraged labourers from reporting abuses, but the fact that they were acutely aware of their own powerlessness was also significant. The system had effectively demoralised the Indian immigrants into a belief that, as one ex-indentured man stated, 'we were in a hopeless and a helpless state in this place hence [we] could do nothing'.²⁶

Charges could be laid against an overseer, but getting conviction was another matter. Why this was the case is difficult to ascertain and involves a certain amount of speculation. Apart from the problems associated with witnesses, already noted above, Naidu suggests that magistrates were often employers, or past employers of Indian labourers, and on good terms with the overseers and managers employed by companies such as CSR. He concludes that their sympathies accordingly lay with those who employed indentured workers.²⁷ In Naraini's case, knowing who made up the jury could help explain why Bloomfield was acquitted. Bloomfield's emphatic response to the incredulity of the hospital attendant perhaps reflects the sentiments that were shared by those who were involved in dispensing the legal system, juries, magistrates and judges. He wrote, 'Don't be so ready to believe a white man a scoundrel unless you are quite sure of your ground'.²⁸ Naraini's case is distressing and could lead to the conclusion that

the plight of the Indian indentured servant was a hopeless one. It is difficult not to see them simply as victims of the powerful plantation system, who were afforded little real protection by the authorities or the law. Indentured immigrants may have had limited avenues for official recourse against the overseers who perpetrated violence against them, but they did not simply accept such treatment without question or retaliation.²⁹ One indication that Indian labourers resisted the brutalities of the plantation system may lie in the number of cases, noted in the *Annual Reports*, of offences against immigration laws. Both men and women were listed as offenders and it is perhaps reasonable to assume that at least some of these actions were a form of protest. There are also accounts of direct resistance. Indian women sometimes chose to deal with brutal overseers, and let them know that their behaviour was not appreciated, by urinating on them.³⁰ An ex-indentured immigrant described a different response:

One day my wife, who was pregnant, and was hoeing the field was whipped by the kulambar. Guljariya who made herself my mother and my wife, her daughter, pulled the kulambar from his horse and gave him a hiding - he ran for his kotte.³¹

These remained, however, individual acts of resistance that had limited potential for challenging the injustice and brutality that indentured Indian women encountered within the plantation system.

Naraini's case is just one account of the female experience of indenture in Fiji. It does, however, provide insight and understanding into some of the major problems that arose within the plantation system. In particular it highlights the vulnerable position of women and the gap that existed between the rhetoric of indenture and the actual experience of Indian indentured workers. Indian women were affected by issues of race and class which saw employers subject them to gross exploitation. In a system driven by profits they, like all indentured workers, were viewed simply as a means to an end. The system of indenture may have had formal boundaries that placed limits on the powers of employers, but few measures were in place to ensure that they were followed through. Overseers were, therefore, given virtually unlimited control over Indian immigrants and the abuse of that position was common and widespread. Subjected to harsh working conditions, cruel and violent treatment and given little effective protection from the colonial authorities or the law, indentured Indian women suffered disproportionately on the Fiji plantations.

Endnotes

1. Naraini's story has been compiled from a variety of documents including correspondence from the Agent General, reports of the District Medical Officer and evidence given in the case of *Rex v. Bloomfield*, found in CO83/101. The specific source has been cited only when a direct quote has been used.
2. Evidence given by Naraini in the case of *Rex v. Bloomfield*, April 24, 1911, CO83/101.
3. Evidence given by Harold Bloomfield in the case of *Rex v. Bloomfield*, April 25, 1911, CO83/101.
4. Evidence given by Muniram in the case of *Rex v. Bloomfield*, April 24, 1911, CO83/101.
5. Evidence given by Naraini in the case of *Rex v. Bloomfield*, April 24, 1911, CO83/101.
6. Evidence given by Bloomfield in *Rex v. Bloomfield*, April 25, 1911, CO83/101.
7. Evidence given by the hospital attendant, Albert Whitaker, in *Rex v. Bloomfield*, April 24, 1911, CO83/101.
8. Letter from Harold Bloomfield to Albert Whitaker, August 22, 1910, CO83/101.
9. Letter from Bloomfield to Whitaker, August 22, 1910, CO83/101.
10. Letter from Whitaker to Bloomfield, August 22, 1910, CO83/101.
11. Letter from Bloomfield to Whitaker, August 22, 1910, CO83/101.
12. Letter from the Agent General to the Colonial Secretary, April 15, 1910, CO83/101.
13. Evidence given by Kaliram in *Rex v. Bloomfield*, April 24, 1911, CO83/101.
14. Evidence given by Dr. Halley in *Rex v. Bloomfield*, April 25, 1911, CO83/101.
15. Report from the District Medical Officer to the Chief Medical Officer, August 3, 1910.
16. Report from the District Medical Officer to the Chief Medical Officer, August 3, 1910.
17. Letter from the Colonial Secretary to the Manager of CSR, May 13, 1911, CO83/101.
18. Letter from the Resident Inspector of Immigrants to the Agent General, November 11, 1910, CO83/101.
19. *Rex v. Bloomfield*, April 25, 1910, CO83/101.
20. Letter from the Colonial Secretary to the Manager of CSR, May 13, 1911, CO83/101.
21. Letter from the Agent General to the Colonial Secretary, December 28, 1911, CO83/101.

22. Section 104 of the legislative framework of indenture states, 'The employer of any indentured adult immigrant may require such immigrant to perform either by way of task-work or time-work any work for which he is not physically unfit. . .'. Indenture Ordinance I in Brij V. Lal, *Crossing the Kala Pani: A Documentary History of Indian Indenture in Fiji* (Canberra and Suva, 1998).
23. Letter from the Agent General to the Colonial Secretary, April 15, 1911, CO 83/101.
24. Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture*, p.44.
25. Letter from Sergeant Mason Police Station, Labasa, to the Superintendent of Police, Suva, March 21, 1897, C083
26. Ali, *Girmit*, p. 16.
27. Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture*, p.55.
28. Letter from Bloomfield to Whitaker, August 22, 1910, C083/101.
29. Beall, 'Women Under Indenture', p. 111.
30. Walter Gill gives an account of this happening in his book *Turn North-East at the Tombstone* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1969), p.30.
31. Ali, *Girmit*, p.46.

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