



The Labasa Strike, 1907¹

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Indenture in Fiji was a system of oppression through which the labour of Indian migrants was extracted largely by coercive control and the denial of legal justice.² Such systems of power, however, are not self-maintaining. They are created, reproduced and interpreted by human actors in the face of challenges by those they attempt to control. Whatever else it might be, a sugar plantation is structured around the exercise of power designed to control and discipline labour. The purpose was to maintain output and production (i.e. to produce a crop) in circumstances where workers had no stake in the enterprise, where the nature of the work itself was intrinsically unattractive, and where few channels existed for promotion through the ranks. Hence the authoritarian character of the plantation and the appeal of coercive control.

The mechanics of oppression varied from place to place but the underlying purpose was the same everywhere: to suppress worker resistance and to maintain planter control. The success with which planters, under the indenture

system, maintained discipline and control may be gauged from the muted nature of worker resistance. Given the disparity in the power relationship, it soon becomes apparent why collective, organised resistance was generally not a viable option, despite labourers often having strong reasons for grievance. So instead of engaging in open and futile confrontations with management and the law, workers largely confined themselves to what have variously been termed 'day to day' resistance, 'silent sabotage', and the 'weapons of the weak'.³ In other words, they kept a lower profile and contented themselves with innumerable petty acts of 'passive noncompliance, subtle sabotage, evasion and deception'⁴ that went undetected and, therefore, unpunished.

Strike action under indenture was not only forbidden but rare; and it is noticeable that the big plantation strikes in places such as Queensland, Fiji and Hawaii only occurred *after* the institution of indenture had been abolished.⁵ David Northrup, the historian of indenture world-wide, has suggested that the paucity of large-scale strikes 'suggest[s] that most migrants found in their indenture experience sufficient measure of satisfaction of the dreams that had driven them into indenture'.⁶ 'Satisfaction' is not a word that readily springs to mind when discussing the indenture experience in Fiji. More plausibly, the answer for lack of strike action in Fiji stems from the extent of coercive power wielded by planters. Equally, as Brij Lal has argued, the diverse cultural background of the labourers hindered the development of common interests and values, and because they were young and generally of low status in their communities, they lacked leadership and organisational skills. Being confined to widely dispersed plantations only increased the difficulties of mounting concerted opposition, and in any case many had no incentive to fight the system. Rather, there was pressure to save money and return to India: these were the primary considerations in the sojourners' calculations, and they acted as powerful disincentives to getting involved in futile and costly struggles against the planters.⁷

It comes as no surprise that only four plantation strikes occurred in Fiji under the indenture system. In 1886, in separate incidents at Navuso and Koronivia, labourers protested at being systematically over-tasked. They were serious affairs, involving 300 and 130 labourers respectively, but short-lived. There was another short-lived strike at Koronivia in 1888, also prompted by over-tasking. The 1907 Labasa strike involved fewer labourers and the grievances were different—on this occasion being deceptive recruiting, low wages, physical abuse and unacceptable work.⁸ Although in global terms the Labasa strike was but a 'minor revolt',⁹ it nevertheless constituted the most significant and sustained challenge to the indentured labour system by Indian immigrants. The strike is instructive because those involved were far from

acquiescent and displayed an unusual degree of solidarity and determination. This caught both plantation and colonial authorities off their guard, and they struggled to find a solution when confronted with particularly tough and resolute labourers.

The strike began on 6 April 1907 when a group of seventeen labourers, who had arrived the previous January, complained to the Inspector of Immigration, Mr Russell, about the measures of rations they were receiving on the Colonial Sugar Refinery's (CSR) plantation at Labasa. On the following Saturday, the 13th, the same group again approached Russell, with the complaint that they did not receive any flour among their weekly rations, but only rice. Russell advised the men to take their rations, promising to procure flour as soon as possible. The men did not do this. The following Monday morning, a larger group approached the Government station complaining that they could gain no satisfaction from the Inspector of Immigration, and demanded to see the Stipendiary Magistrate. The number of strikers had by then increased to 59. Their main complaint now was that they had been lured to Fiji on false pretences. They claimed to have been engaged to work for the government, either in the police or as non-manual servants. They had not signed on to work as 'coolies' for the CSR, and refused to do any more of this work. Russell 'put the necessary facts' before them, but 'seeing they were determined not to listen to reason' he sent them to the courthouse.¹⁰

At the courthouse, the strikers proceeded to put the necessary facts, in addition to those already expressed to the Inspector of Immigration, before the Stipendiary Magistrate, Dr. Brough.¹¹ Their complaints focussed on deceitful recruitment, the nature of the work in Fiji, and general mistreatment. All five complained that they were deceived in India about the identity of the employer and the nature of the work they would be assigned. The immigration agents had said they would be given police or 'bungalow' (servant's) work. One interviewee, Khani Zeman, related the story of his recruitment. He had asked the recruiting agent what sort of work he was to do, and was told 'coolie's work'. On complaining that '[w]e cannot do coolie's work' he was told that 'the people who come from the Punjab will be employed as Sirdars or Police. You will get employment with the Government'. He went on to explain his illiteracy, to make the point that he had not, 'nor did any of us', sign any agreement: 'nor did we even put our thumb-marks to any paper'. Gunda Singh complained that no agreement was read to him: 'I was only told that I would have Government work'. Another, Mahi, claimed that when the Indenture Ordinance was read out, it stated that '[w]e would have

government work, but not work as coolies'. His statement also indicated that deception was ongoing: 'We were 4 times examined by the Doctor and each time were told that by the Sahib [Immigration Agent] who sent us that we would not get coolie work - that we would have to work 5 years for the Government'. A final complaint was that they trusted the Sahibs in India. Khani Zeman said that '[t]he sahibs who come to our country never speak false words—they always tell the truth'. Similarly, Gunda Singh says: 'I thought that the Government would never speak falsely—by Government I mean recruiting agents. I thought I would be given Government work since it was promised to me'.

A specific grievance was that their employment backgrounds did not suit them for this style of work, and that better alternatives were available in India. A fourth labourer, Jerdad, testified that 'since my childhood I worked in the palace with Sahibs at Rajirari. I had charge of men who work with silver ore keeping accounts of what was carried'. Mahi complained that '[w]e are given work that neither our fathers or grandfathers have ever done', and again told of previously tending cattle. The fifth spokesman, Budha, described his position in India as 'servant to Contractors of Public Works', saying he was 'an orderly and always followed orders'. After being told in India that he would have to do coolie work in Fiji, he 'told Grant Sahib [Protector of Immigrants] that [he] could not do coolie work, ... could earn better wages here, or in Burma or Assam, and the Chota Sahib told us that it would be alright, in Fiji you will get Police work or other work suited to your class'.

The five men also complained that they were unable to earn a decent living doing 'coolie' work. Gunda Singh reported weekly wages as low as one shilling or even sixpence after rations were deducted; Khani Zeman, who had been there ten months, reported wages of 3 shillings and 8 pence and 2 shillings; while Mahi, who earned between 4 shillings and 6 shillings after rations, came closest to making the nominated wage of a shilling a day.¹²

Nor were the complaints restricted to fieldwork. Those who worked on the launches and in the mill also registered their dissatisfaction with the conditions. The wages, in the region of 7 shillings to 9 shillings, were an improvement on what was earned in the fields. The jobs, however, held their own grounds for complaint. The mill worker, Jerdad, complained: 'I do not get the work I expected to get, and that I am given work I never did before and do not understand'. He further complained that he could not understand the instructions from the supervisor, who spoke only English. The launch driver, Budha, offered no particular complaint against the work itself or the pay, but complained that he worked very long hours, and did not get Sunday off. The watchman also complained of long hours; and those interviewed at Labasa

also testified to physical abuse by an overseer.

Brough ordered the men to return to work, saying that their complaints would be referred to Suva for investigation. But the strike continued. The men returned to the plantation but refused to work; and refused also to accept rations on the grounds that they had nothing to do with the company and that it was the Government's responsibility to feed them. The strikers collected £10 to buy food, and supplemented this by eating large quantities of the Company's sugarcane.¹³ They also attempted to entice other workers to join them, as well as encouraging their 'shipmates at other plantations'. Also, the plantation overseer asked for police protection, claiming the strikers had threatened to kill him, although no specific individual could be prosecuted for this threat.¹⁴ Further accusations of intimidation came to light when two Madrasi labourers complained of being assaulted and their evidence, that ten men had threatened to throw them off the Labasa bridge in an effort to stop them working, led Brough to issue arrest warrants. The complainants did not know the names of the assailants but claimed to be able to point them out.¹⁵

That same morning (19 April) the Inspector of Constabulary at Labasa was sent to deliver the warrants. The police contingent numbered 9 men. The local Fijian village leader, the *Buli Labasa*, provided a further twenty men, who remained in a boat a quarter mile away from the lines (plantation houses). The police approached the lines and arrested the men identified by the Madrasis. They offered no resistance, but about thirty strikers accompanied the arrested men when the constabulary marched them off. The police decided to allow the strikers to follow, while ensuring they remained a safe distance behind. Meanwhile a message was sent to the back up force to travel to the courthouse. At the courthouse, the arrested men were locked up, while Brough talked to the body of strikers, exhorting them to return to the lines. The strikers insisted that no assault had happened and that it was the men who made the complaint who should be arrested.¹⁶

Brough then authorised the constabulary to move the strikers back to the lines, which was achieved with little resistance. Once at the lines, however, a melee broke out. Shots were fired and three labourers were wounded. The police version of events is that the strikers had threatened them with axes, knives and sticks. The strikers denied that they had taken up arms, saying that they were on their way to complain to the mill manager. According to the strikers, the Inspector gave an order to fire. The Inspector, however, denied that such an order was given; but acknowledged that it was a dangerous situation and there was much noise and confusion. The strikers were calmed by the timely arrival Duncan, the mill manager, who somehow managed to persuade them to return to the lines and to accept rations.¹⁷

That night Brough decided that the strikers should be sent on the steamer *Clyde* to Suva, where their complaints and conduct could be properly investigated. His decision was endorsed by the other officials at the station, who were concerned that the situation might get out of hand. There were 40 Fijian villagers at one stage backing up the regular police.¹⁸ The initial response to the situation had been to request additional police from the station at Savu Savu, on the other side of the island. Consideration had been given to augmenting the police force and the *Buli Labasa* assured Brough that he would be able to call on a reinforcement of up to 90 Fijian villagers. But there were countervailing fears this would provoke a racial feud: 'the men remained firmly resolved not to work and there is no adequate force to coerce them'. Duncan described these precautions as 'unnecessary', and he deprecated Brough's proposal that the CSR vessel *Marama* be dispatched to Suva to secure armed Constabulary.¹⁹ Duncan seemed determined to keep the strikers on the plantation: their labour was needed and he wanted, no doubt, to avoid the impression of being dependent on government support. He preferred the back-up of the local rifle club and thought it sufficient to send only the 'ringleaders' to Suva. But he was overruled, because the strikers refused to be separated. On reflection, Duncan concurred. It was 'better', he said, 'that they should be out of the district and out of the colony than in it, for they are very difficult people to deal with; besides as you know the Pathans are notoriously treacherous'.²⁰

The strikers were all from the northwest of India, not only Pathans but also Punjabis and Peshawaris (for convenience, the strikers will hereafter be described as Punjabis, after the actual province of origin). Indian indentured immigrants initially came in large measure from the northeastern districts of the United Provinces. By the late nineteenth century, the expansion of acreage under sugarcane, coupled with difficulty in recruiting from the United Provinces, resulted in the search for labourers widening to the Punjab, the Central Provinces and Madras. The Punjabis rapidly gained a reputation in every colony as being difficult and quarrelsome.²¹ At Labasa, Russell, Inspector of Immigrants, was concerned that the 'racial character of these men required different treatment from the ordinary coolie', and that it would have been 'fraught with danger to employees and overseers to appear to treat the matter too lightly'.²² These perceptions were shared by the CSR managers who now called for the end of recruitment from the Punjab, stating a preference for labourers drawn from the Central Provinces of India: 'for the Jangalis, as they are called, are about the most tractable people we ever introduced into the country'.²³

The Punjabi strikers at Labasa were the more formidable on account of their solidarity, despite arriving in different ships, being housed in different lines, and in at least one instance being joined by a compatriot from another plantation. Their common cultural and linguistic background, moreover, cut across differences in position on the plantation and transcended religion: Brough identifies Hindus and Moslems amongst his interviewees.²⁴ Following the shooting, the strikers took ceremonial oaths against working for the company, 'such as were Hindoos wading into the river up to their breasts, and such as Mussulmans catching the Koran with their teeth'. Fears among local colonial officials were intensified by reports that, after the violence, the Punjabi recruits had gained sympathy from other labourers and the free Indian community.²⁵

But a serious challenge to authority takes more than commonality of language and identity among workers. It is well known that '[an] important ingredient in the development of revolts out of local disturbances was the division of whites into warring factions and the general weakness of state apparatus'.²⁶ Both these pre-conditions, to varying degrees, are applicable to the Labasa strike. The weakness of the state was initially demonstrated when Brough decided to transfer the entire body of 56 strikers to Suva, precisely because the situation could not be contained at Labasa without the risk of a bloodbath. There were disagreements, as we have seen, at the time of that decision, with Duncan (the mill manager) being over-ruled. The bickering did not stop at that point.

Indeed, the government officers who led the official enquires into the strike were critical of the local officials, refusing to see that their action was in the interests of public safety. Surprise was expressed that the Duncan's opinion should have been overruled, and the men sent to Suva; this had placed the government 'in an awkward position, and expense has been unnecessarily incurred'. The general opinion in Suva was that the local officials had 'lost their heads and nerve in circumstances where coolness and tact' would have settled the trouble.²⁷ Duncan, for his part, gloatingly reported that his 'actions in regard to the Peshawaris [had] general approval while that of the local Government officials is condemned'.²⁸ Indeed, it is possible that the CSR was complicit in the outrageous decision to remove Brough from his posting.

The strikers were duly rounded up and sent to the Immigration Department depot and quarantine station on Nukulau Island, off Suva. A combination of circumstances made the upcoming court case one on which much would hang. The fact to stress at this point is that it was not a matter of CSR routinely

charging workers under the 1891 Indenture Ordinance with causing a disturbance and refusing to go back to work. Had that been so, it would have been an open and shut case, given the frequency with which employers successfully prosecuted their labourers.²⁹ But the case was no longer strictly a CSR matter only. Although Brough had initially warned the strikers that they were in breach of the law for unlawful assembly—that is, leaving the plantation in such a large body to lodge their complaints—the main charge against them was assault. That meant that the government, and not the Company, was pressing the charges. What really raised the stakes was that the strikers had legal representation. The ten strikers arrested at Labasa had subscribed £1 each and engaged a local solicitor to represent them in court, who on the removal of the strikers to Suva, handed their affairs over to Crompton and Muspratt. Fenner, the manager of Nausori Mill, was somewhat dismissive, saying that 'the Coolies have paid Crompton the Lawyer £10 retaining fee to protect their interests but, as this is about all the money they can raise, the lawyer will not trouble himself too much about the matter'.³⁰ To the contrary, Crompton took up the strikers' cause, telling the authorities that he would recommend to the strikers to return to work if the government paid £21 to cover their costs.³¹ The fact of adequate legal representation, combined with the overall gravity of the case, promised a court hearing of uncommon interest. To complicate an already difficult situation, the Governor was out of the Colony, having gone to Tonga without appointing an Acting Governor in his place.

The original legal issues of this dispute revolved around the arrest of the workers and the wounding of the men. As the legal arguments unfolded, much stress was placed on specific interpretations of sections of the Indenture Ordinance of 1891. The legal position enjoyed by the employers was backed to a certain extent by particular readings of the Ordinance. This was rarely challenged. It was not, however, a interpretation held by all in either the government or the CSR. An incident, cited as a precedent by Duncan, occurred when a number of Madrasis left the plantation and lodged a complaint at the government station. The Manager prosecuted the men on the grounds that they had illegally left the plantation, but Brough dismissed the case. In Duncan's opinion, this failure to 'enforce the law' had encouraged the present strikers in their protest.³² Fenner, in contrast, saw this as an example of the hazards that employers ran in taking their labourers to court and having the case dismissed: under clause 223 of the 1891 Immigration Ordinance, he argued, leaving the plantation on Sunday was not illegal.³³ In the first of a series of unseemly squabbles between the two, Duncan told Fenner to 'refer to Part VIII of the Ordinance and read in conjunction with Section 223 to which you allude'.³⁴ On this basis, Duncan argued, workers were prohibited from

leaving the plantation in a body, not leaving 'employment' or 'work' (which may be allowed given that the men were not required to work on Sunday). This gives some indication of the differing conceptions of the regulations governing the labour system.

The interpretation of the law pertaining to the validity of the indenture agreements also varied. Again, Duncan, considered that Brough had erred in listening to the complaints of the labourers and referring them to Suva:

As far as I understand the Indian immigration Ordinance, all the evidence the Magistrate is entitled to call for in proof of indenture is the Indenture papers and they constitute *prima facie* evidence. Why Dr. Brough should have gone out of his way, as it were, to listen to a complaint or grievance alleged to have been perpetrated in India, and which, if at all existent, must have been put right in the depot at Calcutta, is utterly beyond my comprehension.³⁵

Some Government officials were less certain, and admitted that there were possible challenges to such assumptions. The Indian Immigration Ordinance of 1891 covered the regulation of the indenture, but it also concerned with the rights and obligations in the relationship between employers and the government. Articles 54 and 55 are ambiguous about the nature of any agreement entered into by the labourer, and their wording was acknowledged as allowing a challenge to the validity of indenture. The fact that the strikers had legal representation is therefore of some importance in relation to their complaints of deception. A judicial report considered more fully the sort of approach such a challenge might take:

It will no doubt be contended that the words in Section 55 'bound by such indenture' do not mean 'bound by such certificate of indenture' but refer to another contract therein specified and dealt with in Section 54. Further, it will in all probability be argued that 'receivable in evidence without further proof' means only *prima facie* evidence rebuttable on proof that no contract was entered into.³⁶

The report provides further argument revolving around the meaning, in the context of legal precedent or specific phraseology, of certain clauses in this Ordinance – such as 'are hereby indentured', not 'were duly indentured'. In short, Duncan's interpretation, which would seem to have been widely shared, appears not to have been watertight. The Executive Council considered these legal matters on 10 May, with a comment that the judicial report's author restrict his advice to normal legal matters and leave the interpretation of the Immigration Ordinance to those experienced with it.³⁷

The lawyers' involvement heightened this atmosphere of uncertainty. Crompton and Muspratt informed the Executive Council that they would advise the strikers to return to work on certain conditions. In addition to their legal costs being met by the government, they wanted access to the strikers at Nukulau. They stipulated five other demands. The first was that the government drop the charges of assault. Second, no charge should be instituted against the men for riot, unlawful assembly or any other offence arising from the disturbance. Third, the wounded men should be compensated. Fourth, the CSR should find the men work as congenial to them as possible. And fifth, the men join the police force should the opportunity arise.³⁸

The government agreed with some of the conditions, although not immediately and with some reservation. On 10th of May the Executive Council agreed to drop all charges 'provided they take up work quietly on the various plantations to which they will be distributed'.³⁹ The strikers were to be dispersed among the CSR's plantations (which met with Duncan's approval).⁴⁰ This option had already been aired among CSR managers. The other matters were not negotiable but compensation was offered to the wounded men 'as a matter of grace'. The provision of special jobs and eventual recruitment into the police force were not ruled out by the CSR, but deferred.⁴¹

The proposal to disperse the men and to drop charges was accepted by the lawyers. But the strikers were not so easily satisfied. On 11th May, Crompton visited Nukulau with his interpreter and the Agent General of Immigration to discuss the Government's proposal with the strikers. This caused immediate consternation. The strikers stuck to their original demand to do government work and now insisted on staying together. But a few wavered and when the visiting party departed, some of the 'ringleaders' chased the launch down to the end of the jetty, and promised they would try to persuade the men to accept the proposals.⁴² The following day, the 120-ton launch *Ranadi* travelled to Nukulau with the Agent General of Immigration and the Inspector General of the Constabulary and a squad of police to embark the strikers designated for plantations at Lautoka and Ba. The strikers were argumentative and refused to muster. It was then decided to use force with the crews of the *Ranadi* and of two other vessels in the vicinity as back-up.⁴³

The strikers at this time received their food; about twenty went into the barracks to eat and the remainder stayed outside. While they were eating, the constabulary locked the barrack doors and surrounded those who had remained outside. Some men, 'who were becoming very troublesome', were

led by the police to the beach. The others followed them, but in general did not interfere with the police. The men shut inside the barracks were 'clamorous' but did not make a concerted effort to force the doors which, the AGI suggested, 'they doubtless could have done'. Although there was no major resistance, the strikers were agitated. Those designated for Labasa and Rewa were finally separated, and those who were to board the *Ranadi* for Lautoka were embarked. Those designated for Labasa, about twenty, were embarked on the steamer the *Clyde* which arrived at Nukulau soon after. Of the strikers who arrived from India on the *Wardha*, sixteen males and one female were sent to Rarawai plantations, five males were sent to Lautoka and two to Nausori mill. Of those who arrived on the *Fazilka*, fourteen males and one female were sent to Lautoka, four males sent to Rarawai, and one to Nausori.⁴⁴ The role of the two females noted in this document, and their involvement in the strike, is unrecorded. The twenty labourers who were returned to Labasa were distributed among the nine plantations associated with the mill.⁴⁵ The labourers were reported at all the locations to have returned to work peacefully and quietly, at least initially.

The dispersal of the group should have marked the end of the labour troubles, especially when the government eventually agreed that more congenial work would be found for the strikers. But Duncan, arguing that he had not received the instruction to put the returning strikers into special employment before they had arrived back at Labasa, assigned them field work 'till such time as they [prove] tractable and obedient'. He was instructed from Nausori to put the men on non-labouring jobs, and reprimanded for his vindictive attitude toward the returning strikers.⁴⁶ He remonstrated, saying that 'I never dreamed for a moment you that you would have acquiesced in such an arrangement as giving these people special jobs'. He then alluded to the labour management problem that would result:

To have countermanded my orders the instant I got your letter would have been an extremely bad policy and nicely calculated to subvert any authority we still hold over the rest of our coolies, to say nothing of the Peshawaris themselves. Further, I submit it is unfair and unjust to turn out Madrassis or Calcutta from easy, well paid, or special jobs to make room for malcontents like the Peshawari.⁴⁷

He was over-ruled by head office in Sydney, but did not accede graciously. He nevertheless had a point in stating that: 'It is difficult for me to understand what class of isolated work other than what we term special or easy work you allude to in connection with these projects, for within my knowledge, no such work exists'. Special work was reserved for the best of the labourers as one of

the few rewards—in effect promotion—available in what was essentially a coercive labour system. It never occurred to Duncan that the strike would not have begun had the men been given non-labouring jobs, as they had been promised in India, in the first place.

The Labasa strike was an unprecedented occurrence in the history of Indian indenture in Fiji. It was the first sustained labour dispute of its kind. Until then, the plantation and colonial authorities had the measure of the *girmitiyas*. They had asserted their authority from the outset and had progressively rolled back workers' ability to resist through such measures as the 1891 Indenture Ordinance. Given the prevailing attitudes and practices of the white employers, Indian indenture in Fiji could never become a paternalistic system, depending instead on coercion at the workplace or the capricious application of the law. But such measures had the effect of suppressing the symptoms rather than removing the causes. Without going so far as to say that the system of labour control in Fiji was in equilibrium, there was nevertheless a certain balance in that each side knew its respective position within the power relationship. Management held the upper hand, and workers knew from often-painful experience that there was little redress.

The fragility of this 'balance', if it can be so described, was upset by the Punjabis. It is never a matter of unfettered control, even in the most oppressive of unfree labour systems, because masters have to 'accommodate', up to a point, worker's ideas of their own 'rights'. As Peter Kolchin points out, bondsmen had 'firmly developed—if never precisely articulated— notions of what constituted generally unacceptable systems of forced labor in which they were held.... [T]he very existence of such standards among them implied a tacit if unrecognised acceptance of their own unfreedom, of the idea that there was such a thing as an acceptable relationship within [a system of unfree labour].⁴⁸ This notion of 'rights' was violated when the Punjabis, despite earlier assurances, were assigned to do 'coolie' work at Labasa; and they objected strenuously.

The Europeans' perception that the Punjabis' reaction was attributable to their cultural characteristics was not a case of racial stereotyping. It is well recognised in the historiography of unfree labour that the nature of worker response is culturally conditioned. It is no accident that Akan slaves, who came from a highly militaristic society, were usually at the centre of slave revolts in Jamaica.⁴⁹ Closer to home, Clive Moore has explained the methods of response of Melanesian labourers on Queensland cane fields in terms of a 'counterculture of survival' and argues that 'their lack of obvious resistance or

protest relates not only to the authoritarian character of the plantation system but also to their deliberate choice of methods of response. In short, they maintained Melanesian social equilibrium by depending on major inward-focussing Melanesian social mechanisms coming from their ethnic backgrounds to provide satisfactory balances in their lives. Their response was to mediate their working and private lives through their own beliefs, institutions, and forms of behaviour...'.⁵⁰ At the same time, certain responses seem universal. The Melanesians who had been kidnapped to Queensland were the labourers most prone to intractable behaviour,⁵¹ a response that parallels the Punjabis' reaction at Labasa. Nevertheless, the Punjabis, with their proud dispositions, displayed far greater fortitude than their compatriots from the United Provinces and Madras. Part of the difficulty of the latter two groups stemmed from their diversity, which impeded a united front and a concerned response. But it is also clear that they lacked the inner strength and the social cohesiveness of the Punjabis. It does lead to speculation that a less oppressive system of indenture might have emerged in Fiji had significant numbers of Punjabis been recruited from the outset.

But neither is it a case of undiluted agency on the Punjabis' part. The other side of the equation is that they had room for manoeuvre: Fiji was simply not equipped to cope with an uprising of this scale and determination. The colony, in keeping with the British-model, was run on the cheap. There was no extensive state apparatus, much less one designed to suppress plantation revolts. There had never been a need for it. Once the matter became a purely legal issue, the adversarial system to British justice came into play and created further divisions among the European protagonists. The fact that the strikers received effective legal representation was also a stroke of good fortune: there were cases where derelict lawyers, such as Humphrey Berkeley, did nothing for their Indian clients beyond charging exorbitant fees.⁵² The relative success of the Punjabis, then, had as much to do with the weakness in the system of power that confronted them as it did in their own sterling efforts.

Although the Labasa strike was the most serious and sustained protest in the course of Fiji Indian indenture, one is ultimately struck by the limited objectives of the strikers and the leniency of the colonial government's response. The latter, after an initial bout of irritation, had no real cause for concern. After all, the strike was conceived and conducted with no revolutionary purpose in mind; and it produced no revolutionary outcome. The strikers were neither protesting against the colonial government nor against the indenture system *per se*. The strikers' objections to field labour and low wages extended only as far as their application to themselves. They certainly made their point and were successful in so far as the state dropped

criminal charges and exempted them from the field labour that was so much beneath their dignity—despite some rearguard action from Duncan. The government, in fact, was the final arbiter. By dispersing the strikers throughout the colony, the government achieved the triple objectives of reaffirming its authority, of demonstrating that it was not entirely the creature of the CSR, and of minimising what disruptive effect the Punjabis might still exert. This latter strategy of neutralisation and containment was especially important because the government depended on the sugar industry, and especially the CSR, for the bulk of its revenues. This was the vital interest that the government was defending—and economic one on which its own survival depended. There were other considerations. By the turn of the century, men like Totaram Sanadhya and Reverend John Burton were present in Fiji. The government could ill afford to adopt a niggardly attitude; the economy was improving, and the colonial secretariat was increasingly reluctant to let the CSR determine the conduct of industrial relations in the colony. And, above all, the Punjabis had a case.

Endnotes

1. Edited for publication by Doug Munro.
2. E.g., J.W. Burton, *The Fiji of Today* (London, 1910); C.F. Andrews, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth, 1918); Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the export of Indian labour overseas, 1830-1920* (London, 1974); K.L. Gillion, *The Fiji Indians: challenge to European dominance, 1920-1940* (Canberra, 1977), ch.1; Ahmed Ali, *From Plantation to Politics: studies on Fiji Indians* (Suva, 1980), ch.1; Bruce Knapman, *Fiji's Economic History, 1874-1939: studies of capitalist colonial development* (Canberra, 1987), 12-13.
3. Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, 'Day to Day Resistance to Slavery', *Journal of Negro History*, 37 (1942), 388-419; Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American slavery and Russian serfdom* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 241-44; James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven/London, 1985), esp. 28-35.
4. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 31.
5. Doug Munro, 'Patterns of Resistance and Accommodation', in Brij V. Lal, Doug Munro and Edward D. Beechert (eds.), *Plantation Workers: resistance and accommodation* (Honolulu, 1993), 20-21.
6. David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (Cambridge, 1995), 129.
7. Brij V. Lal, "'Nonresistance' on Fiji Plantations: the Fiji Indian experience, 1979-1920', in Lal, Munro and Beechert (eds.), *Plantation Workers*, 187-216.
8. K.L. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants: a history to the end of indenture in 1920* (Melbourne, 1962), 48-49, 83, 88; It would be useful to know why plantation strikes were so numerous in parts of the Caribbean, such as British Guiana and Trinidad, by comparison with the Pacific.
9. Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983), 53.
10. Records of the Colonial Secretary's Office (hereafter CSO), National Archives of Fiji, Inspector of Immigration's report, 16 April 1907, Attachment C, no. 2161 of 1907 (hereinafter abbreviated to despatch number and year; in this case CSO 2161/07).
11. The following three paragraphs have been taken from CSO 2161/07, Attachment A, Memorandum of Complaints, 15 April 1907. In a couple of cases, however, testimony presented a few days earlier to the Inspector of Immigration has been included, to complete the picture.
12. In the imperial measurement of money, which Fiji abandoned in 1969, a shilling is the equivalent of ten cents (and twelve pennies make a shilling). A dollar equals ten shillings, and twenty shillings equal one pound sterling.
13. CSO 2161/07, Attachment D, Agent General for Immigration to Colonial Secretary, 13 May 1907. Records of the Colonial Sugar Refinery Company (hereafter CSR), Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, Series N142/2076, Labasa In-letter no. 552, Manager (Labasa) to General Manager (Sydney), 19 April 1907 (hereafter abbreviated to series

- number, letter number and date; in this case CSR N142/2076, no. 552, 19 April 1907). The Labasa In-letters between July 1906 and July 1908 are missing, so we are lacking the Sydney General Manager's correspondence with Labasa during the period of the strike.
14. CSO 2161/07, Attachment C, Inspector of Immigration's report, 16 April 1907.
 15. CSO 2161/07, Attachment b, Stipendiary Magistrate's memorandum, 19 April 1907.
 16. CSO 2231/07, Attachment I, Stipendiary Magistrate's report, 22 April 1907.
 17. CSO 2234/07, Attachment K, reports by Inspector General of Constabulary and Sergeant Samiosa; CSO 2161/07; Crompton & Muspratt to Governor, 29 April 1907; CSO 2234/07, Attachment K, Inspector General of Constabulary's report; ; CSR N142/2084, no. 156, 20 April 1907.
 18. CSO 2161/07, Attachment B, Stipendiary Magistrate's memorandum, 19 April 1907.
 19. CSR N142/2084, no. 542, 19 April 1907.
 20. CSO 2162/07, Attachment B, Stipendiary Magistrate's memorandum, 19 April 1907; CSR N142/2084, no. 156, 20 April 1907.
 21. Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, 46-52; Lal, *Girmitiyas*, 50-54.
 22. CSO 2163/07, Attachment C, Inspector of Immigration's report, 16 April 1907.
 23. CSR N142/2084, no. 866, undated.
 24. CSO 2161/07, Attachment A, Memorandum of Complaints, 15 April 1907.
 25. CSO 2161/07, Attachment B, Stipendiary Magistrate's memo, 19 April 1907.
 26. Eugene D. Genovese, *In Red and Black: Marxian explorations in Southern and Afro-American history* (New York, 1979), 132.
 27. CSO 2161/07, Attachment D, Agent General of Immigration to Colonial Secretary, 13 May 1907.
 28. CSR N142/2084., no. 166, 13 May 1907.
 29. Shiu Prasad, *Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Suva, 1974), 23; Vijay Naidu, *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji* (Suva, 1980), 52-54; Lal, "'Nonresistance'...", 201-11.
 30. CSR N214/2262, no. 870, 13 May 1907. Fenner may have regarded £10 as a paltry sum but it is the equivalent of at least 200 man days' work. This helps explain why indentured labourers were seldom able to hire lawyers to represent them in court: the price was usually beyond their reach.
 31. CSO 2161/07, Crompton and Muspratt to Colonial Secretary, 9 May 1907.
 32. CSR N142/1207, no. 542, 19 April 1907.
 33. CSR N142/2084, no. 542, 4 May 1907.
 34. CSR N142/2084, no. 162, 4 May 1907.
 35. CSR N142/2084, no. 542, 19 April 1907.
 36. CSO 2161/07, Judicial Report.

37. CSO 2161/07, unidentified report relating to the Executive Council meeting of 10 May 1907.
38. CSO 2161/07, Crompton & Muspratt to Colonial Secretary, 9 May 1907.
39. CSO 2161/07, extract from minutes of Executive Council meeting, 10 May 1907.
40. CSR N142/2084, no. 162, 4 May 1907.
41. CSR N142/2084, no. 162, 4 May 1907.
42. CSO 2161/07, Attachment D, Agent General of Immigration to Colonial Secretary, 13 May 1907.
43. CSO 2161/07, Attachment D, Agent General of Immigration to Colonial Secretary, 13 May 1907.
44. CSR N142/2084, no. 169, 27 May 1907.
45. CSR N142/2084, no. 167, 18 May 1907.
46. CSR N142/2084, no. 184, 18 May 1907.
47. CSR N142/2084, no. 184, 16 July 1907.
48. Peter Kolchin, 'The Process of Confrontation: patterns of resistance to bondage in nineteenth-century Russia and the United States', *Journal of Social History*, 11:4 (1978), 479.
49. Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery* (London, 1967), 276.
50. Clive Moore, 'The Counterculture of Survival: Melanesians in the Mackay District of Queensland, 1865-1906', in Lal, Munro and Beechert (eds), *Plantation Workers*, 66-99 (quotation, 71).
51. Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: a history of Solomon Islands labour migration, 1870-1914* (Melbourne, 1973), 25; Kay Saunders, *Workers in Bondage: the origins and bases of unfree labour in Queensland, 1824-1916* (Brisbane, 1982), 131.
52. J.D. Kelly, 'Fiji Indians and the Law, 1912', in John Dunham Kelly and Uttra Kumari Singh (eds), *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands and The Story of the Haunted Line* (Suva, 1991).



Mr Tulsi's store looked exactly like this quasi-Queenslander. People gathered on the verandah to discuss village affairs and resolve their problems.

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