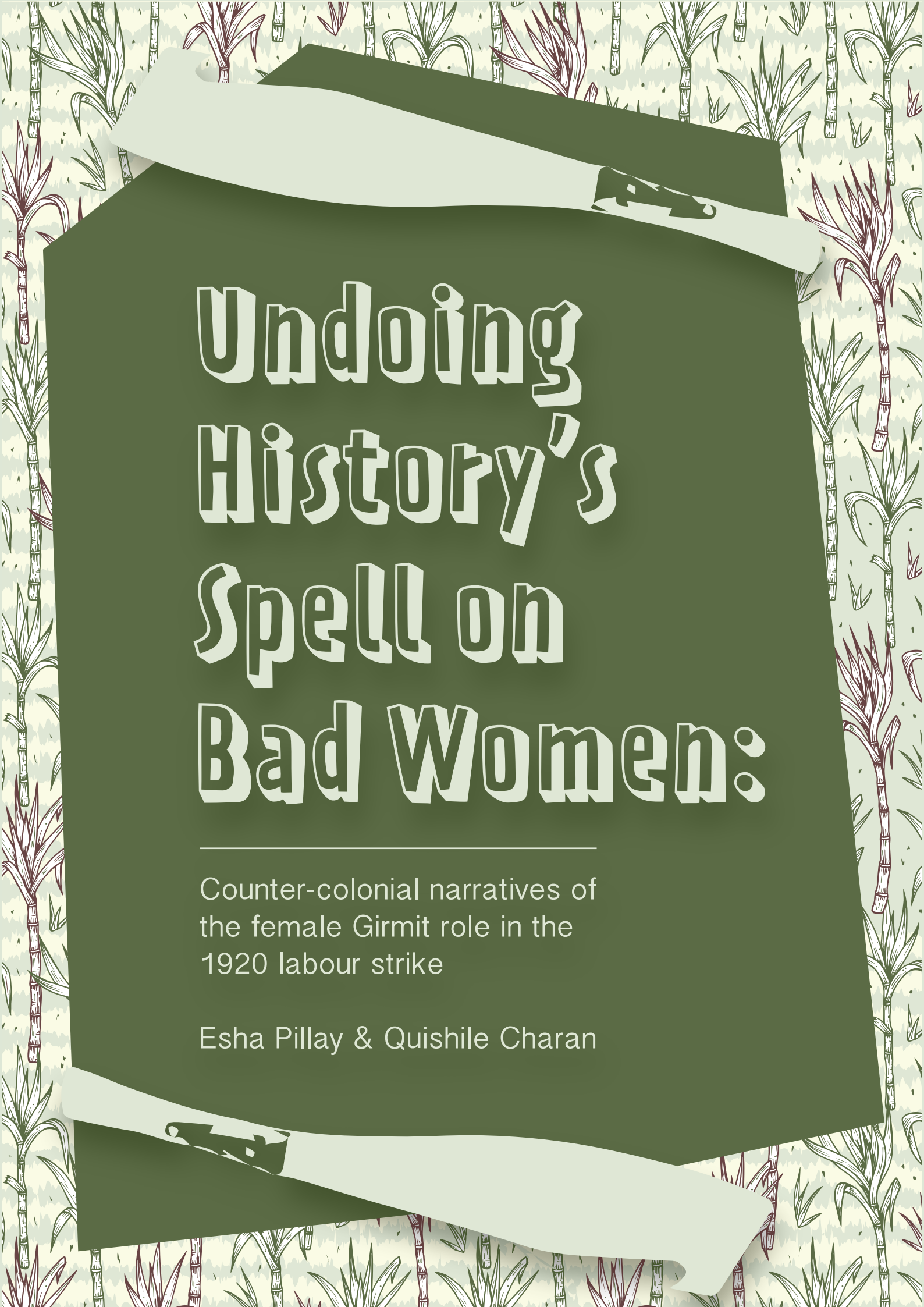




Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women:

Counter-colonial narratives of
the female Girmit role in the
1920 labour strike

Esha Pillay & Quishile Charan



fig 1

Undoing History's Spell on Bad Women:

Counter-colonial narratives of the
female Girit role in the 1920 labour
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fig 2

The labour of sharing stories and knowledge systems to uncover and learn about indentured labour or Giriti—the birth of our community—begins and has grown through friendship and a mutual love for our ancestors, community and Fiji. Re-visiting, re-telling and re-contextualising colonial narratives produced by both the British Empire and the Indian state, we² have found a lack of specific language to describe our colonisation and how indenture as a colonial framework produces its own trauma and corresponding set of insights. The indentured labour system relied on various forms of state-sanctioned violence; however, while the coloniser worked to control our ancestors, there was also anti-colonial resistance against such efforts. We see the acts of resistance led by female Giritiya as the pulse of our community and what has kept us moving forward through the generations of conflict in the young postcolonial nation of Fiji.

We stand here today because of the ongoing efforts of our ancestors and elders—especially the women, queer, trans and gender diverse people in our community. Indenture was officially abolished in 1920 and Fiji gained its independence in 1970, yet we see the remnants of colonialism in our everyday lives and in its continuation as an all-encompassing supremacist ideology that forgets, talks over, and makes these important efforts invisible.

We do not wish to render our female ancestors as monolithic. The fight against indentured labour is inherently messy; this paper is one step towards discussing colonial Fiji's complex world of resistance. We work to position female Giriti at the heart of the resistance narrative in order to reveal and emphasise such stories of strength for our generation and the younger generations to come. We understand that without hope and love we cannot build better futures in which trauma cycles will not be repeated.



fig 3

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Why We Resist:

Unravelling the historical punishment of coolie women



Esha:

“Yeh larrki bahut baat kare.³ Yeh larrki bahut naache.⁴” Fiji Indian women are too loud and too slutty. They are always talking back. They go around with too many men. They are constantly bringing shame to their families. Fiji Indian women are supposed to protect the ijut of their families, husbands and the community. They are here to only create families and to serve families, especially their men and any other man that may cross their path. They are specifically notorious because their “beauty of womanhood” was left behind in India, and in the coolie lines⁵ of Fiji they had become too vile and too vigilant.⁶

This is how we as descendants of female indentured labourers from Fiji are described today, and what the women in our communities and our Girit ancestors were violently reminded and reprimanded for. Our female ancestors serve as the centerpiece of immorality and corrupt culture while also being restricted to the framework of convenient bystanders of colonial resistance. Why is our disruption of a colonial, patriarchal and capitalist system of indentured labour dismissed? Why do we need to be saved by either European colonisers, Fiji Indian men or upper-caste⁷ Indians from

the subcontinent? Why do we cause so many problems? Why are we so threatening?

To “undo history’s spell on ‘bad women,’”⁸ we need to go back and examine how Girmitiya women were viewed and used for colonial identities that ensured economic prosperity whilst also absolving the coloniser from their guilt.

Quishile:

To allow female Girmit to have their place in history would tear apart the fragile European male ego and that of the Indian man too. These egos were built around colonial ideals invented for coolie⁹ women and only allowed them two identities. The first of these identities was the evil Indian woman who sold her sexuality and led men into suicidal despair or blind murderous rage.¹⁰

Esha:

The idea that “it was impossible for a woman to preserve her chastity in the coolie lines”¹¹ was notorious. Our female ancestors were too promiscuous; such agency stood in opposition to the sugarcane plantation’s designation of whom Girmitiya women should be having sex with. Sexuality was a key tool that was used to tell coolie women what their place was in Fiji and as a Girmitiya.

Quishile:

The second identity—and the reason for recruiting Indian women—was that of the passive and submissive woman. The subservient coolie woman was desirable to a colonial economic model that relied on their support towards the production of mass profit. While women were expected to meet the demands of plantation work,¹² they were also the invisible workforce for the emotional,¹³ domestic and sexual needs of Indian male labourers, sirdars, European plantation owners and overseers.¹⁴ Esha: The sole purpose of the female Girmitiyas life was to serve and to bear the punishment of any defiance. They were brought to Fiji to extend Europe’s exploitative labour system for as long as possible, regardless of its inevitable failure.¹⁵

Esha:

Our female ancestors were supposed to serve as silent, sexual objects who foster good family values and keep the labourers occupied while facing violence on the sugar cane plantations. Plantation overseers were proud to be known as a randi-wallahs, translating to someone who is in charge of prostitutes¹⁶. And let’s not forget that Indo-Fijian men would use the

same cutlass that they used in the gaana farms to hack Girmit women into pieces.¹⁷ The extent of violence that happened in the sugarcane farms shows how our female ancestors' sexuality and bodies were controlled.

The severe beatings that people were subjected to on the sugarcane plantations, along with unsanitary living conditions, ultimately produced unstable and torturous environments. Systemic failures and widespread abuse within the indenture system itself, weak labour laws that obviously benefited the colonisers and the continued dismantling of community and family networks were some of the many reasons why so much violence was taking place during Girmit. Who pays the price for this racist and capitalistic system of labour exploitation? When asked such questions, the narrative spins stories of how we come from loose women: women who lie; women who sleep with multiple men and women who disrupt the labouring force. The women were/are seen as the problem. And only physical violence, sexual assault and diminishing their humanity was/is seen as going to keep them in their place.

Quishile:

Oral accounts that survive our Girmitiya ancestors talk of the whippings, beatings, continuous labour and sexual assault, and sahibs who did not see our humanity but rather looked at us like live cattle, animals in the poultry yard,¹⁸ things to toil their fields. Amongst the chaos of violence and abuse, Girmitiya women fought for their survival; unconscious and conscious acts of resistance were a daily act while living under indenture.

Esha:

The shame of what it meant to be a coolie woman was reinforced through continuous colonial and patriarchal policing of bodies. To the coloniser's horror, both the male and female Girmitiya were uncontrollable and their sexualities an "unnatural crime."¹⁹ It was a failure for the colonial officials as female Girmitiya, who were supposed to create heterosexual couplings and counter the queerness²⁰ of male Girmitiya, took control over their bodies and sexuality. Girmitiyas were engaging in sexual relationships outside of the European cis-hetereopatriarchy and the British officials, whose morals endorsed a repressed sexuality at all costs, could not tolerate it.

Quishile:

Of the 68,480 Indians brought to Fiji only 13,696 were female,²¹ yet their massive contribution toward ending the indentured labour system has not been historically acknowledged. The women who took it upon themselves to fight back stood in stark contrast to what men demanded of our female ancestors and tried to confine them to. The militant and violent tactics used by female Girmit fed into pre-existing European disgust for the other and

fuelled their racial coding of Indians in Fiji as animalistic, uncultured and uncivilised.²² With civility treated as one of the bench-marks of whiteness and with female Girmitiya seeming to lack any sense of it—or rather any interest in abiding to colonial logic and law—they had to be punished.



fig 4

Why Caste Matters in Colonial Violence

Indentured labour or Giritmit relied on control in many forms, one being the relocation and isolation of labourers to cultivation hubs. Fiji was one of the central locations for sugar exports to Australia, Europe, New Zealand and the United States of America. Plantations would compete to see who could get, “the maximum amount of work done for minimum amount of pay.”²³ This colonial logic of exploitative labour gave Fiji its reputation for the highest brutality in the sugarcane fields across the colonies.²⁴ Before we move into the resistance movements of the 1920 strike, we must confront why our Giritmit ancestors, especially coolie women, have continuously been looked down upon throughout history.



fig 5

Esha:

“You from India or Fiji?” This question serves as an entry to assess our caste background, class location and essentially the “type of violent communities” we come from. Our experiences as descendants of indentured labourers from Fiji also mean that we have plenty of stories in which we have been harmed by upper-caste people and communities from the Indian subcontinent. It’s no shock that many pandits in Hindu temples in Fiji today are imports from India. But why? Because Brahmin pandits from India are at the head of the hierarchy in terms of caste, knowledge and valorised Hinduism, and ethno-nationalistic politics. Brahmin pandits serve as mascots for Hindu nationalism and Hindutva violence, while we, as descendants of Giritmit, are low-class and low-caste people. We come

from bad people, uncultured people. However, the perception of Girit descendants as being from only low-caste communities and criminals is not accurate. The indentured labourers of Fiji were from various caste backgrounds. As colonisation in India affected the sub-continent as a whole, the movement and displacement of our bodies included people from various caste locations, as well as regions; therefore that ownership over our identities is also a part of the violence we face.

Caste demographics in indentured labour varied from colony to colony. In Fiji, our movement from South Asia included a majority of folks from the middle-caste to lower-caste communities, with smaller groups from non-Brahmin upper-castes, Dalit castes and Adivasi communities. It is also important to note that inter-caste marriages took place between Giritiyas and many folks took on different caste identities through different periods of indentured labour. The caste politics across South Asia do not always function in the same exact ways in Fiji, but rather have been molded to fit into Fiji's historical and cultural landscape.²⁵ Both colonial officials and upper-caste Indians viewed us as inherently violent people—and still do. These colonial and Brahmanical ideas also influenced the significant physical and sexual violence that female Giritiya faced during indentureship. Our ancestors—especially the women—were seen as low-caste women, bad women with loose morals. If you're not from a good family, with good values, why should you matter? Why should your body matter? Why should your labour matter? So the logic went. Giritiya women became viewed as dispensable; their bodies would face the repercussions of a failing labour system.

It's complicated and it's complex, but casteism does live in our communities today and is an important component to analyse when discussing our histories around indentured labour.²⁶ Girit descendants like to proudly claim that when labourers came over to Fiji they had to share space, eat together and sleep next to each other on the ships. This is a very common story, but caste doesn't disappear so easily. In order to understand, we must look at how caste stems from the Brahminisation of the subcontinent and how that is carried across its diasporas. Casteism is found across many communities and religions that are practiced in the subcontinent and among descendants in Fiji. For the sake of this essay, we will look at how Hinduism specifically stems from Brahmin ideas and values because we cannot deny how Hindu nationalism has played a significant role in the increasing Islamophobia we see among Indo-Fijians.

To examine the way in which caste-based discrimination and violence still functions in our communities across Fiji, think about what you consider pure and clean and what you consider polluted and dirty. Also, think about khanna²⁷ and what you should eat and what you shouldn't. You have to question why vegetarianism is linked to orthodox Hinduism and expected among Indo-Fijian pandits and respectable families; why is it atrocious if someone eats beef and pork? Let me assure you that some of our

families do eat beef and pork; are we less “Hindu” or less “Indian”?²⁸ Also, let’s not forget how light is equated with good and darkness with evil, and why the triumph of good over evil is a common theme across Hinduism. Goodness is revered in the lighter-skinned, mainstream Hindu gods while evil is represented by gods and goddesses who have existed long before Vedic Hinduism. Mainstream Hinduism exists to monopolise and homogenise extremely diverse spiritual and religious practices, while co-opting indigenous roots that exist both in the subcontinent and among Indo-Fijians today. And Hindu nationalism won’t let us go so easily. Hindutva teaches us that Brahminised beliefs and values are morally and spiritually superior types of Hinduism and that they are here to save us Girmitiyas. This is part of the colonial violence that our Girmit ancestors faced and what we are experiencing today as descendants. Our history has always been in the process of being cleaned up.



fig 6

We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies



Quishile:

To revisit an event such as the 1920 labour strike—a resistance narrative well documented in academia—is done not to follow previous white and male-centred views but rather to unravel the damage that has already been caused. It is an extra form of labour that we as Indo-Fijian women must engage in to shift in whose hands the control of the written record lies. A question that has haunted us since coming to the archives and when looking at these writings is, where are the Girit female narratives? We have spent hours apart and together going over this, searching for life in decaying files, following the crumbs of existence that our colonisers left us of our female ancestors. The limited availability of this narrative becomes an act of contemporary colonisation as it produces a notion that we, as descendants of Girit, are doomed to passivity; we do not need to be assigned value or worth as we let colonialism happen to us; and that we are a silent mass. What is missing from mainstream history is the fight of our ancestors that shows that we, at our core, are entwined with resistance and

We come from resilient people. A huge part of this friendship and writing collaboration is our sharing of stories about the women in our families. We share stories about the violence we see and experience in our families and communities. We share stories of elders, of young people and how tough and militant our ancestors were. To have survived up to this point in time, we must come from resilient people. It is a huge injustice that so little is known, and remembered, about political resistance movements throughout Giriti. But the stories are there. As we examine the 1920 strike, we find it impossible and unconscionable to ignore how female Giritiyas resisted in different ways against many colonisations and patriarchies. The way female Giritiyas have been historically underestimated and violently silenced is why we are so infuriated. It may seem impossible, but our ancestors historically, socially and economically survived. So then why is it so easy to ignore this entire section of labourers?

“Europeans thought that the Indians were able, in some remarkable eastern way, to live comfortably on a pittance and even to become wealthy, as evidenced by the gold and silver jewelry worn by their women.”²⁹

This racist depiction sounds like a joke, but was actually a legitimate perception colonisers had of coolie people, and coolie women in particular. They were chalaak,³⁰ and colonisers had to keep an eye out for them. Indentured labour was legally abolished in January of 1920, but we know it never really ended; capitalism continues and the labour exploitation of black and brown bodies will always continue. Oppressive systems and Empire-building is constantly re-shaped and colonial capital is moved and shared between political powers. The ending of indentured labour contracts in 1920 provided an opportunity for Giritiyas to face the least backlash from the evil dictator that was the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) and the colonial government of Fiji.³¹

Giritiyas faced colonisation from many powers, but we will begin with how CSR—alongside the colonial government—served as the central culprits to sink their teeth into the lives of the labourers. CSR knew that “sugar plantations in the tropics [couldn’t] be worked without coloured labour.”³²

In Australia the company paid indentured Pacific Islanders, or South Sea Islanders,³³ significantly lower wages than white workers, and in New Zealand they refused to hire women workers in the mills.³⁴ Even today, descendants of indentured labourers remember the horror stories of how brutally CSR bosses treated the Giritiya workers in the sugar mills.

In Fiji, prior to the strikes, the cost of living was fixed through the five-year contract—Giriti—with no increase, though the price of living continuously increased. Another issue under the indenture system was kanna. Rice was

first exported from India to Australia and then it would reach Fiji. Food shortages in Fiji were linked to shipping strikes in Australia and the failure of the rice crop throughout India, followed by a ban on rice exports.³⁵ The Girmitiyas knew that the British officials weren't suffering from this wider economic crisis—they were the protected class in Fiji.

The colonisers believed that the Girmitiyas would somehow figure out creative ways to survive because ~no way~ would Empire increase workers' wages; such an act would "make it impossible to carry on the industries of the Colony."³⁶ The violence is never-ending. The economic concerns of Fiji Indians were ~nonexistent~ in the eyes of the colonial government and CSR.

CSR's violence directly impacted the mill workers, as well as sugarcane farmers who were tragically affected by the "high store prices, heavy debts, and low returns from the cultivation of cane and other crops like bananas."³⁷

And it was no secret that European shopkeepers charged Fiji Indians and iTaukei (Indigenous Fijians) higher prices for the same commodities.³⁸ How would it be possible for us to survive if we did not get enough to satisfy our bellies?



fig 7

Scholarship and the Male Gatekeepers

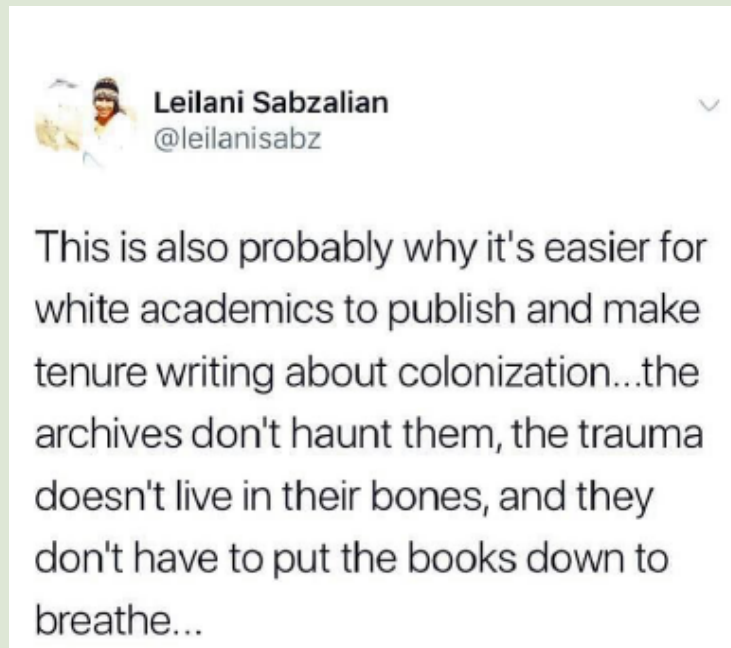


fig 8

Esha:

Girmitiya women organised and led the first strike in Suva two weeks after indenture was abolished. Why was it important for them to strike? Because they had been historically excluded from the political sphere, pushed into the private sphere of domesticity and heterosexuality, and denied educational and paid work opportunities.³⁹

Quishile:

The issue when we come to indenture scholarship is the overbearing white academic voices that echo white saviour narratives of colonial missionaries C.F. Andrews and Florence Garnham. Both these academics and missionaries share an anti-indenture stance but simultaneously amplify other colonial ideologies that maintain colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy for Indo-Fijians. The next biggest issue and quite possibly the elephant in the room is the enormous body of literature written by Indo-Fijian men⁴⁰ that centres their sorrow, pain and torment under indenture as the only valid experience. When our female ancestors become present in these male-centred narratives, the stories that are chosen are of the victimisation and

supposed passivity of female Girmitiya.

For example, Kunti's story of escaping sexual assault, which took place in 1913 in Nadewa, Rewa, highlights how certain indenture narratives were/are told and who for.⁴¹ On the day of the assault, the story goes, Kunti was sent to do weeding in a banana patch as punishment for her "troublesome" behaviour. She was in enforced isolation doing her set tasks when overseer Cobcroft came to inspect her work and made inappropriate advances. Kunti struggled with Cobcroft and freed herself, then ran towards the Wainibokasi River and threw herself into the water.

Kunti's story was common enough within the plantation environment of Fiji, so much so that European observers believed these occurrences were falsified, with Kunti's inherently immoral character standing as evidence of her lies.⁴² The colonial government of Fiji was willing to let this case disappear, as in so many other cases of overseers assaulting Girmitiya women. But the Indian colonial government saw this case as a ripe opportunity to use the female Girmitiya struggle to strengthen their independence movement. Kunti's story of bravery to save her prized chastity went into mass circulation; the people of India became outraged that Girmitiya women were fighting daily to hold onto their womanhood, their purity. Even though each colonial governments'—Fiji's and India's—reactions to Kunti's case stand in stark contrast to each other, in both cases these governments cared little for the actual lives of Girmitiya women; rather, they were interested in how these narratives could serve them.

What is deeply upsetting about Kunti's story is that it was chosen precisely for how she maintained upper-caste Indian values of womanhood; the action of throwing herself into the water, choosing death over degradation, confirmed Kunti's "bravery, patience and strength of mind."⁴³ The reactions in India to Kunti's story implied that for other Girmitiya women who had lost their chastity, their lives had essentially stopped; they were incurable. Because Kunti is chaste, she can have a life after indenture.

Esha:

This narrative of Kunti now stands to satisfy both upper-caste Indian feminism⁴⁴ and that of Indo-Fijian male academics. Kunti is still redeemable, unlike the rest of our stories. Kunti is seen as how Indo-Fijian women should be, our humanity defined by our chastity. She is the ideal woman because her purity, which was more valuable than her life, was saved. The way Kunti's story is celebrated and idolised by upper-caste Indians and Indo-Fijian men plays into how patriarchy is shaped by caste-based violence. Kunti's story is easily comparable to that of Hindu goddess Sita, where Ram brings her back after his exile only to put her through a loyalty test by fire to prove her purity wasn't tainted.⁴⁵

Quishile:

Where, then, does this leave other Girmitiya women within the indenture narrative? Kunti was historically moulded into the picturesque hero of Indian womanhood in Fiji, leaving no room for narratives of those who fought back themselves and those who did not escape but nevertheless survived similar assaults.

Prior to any intervention by the Indian colonial government and ~white saviours~, Girmitiya women had been leading attacks against European overseers who had been physically, sexually or economically abusing female workers. Girmitiya women formed their resistance tactics around the plantation system of ganging, in which Girmitiya were separated into gendered groups and divided into labouring units. They would become known as the Women's Gang.⁴⁶ In one oral account a female worker details how she was saved from sexual assault:

Before I realized what it was, a huge figure pealed at me and grabbed me. I screamed, he reached for my mouth, I bit his hand, he uttered "Bastard", I screamed again and smacked him on the face... We struggled only for some minutes before I realized that a part of my skirt was torn off. But by then a number of women had arrived. We all beat the kulambar properly – tore parts of his trousers and then let him go.... When the men heard this, they swore about the kulambar and made arrangements to kill him. However ... they decided to inform the bara kulambar (big sahib). The report was not accepted as trivial news. It compelled the big sahib to transfer the aggressor.⁴⁷

This case in particular highlights the necessary actions of the Women's Gang but it also shows the lack of justice by plantation owners—moving an overseer with a documented history of assault to another plantation is not dealing with the core issue but rather sweeping it under the ~giant colonial~ rug.

Esha:

It is no coincidence then that the Women's Gang, in contrast to Kunti's story, is described as the "lowest class [that] organized to intimidate workers with obscene language and filthy practices."⁴⁸ Militant resistance is vilified in both a classist and casteist context, especially when female Girmit resistance is centred.

Quishile:

If not framed as passive or the victim, Girmitiya women might be otherwise forced into a narrative of women who used their small numbers to their

advantage by wielding some “magical sexual power” over the helpless male labourers.⁴⁹ The writings surrounding the 1920 labour strike (Ali 1980, K.L. Gillion 1972, Fiji Times 1920, etc.) is no different to these polarising narratives of archetypal womanhood.⁵⁰ So why then does it become hard to acknowledge or recognise female Girit resistance? To admit that women at such small numbers defied and were relentless in destroying the systems that oppressed them would shatter the illusion that colonial sugar had complete dominance.

Resistance and its various forms for Girmity women



fig 9

Quishile:

In conjunction with the militant and violent tactics of resistance the female Girmitya also used covert methods of resisting. These resistance tactics are not seen as significant to the landscape of rebellion and therefore are positioned as only reflecting the working conditions of indentured labour.⁵¹ However, as the economic model of indenture was about securing and exploiting productivity at all costs, to stand in opposition to this capitalist labouring structure can be viewed as an unconscious act of resistance.

Indentured labour operated around set task work wherein a labourer is given x amount of tasks to finish in one day. These tasks were set by plantation owners who wanted the maximum economic output, regardless of working conditions, and plantations sought a “relentless pace of work” with “harsh discipline for even trivial breaches of the labour contract.”⁵² To maintain economic productivity, labour offences were introduced to push labourers

by law to their absolute limits, defying all human capabilities to ensure mass production. As over-tasking became a very real form of abuse, non-completion of work developed into a major issue for plantations. In the Rewa area (Central Division) in 1885, of the set tasks given to labourers, men could only complete 78.4% and women 62%.⁵³

Under the labour offences, female Girmitiya were predominantly charged with unlawful absence and refusing or neglecting to complete a task.⁵⁴ Absenting (not showing up to work) was the most common charge and made up almost half of all the charges brought forward by plantations against their female labourers.⁵⁵ As Fijian historian Brij Lal has pointed out, sickness, physical exhaustion, hospitalisation, bad weather, pregnancy, child care or child sickness and domestic work were all major factors to female labourers absenting.⁵⁶ Whether consciously or not, Girmitiya women countered the demands capitalism placed on their bodies through committing labour offences. It is important to understand these offences within the context of the plantation environment, but we cannot deny nor should we overlook how these acts physically disrupted and minimised labour and economic production for Empire.

The Immigration Department officials saw these acts of defiance towards labour laws as resulting in women choosing easier options, such as sex work over the “irksome pursuit of manual labour.”⁵⁷ These officials and plantation owners also took offence to cases where women utilised the position of men and sought their support in completing task work. Officials had become fed up with how far Girmitiya women went to undermine the complete domination of indenture. When women demanded that they be paid for their invisible but equally important labour—sex work—it became a colonial scandal, as Missionaries C.F. Andrews and Walter Pearson observed:

*Women left their husbands for the sake of jewellery and went to live with other men. They seemed to do just what they pleased, and to live just as they liked.*⁵⁸

The designation of labour offences were designed to benefit plantations first and foremost by expanding the plantation’s control to every aspect of the labourers’ lives, and for the most-part it did immensely benefit those in power. But this supposedly perfect system of labour did not account for the sheer amount of resistance that arose amongst female labourers. Not showing up, completing tasks at a drastically slower pace than what was required or outright refusing to work was direct action that took money away from the companies and colonial nations invested in the indentured labour system. Female Girmitiya and the various forms of unpaid labour that made the system of indenture function was threatened by women refusing to abide by their plantations’ demand of free sexual labour. When they sought payment for their labour through jewelry or money they

asserted their sexual autonomy. What was seen by colonial officials and plantations as uselessness or laziness displayed by female labourers was—in reality—survival.

The positioning of these acts of survival by academic Robert Nicole as “women’s petty acts of resistance,”⁵⁹ or the fact that Brij Lal does not see these reactions to labouring conditions as resistance, highlights how the smallest acts of female resistance—conscious or unconscious—continue to be undermined. The dominance of ideologies of passivity as a trait of female Girmitiya clearly indicates the damage that has been done by allowing a non-colonised and/or cis-gendered man of colour to try to write and make sense of the lives of female Girmitiya—a “double colonised”⁶⁰ body—and what they perpetually had to go through to survive. These agitations, moments of rebellion and resistance may be small acts but over time they accumulated and had some of the biggest effects in the fight against indentured labour.

*The labourers were further immobilized by the fact that the estates they worked on were widely scattered across the two main islands of Fiji, frequently separated from each other by rugged mountainous terrain, rivers, and generally poor communication. Thus, a very large number of indentured labourers in different parts of the island spent their entire indenture insulated from each other, without the opportunity to develop and coordinate strategies for collective action.*⁶¹

The 1920 strike becomes pivotal in building resistance narratives that position female Girmitiya as strong and courageous, and their fight against indenture as done for the community. As much as some academics would have you believe, female Girmitiya were in fact “coordinate[ing] strategies for collective action.”⁶² This is evident throughout the archives if we recontextualise what is seen as “rule-breaking behaviour”⁶³ to that of necessary action in the struggle to survive. Female Girmitiya were drastically slowing down labour production and causing the European settler population to become manic; or rather, these acts of resistance embroiled white male hysteria. Because the tactics used by female Girmitiya were seen as “uninhibited instincts of animals,”⁶⁴ their bodily rage and direct action for justice fuelled racial disgust and proved our distance from “white sensibilities.” For instance, Walter Gill, an overseer who was an employer and enforcer of brutality during the indenture era, penned memoirs of his experiences, which he saw as worthy of account.⁶⁵ The book itself finds Gill swooning over his own and other European overseers’ sexual exploits with coolie women, without him acknowledging these engagements—resulting from his and others’ obsession with the “oriental”—came about because of specific power dynamics that existed under indenture. Gill recounts how a Rarawai overseer was caught off-guard by 30 or more women and held to the ground while women took turns urinating on him. This was a physical act of justice against a man who stood not only as a symbol of colonial and patriarchal violence but who was a very real threat towards Girmitiya

women. Humiliated, this overseer gave his resignation and left Fiji to return to Australia.⁶⁶



fig 10

Later on in the text, Gill, who is overseeing weeding and field work in Lautoka (the Western division) goes on to explain that his “poor gormless bitches” one day in the fields had decided that he should meet the same fate as the overseer who fled Fiji in shame. “It had become a fast-enfolding circle of female fanatics aflame with purpose... I was to be given the father of a hiding, and as shown only too plainly by the lowered skirts—coolie women wore no undergarments—I was to be subjected to the disgustingly feminine rite responsible for the Rarawai overseer’s resignation.”⁶⁷ Unfortunately, Gill escaped “those swaying skirts concealing the unspeakable.”⁶⁸ In an oral account from Marda Naicker, a Giritiya, he states that Giriti women at a Labasa plantation (Northern division), formed a line and walked continuously over an overseer until he shat himself.⁶⁹ Another Giritiya, Hussein, gave an oral account similar to the incident in Labasa but this time a group of women took their hoes and forced an overseer to fall into a sewer pit where they then started throwing shit on him.⁷⁰

What stands out about these accounts is that they sit outside of the official record: the archives. Why is it that these oral histories are deemed unworthy of being a part of mainstream history? How is it that an essential piece of female Giriti resistance has become forgotten? When we address how history is written and documented we cannot forget whom it serves and that the archives are the record of power—it is written by and for our colonisers. These very physical actions of degradation become a historical marker of insult to a colonial force that was patriarchal in nature. When we consider the position of Giriti women during indenture we must remember that they were considered to be at the lowest part of society in Colonial Fiji, and were not afforded the status of being even human. This identity in comparison to that of the colonisers who were predominantly male and seen as superior, the peak of civilisation, the heart of holy Christian morality. To have not only one but a gang of women—the Women’s Gang—target overseers, using force to piss on them, make them shit themselves or throw shit at them, was a complete disruption of colonial order. It became an insult to white Christian morals of cleanliness and responded to the very real interpretation of disgust and revulsion of the other.

These acts of resistance clearly show the level of sophistication that Giriti women had in recognising how to shift colonial ideologies that fuelled racial fear of the other and weaponise these dynamics as a protest for safety. What is even more important to note is how these tactics—bodily fluids and excrement—did not follow or abide to the traditional Western frameworks of violence. Colonial violence in Fiji operated around severity through state-led laws and ordinances, penalty sanctions, racial, economic and sexual abuse, and female Giriti resistance sat in parallel, negating the intersecting systems that colonised them and utilising the abject disgust that their colonisers had cast their bodies into.



fig 11

Hindu Nationalists Won't Save the Girmitiyas



Esha:

One insidious trick of colonialism is to convince us that one of our own cannot betray us. To the colonial mind, we were/and are all the same. A disturbing element of the 1920 strike was Europe's colonial agenda and India's Brahmanical supremacy, both of which inflicted violence on the Girmitiyas. If Girmitiyas are not respectable people, or respectable Indians, how can they have the political agency to mobilise and fight back? This is where British colonialism, Brahmanism and Indo-Fijian patriarchy intersect.

It's easy to label Girmitiya women as "frenzied, kava-drinking, veiled" and violent people who attacked British officials on February 11,⁷¹ but we will no longer allow Indo-Fijian men, European colonisers, and privileged caste Indians from India to vilify us and our resistance tactics. In 1911, a group of Indo-Fijian men, which included J.P. Maharaj (a Suva storekeeper), Totaram Sanadhya (a pandit from Rewa), Babu Ram Singh (a Suva printer) and Ram Rup, formed the British Indian Association of Fiji, which reached out to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to send a lawyer to help

the Indians in Fiji.⁷² Gandhi was, at the same time, in South Africa leading his own feminist⁷³ *~trusty male ally [roll eyes]~* movement as a part of getting women involved in his Satyagraha Campaign.⁷⁴ A key woman that joined him in organising was Jayakunvar Manilal, who was married to a Indian lawyer, Manilal Maganlal. Infamously referred to as the Manilals, they were upper-caste Gujratis from India, who aligned well with Gandhi's skewed morality and politics. They were all complicit in introducing and promoting Hindu nationalism across different colonies, as well as forcefully deepening Hindutva politics and values among the Girmitiyas in Fiji. To be clear, Gandhi's feminism, activism and colonial resistance tactics weren't going to save us. Gandhi was and still is a violent, racist and predatory figure in history.⁷⁵ His agenda, disguised as colonial resistance, was to only strengthen and glorify Hindu nationalist ideas around freedom, which benefited other caste and class-privileged Indians like himself. He had no understanding of what it meant to be a labourer of Girmit. And neither did the Manilals. Mr Manilal was an opportunistic upper-caste Indian lawyer that wasn't doing well for himself in Mauritius so he ran away to Fiji to see what else he could capitalise on *~was the grass greener on the other side?~*. Jayakunvar was the complementary agent to lead, and appeal to, Girmitiya women. The 1920 strike was the perfect moment for the Manilals to take over the resistance movements of Girmitiyas in Fiji, and sadly that's how history forces us to remember this moment. Being saved by upper-caste Indians was ideal because they knew how to respectively fight the colonisers. They were educated enough, knew how to speak and write in English⁷⁶ and were connected to other elite Indian "activists."

They were the respectable Indians that should have been negotiating with the British officials, not the actual labouring class who were "violently" seeking relief from the food shortages, low-wages and constant physical violence and public policing by colonial officials.

Time and time again our bodies, labour and even our resistance tactics are punished. We won't erase the anti-colonial movements of our female ancestors and that's why we also push back on upper-caste Indian feminism—because, again, we are not the same. Jayakunvar is glorified as the feminist face of the strikes but she was never physically present at the riots. Her Gandhian values didn't support militant resistance and her positioning as an upper-caste, English-educated and married Indian woman were a stark contrast to that of a coolie woman. It was our Girmitiya ancestors who fought back against colonial officials with sticks while chanting "hit, beat, kill."⁷⁷

Quishile:

When academics tell of Jayakunvar and place all their attention and effort into writing her onto a historical pedestal, they flatten and homogenise the experience of what they see as "third-world women."⁷⁸ Even though

both Girmit women and Jayakunvar come from India, they have different class and caste backgrounds that dictate access and mobility. We should not write someone into history as an act of eternal gratitude for doing the basic human thing. It is a great injustice to Indo-Fijian women to have our histories stolen from us and placed on the backs of upper-caste women—an act that is also an attempt to reform us to Brahmanical standards of womanhood. We are not offered our coolie histories as they are too impure, contributing to ethnocentric universalisms such as Hindu nationalism. This is part of the neo-colonialism or third-wave of colonialism that our community is fighting now.

Esha:

Instead we are here to name and learn about our Girmit ancestors who were instrumental in leading the 1920's strike. We name Fulquhar, Rahiman, Rachael, Sonia, Mungri, Kalan, Ladu, Majullah, Hansraj, Dreemal, Hanki, Dwarka, Junkaom and Etwari.⁷⁹

The Manilals needed us more than we needed them. During a women's meeting in Muanivatu, on 23 January, Mrs Manilal explicitly requested the Girmitiya women to stand by her and her husband if at any point the colonial government retaliated against the couple.⁸⁰ Mr Manilal had angered the colonial government and the European society in Fiji when he utilised his position as head of the Indian Imperial Association⁸¹ to inform the Indian government how the Girmitiyas were miserable, being persecuted for occupying native Fijian land, and had the highest mortality rate at the time due to the influenza epidemic.⁸² In reality, Mr Manilal was upset at the fact that he himself was rejected from opening his own private practice office in Nausori on Fijian land. As an educated, upper-caste Indian lawyer he knew his voice was louder than the Girmitiyas' and he could abuse his power. Mr Manilal didn't want to be a part of the strikes to support the labourers, but rather he used the Girmitiyas plight to secure his miserable status across the colonies.

It's quite disturbing to think that Mr Manilal and Jayakunvar were credited as leading the strikes and reputed as the voice for the Girmitiyas political future, all while Mr Manilal himself employed two indentured labourers in Fiji.⁸³ That is horrifying. The Manilals were instrumental in stealing any agency Girmitiyas themselves had demonstrated against colonisation. They wanted to reap all the benefits of having a comfortable and respected position in Fiji, and it is extremely violent to revere them as our saviors, because they weren't like us. The Manilals' social, economic and caste privileges were not representative of our histories, struggles and resistance. We were not the same. And even today, we are not the same.



fig 12

The 1920 Labour Strike: The Female Horror



fig 13

Quishile:

When we consider this history of female-led resistance in the context of the labour strike of 1920, it is clear that it was inevitable. As a community, Girmitiyas were entering a post-indenture era—an important opportunity to gain a sense of security within a country that resented the disobedience and defiance of Girmitiyas, especially female coolies. Now that indenture contracts—Girimits—were abolished, what did this soon-to-be new future look like?

Anxieties were rising in the Suva-Rewa (Central Division) area of Viti Levu for the Indian community and, on 15 January 1920, Indian Labourers at the Public Works Department in Suva started striking. This was followed by Suva Municipal Council employees four days later and on 21 January the strike reached the Rewa area, where labourers at the CSR stopped work. Finally the strike reached new heights when 2–3,000 labourers at the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company in Navua stopped showing up for work.⁸⁴

This strike is one of the largest demonstrations of resistance during the indenture era, yet when we look to the archives the acknowledgement of female Girmitiyas as leaders of this strike is a rare sight. The methods of resistance used by female Girmitiya were both covert and overt, covering various tactics of countering the colonial government while ensuring the safety of the community. One of the most important documents and resistance tactics used during the strike was Sushila's letter.

Written on 16 January 1920, Sushila's letter represents the collective voice of the Indian Women's Imperial Association of Fiji. Sushila highlights that "We as the women who have to keep the home going find it impossible to make both end[s] meet. And we most respectfully submit that the time is fully ripe now for legislation to come to our assistance and fix a minimum living wage (we say five shillings) and enable us to live a decent life."⁸⁵ The letter was given to the colonial secretary's office the day after the first strike and highlights the capability of female Girmitiya to articulate their concerns for their future; it set off more petitions and letters to the government led by "free Indian" men who believed themselves to be the rightful owners of the Indian community's presence in the public political sphere of Fiji. Sushila's letter is also evidence of how female Girmitiya were first to care and seek action for the injustices committed against the Girmitiya community.

1920 does mark the abolishment of indenture, but CSR had already been gradually moving away from the plantation system to a land-leasing system that curbed the abuses found in the original indenture system; as with the previous move from slavery to indentured labour, this was re-branding at its finest. Both CSR and the Fiji colonial government believed that they could maintain a high level of production through introducing a new labouring system that relied on the European and Hindutva nuclear family structures wherein a married Indian man could lease land to grow his own sugarcane and sell it to CSR sugar mills that would distribute it to the global market.⁸⁶ This new system cut out the troublesome workforce (women) by forcing them to seek out marriage for security, as Girit women could not lease land as individuals. This updated version of bonded labour was done in large-part to pacify female Girit and finally get them to conform as the silent mass of free labour they were always intended to be. Sushila's letter within the wider context of labour reform in Fiji becomes a very important historical document as it shows that Girit women were aware of this shift into the domestic sphere and were looking to counter it through ensuring that if men were the only paid workers, there would be a set wage for their household.

[They] shamed the men again and again into holding out for higher wages and not betraying the cause. They organised themselves into "Strike Committees" and would not let their men surrender... They used the moral force of openly and publicly disgracing the men, in their own eyes, if they dared to play the coward where women were so brave.⁸⁷

After Sushila's letter the biggest riot of the 1920 labour strike was recorded on 11 February. In Toorak, Rahiman—"a woman with a bad reputation"⁸⁸—approached Constable Reay, who was patrolling in the area, and asked what was in his pocket or sleeve. Reay told Rahiman that he had a baton. Rahiman started to swear in English at the Constable. When Rahiman was told to move she replied, "I'll stay where I like."⁸⁹ Constable Reay tried to manhandle Rahiman to arrest her. The two fought but Reay was losing, and to a coolie woman at that. Other Girmitiyas women joined Rahiman, armed with sticks,⁹⁰ and started to beat the Constable and his other officers. The Girmitiya women fighting were then joined by 200 Indian men armed with sticks and rocks. Constable Reay was joined by his own reinforcements but still the police were losing. As one of the policemen present that day stated in a court testimony, "The batons were useless things, too short and too light to parry the 3 or 4 feet sticks of the Indians."⁹¹ Special constables and the military arrived, and a "machine gun was placed on the hill and a cordon was drawn round the houses."⁹² At the sight of mass reinforcement and the threat of death (machine gun), the Girmitiyas fighting retreated to surrounding houses to ensure the safety of their own lives. With the growing paranoia from the European population in Fiji, who knew how far they would have gone to secure their money and picturesque colonial lifestyle.

After the fight that broke out in Toorak, the Fiji Times recounted how women "were the cause." The colonial language in these articles that were published for the month of February display a clear European disgust at the resistance tactics used by female Girmitiya, in an article titled "THE INDIAN QUESTION: THE FEMALE HORROR," a reporter states:

*Something must be done to put a stop to the Indian women suborners. Theirs is not a case of mere intimidation. They use cruel filthy and hideous methods. They are not women, they are ghouls, who ought to be gaoled [jailed] at once. They are too awful to be at large. Last night they hunted in packs, chasing "boys" into their very homes. If any of them get seriously injured, no one could reasonably be blamed. This thirteenth century sort of business must be stopped. Can the police or the military not devise some way of stopping it? If it were not for these fiends who have lost all sense of sex, there would be hundreds of men at work.*⁹³

The Fiji Government, after the fight, proceeded to arrest 175 men and 14 women.⁹⁴ They stood trial and the court proceedings were published in the Fiji Times and Herald. The witnesses that The Crown called upon gave conflicting testimony, Constable Reay himself couldn't seem to decide why he first approached Rahiman. In one of Reay's testimonies he says he saw a meeting of 70 to 100 women gathering to discuss forcefully stopping Indian men from going to work.⁹⁵ One witness said that "the object of the meeting was that if any man wanted to go to work, he was to be caught and filthy water poured down his mouth."⁹⁶ Locals of the neighbourhood (other Girmitiya) stated that they saw coolie women drinking yaqona (kava) and they were beating a drum.⁹⁷ To me this reads as a grog circle—that Girmitiyas were gathering to drink and sing, that there was no militant attack

planned. The “dirty water” that is referenced in testimony seems to be yaqona as well and it would not surprise me that the colonial government completely misread the situation. The Crown framed the yaqona—an herbal relaxant—as inducing the aggression and violence that was seen by the women that day. However, it is impossible for yaqona to invoke the type of aggression the colonial government was suggesting.

As state-induced paranoia amongst the European population grew throughout the Suva-Rewa area, it seems that Rahiman’s fight with Reay was used as ammunition for a well-armed nation to retaliate against a community that refused to do their labour. When reading the testimony given, especially by other Girmitya, it is clear that things escalated when Girmityas lives were put in danger. Two oral accounts in particular highlight that Gimit women were in fact fighting back for their own safety: “Many of the women were seen armed with table and sheath knives and bottles.”⁹⁸ Another account stated that women were asking for others to “bring axes, bring knives.”⁹⁹ If we consider these accounts within the context of that time, it makes sense that if your life is being threatened by guns, military or police, that you would retaliate with whatever you could find at hand, whether that is sticks and stones, knives and bottles or axes.

These acts of resistance shocked the European community, who felt it necessary for violence to be inflicted upon Gimit women, as seen through the response a reader sent into the Fiji Times:

*Now as it is illegal to strike a woman why not get two or three men (good stock-men) to go around on horseback with a dog whip, which would be far more effective than a dozen special constables, with their paltry little batons, and perfectly legal.*¹⁰⁰

Gimit women understood colonial violence well; they had been forced to live within colonial confines of domination and control long before the first ship—Leonidas—arrived on the shores of Fiji in 1879. As with all Girmitya female resistance documented or orally passed on, these acts of resistance and rebellion only existed due to colonialism and indentured labour. It should be of no surprise that 1920 marked a political stand made by Girmityas seeking justice for themselves and their right to citizenship in Fiji, a country where their blood and sweat built European economic prosperity.

Along with physical confrontation as a resistance tactic, Gimit women also sought solidarity with each other through shifting cultural practices into acts of defiance and rebellion. In one oral history an Indo-Fijian man, Barodi Buksh, recalled the actions of his mother and other Gimit women. On 11 February, the same day as Rahiman’s fight, a rumour had spread that officials had arrested Jayakunvar. Gimit women abandoned their field work and started to march towards Suva, a 12-mile walk. When they were stopped at a police barrier, the women raised their hands above their heads and smashed their glass bangles. This action is immensely significant as glass bangles¹⁰¹ are worn by married women and only broken when a husband

has passed away. To take a custom from Hinduism and use it against policemen would have been a unified fuck-you, or maybe a symbolic way of saying that they sought death upon those officers. This oral history was never recorded in the archives as to Europeans these actions would have meant very little. For me, a female descendent, they stand as a bold and courageous gesture.

Following the incident with Rahiman, the Governor of Fiji, C.H. Rodwell and the Legislative Council put through a new ordinance on 12 February to ensure “public safety during times of civil commotion.”¹⁰² This ordinance was racially targeted at the Girimitiyas community as the European settler population believed Girimitiyas were trying to overthrow their power. As one colonial official, Hon. Robert Crompton stated:

*I am convinced that, unless the matter is taken in hand and something is done so as to be able to relieve distress, in the event of it arising, the Indians will begin to take the law into their own hands. I think those who know the Indians best will advise you that, in the event of the position becoming strained, he [they] will adopt measures which will not be conducive to the peace of mind of the European community.*¹⁰³

What is ridiculous about this Ordinance is how it targeted the use of sticks and stones as weapons, and labelled gatherings or meetings in the Girimitiyas community as unlawful activities.¹⁰⁴ If Indians were found in breach of the ordinance they could be arrested on sight. The retaliation and sheer force of the colonial government was astounding; when reading these accounts it seems as if the European population in Fiji were taking to arms and preparing for war. By the time the fight broke out in Toorak, the colonial government had almost enlisted the majority of the Europeans that were of military age.¹⁰⁵ An auxiliary force was put on patrol to monitor any movements by Indians on the roads of the Rewa-Nasouri area, also watching bridges to ensure that Indians would not mobilise and march to Suva.¹⁰⁶ Governor Rodwell sought support from Australia and New Zealand and by 12 February 60 New Zealand troops with Lewis gun sections arrived and were placed at the Suva and Nausori police stations.¹⁰⁷ On 14 February the Australian government’s warship—the Marguerite—arrived. They were armed and ready to “overawe coloured population and reassure [the European] public.”¹⁰⁸

Fiji was placed on Marshall law for the year of 1920. What was the European population really afraid of? Some thousand workers striking? Or was it sticks and stones that could at any moment crush the brute force of guns, a military and a warship? Did they think that these sticks and stones could overthrow a whole nation? Maybe it was the fact that a Girimitiya woman and her Women’s Gang asserted their right to do just as they liked? Did Constable Reay take offence to Girimitiya women defending themselves against their oppressors?

Girimitiya women utilised past resistance tactics of abject disgust to retaliate

against a corrupt system of labour, but because these acts sat outside what the European population saw as civilised action they painted a story of ghouls who flew around at night, larger-than-life monster that were going to destroy European supremacy. The shortage of labour had already reduced the output for the major sugar companies and forced independent European planters to sell off or give up their plantations,¹⁰⁹ which shows how effective Girit women were in their strike action. Girit women used a simple but efficient method of intimidation: they requested their men to not go to work, when Indian men made up the majority of the labouring population. With the strikers threatening that they could hold out for two more months and that they had a force ready in case of an emergency,¹¹⁰ the European population would have been afraid to their very core. Even though the strike was short-lived, it was successful in causing such fear for the coloniser's precious economy.

616/20

THE INDIAN WOMEN'S IMPERIAL ASSOCIATION OF FIJI.

G.P.O. BOX 19,
Suva, Fiji
14th. January 1920

To
His Excellency
The Governor,
Suva.

Your Excellency,

On behalf of the Indian Women's Imperial Association of Fiji I have been asked to represent to your Excellency the fact that foodstuffs, ~~xxx~~ Clothing and other necessaries have in many cases trebled in price whilst the wages that ourmen are accustomed to get have remained stationery.

We as women who have to keep the home going find it impossible to make both ends meet. And we most respectfully submit that the time is fully ripe now for legislation to come to our assistance and fix a minimum living wage (we say five shillings) and enable us to live a decent life.

I beg to remain
Your Excellency
Yours most obediently,

Sushila
secretary.

fig 14

Conclusion: Jahajee sisters, friendship and pyaar



fig 15

Quishile:

This collaboration of researching and writing shared between Esha and myself comes about as a necessary and contemporary act of resistance and defiance that upholds the legacies of female Girmit resilience. It is an act of building strength and producing counter-narratives to the understanding that we only have stories of displacement, rejection and violence.

Just as our ancestors during the 1920 strike told officials that “we do not have enough to satisfy our bellies” we as female descendents standing here today find ourselves unsatisfied; we are not satisfied with the narratives that have prevailed of us: of how Indo-Fijian women are not chaste enough, clean enough, capable enough, smart enough or pure enough. These narratives continue to live and breathe, to be felt to the core of our bodies because they have worked to dominate us. Our words act as contemporary

forms of resistance against indentured labour and the ongoing trauma that is still felt today.

We chose to love and cherish our female ancestors and uphold their monumental legacy. Just as collective action was necessary in the fight against colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy, we too as female descendants undertake the same collective action through friendship as Jahajee sisters. Resistance does not always mean grand acts; resistance encompasses the relationships we create, how we understand to care and love for each other and how we hold space together. These gestures may seem small but just as our female ancestors chose covert and overt methods of rebellion, we look to how we can nurture each other as Indo-Fijian women.

The words that cover these pages have been hard and scary for us to write, as we know it stands against mainstream history and colonial narratives that many have been more than happy to sustain. Love has prevailed during this project as it did during indenture for Giritiya women. We have learnt a lot about courage through the women in our families and our female ancestors. To talk back, to reject, to do just as we like, to break these cycles of abuse has been an act of keeping our female ancestors' memories alive. We feel our ancestors; they live and talk through us and we stand here today and have become the women we are because of their actions.

When I first started my research into indentured labour and female Giriti, it was a lonely journey. To have been able to meet Esha and to commit ourselves to this work through collaborative and collective research has strengthened my hope for our future as Indo-Fijians. To Esha: I know our ancestors forged this friendship generations before we were born; I am so grateful they placed you and me together. I cannot imagine a world without you in it.

Esha:

As an Indo-Fijian woman, it's important for me to listen to and learn about the women that I come from. My first story was about my great-grandmother, Applamma, or Poni nani as I called her. Poni nani was in the belly of my great-great-grandmother, who came on the ship from Madras to Fiji. It's likely that Poni nani was also born on that ship. To be born across the oceans and into Giriti, can you imagine that sort of violence? We must care for our stories, even if all we have are pieces. The stories are always changing and moving, and that is okay too.

To understand better how much violence us descendants experience today, we must question how history has tried to erase and write over us. I am deeply grateful to have met Quishile and to share this work together. To go back into the colonial archives, re-examine academic texts and also

experience constant policing by Indo-Fijian patriarchy is not something we could have done by ourselves. This sharing of labour, re-learning and re-telling of the 1920 strike is important because we deserve to learn about our resistance movements and political histories. We understand what it feels like to experience the traumas of what it's like to come from kharaab¹¹¹ and “crazy” women. We also acknowledge the privileges we have, as Western and English educated people, and the resources we can access to share knowledge across international platforms. Our work together is the beginning of many projects to come.

We also want to remind readers that our stories and experiences are different across different coolie diasporas, and among the specific Indo-Fijian context. We are not here to speak for all Girmityas, but to share and really think about why so many forces try to continuously homogenise and capitalise on our histories. We have been exhausted by the white academics who shouldn't be writing about us in the first place, the Indo-Fijian men who continue to push us into binaries of good and bad, and upper-caste Hindu nationalists that want to manipulate our histories for their own agenda.

As a descendant of indentured labourers, I learn from my friends and their communities across different coolie diasporas. It's also important to acknowledge descendants and communities from a history of transatlantic slavery, as well as indigenous communities from the South Pacific, and indigenous peoples whose land we are settled on now, because the intergenerational traumas of slavery, black birding, forced labour and genocide contribute to our understanding of what resistance looked like for our ancestors and what hope can look like for our communities today. We are not here to shelter all of our oppressed histories under one umbrella; rather, we believe that our histories don't live in isolation. This collaboration and friendship with Quishile has been deeply healing because we are working to also learn better practices of rest for ourselves and our communities. It has been immensely fun, too, and we hope to continue sharing the joy and power of the people we come from.



fig 16

Notes

2 “Us” and “We” will be used in this essay to refer to the shared thoughts, opinions and lived experiences of Esha and Quishile. It will also refer to the shared experiences of descendents of Girit.

3 Fiji Hindi translation: This girl talks too much.

4 Fiji Hindi translation: This girl goes around too much. “Naache” literally translates to “dancing”, but has a negative connotation that implies promiscuity.

5 Please refer to Durgahee, Reshaad. “Native’ Villages, ‘Coolie’ Lines, and ‘Free’ Indian Settlements: The Geography of Indenture in Fiji.” *South Asian Studies*, 33:1, 68–84. 2017: 7; “The use of terminology such as ‘lines’, in the same vein as the usage of ‘colony’ and ‘quarters’, became a colonial practice that characterised those parts of a plantation where labourers were housed. Lines enabled ‘the desired positioning of bodies and spaces’ that was essential in creating a functioning and efficient plantation economy.”

6 Shameem Shaista’s PhD dissertation, *Sugar and spice: Wealth accumulation and the labour of Indian women in Fiji, 1879–1930* (1990): 340.

7 For a better understanding of caste please refer to the article “Caste Privilege 101: A Primer for the Privileged,” written by Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Sinthujan Varatharajah. Published online at *The Aerogram*. February 10, 2015.

8 Mishra, Margaret. “Your woman is a very bad woman’: revisiting female deviance in colonial Fiji.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016): 67.

9 For more context about the word ‘coolie’ please reference “A History Of Indentured Labor Gives ‘Coolie’ Its Sting,” by Lakshmi Gandhi. Published online on *Code Switch*. November 25, 2013.

10 For further reading about suicide and murder in the Fiji plantations please refer to Quishile Charan’s *Unearthing the History of my Female Ancestors in Fiji*. *Matters Journal Aotearoa*, Issue 8 (2018).

11 Missionary Florence Garnham (from the London Missionary Society in Calcutta), quoted in Margaret Mishra’s “Between women: indenture, morality and health.” *Australian Humanities Review* 52 (2012): 64.

12 Women were given the same set task work as men but for half the pay. As in European gender structures, female labourers were seen as incompetent and so the indentured labour system abided by a structured cis-het male environment. Due to the laws and ordinances of colonial Fiji, pay was continuously deducted or withheld, causing a major debt cycle for a large portion of the Girit community.

13 “As the system uprooted male labourers from their cultural context within India and into a situation of brutality on plantations, women were used to create a sense of stability through upholding ‘Indian family values’” (Charan, Quishile. *She Cut Me From Ganna*. Masters Dissertation for Visual Arts AUT (2019). 17).

14 Mishra, Margaret. “Your woman is a very bad woman’: revisiting female deviance in colonial Fiji.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016): 67.

15 Transatlantic slavery—of peoples from the African continent—and indentured labour—out of South Asia—are connected as both move along on a complicated and intertwined spectrum of capitalist labour exploitation. These systems share similarities but are not to

be equivocated on basic details such as sheer numbers, period of time and contracts. The Kafala system that bonds labourers who travel to work in Middle Eastern countries today is also connected to these two forced/contracted movements and displacements. We question the validity of colonial labouring systems because capitalism is always being reshaped in complex ways; it simply cannot succeed at the expense of all the lives lost.

16 Bahadur, Gaiutra. *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. 2013: 110

17 Bahadur, 118.

18 Andrews, Charles Freer, and Walter Washington Pearson. Report on indentured labour in Fiji. Star Print. Works, 1916. 31. 19 Bahadur, 88.

20 Bahadur, 88.

21 Mishra, Margaret. "A History of Fijian Women's Activism (1900–2010)." *Journal of Women's History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 116. 22 "...the loss of any idea of the sanctity of marriage and the consequent sexual immorality that was rampant on every side. The evil had spread in wider and wider circles from the coolie 'lines', till it had infected nearly the whole Indian population. Someone has described the condition of the sexes in the coolie lines of Fiji as the 'moral of the poultry yard.'" Andrews, Charles Freer, and Walter Washington Pearson. Report on indentured labour in Fiji. Star Print. Works, 1916. 31.

23 Nicole, Robert Emmanuel. "Disturbing history: aspects of resistance in early colonial Fiji, 1874-1914." PhD diss., University of Canterbury, 2006. 195.

24 Lal, Brij V. "Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji." ANU Press, 2013. 216

25 To understand caste in different diasporas, please read "Spearheading a Survey of Caste in South Asian Diasporas," written by Valliammal Karunakaran, Asmita Pankaj, Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Prathap Balakrishnan. Published online on Medium . August 11, 2016.

26 We will work on a future essay to explore casteism among Girmitiyas in more depth.

27 Fiji Hindi translation: food.

28 Also we would like to state that food habits among Indo-Fijians reflect class backgrounds.

29 Gillion, Kenneth L. *The Fiji Indians: Challenge to European Dominance 1920-1946* . Canberra, ACT: Australian National University Press, 1977. 18.

30 Fiji Hindi translation: cunning; clever; associated as a racial characteristic of Indian people.

31 Shameem, 328. CSR was an Australian industrial company that played a major role in colonising Indo-Fijians.

32 To learn more about CSR's violence in Australia please refer to Irvine, Helen. "A Genealogy of Calculations at an Early Queensland Sugar Mill." Queensland University of Technology. SAGE Publications. 2012: 9.

33 Important to note that the racialised labour force in Australia at this time, in addition to South Sea Islanders (blackbirders), also included Chinese, Aboriginal, Javanese, and Malay labourers (Irvine, Helen. "A Genealogy of Calculations at an Early Queensland Sugar Mill." Queensland University of Technology. SAGE Publications. 2012: 16).

34 Shameem, 349.

35 Gillion, 18.

36 Ali, Ahmed. *Plantation to politics: Studies on Fiji Indians* . University of the South Pacific: Fiji Times & Herald, 1980: 55

37 Gillion, 36.

38 Ali, 57.

39 Shameem, 324.

40 There is also the issue of subcontinental Indian academics (mostly men) stealing Girit histories as we have shared ancestral connections. It is not their place to mobilise and capitalise off of our histories and this act contributes to the generalising and universalising qualities of Hindu nationalism.

41 Please refer to Brij Lal's chapter, "Kunti's Cry" in *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* (2013).

42 Lal, Brij V. "Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji." ANU Press, 2013. 196.

43 Lal, 196.

44 To learn more about Savarna (upper-caste) feminist politics please refer to S. Kanika's article, "Brahmin Feminism sans Brahmin Patriarch." Savari Website (dalitweb.org). 2017.

45 To understand more on upper-caste feminism and chastity refer to Shivani Channan's article, "In Diwali, It's Not Just The Crackers Which Are A Problem," (2017) on feminisminindia.com.

46 "The individual ordeals of indentured women fostered the need for a collective forum where women could come together to articulate their grievances and challenge their maltreatment by sardars and overseers... the Indian (Indentured) Women's Committee, colloquially known as the 'Women's Gang' In the late 1800s and early 1900s, [was a] Committee set out to confront Indian and European men who sexually and/or physically violated indentured women." (Mishra, Margaret. "The emergence of feminism in Fiji." *Women's History Review* 17, no. 1 (2008): 45.)

47 Original reference Prasad, Shiu. *Indian Indentured Workers in Fiji*. Suva: South Pacific Social Sciences Association and UNDP, 1975. Quoted in Nicole 360.

48 Ali, 48.

49 See Vijay Naidu's book, *The Violence of Indenture* (1980). Oral accounts collected from male Giritiyas in the book uphold the idea of female Giritiyas as whores (Naidu 38). For further discussion on Naidu's book and this type of academic violence see

Quishile Charan's "Unearthing the History of my Female Ancestors in Fiji" (2018).

50 To the best of Esha and my own knowledge, only two academic writers who have acknowledged that women led the strike are Shaista Shameem and Margaret Mishra.

51 Such positions are taken up in Brij Lal's *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*. ANU Press, 2013 and Robert Nicole's "Disturbing history: aspects of resistance in early colonial Fiji, 1874-1914." PhD diss., University of Canterbury, 2006. 52 Lal, 208.

53 Lal, 209.

54 Nicole, 353.

55 Nicole, 355.

56 Lal, 186.

57 Lal, 209.

58 Andrews, Charles Freer, and Walter Washington Pearson. Report on indentured labour in Fiji: An independent enquiry, February 1916. Star Printing Works, Calcutta, 1916. 32.

59 Nicole, 367.

60 Mishra, Margaret. "'Your woman is a very bad woman': revisiting female deviance in colonial Fiji." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016): 67.

61 Lal, 171.

62 Lal, 171.

63 Mishra, Margaret. "'Your woman is a very bad woman': revisiting female deviance in colonial Fiji." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 4 (2016): 67.

64 Gill, Walter. *Turn North-east at the Tombstone*. Rigby, 1970. 36.

65 This act of writing his own memories was done to absolve himself from his own inhumane treatment of Girmitiyas.

66 Gill, 34-36.

67 Gill, 37. 68 Gill, 37.

69 Naidu, Vijay. *The violence of indenture in Fiji*. No. 3. (Suva: World University Service, 1980). 66. 70 Nicole, 360.

71 Mishra, Margaret. "Between women: indenture, morality and health." *Australian Humanities Review* 52 (2012): 59. We should celebrate this day!

72 Gillion, 21

73 This is us being sarcastic.

74 "Women and the Satyagraha Campaign." *South African History Online (SAHO)*. 2000.

75 To learn more about the violence of Gandhi please refer to Thenmozhi Soundararajan's article, "Why It is Time to Dump Gandhi." *Medium Website* (2017).

76 Mr. Manilal was given the privilege to be editor of the first Indian paper published in Fiji.

77 Mishra, Margaret. "Between women: indenture, morality and health." *Australian Humanities Review* 52 (2012): 59

78 Mohanty, Chandra. "Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses." *Feminist review* 30, no. 1 (1988): 61-88.

79 Mishra, Margaret. "Between women: indenture, morality and health." *Australian Humanities Review* 52 (2012): 59. These may not include every person, but at least we can share some names.

80 CSO MP 765/20

81 CSO MP 710/20

82 Gillion, 23.

83 Gillion, 23.

84 Ali, 43.

- 85 CSO 616/1920
- 86 Shameem, 367-369.
- 87 C.F. Andrews quoted in Robert Nicole's book, "Disturbing history: aspects of resistance in early colonial Fiji, 1874-1914." (2006) 369.
- 88 "Indian Riot: Women the Cause." Fiji Times and Herald, February 12, 1920.
- 89 "The Indian Trouble." Fiji Times and Herald, February 25, 1920.
- 90 "Rioting." Fiji Times and Herald, March 4, 1920.
- 91 "Indian Riot: Women the Cause." Fiji Times and Herald, February 12, 1920.
- 92 "The Indian Trouble." Fiji Times and Herald, February 25, 1920.
- 93 "The Indian Question: The Female Horror." Fiji Times and Herald, February 11, 1920.
- 94 Ali, 50.
- 95 "Rioting." Fiji Times and Herald, March 4, 1920.
- 96 "Rioting." Fiji Times and Herald, March 4, 1920.
- 97 "The Indian Trouble." Fiji Times and Herald, February 25, 1920.
- 98 "Indian Riot: Women the Cause." Fiji Times and Herald, February 12, 1920.
- 99 "The Indian Trouble." Fiji Times and Herald, February 25, 1920.
- 100 Ali, 49.
- 101 Shameem, 337.
- 102 Ordinances of the Colony of Fiji: Public Safety in Times of Civil Commotion Ordinance 1920.
- 103 CSO MP 764/20
- 104 "The regulation restriction or prohibition of gatherings of persons in any place whatsoever and the prohibition of the holding of meetings in any place whatsoever without the permission of the Inspector-General of Constabulary; and any gathering of persons or meeting held in contravention of any of the provisions of any regulations made under this subsection shall be deemed to be an unlawful assembly and may be dealt with accordingly." (Ordinances of the Colony of Fiji: Public Safety in Times of Civil Commotion Ordinance 1920)
- 105 Gillion, 28.
- 106 Gillion, 28.
- 107 Gillion, 29.
- 108 Gillion, 29
- 109 Gillion, 37.
- 110 CSO MP 764/20

fig 1 - Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown.

fig 2 Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman at Firstdraft Gallery (right). Photographed by Quishile Charan. Sydney, Australia. 2018.

fig 3 - Quishile Charan and Esha Pillay. We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies: Protest Banner , SEVENTH Gallery. Melbourne, Australia, 2019. Image courtesy of the gallery. Installation: cotton, textile ink, natural dye (aal bark and kumkum seeds). 4930mm x 1170mm

fig 4 - Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown. Girmitiya women.

fig 5 - Meme sourced from Fijian-Indian memes Facebook group

fig 6 - Quishile Charan. We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies, SEVENTH Gallery. Melbourne, Australia, 2019. Image courtesy of gallery. Installation: cotton, textile ink, natural dye: haldi (turmeric).

fig 7 - Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown. CSR sugar mill in Fiji.

fig 8 - Original tweet by Leilani Sabzalian (2018).

fig 9 - Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown. Crowd of Girmitiyas in Fiji.

fig 10 - Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown. Girmitiya woman holding her baby.

fig 11 - Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown. Girmitiyas women outside the coolie lines.

fig 12 - Quishile Charan. We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies SEVENTH Gallery. Left: Sushila's Letter. Archival document, cotton, textile ink, natural dye: haldi (turmeric) and kumkum seeds. 1360mm x 1300mm. Right: The Female Horror: Fiji Times Article 1920. Archival document, cotton, textile ink, natural dye: haldi (turmeric) and marigold flower. 930mm x 1430mm Melbourne, Australia, 2019. Image courtesy of gallery

fig 13 - Quishile Charan. We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies , SEVENTH Gallery. Melbourne, Australia, 2019. Image courtesy of gallery.

Oral History: Glass Bangles Broken in Protest at Police Barrier, Nausori 1920. Embroidery thread, handmade Mohar coins, cotton.

1100mm x 1000mm

fig 14 - Letter from the Indian Women's Imperial Association of Fiji 1920. Courtesy of The National Archives of Fiji.

fig 15 - Archival image courtesy of the Fiji Museum. Photographer and date unknown. Gathered group of Girmitiyas children.

fig 16 - Quishile Charan. We Do Not Have Enough to Satisfy Our Bellies , SEVENTH Gallery. Melbourne, Australia, 2019. Image courtesy of gallery.

Oral History: Glass Bangles Broken in Protest at Police Barrier, Nausori 1920. Embroidery thread, handmade Mohar coins, cotton.

Quishile Charan
(she/her)



I am an Indo-Fijian textile maker and writer living in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa. Craft was gifted to me through being my aaji's namesake and encompasses language, identity, story-telling and a place of healing. I create textiles that nurture craft as a form of generational exchange and love. Stitching and threading together memories and stories, I uphold the values of textile making and craft as a cultural knowledge system and a way to actively challenge colonial violence. I work to affirm the significance and importance of craft through the relationships with the women in my family. Another aspect of my work is the centering of Indo-Fijian women's narratives of resistance and oral stories that are excluded historically, in the archives and in academia. By bringing craft and textile work together with my research on the silencing of Indo-Fijian women's narratives, I seek to challenge hierarchies of silencing women's labour and their histories. I am of Girit and pākehā descent.

Esha Pillay
(she/her)



I'm a writer whose stories connect with the women who came before me: my grandmothers and great-grandmothers, all the ammas. I'm Fijian-born with roots in Lautoka and Labasa and currently live in the U.S. My research focuses on the intergenerational traumas among Indo-Fijian communities and the connection between the colonial violence of indentured histories that manifest in present-day traumas. The function of caste violence throughout Giriti, its impact on descendants and the lived experiences of my family is another key area of my research. Being Madraji, I also highlight the experiences of indentured labour communities who came from South India. I hold a M.A. in Migration and Diaspora Studies from SOAS, University of London and work in education and web design.



Vinaka vakalevu to creative New Zealand for the funding for the redesign of this essay.



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