

Indo-Fijian Women

—Past And Present

THE Fiji islands lie in the south-west Pacific, approximately 1,700 miles northeast of Sydney, Australia. Fiji is one of the small independent island nations in the south Pacific, having acquired its independence from British colonisers in 1970. The population of Fiji is made up of indigenous Fijians 44 percent, Indians 51 percent, Europeans, Chinese, part-Europeans and other Pacific islanders five percent.

The Indian population of Fiji is the direct descendant of indentured labourers (*girmityas*) taken to Fiji by the British to work on the sugarcane plantations between the years 1879 and 1916. Out of the 60,000 indentured labourers taken to Fiji, 60 percent chose to remain permanently in Fiji as free settlers after completing their indenture.

The Indenture System

The majority (approximately 45,439) of indentured labourers that arrived in Fiji were recruited from north India, particularly UP. The remainder were recruited from southern India, especially after 1903, when recruitment began there.

Both Hindus and Muslims signed up to go to Fiji and, contrary to popular opinion, not necessarily only those at the bottom of the social structure emigrated. Recent studies have shown that members of every stratum were represented amongst the emigrants, with the majority coming from the middling castes.

Not only were members of a wide range of castes represented amongst the

emigrants, but women and families were also represented. About 13,696 females were transported to Fiji, and overall there were 40 females to every 100 males. Interestingly, the majority of females that emigrated to Fiji were registered as "single" migrants and not accompanied by males. While some writers maintain that the women who went to Fiji were from the low castes and of questionable reputation, recent research indicates that such assertions have no valid basis. In fact, the majority of females, like males, were of middling castes.

Girmi refers to the agreement under which the indentured labourers



emigrated to Fiji. This agreement, signed before they embarked on their journey, contained the actual conditions of employment under which the *girmityas* were recruited. The agreement that stated the indenture was for a period of five years commencing on the day of arrival in Fiji, and the *girmitya* was required to work nine hours a day for five days, and five hours on Saturday. Remuneration rates were specified as well as accommodation and other facilities. At the end of the initial five year period, a *girmitya*, at his or her own expense, could return to India or sign up for a further five years—after which she or he

would be entitled to a free return passage.

Because the recruitment of women was difficult, a higher commission was paid to recruiters for women. Female recruits were seen, until recently, as pathetic victims led to the embarkation depot by dishonest and cunning recruiters. It was assumed women were ignorant and helpless, and thus easy prey for unscrupulous recruiters. Women were supposedly recruited in large urban centres where they had presumably lost their way and, on the pretext of offering assistance, the recruiters took the women to the depots and thus tricked them into emigrating.

While this may have been true for some women, it was by no means true for all women. Recent evidence suggests that the majority of women were recruited in local urban centres and outside their district of origin. It seems that many women were already separated from their families and homes before they were recruited for Fiji. It has also been suggested that many women knowingly and consciously registered for emigration.

Why women signed up for indenture and how they were able to break the bonds of the oppressive and patriarchal extended family—as so many of them registered as single women—is difficult to gauge. My own grandmother left behind a husband and two sons to escape the hardship and oppression of her extended family in which she was treated as a virtual slave. According to my grandmother, while she was getting water from a well, a recruiter approached her and asked her whether she would like to go to Fiji, a faraway place where there was good weather, picturesque surroundings, easy work and plenty of food. Without telling anyone, she left with him immediately. However, for many years she corresponded with her sons and sent them money until they found out that she had remarried and had more children in Fiji.

One thing we can say for certain is that more women than we often credit were mobile and extremely daring, strong

and willing to take their destiny in their own hands.

Work Conditions

Those who survived the perilous journey across the *kalapani* and arrived in Fiji, were then despatched to the individual European owned plantations. The new land of hope, promise and fortune quickly disappeared. *Girmit* was humiliating, degrading, oppressive and brutal and it is no wonder it was referred to as *narak* (hell).

The nature of the work undertaken by indentured labourers consisted of

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clearing, digging, planting, harvesting and loading. The work was arduous and the practice of overtasking created harsh working conditions. During the initial years of indenture, workers were allocated tasks by overseers that were virtually impossible to complete. Non-completion of tasks led to nonpayment even for the amount of work that had been completed. Historians of the period claim that in certain areas men were only able to complete 78.4 percent of the tasks while women completed 62 percent. The problem of overtasking and the consequent nonpayment was however somewhat alleviated in the 1890s through legislation forcing payment of workers at least proportionately for the amount of work completed.

Besides overtasking, workers were subjected to harsh punishment for even trivial misdemeanours. The overseers meted out corporal punishment for lateness, failure to comply with rules and regulations and failure to complete tasks. Both men and women were subjected to beatings and general use of force by the overseer. Other forms of punishment included fines, imprisonment and depriving males of their women.

Workers were housed in barracks that came to be known as “coolie lines.” These barracks were divided into approximately 40 rooms, 10 by seven

feet, housing adults or married couples with two children. The rooms had no windows, making for poor ventilation since the workers cooked, ate, slept and related in the same room. Indentured labourers described the barracks as *kasbighar* (brothels), “pig sties”, and “horse stables.”

Breakdown Of Institutions

Caste and religious differences were given no consideration. In the “coolie lines”, workers from different castes and different religions were forced to live, work and eat together. For the indentured

labourers, this intermingling of caste and religion was initially a difficult adjustment to make but as time passed it became easier. A further factor contributing to difficulties in adjustment was the regional variation amongst the labourers. Indentured labourers, as mentioned earlier, were recruited from different regions in India and they brought with them different cultures and languages. Initially, the diversity of languages and cultures within the immigrant group led to problems of communication, feelings of isolation and misunderstanding. The arduous work, harsh discipline, lack of family support mechanisms, isolation and loneliness made plantation life for indentured labourers unbearable. Illness, murders and suicides became the response of the indentured labourers to an insidious system they could not escape.

The general paucity of women has often, been cited as one of the major social problems of plantation life or the indenture system. The competition for women and sexual jealousy sometimes led to murder, suicide and other forms of violence.

Although there was intense competition for women they were still treated as chattels owned by men and given little respect by either the male labourers or the overseers. Sometimes,

overseers assigned women to men as rewards and at other times they kept the “best” women for themselves. Some indentured labourers married their wives as temporary conveniences to be disowned when they returned to India. Of course, many never returned and these relationships became permanent. Others treated and perceived women as “whores” and “loose women of bad character.”

The conditions under which the *girmityas* lived and worked inevitably led to the breakdown of Indian social systems and institutions. The caste system disintegrated and the institutions of marriage and the family became extremely difficult to maintain in the “coolie lines.” Marriage according to religion was not recognised by the authorities and the proportion of males to females inevitably meant family life as it had existed in India could not be reproduced on the plantations. Many have argued that the disproportion of the sexes led to immorality, polyandry and violence. It was the abuse, degradation and immorality of women that proved to be the compelling arguments used to mobilise public support in India that finally led to the abolition of indenture in 1916.

High rates of male suicide, supposedly caused by the paucity of women, and the degradation of Indian women on colonial plantations attracted massive support in India for the abolition of indenture in 1916. Indian nationalists such as Gokhale took up the cause of indentured labourers and demanded the abolition of the indenture system. This became a major issue for Indian nationalists in their struggle for independence.

Women—Maltreated And Malignated

Women worked as field labourers. Their work included clearing, planting, harvesting and sometimes loading. Their day began at 4 a.m. when they awoke to cook breakfast and lunch. They would then walk to the worksite, carrying their infants, their lunch, a sack on their head



and a hoe. They received lower rates of pay than men even though they were subjected to the same conditions of work and punishment as men.

Both official records and social commentators of the day claimed that women were the cause of major conflict between men, sometimes driving them to murder and suicide. The gross disproportion of the sexes supposedly led to intense competition for women resulting in violence between men, and promiscuity amongst women.

Violence was of course also meted out to women by men who could not get their own way with them. One historian of this period cites the example of a man who disfigured a woman face by cutting her nose and cheek because she refused to live with him. Another man murdered a woman because she refused to be enticed away from her husband. There are many documented cases of men murdering or grossly disfiguring women who refused to live with them or to grant them sexual favours. Yet, women were

used as scapegoats for explaining the violence of plantation life.

It has been stated that women played men off against each other in pursuit of more money and jewels, with the highest bidder being the winner. Hence, women were also blamed for the indentured labourers general disregard for the sanctity of marriage and the family.

The vast majority of commentaries mostly written by men, are imbued with derogatory comments about women. Few have bothered to discuss in any detail women’s working conditions or attempted to analyse indentured women’s lives from a perspective other than a male centred one. This bias pervades much of the historical data and makes it extremely difficult to gauge with any accuracy the degree of truth or falsity of such statements.

Recent attempts to acquire more accurate data from the few remaining women indentured labourers; has met with understandable reluctance on the part of these women to recall or discuss

the experiences of indenture. So we are left with basically male centred explanations of women's behaviour and life in this period.

While the disproportion of the sexes no doubt led to serial cohabitation, a certain amount of sexual promiscuity and perhaps even extramarital relations, the incidence of such activities are grossly exaggerated. In fact, some evidence suggests that men actively promoted the sexual promiscuity of their wives by treating them as chattels to be exchanged and lent out, especially to overseers, in return for material favours. Similarly, many men sold their young daughters more than once to prospective husbands which often led to extreme forms of violence when these men tried to claim what they viewed as their rightful property. Women had to contend not only with their male compatriots but also with the sexual advances of the young white unmarried overseer whom they sometimes could not refuse.

New Opportunities

Nevertheless, even if many women did change their men often, were sexually promiscuous and had no regard for the sanctity of marriage and the family, androcentric and moralistic explanations are, to say the least, inadequate. Such approaches fail to address in any detail the implications of the breakdown of social control mechanisms on the social relations of gender. Without denying, or in any way negating, the degradation women endured during indenture, one must surely acknowledge that the breakdown of the traditional patriarchal family gave women some control over their own destiny, at least in the arena of personal relations with men.

Women were recruited as indentured labourers in their own right. As such, they had access to an independent income, meagre though it was, and were no longer economically dependent on their fathers, brothers or husbands.

The absence of the traditional patriarchal family and the village structure, combined with access to an independent income, meant that women

no longer had to put up with men who oppressed them. When maltreated by husbands or partners, women did not hesitate to terminate these relationships. The new circumstances in which they found themselves provided them with the opportunity and courage to do so. Remember, the majority of women who emigrated probably did so to escape the oppression of the family and so were in no hurry to reestablish or reproduce the social arrangements from which they had escaped. That many of the women were not particularly enthusiastic about the institution of the family is understandable as it is in the arena of the family that much of women's oppression is produced and reproduced.

Male commentators' blinkered vision led to their failure to acknowledge small areas of the control women acquired over their personal lives as a result of the breakdown of the oppressive family system. Instead, they chose to stress "moral decay" and women's disregard for the sanctity of marriage and the family.

In the newly settled peasant household, the tendency was to withdraw women from agricultural work and confine them to the domestic sphere

Recognising that women did achieve a certain degree of control over their personal lives in no way negates the overall oppression suffered by both women and men during indenture. The control women acquired in one small aspect of their life was minute compared with their overall powerlessness. Both men and women were rendered powerless by an institutional arrangement that was akin to slavery. Furthermore, the small measure of control women enjoyed over their personal lives during indenture was shortlived.

Back To The Family

On completion of their contracts, indentured labourers were free to settle in Fiji or be repatriated to India. The majority chose to remain in Fiji. The government encouraged them to stay and they were free to either work for

themselves or for another employer. Most did not remain on the plantations after completing indenture but instead settled down as cultivators, became hawkers in the towns or labourers in the sugar mills.

In the late 1920s, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) offered leases on land to Indian labourers for the specific purpose of cane cultivation. The contract bound the labourers to growing cane and selling the cane to the CSR at an agreed price. This small farmer scheme favoured nuclear families as tenants and only married men were selected.

Simultaneously, it was made possible for indentured labourers to lease land for cultivation from the Fijians through the Native Land Trust Board. Those who acquired land then recommended their kin or fellow villagers for neighbouring lands, resulting in clusters of related households forming small communities. These clusters cooperated in the cultivation and harvesting of cane. These work groups came to be known

as cane gangs.

In the newly settled peasant household, the tendency was to withdraw women from agricultural work and confine them to the domestic sphere. The nature of cane growing in Fiji favoured the partnership of two adult males, generally a father and a son. For women, this meant the loss of an independent income which they had enjoyed during indenture. Once freed from indenture, women had little choice but to marry and settle with men who had acquired leases from either the CSR or the Native Land Trust Board. Within a generation, the imbalance of the sexes was restored and the subordination of women secured.

With the setting up of separate homesteads as free settlers. Indo-Fijians began to reconstruct their lives and

reestablish, some of their cultural traditions in the new environment. The reconstitution of the family became for the free Indians the means to regaining their *izzat* or self respect after the degrading, dehumanising and alienating experience of indenture. In the absence of the wider village structure, and kinship networks, it was impossible to reproduce the social structure and social institutions as they had existed in India. What emerged were adaptations of cultural practices in forms more suitable to the new environment.

While major social institutions such as caste and the *panchayat* system either disappeared altogether or were radically modified in the new environment, the institution of marriage and the family was reestablished with only minor modification despite the major disruptions to it during the indenture period.

With the reestablishment of the family after indenture, greater controls were imposed on women by men, particularly control over female sexuality. The memory of life in that "coolie lines" was still fresh and men made certain any control exercised by women previously was reappropriated by men.

The economic, political and social arrangements of indenture had led to the treatment and perception of women as "whores." This factor worked to the detriment of women in the long run as the family not only meant the reimposition of traditional power relations between men and women but also that even more stringent controls were placed on women. This legacy is visible today in the stringent control of women's sexuality, behaviour and physical space.

The maintenance of traditional forms of marriage and household arrangements amongst Indo-Fijians still provides the crucial link with their culture of origin. It seems that it is through the practice of relegion and traditional form of marriage and household arrangements that Indo-Fijians maintain and reproduce their cultural traditions to the present day.



An Indo-Fijian woman today

Indo-Fijians Today

Of the 293,000 Indo-Fijian population, some 177,000 live in rural areas, working mainly in agriculture, while the remaining 115,000 live in urban areas, working mainly in manufacturing, construction, whole-sale and retail trade, community, social and personal services sector. Forty percent of the Indian workforce are still tenant cane farmers. Urban Indo-Fijians work as professionals, semi-professionals, unskilled labour, tradesmen, technicians and businessmen, Indo-Fijians constitute a strong middle class group although many Indians are also very poor and some extremely rich.

Although Indo-Fijians have now lived in Fiji for more than 100 years, they still remain a distinct community. Interactions between Indians and Fijians are minimal and intermarriage rare. To a large degree separateness rather than integration is the order of the day. Indian tradition and customs are vastly different from those of the native Fijians. The vast majority of Indians are Hindus and Muslims while virtually all the Fijians are Christians.

The two major political parties could be said to represent the two major racial

groups although the recent emergence of the Fiji Labour Party is attempting to redress this situation and mobilise along class lines. Political representation is through communal franchise which many Indo-Fijians find inadequate, preferring common roll. Indo-Fijians have 22 out of the 52 elected seats in the House of Representatives even though they constitute 50 percent of the population.

Besides the issue of common roll, Indians perceive their major problem as being security of land tenure since the majority of Indian farmers operate on Fiji leaseholds. About 83 percent of land in Fiji is owned communally by Fijians and only one fifth of the land is freehold.

The lack of security in land has meant that Indo-Fijians look to education as their means of security. The professions and middle management in the public service is dominated by Indo-Fijians as is commerce. These factors have created a certain amount of tension between Fijians and Indo-Fijians although there is hardly any open conflict. In recent years, positive discrimination in favour of Fijians, particularly in education, has reinforced these antagonisms. The combination of all these factors and the fear that one day Indo-Fijians will be forced out of Fiji has led to many Indo-Fijians migrating to countries such as USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Stringent Controls On Women

In general, as in India, Indo-Fijian women are a less welcome addition to the family than males. Females are seen as problematic since they have to be protected and kept pure for the marriage market; a potential threat to family honour and more money will have to be spent on their weddings. Parents are generally reluctant to spend money on educating females because they believe the rewards of their investment will be enjoyed by her conjugal family rather than her natal family. Parents attempt to marry their daughters off as soon as possible. Although dowry does not exist, daughters-in-law tend to be subjected

to the tyranny of husband and in-laws.

For the majority of Indo-Fijian women there exists very little option but to adhere to the dictates of the male dominated family since they are economically dependent on males and there is an absence of other support structures. The threat of physical violence banishment from the parental home, being "left on the shelf", and the possible questioning of their morals act as powerful mechanisms to ensure compliance.

When Indo-Fijian girls reach adolescence a number of restrictions are imposed on their physical appearance, behaviour, relationship with males and physical space. All of these constraints are imposed in order to increase the female's saleability in the marriage market since arranged marriages are still predominant. The notion that a family's reputation and honour rests with the purity of its women is alive and thriving.

Women are given instructions to be demure, quiet, unobtrusive and obedient. They must not talk too much or too loudly, be argumentative or talk back, especially in front of male members of the household. In this way, women are kept socially inconspicuous, in no way threatening male authority in the household or in the public world. As a result, Indo-Fijian women are rendered incompetent, inarticulate and totally dependent on males in the public arena. An ideal candidate for an arranged marriage is a woman who is quiet, submissive and gives in to male control without a struggle.

Young, unmarried women are seldom permitted to go out during the day on their own or with female friends and never at night unless accompanied by the family. In some cases, females are not even permitted to hang around their own front or back yards unnecessarily, especially if there are young males in the neighbourhood. Failure to comply is likely to result in physical punishment meted out by the father or brother.

Female friendships are conducted only at school or in the workplace and

Struggle For Independence

Nisha is a 23 year old Muslim woman who has a professional occupation and is a government employee. She comes from a family of eight children. Her father died when she was very young. The eldest male economically supported the family until her elder sisters acquired jobs and also contributed to the family's maintenance. Nisha is the second youngest and now all her elder sisters are married.

Nisha won a scholarship which enabled her to undertake tertiary studies. When she obtained her qualification she was posted to work in another town. While working in this town, Nisha met and started going out with a south Indian Christian who is totally unacceptable to her family,

Her brother found out about her boyfriend through some people and arranged to have her transferred back to Suva. According to Nisha, he approached her superior in Suva and requested her transfer on the grounds that he and his mother disapproved of her lifestyle in this town and it was difficult for them to monitor her activities from Suva. In addition, he explained to her superior that this sort of lifestyle was unacceptable in the Indian community, contrary to the norms of Indian culture and that if she returned to Suva and lived with them she would no longer pose an embarrassment to the family. Consequently, Nisha was transferred to Suva.

Of course Nisha was furious that her brother dared do this, and that the government granted this sort of request. Furthermore, she was angry the government did not view her as an adult capable of making her own decisions. Once in Suva, living with her family, Nisha's freedom to go out became extremely limited. Whenever she came home late from work, or went out with her friends, her brother beat her. One night, Nisha went out after work with some female friends and when she got home her brother beat her up very badly and called her a prostitute.

That week, she arranged to move out of home and share a flat with some of her female workmates. In Suva, flats are extremely expensive to rent even for professional women. The only way Nisha could afford this flat was because it was being sublet and she was sharing.

Once Nisha moved out, her brother and mother on separate occasions turned up at her workplace and verbally abused her in front of everyone. They called her a "slut", "prostitute", "besharm". in front of her colleagues. According to Nisha, they thought if they humiliated and embarrassed her in public she would return home. When I last left Fiji, Nisha was negotiating a transfer back to the town where she had previously worked.

are seldom extended beyond this realm, while women's participation in the public world is, virtually nil. There is a noticeable absence of Indo-Fijian women in sports, politics or public organisations. In fact, it is interesting to note that the one Indian female in politics was born and educated in India.

In part, restrictions on women's physical space are imposed to keep contact between unrelated males and females to a minimum. Indo-Fijians are preoccupied with their attempts to keep males and female apart and go to great

lengths to achieve this end. Not only are women not permitted to talk to unrelated males but all possible avenues for contact with males are blocked. For example many of the girls are not allowed to receive phone calls or letters.

A woman who is known to have had a prior relationship with a male is likely to lose out in the arranged marriage market. Not only those women who are known to have engaged in prior relationships with males but even those suspected because they have been publicly seen talking to males are likely

to be disadvantaged in the marriage market. Such women are likely to be labelled "loose" and of bad character.

The oppressive nature of these constraints as well as the burden of family honour is demonstrated through the response of one unfortunate woman. An 18 year old daughter of one of my informants committed suicide by hanging herself from a tree when a relationship she had been having was discovered by her parents and the male refused to marry her. In desperation and in order not to bring shame on her family she took her own life. As her mother said, "Izzat is so important to us Indians."

Women And Paid Work

Indo-Fijian women's participation in the labour market is minimal. Only 10 percent of Indo-Fijian females overall are engaged in paid employment, although the rate for urban Indo-Fijian females is marginally better—14 percent. While these figures contain some distortions, for example, rural women who work on family farms and women who work in family owned firms as unpaid workers are not included, yet the asymmetry between men's and women's participation in the labour market is obvious.

With the growth, and development of the Fijian economy, women are increasingly entering the public world of paid work. Participation in the labour market is increasingly viewed as an advantage in the marriage market as well as a welcome contribution to family income, for Indo-Fijians the problem of combining the need to keep females physically and socially invisible as well as reaping the benefits of their participation in the labour market is solved by regulating and controlling the types of occupations women enter. Certain occupations are classified as appropriate occupations for Indo-Fijian females and certain inappropriate.

Inappropriate occupations are generally those that entail contact with large numbers of unrelated males, night

work or spending nights away from home. If females are unable to find employment in appropriate occupations, they are not permitted to work at all. A woman not at school and not in the workforce becomes a target for numerous marriage negotiations as her parents try to marry her off.

Where women have entered the paid labour force and do have access to an independent income, they tend to be concentrated in the service sector, working as stenographers, typists, clerks, housemaids and school teachers; areas of work not renowned for their high income. Therefore, not only are women outside the labour market in a

are treated as commodities in the marriage market.

The question of whether or not one desires marriage is not contemplated by Indo-Fijian women. Instead, Indo-Fijian women contemplate whether one is to have an "arranged" marriage, an "arranged love" marriage or a "love" marriage, and whether the prospective husband will be handsome, kind and considerate.

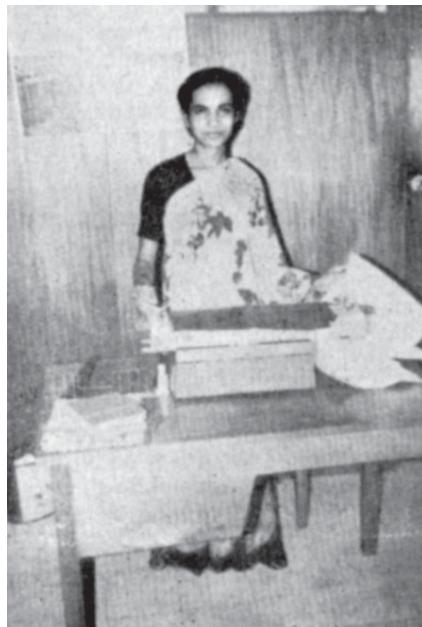
A number of adolescent schoolgirls I interviewed were already subject to marriage negotiations.

For example, a 17 year old Muslim schoolgirl, Rounaq, I interviewed while she was still at school was withdrawn from school the following year and married to an Indo-Fijian now residing in Canada. Rounaq's father is an accounts clerk and her mother a primary school teacher. They live in a beautiful concrete house with modern furniture in a middle class suburb.

Rounaq's marriage proposal came while she was still at high school. She was repeating fifth form at an Indian secondary school as she had failed the school certificate examination. The male and his family saw a photograph of Rounaq in the Muslim Youth League magazine in which she appeared because she was participating in the Islamic Quiz contest. At this point in time, Rounaq's parents were not actually searching for a match for Rounaq.

Confronted with a proposal, Rounaq's parents decided to go ahead and arrange a marriage even though Rounaq was still at school. According to Rounaq, her parents felt this was a proposal that was "too good to miss." The male resided in Canada, had a good job as a motor mechanic and came from a good family.

The arrangements were made and Rounaq's parents requested the marriage take place in December so that Rounaq could complete the school year. The male and his family, however, did not wish to wait. They informed Rounaq's family



Typing—an acceptable occupation

perpetual state of economic dependency but even those in the labour market remain dependent because of inadequate incomes.

The Marriage Market

Amongst Indo-Fijians, arranged marriage is the preferred and dominant form and women have little choice in the marriage partner selected for them. Although the practice of dowry does not exist the persistence of arranged marriages inevitably means that women

that if the marriage could not take place within the week they would look elsewhere for a wife. Apparently, the male and his family were only in Suva for a month and they wanted to find their son a wife in that time. So, Rounaq's family agreed and she was withdrawn from school and married. One week after the *nikah* the male returned to Canada and Rounaq stayed home for six months before joining him in Canada.

When I had initially interviewed Rounaq about six months prior to her wedding, she had spent a lot of time complaining to me about the restrictions her parents imposed on her. She complained she wasn't allowed to wear "modern" clothes, go out with her friends to town, to the movies or to visit friends. She was extremely critical of her parents' intention to send her brothers overseas for further education but not her. According to Rounaq her parents felt girls who go overseas to study enjoy "too much freedom" and become "spoilt." Her parents intended sending her to secretarial college and had already informed her she could only work if she got a job as a secretary in a bank, otherwise they would prefer her to just stay at home.

Interestingly, at this time Rounaq had also conveyed her definite intention to have a "love marriage" despite her parents' intention of arranging a marriage for her. When I reminded her of this in the interview after her marriage, Rounaq explained it by saying: "I did not wish to let my parents down."

For Indo-Fijians the chance to marry off a daughter to an Indo-Fijian residing overseas is an opportunity too good to miss since it means the likelihood of future migration for the whole family. The desire to migrate overseas is so great that families are willing to pawn their daughters for this opportunity. Many parents even asked me to search for prospective husbands for their daughters in Australia and this request was often prefaced with a statement about their

desire for migration.

In recent years, the desire to migrate overseas has become such an obsession with Indo-Fijians that many families are encouraging and allowing their daughters to marry Europeans from Australia and the USA through marriage bureaux and penpal clubs. These males tend to be middle aged, divorced, living in rural communities, and suffering either social or physical disabilities.

The idea, of migrating to another country and improving their economic status is extremely attractive to large numbers of Indo-Fijians. Conversations often centre around who has recently migrated, who is about to migrate, who is in the process of being sponsored and who has a desire to migrate. According to the Bureau of Statistics in Fiji, during 1983, out of the 2,752 people who emigrated, 83.4 percent (2,152) were Indo-Fijians.

Migration is sought not only by Indo-Fijians suffering economic hardships, but also by those Indo-Fijians seeking to further consolidate their economic positions and provide better educational opportunities for their children. According to a report in the

Sunday Time, 14.4.85, "figures show that a significant percentage of emigrants are professional, technical, administrative and managerial workers." Initially, migration to the USA and Canada was through technical qualifications, but now it is mainly through marriage and family sponsorship.

Amongst working class families, the general preference of the Indo-Fijian community to marry within one's race or religion is sometimes set aside in favour of marriage to a European male from another country. However, it is important to stress that while the general preference may be set aside for overseas Europeans, it is seldom set aside for native Fijians or Indians whose religion is not compatible. In fact, the preference is only set aside for Europeans even though they may reside overseas.

While there is no statistical data to assess this trend, migration statistics, advertisements and my own research provide some evidence to suggest the existence of bureau marriages. The incidence of bureau marriage is difficult to gauge accurately, but virtually everyone I encountered in Suva seemed to know someone who had contracted this form of marriage. Six women I had interviewed in depth had bureau marriages while I was in the field, and numerous others were communicating by letter with overseas European males.

Authority In The Family

Power and control is firmly vested in males of the household in Indo-Fijian families. The important decisions regarding women's lives are all made by men, resulting in women having no control over such matters as their education, their marriage (when to marry, whom to marry or even whether to marry), their physical movements outside the home, their relationships with other women, their own sexuality and fertility.

The division of labour in the household operates in favour of men since women undertake the bulk of the household chores. Those women who



Between east and west

are in paid work are not relieved of the household chores and thus, in effect, undertake a double day.

An important mechanism by which men maintain control over women is physical violence. The threat and use of physical violence is a powerful mechanism of social control and pervades the lives of Indo-Fijian women. All my informants, whether they were schoolgirls, unmarried working women or married women, explained their compliance partially in terms of the threat and use of physical violence by the

particular male in control of them.

In the case of schoolgirls, the absence of resistance to unpopular rules and regulations regarding their social activities or to the form of marriage being contemplated by their parents is due to the fear of being subjected to physical violence either by the father or brother. Similarly, amongst married women, the absence of resistance to unpopular practices of their husbands, like excessive consumption of liquor, can also be attributed to the fear of physical violence.

That suicide is the solution chosen by so many Indo-Fijian women is an indictment of the insidious system under which they are forced to live a rather precarious life. Indo-Fijian women have one of the highest rates of suicide in Fiji.

For the Indo-Fijian female, succumbing to male control and bearing the burden of a woman's life is virtually the only option. The power of the ideology and their economic dependence on males means women are locked in an oppressive system from which it is difficult to escape.



On February 13, 1987, the first V. Krishna memorial lecture was held at Miranda House college for women, Delhi University. V. Krishna was one of the first women teachers of the university, and had much to do with creating a certain liberal tradition in Miranda House in its early years.

Krishna was from a Tamil Brahman family of Palghat. Her father was a theosophist and a nationalist; her mother was uneducated but encouraged Krishna to be independent, advising her never to hold out her hand for money to a man.

Krishna belonged to the generation of educated women who emerged from the preindependence ferment. Many of those women dedicated themselves to the nationalist and other movements, Krishna chose the path of individual

experimentation, in the process breaking many social taboos.

An element of that pioneering excitement was visible in her attitudes and her choices, many of which were unconventional and stirred up a lot of criticism—from her going to Oxford for further studies, leaving her son in his father's care, to her later choosing to remain in Delhi even though her husband was posted out of the city. Another was the energy she poured into her relationships with women friends, and into the college where many of these friendships originated. She was, in a way, wedded to the college or rather to her idea of the college.

Deeply committed to her vocation as a teacher, she was known for never missing a class, not even when unwell, and for putting much energy into preparation although she never delivered a set lecture, her teaching being, in the words of a student, a "generation of enthusiasm", dependent on her rapport with a class. Right to the end of her life, she continued to participate in teachers' attempts to improve curricula and to familiarise themselves with the latest trends in literary criticism.

Her field was drama, particularly seventeenth century English drama. She directed a number of plays in the college and was involved with theatre at the university and the city level.

Krishna, had a stormy love-hate

relationship with teachers rights movements in the university. A strong nonconformist individualism was at odds in her thinking with an authoritarian emphasis on discipline and sticking to the letter of the law. In the last years of her life, she was distressed by the increasingly repressive, atmosphere developing in the college. Her courageous eloquence in staff meetings will long be remembered. As one of her contemporaries put it: "You could agree with her or disagree with her, but you could not ignore her."

After her untimely death on February 12, 1985, aged 58, her colleagues, students, family and friends established a fund for an annual event in her memory. The first lecture was delivered by Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak, an Indian woman settled in the USA, who holds the Andrew Mellon professorship at Harvard and is a reputed feminist structuralist scholar. She spoke on "The Burden of English Studies in the Colonies." Using texts by Tagore, Kipling and Nadine Gordimer, among others, she showed how the overt message of a text is often undercut by an emotional texture which wins the reader's assent to a covert racist or sexist message. She suggested that rather than trying to assimilate their students to a British cultural tradition, teachers of English in the former colonies need to bring a knowledge of their own literatures to their readings of English texts so as to help students become alert and critical readers. □

Tribute To A Teacher