



PRESS

Chapter Title: 'A most callous indifference' Sukhdei's story

Book Title: Levelling Wind

Book Subtitle: Remembering Fiji

Book Author(s): BRIJ V. LAL

Published by: ANU Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctvr7fcdk.10>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



JSTOR

ANU Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Levelling Wind*

4

‘A most callous indifference’

Sukhdei’s story

Death lies on her face like untimely frost.

— William Shakespeare¹

How do we write about a past where records don’t exist, or exist only partially, and memory is not properly archived? Yet, unwritten pasts must be remembered for they, too, are part of our lives. This conundrum confronts all of us who write about the experience of indenture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Written records are partial and fragmentary, but often that is all we have to go by. This is where imaginative reconstruction comes in, as in the case of the story that follows. We begin with the documented facts but then put flesh on their bare bones, read against the grain, draw upon similar cases to provide a fuller picture of what happened and why. Factual accuracy is important, but a higher purpose is to capture the truth of the experience through ‘true imagination’. Sometimes, the truth of an experience or a fact is best understood in its imaginative version. This is Sukhdei’s story, but I have drawn on my lifetime’s knowledge of the indenture experience to create a composite picture that, I hope, does justice to the tragic experience of one woman. This is Sukhdei’s story, but not hers alone.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Alexander, 902–39 (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951; reprint 1980), 4.5.28.

There is a spot on the banks of the Sigatoka River a few chains from Ram Sami's village shop that men avoid and try not to walk past at night. Many say they have seen the figure of a frail woman with fraying white hair and dressed in funeral-white clothes wondering aimlessly at various times of the night, lost. Some swear they have heard soft wailing noises at odd hours, and others recall the fragrance of scents sprinkled on dead bodies during funeral ceremonies to keep the stench of death at bay. A mango tree stands forlornly in overgrown para grass. Some old timers remember this as the place where a deranged woman drowned herself. That is all they remember about her and about the remote past of their forebears. The woman's name was Sukhdei. Her death, in the early years of the twentieth century, and the tragic events that led to it were widely talked about in the Indian indentured community right across Viti Levu at the time. The story of complicity and attempted cover-up, the violence and treachery that surrounded Sukhdei's case finally ended in Fiji's Supreme Court, a very rare event almost unprecedented. Who, then, was Sukhdei and what was the true story of her ordeal? This imaginative reconstruction based on fragments of written and oral evidence seeks to answer this question.

Sukhdei, five foot something and a loner, was a *girmitiya* from the district of Mathura, in western Uttar Pradesh. She was seven months pregnant when she came to Fiji in July 1910. She was 18 or thereabouts when she was assigned to the CSR's Tuva Sector. A month after arriving in Fiji, she gave birth to a child (on 16 August) who died four days later. A pregnant unmarried woman would have been a source of great shame to her family and the broader community; the situation was made even worse in this case by the fact that Sukhdei was a Brahmin, of priestly class, from a holy region that was the playground of Lord Krishna. She would most certainly have been tossed out from the village to fend for herself, or killed to avoid giving her family a bad name. At the Emigration Depot at Matiabruj, Calcutta, she was introduced to Ballu, a Fiji-bound immigrant from the district of Benares, and they came together as husband and wife. There must have been many Sukhdeis among the indentured women who easily fell into the recruiters' net and emigrated to the colonies, victims of violence and sexual molestation by their own men, broken and discarded.

Sukhdei was one of 13,596 Indian women who came to Fiji, all adults, as indentured labourers. She was one of 262 from the district of Mathura, and one of 510 who were Brahmin. The majority came as single migrants, though there were about 4,000 who came as members of families.

But whether they came alone or in families, they were all assumed to have fallen into the depths of degradation and vice, as one emigration agent of Trinidad suggested; unsteady, rudderless vessels, as an otherwise sympathetic observer C.F. Andres put it; or immoral doe rabbits, as an overseer in Fiji described them. And they accordingly bore the brunt of the blame for the social ills of indenture. Their faces were hidden behind a veil of dishonour.

Sukhdei's misfortune was not uncommon on the plantations as infants fell to high mortality rates, especially in the wet cane areas of south-eastern Viti Levu. Nearly a quarter of infants in the 1890s died within a year of birth from a variety of ailments including anaemia, respiratory illnesses, diarrhoea and dysentery and the general unsanitary conditions of the lines. Things improved over time, but the danger of death was ever present and tore at the heart of many a family. The *girmitiyas* bore their tragedies stoically, but not so the overseers and government officials who routinely held the mothers responsible, believing they lacked the motherly instinct. Weren't they, after all, the flotsam and jetsam of Indian society, the lowest of the lowest? This deeply entrenched view among the planters, despite much evidence to the contrary, blunted sensitivity to the indentured labourers. Some parents pooled money together to hire a *dai* (maid) to look after their children in the lines while they went out to work, but many mothers also took their children with them to the fields to suckle them during breaks. Exposure to the elements held its own peril.

Two days after the death of her child, Sukhdei was ordered to work crushing stones with a hammer for the railway track being built to cart cane to the recently opened Lautoka sugar mill. Sending mothers to work so soon after childbirth was against the regulations, but on the plantations, especially the remote ones, where official inspections were infrequent and the opportunity to lay complaints limited, it was not the courts but overseers who had the final say. And Sukhdei was desperately unlucky to have Herbert Brackman as her overseer, or *kulambar*.

Brackman was a particularly violent man—volatile, quick to anger at the slightest hint of disobedience, or what he perceived to be disobedience. The possibility of miscommunication or misunderstanding never crossed his mind. In his 30s, he had worked with Kanaka labour in the cane-growing district of Mackay, Queensland, before coming to Fiji to work for the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR). It was rumoured that he had been 'advised' to leave Mackay before things got out of hand

because of his rough treatment of the workers under him. At least two overseers had been hacked to death for systematically mistreating their labourers. Brackman had become a marked man. His first posting in Fiji was to the Naqiqi Sector in northern Vanua Levu where, with a free hand, he unleashed what officials called 'a reign of terror' on the sugar estate. He had once poured a pot of hot water on his servant because he was unhappy with the way his breakfast had been prepared. The stipendiary magistrate at Labasa exonerated him of all blame because he had found 'no criminal intent' in his behaviour. Fearing reprisal against him for his violence and brutality, the CSR quietly transferred him to Viti Levu, to the newly opened and remote Tuva Sector where, it was hoped, he would escape official notice. But Brackman was Brackman, a creature of habit who continued with his old ways.

Totaram, Brackman's *sirdar* (foreman) was not much better. *Sirdars* were the lynchpin of the system, the overseers' ears and eyes on the ground, chosen for the role for their ability as enforcers and task masters. On some plantations, they made a little extra by operating a store on the side, with the concurrence of the plantation manager as a reward for loyalty, even though this was strictly against the spirit of the labour ordinance. They could also be relied upon to procure women for the overseers who were invariably young and unmarried. Some were not averse to 'sampling' women under their charge themselves, though the constant fear of a sharpened cane knife in the hands of an enraged man kept matters in check. Totaram, an Ahir cowherder from Gorakhpur, had arrived in Fiji in 1905. He was a big man with a fierce handlebar moustache and a no-nonsense demeanour. A man with a very short fuse, he was feared in the lines. He often talked with his fist, people said. And he had big ambitions for himself too. He knew which side his bread was buttered on, as the expression goes. If he played his cards right, he might be transferred to a bigger sector with greater opportunities for himself. The combination of Brackman and Totaram proved deadly for Sukhdei.

At around 11 o'clock, Totaram came on his routine round of inspection. Seeing Sukhdei resting under a mango tree, he barked, 'What is this? Why aren't you crushing stones? *E tumhar baap ke kam hai*, you are not working for your father.' Sukhdei, weak and bleeding, replied, '*Hamar haal theek nahi hai. Hum nahi sakta e kaam kare*, I am not well. I can't do this work. *Kutch aur kaam deo*, give me some other work.' Totaram interpreted this as insolence, this woman talking back to him like that? Who the hell did she think she was? He advanced towards her, slapped her a few times

and ordered her back to work. '*Agar hum phir tummhe sustaate dekha to hum tumhar khaal utaar dega*, if I find you shirking work again, I will strip the skin off your back.' Someone uttered a muffled obscenity, but no one did anything, continuing with their work as if nothing had happened. The alleged abuse would be offered as mitigating evidence in Totaram's favour. On his way back, Totaram reported Sukhdei to Brackman when he inquired about work on the new railway track.

When Brackman came on his daily round of inspection around midday and saw Sukhdei resting, he remembered what Totaram had told him and flew into a rage even after Sukhdei had told him about the loss of her child and her weak state. She pointed to her bloodied dress. Could the *sahab* (master) please give her some other work, she pleaded, sobbing? Brackman refused, 'No, I cannot give you other work. Come on, get up. *Jaldi, jaldi*. Quick, fast.' When Sukhdei remained seated on the ground, he walked towards her, grabbed her hair and slapped her face hard. 'You talking back to me like that? I will teach you a lesson you will never forget.' Suddenly, Brackman lost his senses. He was like a man possessed. He lifted Sukhdei and threw her down hard on the stones she was crushing and kicked her several times, as Sukhdei recalled in her testimony to the stipendiary magistrate at Sigatoka. Then the whip came raining down on Sukhdei's sweating bare back. Blood began to ooze from her mouth and back. The beating, fast and furious, went on for several minutes. Once his rage was exhausted, Brackman called out to Kali Das a chain or two away to take Sukhdei to the creek nearby to clean her up of blood and dust. Again, there was complete silence from fellow workers who had all witnessed the attack on Sukhdei.

Brackman's junior sector overseer, A.G. Allen, was aghast at what he had just seen but he was too timid to do anything. Reporting the assault to the estate manager would have spelled trouble for himself and, possibly end his career. 'Snitching' was a punishable crime among the overseers. Allen knew Brackman well, too well, and so did everyone else on the estate, but a 'good' man was hard to find and, as far as the estate management was concerned, Brackman was a good man who maintained discipline among his workers and got the job done. Still, something moved Allen when he saw Sukhdei's terrible blood-stained clothes and heard her sustained sobbing. He pleaded with Brackman to send her to the estate hospital accompanied by Kali Das. Brackman reluctantly agreed but demanded that Sukhdei walk to the hospital some 5 miles away in Nailaga rather than be carried by Kali Das. As soon as he was out of sight of the

overseers, Kali Das carried Sukhdei, bleeding and barely conscious, on his back to the hospital. Brackman sent a note with Kali Das to the hospital superintendent that asked T.G. Witton to examine and classify the woman Sukhdei ex-*Santhia II*. He added that she was apparently incapable or else damn lazy and Brackman wanted to know if she was physically capable of work and if so how much.

Witton was new to the Tuva plantation, having arrived there in May 1910, just a few months before the attack on Sukhdei occurred. As a newcomer, he was unacquainted with the way things were done in a remote area like Tuva, unaware of the rituals and protocols of the culture of silence and conspiracy that governed life of the *sahibs* on the plantations. Protecting the good name of the community and closing ranks against any outside intrusion was understood by everyone, if not explicitly stated. But not Witton. He made the 'cardinal mistake' of saying openly that he believed Kali Das's version of events. Brackman had claimed that he had merely 'tapped' her with a fly whisk to get her attention. Witton rejected this outright. He suggested that the wounds he saw could not have been inflicted how Brackman had claimed. He added that he was positive the wounds on Sukhdei's buttocks had been caused by her being lifted up and thrown down on stones. Witton told the District Medical Officer Dr Mullen, when he came around on his weekly tour of inspection, that Sukhdei was black and blue with weals on her back and buttocks. Mullen agreed, suggesting that she had been flayed.

Mullen added that the eight wounds he found on Sukhdei's body were the result of contusion caused by some weapon, probably a stick. Like Witton, he, too, was horrified. He wrote that the facts pointed to a degree of brutality that could hardly be conceived by any man in his right senses, and added that the victim had not been shown to him in the ordinary way but with manifest reluctance. He suggested that Witton had been influenced to cloak the matter. It later emerged that either Totaram, or one of his men, had bribed the hospital orderly to hide Sukhdei from visiting inspectors.

Witton knew that labourers were regularly abused for not completing their task, for malingering, or for damaging field equipment, but this attack was outrageous, beyond anything he had ever seen. And he had seen a lot. He immediately wrote a note to Brackman that he asked Kali Das to deliver. In the note he asked when had Brackman received instructions to put women to work five days after confinement. Witton

also castigated Brackman by asking what he thought of himself for ill-treating a woman in such a condition and he added that he thought it would be lucky for Brackman if the woman didn't die. At the same time, Witton wrote that he accepted no responsibility whatever and if anything happened to Sukhdei it was Brackman's fault.

His humane concern was genuine, but it would be used against him in court; his willingness to believe the words of a mere 'coolie' against that of a fellow white man.

The note unsettled Brackman enough for him to write immediately to Witton saying that he didn't understand about the woman's child being dead and adding that he believed she was legally liable for work. He insinuated that Sukhdei had asked for work herself and, when he asked if she was sick or ill, she had said no. In answer to Witton's accusations, he said that he had found Sukhdei lying down at midday, and sent her to hospital against her will. He denied ill-treating her and added that Witton should know that he did not work the women. In an effort to shift the blame, he said that he believed the *sirdar* had handled her roughly when she refused to work but, since he was not there, he felt unable to say. He added that he was sure her husband flogged her in the lines on the Friday morning since he had seen the marks and that the *die* (midwife) who attended Sukhdei had told him that her child had been born quite normally and that the woman was all right. He continued his note to Witton by querying about Sukhdei's sickness, adding that he felt anxious about the woman's health since he had received Witton's note, but denied any responsibility for it in view of the facts. He instructed Witton that he should not be so ready to believe a white man a scoundrel unless he was quite sure of his ground. Finally, Brackman added that if he was not right in sending the woman to work that to please inform him of what he should have done according to the ordinance.

Brackman stuck to his improbable version that Sukhdei had asked for work. Later he added to his story. He said that he had complained to Sukhdei that her person and clothes smelt. According to Brackman, she asked him what she should do about it, since she had no money and no other clothes. When Brackman asked her if she had any soap she told him she didn't. Brackman said he told her to get some soap from her husband, but she replied that her husband was presently in hospital and that he wouldn't give her soap anyway. Brackman reiterated that Sukhdei had asked him to give her work and indicated that she was capable of it.

Brackman thought he was doing the woman a favour.

The stipendiary magistrate summed it up well. Brackman's assertion that he gave work to the woman at her request is hardly credible, and was denied by her, but if she had asked for it, her request should have been complied with as she was receiving rations. All new migrants were entitled to rations for the first six months. As for the provisions of the law governing the employment of pregnant women, the stipendiary magistrate simply noted that what Brackman had done was not in conformance with the intention of the ordinance. Pregnant women were not to be given onerous tasks and, after childbirth, women were not to be sent to work for up to two months and then only upon medical clearance. That was the letter and spirit of the law, but on remote plantations other realities prevailed.

Brackman could not get Witton's note out of his mind. He had to cover his tracks and quickly. Later that day, he asked Totaram to bring to his bungalow other workers who might have witnessed what took place at midday or had heard about it from others. Hansi, Balchand, Pudar, Hasmat and Ramphal went with Totaram and squatted on the veranda waiting for the big *sahab* to arrive. They were all influential men in the sector and their word would carry weight backed by brute force. It was a very brave or foolish man indeed who went against their wishes or directives. Brackman opened the screen door and came out. Allen was with him. After a round of rough rum, Brackman looked at Totaram and said that if he (Brackman) got caught that will be the end of his life. But if you (Totaram) took the blame, he would pay the fine. He handed two pounds sterling to Totaram to be shared among the witnesses. No one demurred. They all knew only too well the price of disobedience and defiance. They would become marked men and vulnerable to beatings, hard labour and extension of indenture contracts. Better to get along and get out. Resistance came with a heavy price. If bribery did not buy compliance, the threat of violence did. The next day Brackman told Kali Das that if he said anything he would be shot. Kali Das did not say anything. The threat was repeated several times over the week. Brackman thought this was where the matter would rest. He was wrong.

Witton was sufficiently outraged to report the assault to the local police. For his part, Dr Mullen reported it to the Agent-General of Immigration in Suva, the colony's top official responsible for Indian immigrants. He sought the advice of Colonial Secretary Eyre Hutson, the colony's chief administrator a few rungs below the governor, who advised getting

more independently verified information from the Resident Inspector of Immigration based at Lautoka. Unable to contact the resident inspector who was on leave, and in any case was leaving government service, the Agent-General of Immigration asked the Inspector-General of Constabulary (IGC) for assistance. The IGC went to Tuva immediately to acquaint himself with the case. He visited Sukhdei in hospital and talked with the stipendiary magistrate. He told Hutson that things on this occasion had gone too far, that Brackman was an uncommonly violent man unfit to work with the labourers under his charge, and that the assault was too serious a matter to be ignored. It should be treated as an aggravated assault and Brackman indicted.

If word of the assault reached India, the consequences for the company and the government could be dire. India, the IGC said, was beginning to take greater interest in the affairs of indentured labourers. Word had reached Fiji that an official delegation was on its way to Fiji to investigate the conditions on the plantations. These were all compelling reasons to take immediate action.

Hutson agreed, and so did the governor. The case eventually came before the Supreme Court in April 1911. The CSR was bent on clearing its name at any cost. And the Supreme Court was the place to do it. Much was at stake including the future allotment of indentured labourers to its plantations. If Brackman was indicted, who would be next? Wouldn't this incite the labourers to lay more complaints against the company? Order and discipline had to be maintained. But Brackman was charged with wounding with intent to do grievous bodily harm and unlawful wounding. What, one wonders, was lawful wounding? Attorney-General Albert Eckhardt KC prosecuted while H.M. Scott, the colony's leading criminal lawyer, appeared for the defence, with Leslie Davidson of Ba, a large sugarcane growing district, who was well versed in cross-examining Indian immigrants. He knew their language and understood their culture. Sukhdei, the first witness, was brought into the courtroom in a wheelchair.

Sukhdei was clearly mentally unwell, deranged, her evidence barely coherent, her recollections vague, contradictory. Indentured labourers were invariably at a disadvantage in a court of law, being unfamiliar with the processes and protocols of the law of evidence and being cross-examined by *sahibs* in an alien language. But this was worse. No, Brackman did not beat her, she told the court. Neither had Totaram. Her husband, Ballu, was the culprit; a point used to significant effect by defence lawyer

Scott. Sukhdei also told the court, improbably, that it was Ballu who had killed the child because he was not the child's biological father. Some of the witnesses who had gone to Brackman's bungalow on the day of the attack had changed their minds and testified that they had indeed seen Brackman assault Sukhdei, but they compromised their evidence by admitting to accepting the bribe. The court rejected their testimony out of hand. Kali Das, who had witnessed the whole episode, told the court that Totaram did not beat Sukhdei, and that he had not seen Brackman assault her either. Witton was upbraided by Leslie Davidson for writing the note to Brackman accusing him of the assault based on what Kali Das had told him. Wasn't a man to be presumed innocent until proven guilty?

Chief Justice Sir Charles Major dismissed the case. He was Fiji's chief justice from 1904–14. Born in the tiny West Indian island of St Kitts, he was a quintessential establishment man, the son of the chief manager of the Colonial Bank of the West Indies and Chancellor of the Diocese of Antigua. He religiously followed the letter rather than the spirit of the law. He had to decide on evidence adduced in court and tested through cross-examination and not on hearsay, he said summing up the case. But many questions remained. Was the chief justice aware, as evidently everyone else was, of Sukhdei's state of mind and body? After all, she had been brought into the court room in a wheelchair several months after she had been attacked. Why was Ballu, Sukhdei's husband, not questioned about allegedly having savagely beaten his wife and killing the infant? Shouldn't he have been sentenced to imprisonment for inflicting such bodily harm on her? How could the discrepancy between what Sukhdei had told the stipendiary magistrate at Sigatoka and what she told the Supreme Court be explained? Why was the stipendiary magistrate himself was not cross-examined? Why had Kali Das changed his testimony? Why did Brackman bribe the workers if he was innocent? Did he not have a history of violence and brutality?

Some years after the Sukhdei incident, bits and pieces of information about it dribbled out. As soon as the severity of the assault had become clear, the ring of silence around Brackman had closed. Totaram was promised promotion to the Lovu Sector in Lautoka. All his needs would be taken care of (women, alcohol, cigarettes, extra bonus). Brackman would personally see to that. Totaram told Ballu to forget about the assault and move on. *'Jo hoi gaye so hoi gaye, bhai*, what has happened, has happened. Now look after yourself. Once Totaram is gone, you will be

made the junior *sirdar* with a store to run on the side. If you decide not to go along, don't ever say I did not warn you. Accidents can happen, as you know.' Ballu did. 'Rotten potatoes have no place among us.'

Totaram told Sukhdei not to say anything about Brackman because that would make matters worse for everyone. Totaram added that if it is Brackman today, it could be someone worse tomorrow. He would speak to the *sahab* to assign Sukhdei to domestic duties. And when matters settled down, he would try and get her *girmat* reduced. Some fellow women workers who had witnessed the attack consoled Sukhdei. They told her the story of an overseer on a neighbouring estate who had been set upon by women, pinned to the ground as they took turns urinating on him. Humiliated, the fellow left the estate. They told her that his day would come, *bahini* (sister), adding that *bhagwan ke ghar me der haye, andher nahin* (justice will eventually prevail).

Justice of sorts did prevail. Things did not turn out the way Brackman and his accomplices had hoped. The Immigration Department was convinced that Brackman had indeed committed the grievous assault on Sukhdei. His own previous record of violence and callousness toward the labourers under his charge spoke eloquently about the man's character. The Agent-General of Immigration had said that the callous indifference to the suffering of Sukhdei evident in Brackman's notes was unmistakable. Sadly, it was not evident to the chief justice. And officials were deeply troubled by Brackman's manner after the incident: no remorse, no sympathy. On the contrary, Brackman bragged to others about how he controlled his workers—with a firm hand and, if force was required, he would happily teach the recalcitrant a lesson they would never forget. As evidence of his successful *modus operandi*, he often pointed to the absence of strikes on his estate and the paucity of complaints to the Immigration Department. Fellow overseers viewed Brackman with a mixture of horror and muted respect.

The Immigration Department advised Colonial Secretary Hutson, a future Governor of Fiji, to ask Governor Sir Henry May to direct the CSR not to employ Brackman any longer on any of its estates anywhere in Fiji. Hutson explained the situation about Brackman's extremely callous conduct in putting a woman to labour or allowing her to go to labour, even if it was admitted that she asked to be put to labour only six days after childbirth; his cruelty in not having the woman carried to hospital, although she was in such a serious condition that the hospital

administrator said that she was very seriously wounded and that he thought her life was in danger upon admission. Brackman failed to inform the hospital administrator that the woman had been assaulted. Instead, he wrote to the hospital administrator that she was either incapable or damn lazy. He neglected to make a report to the police on receipt of the note from the hospital administrator drawing attention to the ill-treatment the woman had received; and Brackman neglected to report the occurrence to the manager of the estate.

Hutson was adamant that if the CSR disregarded the government's advice and continued to employ Brackman it should be told that there would be no further allotment of Indian indentured labourers to any of its estates in any part of Fiji and would result in the cancellation of all indentured allotments to any plantation where he was employed. The governor and the chief justice concurred and so, too, did the CSR.

Brackman's employment with the company was terminated, but that did not end his employment in Fiji. The Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company in Navua hired him as an office clerk and to do other duties as the need or opportunity arose. Sooner rather than later he would have been restored to his old position. Agent-General of Immigration Coates was outraged. He wrote to Hutson to tell the manager of the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company that the government had no intention of rescinding the decision already given as to any further employment of Mr Brackman. Why should the Navua company be allowed to employ Brackman when the CSR had cancelled his contract? Governor May was so advised but he disagreed stating in a letter to Hutson that Brackman had only been barred from being put in charge of indentured labour. That meant that if he was employed as a clerk there was no way to object. Coates told the colonial secretary to inform the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company that all allotments of Indian indentured labourers to it would cease if Brackman had any supervisory role over indentured workers.

At the Supreme Court trial, the jury had taken only 20 minutes to arrive at the verdict of not guilty, but they added that Brackman's conduct in putting a woman to work in her condition at such a heavy task was callous in the extreme. It was a mild reprobation of an inhumane conduct. But, the chief justice disagreed. His Honour decided that in the circumstances he would exonerate the accused from the stigma of callousness. What the circumstances were, he did not elaborate, and no one asked, although there was ample written evidence and testimony to the contrary. Brackman

realised that his days in Fiji were effectively over. The assault on Sukhdei would haunt him wherever he went, hanging around his neck like an albatross. His notoriety had spread far and wide and he would be a prime target for a murderous revenge attack. The gruesome hacking attack on Overseer Steadman in the Moto district of Ba was fresh in everyone's mind. Bits and pieces of his body were strewn around the cane fields. It was time to move on. Brackman left Fiji on 5 July 1911 and was never heard from again. Sirdar Totaram was reluctantly demoted when the Resident Inspector of Immigrants at Lautoka protested his continued employment as *sirdar* by the CSR. He was sent to work looking after the estates' cows and horses—a stable hand. But not for long. A few years later, he was diagnosed with leprosy and sent to the remote Makogai Island in the Lomaiviti Group where he died and was buried. Kali Das and Ballu both left Tuva some years after their *girmit* ended and nothing was heard from or about them.

And Sukhdei? What a lovely name: giver of happiness. But happiness was not her lot. Hers was a truncated life lived in suffering and on sufferance in a faraway land to which she had come in such hope and anticipation, all dashed so soon. She spent the rest of days as a physically disabled, mentally deranged vagrant around Sigatoka. One day, her body was found floating in the Sigatoka River. Her death was noticed and talked about for years by people who believed she continued to haunt the Tuva district long after she was gone. Her grave is unmarked. Was her death an accident (unknown for a people new to water)? A suicide, a conscious act to end a damaged life drained of dignity and meaning? Or was she deliberately despatched to salve the conscience of fellow Indians who had witnessed the violent attack on her but chose to remain silent or, worse still, accept a bribe to cover the tracks of the perpetrators, a constant reminder of their callousness and cowardice? No one really knew. Sukhdei remained a mystery in death as she had been in life.

