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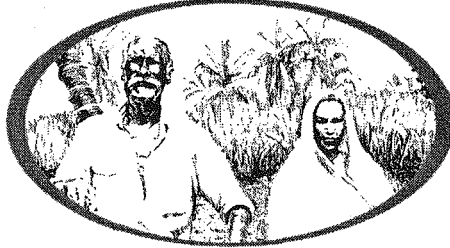


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Girmitiyas at play. Wrestling or *kusti* was a favourite sport, as late as the 1950s. Other games included *kabbadi* and *gulidanda*. They were later replaced by football.



The Wreck of the *Syria*, 1884

People falling, fainting, drowning all around one; the cries for instant help, uttered in an unknown tongue, but emphasised by looks of agony and the horror of impending death...

Dr William McGregor

At 8.30 pm on Sunday, 11 May 1884, the Indian immigrant ship *Syria* was wrecked on the Nasilai reef. By the time the shipwrecked passengers were brought to safety, fifty six immigrants and three lascars (Indian seamen) had drowned; many more would have lost their lives but for the prompt and efficient rescue operation mounted by Dr William MacGregor, then the chief medical officer and acting colonial secretary of Fiji. Later Dr MacGregor wrote emotional and vivid accounts of the tragedy, chiefly about the rescue operation, and these were well publicized in Fiji and elsewhere; some of them are reproduced here. A few other accounts of what happened are available,¹ but the full story is lost to history: important *Syria* papers, including the ship's log and the ship list which would have

illuminated the events preceding the disaster, were lost at sea, the only important papers to survive being the emigration passes. And in Fiji, no record exists of the impressions of those who survived the disaster, while the recollection of the children of the *Syria* immigrants and some indentured labourers still alive (in 1979) is evanescent. It is not surprising in the circumstances then that many incarnations of the *Syria* tragedy are with us today, evoking haunting memories of some of the horrors of Indian immigration to Fiji. This article, based on the small number of remaining sources pertaining to the episode,² attempts to provide a fuller picture of the incident, the ship, its crew and the immigrants, the events leading to the disaster, and the rescue operation, and concludes with a few brief comments on the lives of those who survived. It will have served its purpose if it facilitates a more accurate and clear understanding of the tragic event; it would be an added bonus if it contributes to a more sympathetic appreciation of some of the unhappy conditions in which Indians came to Fiji and worked, lived and died.

Between 1879 when indentured Indian immigration to Fiji started, and 1916 when it finally ended, immigrant ships made eighty seven voyages to Fiji carrying over sixty thousand indentured adults and children to the islands. The *Syria*, a sixteen year old grey and white Sunderland clipper, was the fifth ship. It was one of the smallest and also one of the finest sailing ships in the fleet of James Nourse, one of the two shipping contractors to the Fiji government, the other being the British India Steam Navigation Company.³ Like many other Nourse's ships, the *Syria* was especially designed and fitted for labour traffic. It had been operating to the West Indies for some years but it was making its first voyage to Fiji in 1884. Among the officers of the ship, the most important person was the surgeon superintendent, whose duties included medical inspection of the passengers and supervision of ventilation and cooking facilities. The safety and well-being of the immigrants was in his interest as he was paid a small gratuity for each immigrant landed alive in the colony. Even the captain and his crew deferred to the surgeon superintendent's views for their small pecuniary rewards depended, in part, on his report. The surgeon superintendent, of the *Syria*, Dr Charles Frederic Shaw, was an experienced officer, having been to Fiji aboard the *Berar* two years earlier. But those officers responsible for navigation and sailing were novices in their jobs: Charles Belson, William Henry Hurford Henson and Walter George Johnson were holding the positions of captain, first mate and second mate respectively for the first time. In addition, they were making their first trip to Fiji. Unfortunately, inexperience was not the only handicap as the ship

was poorly equipped with navigational aids as well: sailing directions for the Fiji waters were dangerously outdated, being based on *Finlay's Sailing Directions*, which was first published in 1840, and the charts were similarly obsolete, with no currents marked on them. To make matters even worse, the inexperienced captain was not given a precise destination in Fiji.

What of the immigrants aboard the vessel? The *Syria* immigrants were on the whole unrepresentative of their later counterparts, not only in terms of their area of origin, but also to some extent in their social and occupational background as well.⁴ Of the total number of Indians who emigrated to Fiji during the thirty seven years of indentured migration, almost seventy five per cent came from north India, mostly from the poor and heavily populated districts of the United Provinces (present day Uttar Pradesh): Basti, Azamgarh, Gonda, Ghazipur, Fyzabad, Jaunpur, and Allahabad; the remaining twenty five per cent came from south India. But the majority—fifty two per cent—of those on the *Syria* were from Bihar, the remaining thirty eight per cent from the U.P., five and a half per cent from the Punjab (including Delhi), two and a half per cent from Nepal, and another two per cent coming from the Central Provinces (present day Madhya Pradesh). Bihar was probably the most migration prone province in India, but its people went mostly to the neighbouring districts for seasonal employment, and further afield to the Calcutta jute mills and the Assam tea gardens; this movement diminished later with the development of indigo plantations and coal industry in Bihar itself. Its contribution to overseas Indian migration, however, remained small throughout, hardly ever exceeding the twenty per cent mark in any one year.

In Bihar it was the Monghyr and Gaya districts, two of the poorest and most heavily populated, that furnished sixty per cent of the *Syria* immigrants, while another thirty per cent came from Patna, Shahabad, Darbhanga, and Bhagalpur districts. In terms of their caste and occupational background, most of Fiji's north Indian immigrants came from middle order agricultural castes—Koris, Kurmis, Kohars, Ahirs, Lodhas—but on the *Syria* the percentage of low caste landless labourers was higher than normal, thirty five per cent compared to the average figure of thirty one per cent.⁵ One low caste, the Mushars (or mousers) in particular predominated, constituting about sixteen per cent of the total number of immigrants on the *Syria*. This was somewhat surprising as the Mushars were not noted for their enterprising spirit; on the contrary, as the District Gazetteer for Monghyr, noted,

They live in a land of social thralldom, sometimes selling themselves, their wives, and children to lifelong servitude for paltry sums. With an ingrained

aversion to emigration, pilfering in times of plenty, and living upon roots, rats, snails and shells, they cause considerable difficulty to Government officials in times of dearth.⁶

However, in 1884 economic conditions in Bihar were so acute that even the Mushars, used to eternal poverty and servitude, had to migrate to escape death by starvation. Another striking feature of the *Syria* immigrants was the very high number of families among them, coming mostly from the district of Monghyr. Typical of the many families on the ship was the extended family of Somerea, a fifty year old widowed Mushar from Monghyr: she was accompanied by her son Bundhoo (twenty eight years), and his elder brother Gurdiaal (thirty years) and his wife Sonicharee (twenty eight years), their son, Bolaki (ten years), and their three daughters, Kublasia (seven years), Jeeroa (four years) and Sookeri (fourteen months). In previous years this family, like all the others on the ship, had determinedly fought to stay at home despite mounting adversities; they simply did not have the will-power or the resourcefulness to contemplate the consequences of group migration. To alleviate distress, individual male members of the family had gone to the neighbouring districts for seasonal employment, even venturing further afield to the Calcutta jute mills — but their wives and children had always stayed at home. However, things were different in 1884: the crops had failed, the cattle had died in the drought, and the landlord had threatened them with ejection for arrears of rent. They therefore left with their families in desperation, never to see the sight of home again: for them, any alternative was better. But there were also many others who knew they were going to some place they had never been before or heard of, but they would be back soon after they had acquired a little wealth to provide for the simple amenities of life at home. Thus all the immigrants on board looked to the future with keen interest but not without considerable apprehension.

The *Syria*, carrying four hundred and ninety seven indentured adults, children, infants, and a crew of forty three (including thirty three lascars) left Calcutta on 13 March 1884. Its journey to Fiji seems to have been remarkably uneventful except for a minor storm off the Cape of Good Hope in which both the captain and the second mate allegedly lost their certificates of competency. The mortality rate of 0.80 per cent on the voyage compared favourably with the overall average of 1.00 per cent for the entire period. But perhaps the most astonishing feature of the trip was its length—fifty eight days—a record well below the average for sailing ships of seventy two days, and one that was broken only once, by another sailing ship in the same year, the *Pericles*, which took only fifty three days.⁷

The *Syria* was within Fiji waters on early Sunday morning, 11 May. It was between then and the late evening that the combination of inexperience and simple incompetence of the crew and the poor navigational facilities took their toll. We shall follow the ship upon its course and see how the errors that led to the disaster were committed. The captain sighted the island of Kadavu at 9 am, at which time he was fifteen miles leeward of his dead reckoning on the previous day's sight. The ship proceeded to about ten miles off the coast of Kadavu when her course was altered to the north-east according to the trend of the land without, surprisingly, taking any note of the strong winds and currents then prevailing. At noon, the captain hauled in the patent log (an apparatus for gauging distance of a ship), calculated the distance travelled, but without writing it down for future reckoning or cross-checking it with the hand log, as was the usual practice, he fixed his new position and proceeded along the Astrolabe lagoon. Bearings were reportedly taken along the way, but nothing was entered in the ship's log. At about 2.30 pm, the ship passed the island of Bulia which the captain recognized by 'a little pyramidal rock on the south side'; here a north half-east course was set along which the ship was ordered to proceed till 5.30 pm. The captain erred in setting his new direction by allowing only one point leeway instead of at least two or more, especially in view of the lightness of the ship and the progressively worsening weather condition. By 4 pm when the patent log was once again hauled, the ship had logged in about fifteen miles. In the next one and a half hours, another twelve or so miles were to be added, but here the captain thought differently; in his estimation the ship had travelled less than three miles between 4 pm and 5.30 pm. He based his judgment, he later said, on the observation that the wind had subsided after 4 pm, but his assertion remained unsubstantiated and indeed was contradicted by other members of the crew who testified to the increasing force of wind in the late afternoon.

Apart from miscalculating the wind factor, the captain had also neglected to take sufficient notice of the increasingly strong currents of up to five knots an hour by making only a two and half point leeway. At 5.30 pm the high mountains behind Suva were sighted and an east north-east course was set till midnight. The ship then was within the actual distance of eleven miles from the Nasilai reef and not twenty as the captain estimated. The squally conditions of the late afternoon improved somewhat by about 6 pm when the dark and heavy clouds began to dissipate. By 7 pm a nearly full moon was out. Between 6 pm and 8 pm, Ali Sakani (a lascar) was at the wheels and the first mate (Henson) was watching the helm and

keeping a general lookout. During this time both the captain and the second mate were dining below the deck. There was a lascar placed on the forecastle-head to keep a lookout, but none, strangely, on the mast-head, a common practice on all sailing ships in the vicinity of reefs. The placement of a mast-headman might, in all probability, have averted the pending disaster because the breakers would have been visible in the moonlight from a considerable distance. The ship was making more leeway than ever before on the voyage, and was within half a mile off the Nasilai reef when the captain saw the breakers at 8.15 pm. He wrongly supposed it to be more than a mile and a half away. Nevertheless, he and his crew who by now had come on the main deck, undertook desperate measures to sail clear of the danger, but their effort proved fruitless. The final chance to stop the ship from striking was lost when the captain neglected to order extra sails to be put up when turning the ship around. The *Syria* ran aground on the Nasilai reef at 8.30 pm on Sunday.

Nobody on board had the faintest idea as to their precise location, least of all the captain who ventured to think loudly that they were on the Astrolabe reef which had been passed around 3 pm! After initial confusion, all the six lifeboats on board were ordered to be launched. Two were immediately broken by the motion of the ship, and another three were smashed on the skids by the heavy sea. In the sixth and only remaining boat, the first mate, the carpenter and two lascars went to get assistance. Among the remaining crew, much commotion followed once the exact nature and extent of the disaster was realized. The captain later recollected:

The ship's crew were frightened on striking and made for lifebelts and lifebuoys. They were too frightened to do anything more. I told them I would shoot the first man that left the ship without orders. I took the cork belts and lifebuoys from them and locked them up, but they got possession of them again. They were armed with their sheath knives to defend themselves in case of being attacked by sharks.

Both the captain and the surgeon superintendent denied any knowledge of alcohol on board, but the following day several lascars were found drunk, some too drunk to save themselves. All the immigrants were on the between deck as was usual during this time of night. They had gone to bed early after their evening meal of *churah* and sugar, hoping to reach the promised land early in the morning. Events in the night would play havoc with their hopes. As for the captain, he added to his record of negligence and incompetence by not making any distress signals, or, after striking the reef, attempting to communicate with any passing vessels; he believed,

wrongly, that his 'ship would last a couple of days'.

The first mate's party reached Nasilai village at dawn on Monday and asked to be taken to Suva, but due to failure of communication were taken to Levuka instead. From there at 5 pm a search party including Captain Cocks, the harbour master, and Captain Barracks, the president of Fiji Marine Board, left for the Nasilai waters aboard the U.S.S. *Penguin*. They reached the vicinity of the shipwreck around 9 pm but, unable to communicate with the shipwrecked vessel, left for Suva, reaching there around midnight. By then, the news of the disaster had already become known, firstly around 8.30 pm from the S.S. *Thistle* which had sighted the *Syria* earlier on its way from Levuka, and around 9 pm from the surgeon superintendent, Dr Shaw, who had reached land, partly by swimming and wading and partly with the help of a Fijian canoe.

Dr William MacGregor took charge of the rescue operation immediately. It was somewhat ironic that such a responsibility should fall on the shoulders of a man who made no secret of his dislike for Indians and who regarded them, in his own words, as 'necessary evils'.⁸ But once in charge, he stood by the Indians in their desperate hour; without his courage, the loss of life would have been unimaginable. He ordered the captain of S.S. *Clyde* to prepare his ship for sea at once. Five government boats, all that were available at the time, were also got ready, in addition to a boat lent by Captain Hurburgh of the ship *Rewa* and a lifeboat from Captain Cromarty of the *Penguin*. Mr James Robertson, the general manager of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) also lent one of the company's fast and powerful steam launches. Dr MacGregor hurriedly organized a search party which, beside himself included, Dr Patullo, Dr Shaw, Lieutenant Malan, Captain Hedstrom and his crew of Fijian prisoners, two groups of police constables under the direction of Ratu Josua and Ratu Rusiate and commanded by Acting Superintendent of Police Fowler, Agent General of Immigration Henry Anson and his own crew, and twenty men from the Armed Native Constabulary.

The party left Suva shortly after midnight and reached the Nukulau waters at daybreak. The sea ahead was rough, especially for the steam launch, and the prospect of quick progress dim. Consequently, at Taituraga Island the party was divided into two groups: the first, consisting of Dr MacGregor, Dr Patullo, Captain Hedstrom, Superintendent Fowler and Constable Kingston and their crew, was to proceed along the shore and then to cross the reef to the sight of the disaster, while the other, including Dr Shaw, Dr Anson and Lieutenant Malan and their crew, with the steam launch, was to join the rescue operation by descending the Nasilai river. On

its way the shore party was met by one Mr Davis, who put on board to act as a guide his Fijian servant, who was later to become one of the minor heroes of the episode. The first boats of the shore party reached the shipwrecked vessel at 12.30 pm, after weathering extremely strong winds and 'lumpy' water; the launch party arrived three hours later. This is how Dr MacGregor saw the scene:

When the first boats reached the scene, the majority of the Indians were in the water on the reef, making as far towards the land as they could, but a considerable number were still in the wrecked vessel, chiefly women and children. The ship lay on her port side. The masts were all broken into fragments, and spars, sails, ropes, and debris of all kinds were mixed up and thrown about in the breakers in wild confusion. The front third of the hull was completely separated from the posterior two thirds, and driven about four or five yards further onto the reef than the posterior portion, and the sea rolled with tremendous fury through this gap, and sometimes broke right over the whole wreck. . . . As the tide rose, the sea became more furious about the ship, and there was great danger when near it of getting injured by floating wreckage, or of being swept off by irresistible force of the reflux of the breakers.

Almost all the Indians were entirely at the mercy of the rescuers as very few indeed knew how to swim. Dr MacGregor observed that 'if an Indian fell into water, it was seldom that he or she ever rose again without help'. Most were simply immobilized by terror and confusion, and hung on to the remains of the rapidly breaking ship. There were some cases of husbands deserting their wives for their own safety, but on the whole most families, especially those with children, stuck together. The impatient and the reckless met certain death in the patches of deep water ahead and in the floating debris. The first to be carried to the safety of waiting boats and thence to land were women, children and the injured, while those already in water were aided to a nearby sandbank. Despite increasingly difficult weather conditions and considerable commotion among the immigrants, the rescue operation was carried out fairly smoothly. But a few mishaps could not be avoided, and these, not surprisingly, involved the drunk or the extremely hysterical. One such case was that of a diminutive half-drunk Indian woman who was being conducted by the captain across a piece of broken mast that lay at an angle extending across the gap that existed between the two portions of the hull. The unsteady movement of the woman knocked both of them over and they fell towards the perpendicular edge of the reef, the woman holding the captain by the neck 'like a vice'. Mr

Fowler waiting at the other end jumped promptly into the breakers to rescue the drowning couple but he too was knocked over and caught by the woman who by now had sustained a compound fracture in one of her legs. Finally Dr MacGregor went to their rescue and with the woman's hair in his teeth and the two men in his arms, he dragged them to shallower waters. The Fijian man put on board by Mr Davis then carried the woman on his back across a patch of deep water to one of the waiting boats. She was later admitted to the Suva Hospital. The captain himself sustained a deep cut in one foot, and fainted from loss of blood; he too had to be carried to safety. Another unfortunate case involved a drunken lascar who, after being brought to a safe point, scrambled back into the wreckage and drowned despite courageous attempts by Ratu Josua to save him. But perhaps the most moving was the plight of about ten men who were left to their fate on the sandbank as the last boat, already too full of people, left the scene in the encroaching darkness; later attempts that night to find them proved to no avail. They were presumed drowned.

The last of the rescue boats carrying the surviving immigrants and crew reached the village of Nasilai shortly after 8 pm on Tuesday where they were received hospitably by the chief of Nasilai with warm food, water and shelter for the night. Next morning, shortly before high tide, all except one hundred strong Indian men were put on board the rescue boats and taken to the Nasilai Immigration Depot. Those remaining behind were marched under Anson's supervision to Rewa, receiving food and fruit from Fijian men and women along the way. On the following morning they were carried by the CSR ship *Ratu Epeli* to Nukulau where they met their other *jahazi bhais* (ship mates). The Nukulau Depot was their first real contact with the promised land. Away from India, and shaken by their brief but unforgettable experience at the Nasilai reef, the immigrants were stoically resigned to the dreariness and vulnerability of the future. In addition to the fifty-six immigrants and three lascars who died in the Nasilai tragedy, in the next fortnight eleven others (eight men, one woman and two infant girls)⁹ were to die chiefly from the inflammation of lungs, diarrhoea and dysentery. The loss of life would have been much greater but for the perseverance and courage of the rescue crew, especially its leader, Dr William MacGregor. But MacGregor himself was not satisfied, and in a long letter to Sir Arthur Gordon a month later he expressed his feelings about his own role and experience at Nasilai vividly:

I hardly like to mention the matter because the press and people have spoken of myself in connection therewith in a way that makes me feel

ashamed, and that I tell you honestly hurts me very keenly . . . The scene was simply indescribable, and pictures of it haunt me still like a horrid dream . . . People falling, fainting, drowning all around one; the cries for instant help, uttered in an unknown tongue, but emphasized by looks of agony and the horror of impending death, depicted on dark faces rendered ashy grey by terror; then again the thundering, irresistible wave breaking on the riven ship, still containing human beings, some crushed to death in the debris, and others wounded and imprisoned therein; and all to be saved then or never . . . Some sacrificed their lives to save others; some, such as the strong lascar crew thought only of themselves, and rushed into the boats surrounded by dying women and children. One of these lascar seamen I took out of the wreck paralyzed with terror; afterwards by brute force I threw him twice out of a boat to make room for drowning children . . . in spite of everything that could be done the loss of life was fearful. At 2 pm I was almost faint with despair, and I did not then think that a hundred or so could be saved. As I had somehow got to have charge of the whole concern, you can imagine the crushing weight of responsibility I felt, and you will, I am sure believe me when I tell you that I do not feel the same man since. I fear you may think it strange that fifty-six people should be killed and drowned and I, whose duty it was to see that assistance was given in the worst cases, came off with only a few bruises and slight wounds that were healed in a week. I can only say that I did the best I could. I did not ask any of those with me to risk their lives in going into the wreck with myself, save the four Fijians, whom I have recommended for the medal of the Royal Humane Society: and I could not know each time, for I went many times, whether I could return alive, especially as I am no swimmer of any use—although in the breakers there swimming was not of much avail. I feel it almost ludicrous to offer, as it were an apology for being alive: but I am sure you can understand the feeling that I entertain, half fearful lest you should think that because I am alive I did not do all that might have been done.¹⁰

But observers in Fiji and elsewhere thought otherwise, and he was rewarded with the Albert Medal of the Royal Humane Society of England and the Clarke Gold Medal from Australia. Superintendent Fowler received the Albert Medal (second class) and the Clarke Silver Medal. The surgeon superintendent received his gratuity of fifty pounds, and other members of the rescue crew were rewarded with pecuniary awards from the colonial government.¹¹

Immediately after the shipwreck, an inquiry was held to ascertain the causes of the disaster, but J.B. Thurston, the colonial secretary, was unable to approve of its findings. On 3 June, he appointed Lieutenant Coser de Merindol Malan, R.N., William Kospen and Captain Frederick Craigie Halkett, the acting chief police magistrate, to the Fiji Marine Board to institute a thorough investigation

into the wreck. In his own mind though, Thurston was certain where the blame lay, as he wrote to the secretary of state for colonies that 'the ship was lost by the incompetence and carelessness of the Master and the officers'.¹² The Board met from 4 to 17 June, closely examined the crew, especially the captain and the first mate, and sought expert opinion of those familiar with Fiji waters. It found the captain severely wanting in the exercise of his duties and suspended his certificate for nine months. The first mate was reprimanded for not having 'volunteered that interest in the navigation of that ship which might reasonably be expected from him', but no firm action was taken. Only one member of the crew, Second Mate Walter George Johnson, was singled out for praise for 'doing his utmost for saving lives'. The Fiji government itself, however, was not entirely free from blame as, despite repeated complaints, it had not taken sufficient measures to warn ships of the dangerous passage. The *Fiji Times* criticized the government for 'official indifference' and 'procrastination' and regretted that 'so great a sacrifice was necessary to stimulate official supineness'.¹³

The loss of the *Syria* was one of the worst maritime disasters in the history of Fiji, but similar losses of life, though perhaps not always as dramatic, were not uncommon in the history of overseas Indian migration. Indian immigrant ships were, by the standards of the times, much better equipped and looked after and took less payment in human lives than ships engaged in labour traffic in other parts of the world; but even so, severe losses of life could not always be contained. Cholera, fever, typhoid, and dysentery were the most frequent and indeed the most dreaded killers, and when they struck, lives were lost in great numbers: in 1859, 82 immigrants died of cholera on the *Thomas Hamlin* on its way from Calcutta to Demerara (present day Guyana); four years later on the same route, 124 died from a severe epidemic of fever on the *Clarence*, and nearer to home, 61 died from cholera and another 8 from measles on the *Fultala* on its way from Madras to Fiji in 1906. The Mauritius route too abounds with many examples, but perhaps the worst disaster there, and indeed in the history of overseas Indian immigration, took place in 1859 with the burning of the immigrant ship *Shah Allam*: of over 400 immigrants aboard, only one survived the disaster.¹⁴

These calamities served to emphasize the need for reform and vigilance, which, aided by rapid developments in naval technology, were not long in coming. In the case of Fiji at least, few major maritime catastrophe occurred after the wreck of the *Syria*. Things improved considerably after 1905 with the introduction of steamships which shortened the perilous journey by about half, avoided the cold weather south of Australia which brought pneumonia and bronchitis, and allowed the labourers greater time for acclimatisation before beginning work on the plantations.

The subsequent story of the surviving *Syria* immigrants cannot be told with any certainty. However, from the available records it appears that after two weeks of rest from the exhaustion suffered during the ordeal, the indentured labourers and their children were taken from the Nukulau Depot to Suva, where they were sorted out and allocated to the various plantations as follows:¹⁵

Table 1
Employment of *Syria* Migrants

Name of Employer	Adults		Children		Infants		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	
John Hill & Co. Rabi	14	6	1	-	-	-	21
Deuba Estate Sugar Company, Navua	14	6	3	2	-	2	27
CSR, Navuso	37	15	1	1	3	2	59
CSR, Nausori	71	35	1	-	1	1	109
CSR Naitisiri	45	19	2	1	-	-	67
Geo Smith & Co, Levuka	1	1	-	-	-	-	2
Starlake Lee & Co. Tamavua	69	30	18	15	7	4	143
Allocated	251	112	26	19	11	9	428
Unallocated	8	1	-	-	-	2	11
Total landed	258	113	26	19	11	11	439

Among the many who had lived through and survived the shipwreck was Soomerea, the fifty year old Mushar from Monghyr district in Bihar, and her children and grandchildren. They too, were allotted and were employed by the CSR, Nausori, where Soomerea worked, at half rate of pay. But not for long: she died on 18 August 1884, three months after landing in Fiji. Many other *Syria* immigrants too died in the 1880s and 1890s, few living after the turn of the century. Some found the courage to return to India once their indentures had expired, and many others talked of one day returning to their *janmabhumi* (birthplace). But when the opportunity came they balked, afraid to leave the security of what V.S. Naipaul has aptly called the 'familiar temporariness'. For them life ahead would be wrought with innumerable difficulties: they would collide with unaccustomed problems, work out new relationships in often harsh and hostile conditions, create values of neighbourliness and mutual assistance based on their remembered past, and build fortifications of social and cultural institutions to give meaning to their new lives. Many would be brutalized in the process and left by the side. But many would also survive the rigours of plantation life to build secure foundations for their children and grandchildren. The story of their traumatic experiences would reverberate for many years to come, serving as a haunting reminder of some of the less fortunate aspects of the Fiji Indian experience.

Endnotes

1. See K.L. Gillion. *Fiji's Indian Migrants* (Reprinted, Melbourne, 1973), pp. 64-65 for a brief account, and R.B. Joyce, *Sir William MacGregor* (Melbourne, 1971), pp. 72-73, for MacGregor's recollections.
2. These are in the Colonial Office Emigration Proceedings C.O. 384 series on microfilm at the Australian National Library, Canberra. The most valuable source was the 'Minutes of the Proceedings of the Fiji Marine Board Enquiry and Investigation into the Circumstances attending the wreck of the ship *Syria* on 11th May 1884'. Since most of my facts derive from this source, references and footnotes will be kept to a minimum.
3. Basil Lubbock, *Coolie Ships and Oil Sailers* (Glasgow, 1955), pp. 85-86, 174.
4. This observation is based on a preliminary analysis of the emigration passes of the *Syria* immigrants.
5. This average figure for the entire period is derived from Gillion, *Fiji's Indian Migrants*, p. 52.
6. L.S.S. O'Malley, *District Gazetteer of Monghvr*, p. 63.
7. Based on Gillion, *op. cit.* p. 59, and the annual reports of the Agent General of Immigration. The *Syria* was not the quickest ship to come to Fiji as Tinker (p. 154) says. The longest sailing voyage to Fiji was that of the *Elms* in 1904—123 days.
8. See Joyce, *Sir William MacGregor*. p. 73. The description of the rescue operation is based on Dr MacGregor's report to J.B. Thurston in C.O. 384/148, the *Fiji Times* account on 14 May 1884. and 'Minutes of the Board of Enquiry'.
9. This figure is derived from the General Register of Immigrants, 1884.
10. Joyce, *Sir William MacGregor*, pp. 72-73.
11. *Ibid.*, see also C.O. 384/154. Ratu Josua, Constable Empraim, Corporals Swani and Osai, and Emosi (of Nasovata) each got £3; members of Police (presumably non-native) £2 each; 21 members of the Armed Native Constabulary £1 each. and the Turaga ni Koro, Nasilai £20.
12. J.B. Thurston to the Secretary of State for Colonies, 5 June 1884 in C.O. 384.
13. The *Fiji Times*, 21 May 1884.
14. Lubbock *Coolie Ships and Oil Sailers*. pp. 30-32. 58-60. 68. The *Shah Allam* is referred to as the *Shah Jehan* by Lubock but Tinker (p. 395) states that '*Shah Allam* has been accepted as the real victim'. I have followed Tinker
15. This table is based on figures from the General Register of Immigrants, 1881 (under the heading *Syria*).