***Girmitiyas* in front of the "lines" of the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company, circa 1911.** City of Vancouver Archives

VIOLENCE AND PROFIT
Canada's debts to the Girmitiyas of Fiji

By Donica Belisle

In 2023 the Republic of Fiji introduced two new holidays: Girmit Day and Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Day.[1] The latter honours the life and accomplishments of Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna (1888–1958), an influential *iTaukei* (Indigenous Fijian) chief who achieved major land reforms under the British colonial administration.[2] The former refers to the indenture agreements, known as *girmits*, that between the years 1879 and 1916 bound 60,965 people from India, who became known as *Girmitiyas*, to five years of violence and coerced labour in Fiji's colonial sugarcane fields. Girmit Day and Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Day reference important people and events in Fiji's colonial past, a past that—due to intense foreign interest in Fiji—intersected with global histories of British imperialism, multinational trade, and plantation agriculture.

Canada played a role in these histories. In 1902 the Vancouver company BC Sugar, known today as Rogers Sugar, began importing raw cane sugar from Fiji.[3] It processed such sugar at its Vancouver refinery, along with other sugars sourced internationally, and then packaged and sold this sugar to wholesalers and retailers throughout the Canadian north and west. By 1919 Rogers had gained a monopoly over western Canadian sugar.[4] In this way not only Rogers but also Canadians more generally benefited from Girmitiya-grown sugar. Produced under conditions of coercion, abuse, and starvation, Fiji's raw sugars were—along with those grown under inhumane conditions in such other locations as Java, Mauritius, and Peru—among the most affordable in the world.[5] Even after buying, refining, packaging, and selling these sugars, Rogers was able to make a profit. It then passed these savings on to manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, and consumers.

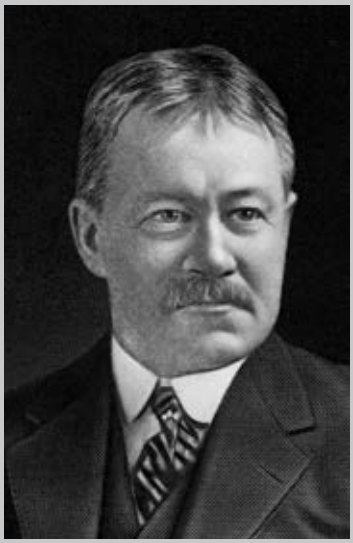
When Rogers purchased its first batch of Girmitiya sugar, six major sugar mills were operating in Fiji. Four were owned by the Australian-based Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR), the largest company in the colony. So powerful was the CSR that it controlled much of the colony's policy.[6] By the early twentieth century it had a monopoly over Fiji's largest sugarcane districts: Rewa, Labasa, Rarawai, and Lautoka. Two other companies were also present: the Australian-owned Melbourne Trusts Limited, in Ra, and the English-owned Fiji Sugar Company, in Navua. After being crushed, all such sugars were sent to Lautoka, Levuka, and Suva and then shipped internationally. New Zealand was the country's largest sugar buyer. Fiji's sugars also went to Australia, Tonga, Samoa, Niue, Fanning Island, and elsewhere. In 1902 Canada joined this list, becoming by 1914 the colony's second largest sugar importer after New Zealand.[7]

Whether it was only Rogers that was buying Fiji sugar at this time, or if other Canadian importers were also doing so, is currently unknown. What is known is that in 1905, the founder of Rogers Sugar—the American-born Benjamin Tingley ("B.T.") Rogers—became so

interested in Fiji sugar that he purchased a sugar mill in Fiji. To do so, he formed a subsidiary named the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company (VFSC). This company then purchased the Fiji Sugar Company's operations at Navua, acquiring all of its assets, including the indenture agreements that bound 539 men and women from India to the Fiji Sugar Company. These individuals lived in the Fiji Sugar Company's cane fields, in small, airless, and otherwise highly inadequate units called "coolie lines."[8] Among them lived 90 children under the age of 12. By acquiring the Navua operation the VFSC and its parent company, Rogers Sugar, became responsible for the housing, rations, and care of 539 Girmitiyas and their children.[9]

After purchasing the Navua operations, Rogers did try to improve, at least marginally, the terrible conditions there. Prior to purchasing the mill, B.T. Rogers and his wife, Isabella "Bella" Rogers, had visited the location. Bella became alarmed at the state of the mill's hospital and ordered improvements.[10] Still, nothing else was done. At Rogers's plantations as elsewhere, Girmitiyas and their children suffered horribly. Their days and nights were surveilled by overseers and other personnel who beat, whipped, raped, and otherwise inflicted grievous atrocities upon them. Additionally, plantation managers routinely withheld rations, pay, and medical care, and forced the Girmitiyas to work overtime as well as to perform backbreaking labour even when ill, grieving, pregnant, or postpartum. All too often, Girmitiyas and their children died of injuries, abuse, and malnutrition. So intense was their suffering that they referred to indenture as *narak*, meaning "hell."[11]

During the time of indenture (girmit), the violence of Fiji's cane fields was widely recognized, not only by Girmitiyas themselves but also by corporate personnel and colonial administrators. As a case in point, in 1911 officials found that a man named



B.T. (Benjamin Tingley) Rogers (b. Philadelphia 1865, d. Vancouver 1918), Founder and Director of BC Sugar ("Rogers Sugar"), 1890-1918, President of the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company, 1905-1914. City of Vancouver Archives

John William Fordham Johnson (b. England 1866, d. Vancouver 1938). Manager of the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company 1905-1907, Director of BC Sugar 1907-1938, President of the Vancouver-Fiji Sugar Company 1914-1922, President of BC Sugar 1920-1930, Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia 1931-1936. City of Vancouver Archives

Harold Bloomfield had been working at the VFSC as an overseer. Upon learning of his presence, they ordered him to leave. This was because Bloomfield was so violent that the government had previously ordered the CSR to fire him. This order had been in response to a beating Bloomfield had given eight months earlier to a woman named Naraini, who was injured so severely that she almost died. The government had notified the CSR that "if Bloomfield continued to be employed, no Indian labour would be allotted to the estate on which he was in charge." Despite this, the VFSC had hired him. After being reprimanded for doing so, it simply transferred him to "office work."[12] As this case indicates, the CSR, the VFSC, and the government were well aware of the plantation's atrocities. Yet due to indifference and the quest for profit, they chose to largely overlook them.

In fact, far from lessening its reliance upon the girmit system, Rogers Sugar decided to wring further profits from it. Before purchasing the Navua operations, B.T. Rogers had been made aware that the Fijian growers of Indian descent in the district, most of whom had previously been indentured, had been pressing the mill to increase its cane prices so they could pay off their debts. Rather than doing so, however, Rogers decided instead to decrease the mill's reliance on local growers, and to put more acres under cultivation.

To support this venture, the VFSC started indenturing more people. Between 1905 and 1916 the VFSC brought approximately 1,832 more indentured men and 889 more indentured women to its estates. With them came approximately 194 children and 48 infants. Of both Hindu and Muslim faiths, they came from diverse occupational and linguistic backgrounds. Prior to arriving in Fiji they had journeyed throughout India to Calcutta and Madras, where they then spent time in "emigration depots" prior to sailing on indenture ships to Fiji. After

being quarantined like prisoners on Nukulau Island, administrators sent them to Navua, where they joined the Girmitiyas already living there. In 1916, when India ceased indentured emigration, the VFSC reported a total of 1,509 indentured adults (including 422 women) and 244 children on its plantations.[13]

Despite Rogers's intentions, the Navua mill had difficulty turning a profit. The Navua district had such heavy rains that it was difficult for sugarcane to reach maturity. Further, Rogers's plan to put more land under cultivation had mixed results, for the land had such thick vegetation and such muddy soil that it was challenging to clear. Tragically, the period when the VFSC was actively opening more estates was the same period in which the Girmitiyas of Navua suffered the most illness and death. Between March 1910 and February 1911, 79 indentured adults at the VFSC died. Overall this figure means that on average, six to seven adults died per month for an entire year. According to an internal company report, this mortality was caused by "the opening up of new and wet land."[14]

"Shannon," the Vancouver home of B.T. Rogers and Family, circa 1920. Building began for this home in 1912.

City of Vancouver Archives

By 1911 Rogers had decided that the VFSC was no longer viable; as such, Rogers decided to sell it. Precipitating this decision was not only the VFSC's difficulty in increasing yields but also severe cyclone damage sustained in 1910. Nonetheless, Rogers could not find a buyer. Things turned around in 1914, though, when Europe went to war. Disruptions to world sugar supplies triggered widespread shortages. In 1913 the average global price of raw sugar was 10 British pounds per ton. In 1917 it was 27 pounds per ton. In 1920 it climbed to 66 pounds per ton.[15] In this atmosphere, the VFSC became immensely profitable. Beginning in 1915, writes historian John Schreiner, the VFSC enjoyed "seven consecutive years of profits."[16] Its most spectacular year was 1919–1920, when the company reaped $1.1 million.[17] That same amount today would be close to 16.5 million Canadian dollars.[18]

These earnings were a boon for the VFSC's executive and shareholders.[19] Yet neither Girmitiyas nor growers in Fiji benefited. In 1916, and in response to India's ending of indentured emigration, Fiji de-criminalized desertion of indenture contracts. By 1917 so many people had left the plantations that the companies were complaining of labour shortages. A year later the worldwide pandemic struck Fiji, disproportionately affecting iTaukei and Fijians of Indian descent.[20] Meanwhile, due to inflation, living costs rose. Still, the sugar companies refused to bring up wages and cane prices. So dire did the situation become that in 1920 a general strike by Fijians of Indian descent occurred in Rewa, Suva, and Navua. This strike occurred just two weeks after the Fiji administration cancelled all remaining indentures and was both politically and economically oriented, as historian Ahmed Ali makes clear.[21]

This strike caused such disruptions that the 1920 crushing season was affected. This, combined with a 1921 crash in world sugar prices, ongoing weather problems, and the CSR's and VFSC's refusals to raise wages and prices, meant that the VFSC had become a liability. After trying and failing to find a buyer, in December 1921 Rogers Sugar announced it was closing the Navua mill. Since the VFSC was the largest employer and only cane buyer in Navua, this announcement prompted an "exodus" from the district.[22] By mid-1922 the economic situation of Navua had changed forever. Rogers sold off all of its assets, including its machinery and tramlines. Navua's growers switched to rice, bananas, and other products. As well, a dairy operator moved in. Still, as historian Vinod Masih writes, "it is doubtful whether the township of Navua ever fully recovered."[23]

View of the Navua sugarcane fields looking north, c. 1911. Evident in this photograph are individual buildings, some of which may have belonged to Fijian growers of Indian descent. Also in view are the cloudy conditions that often prevented sugarcane in Navua from reaching optimum maturity. City of Vancouver Archives

Rogers' investors, meanwhile, continued to prosper. B.T. Rogers died in 1918, leaving Bella almost his entire estate, "valued at $1,250,000."[24] Additionally, and as he himself once wrote, his sugar ventures had earned "$10,566,909 of which $5,289,375 has been paid out in dividends to shareholders."[25] The president of Rogers Sugar from 1920 to 1930, John William Fordham Johnson (who, notably, had lived in 1906 and 1907 in Navua, serving as the VFSC's first manager), was also wealthy. To celebrate his retirement, he took "a trip round the world with his wife Alice." Johnson owned a house in Vancouver as well as a "country estate near Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island" where he entertained "royalty." In 1931 he became the lieutenant-governor of British Columbia.[26]

When one considers the fates of Rogers's executive on the one hand, and Navua's Girmitiyas and growers on the other, certain things are made clear. It was the Girmitiyas who tended the VFSC's lands and sugarcane. After their indentures expired, these same people rented small plots, cultivating cane and selling it to the VFSC. Navua sugars, in turn, were exported to Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, where they enriched importers' profits and contributed to these nations' economies. These same sugars, too, enhanced consumers' pocketbooks, in that they were made affordable by Girmitiyases' sacrifices. Still, Rogers Sugar did not formally recognize the Girmitiyases' contributions, even during the heyday of 1915 to 1920 when it realized record profits but refused to raise wages or cane prices.

To this day Rogers Sugar has not publicly acknowledged its debts to Fiji or the Girmitiyas. Yet neither have Canadians more generally. By purchasing Girmitiya-grown sugar refined by Rogers Sugar, western Canadians have profited—knowingly or not—from the violence of Indian indenture. And, by allowing Rogers Sugar to operate at will in Fiji, Canada was complicit in this abuse. Canadians, iTaukei, Girmitiyas, and Fijians of Indian descent were all members of the British Empire during the early twentieth century, but they did not benefit equally.

Note on Sources

This article is based on research undertaken in Canada and Fiji, including in the City of Vancouver Archives and the National Archives of Fiji, as well as on scholarship pertaining to Canada, Fiji, and sugar including those works cited below. For extended discussion please see my forthcoming book *Indian Indenture and Canadian Sugar in Fiji: Violence and Profit Across the Pacific* (2025), or be in touch at donica.belisle@uregina.ca.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Thank you to Brandi Adams, Varun Lalotra, and Kiera Mitchell for their research assistance. I am grateful to the archivists and librarians who helped me with my queries including Asena Dame, Timoci Balenaivalu, Losena Tudreu,

Unloading internationally produced raw cane sugars at Rogers Sugar's dock, 1902. City of Vancouver Archives

Onisimo Volau, Amelia Waqa, Jennifer Voka, Emily Rasoqosoqo, Sekaia Nauasarawa, Chak Yung Hi, Kira Baker, and Bronywn Smith. Thank you also to Rizwaan Abbas, Jasmine Ali, Shwetanshu Bhushan, Ganesh Chand, Praneil Chandra, Jonathan Crago, Marie-France Duhamel, Farzana Gounder, Nicolas Halter, Arif Khan, Pravind Kumar, Shailesh Lal, Margaret Mishra, Shobha Rae, Nikhat Shameem, Kate Stevens, David Taylor, Ravindra Prajapati, and many others. All errors are my own.

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Endnotes

1. Vijay Narayan, "Cabinet Approves Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Day and removes Constitution Day as a public holiday," *Fiji Village,* February 15, 2023, https://www.fijivillage.com/news/Cabinet-approves-Ratu-Sir-Lala-Sukuna-Day-and-Girmit-Day-and-removes-Constitution-Day-as-a-public-holiday-f48r5x/.
2. According to Suliasi Vunibola and Regina Scheyvens, *iTaukei* is the Fijian "sub-word of Itaukei ni vanua (the custodians of the land) or tamata ni vanua (people of the land)." Since 2010, the Government of Fiji has used the word *iTaukei* to refer to Indigenous Fijians. See Vunibola and Scheyvens, "Strategies for success of Indigenous businesses on customary land: case studies of three Itaukei (Indigenous Fijian) enterprises," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, *19*(3), 646.
3. For clarity, this article refers to the historic company BC Sugar by its current name, Rogers Sugar. For most of the twentieth century, BC Sugar was known as Rogers Sugar. BC Sugar existed until 2008 when it merged with Lantic, Inc. This latter company is today known as Rogers Sugar.
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6. Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jahiji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2012), 172.
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12. Jane Harvey, "Naraini's Story," in Lal, *Chalo Jahiji*, 341.
13. These statistics are drawn from the Plantation Registers held at the National Archives of Fiji. See also "Reports on Accounts," in "Fiji 1914," City of Vancouver Archives, AM 1592-S17-F15.
14. "Early Fiji Reports," March 14, 1910, City of Vancouver Archives, AM 1592-S17-F15.
15. Moynagh, *Brown or White?,* 106.
16. Schreiner, *The Refiners*, 42.
17. Blythe D. Rogers to Sir Edmund Osler, February 27, 1920, City of Vancouver Archives, AM 1592-1-S12-F68.
18. Comparing the 1920 Canadian dollar to today's dollar, the exact amount would be $16,427,358.49. See Bank of Canada, "Inflation Calculator," accessed March 7, 2024, https://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator/.
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20. "Navua," *Fiji Times*, December 18, 1918, 5; "Navua," *Fiji Times*, December 23, 1918, 5.
21. Ali, *Plantation to Politics*, 67.
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24. "Late B.T. Rogers's Estate," *Victoria Daily Times*, June 28, 1918, 2.
25. As quoted in Schreiner, *The Refiners*, 73.
26. Schreiner, *The Refiners*, 87.