

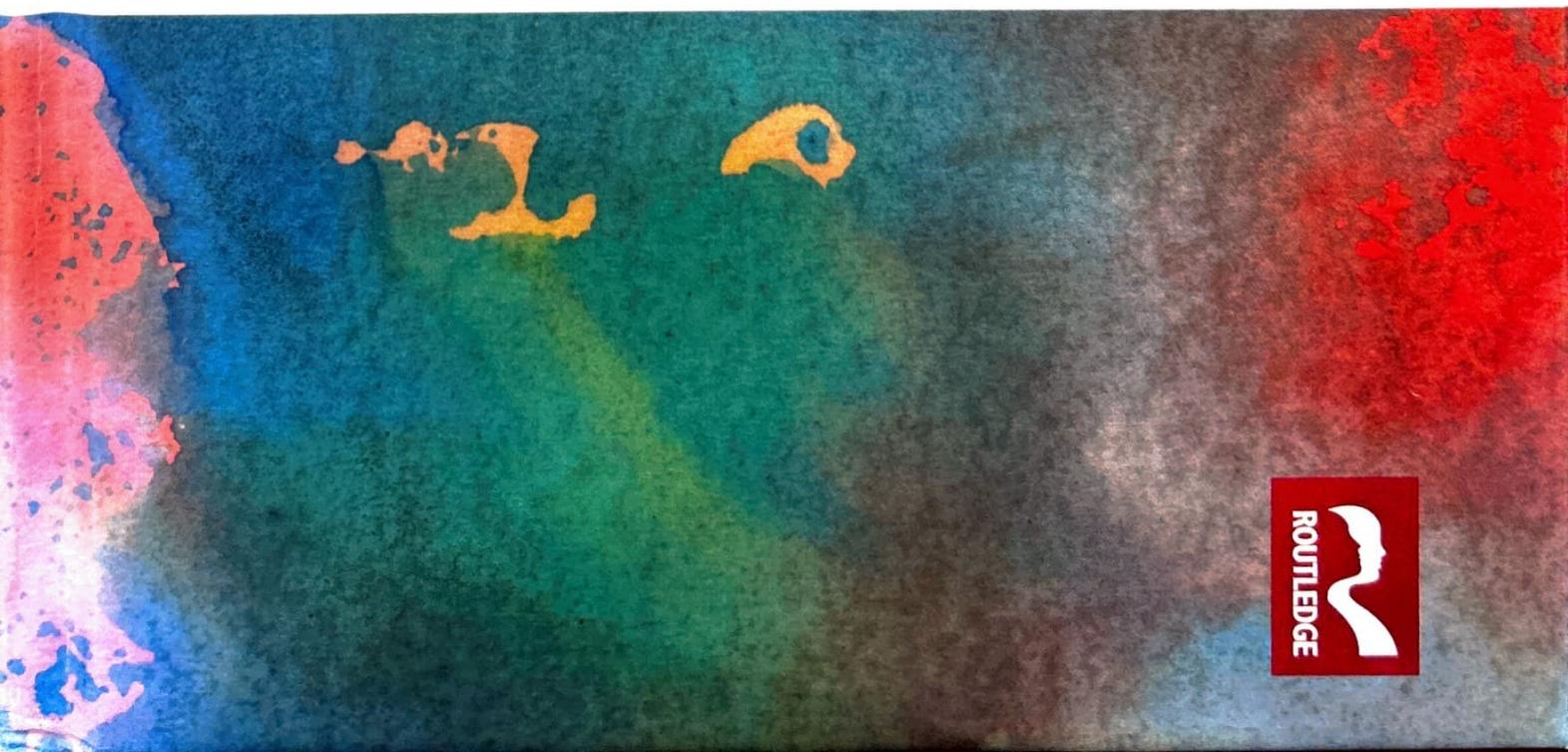


# **KALA PANI CROSSINGS, GENDER AND DIASPORA**

## **INDIAN PERSPECTIVES**

Edited by

• Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao



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Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao**

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## Revisiting Indian Discourses

*Amba Pande*

#### Introduction

The indenture labour system was introduced during the 19th century as a response to the abolition of Atlantic slavery between 1830–1860 by Britain, France, and Portugal. Under indenture the Indian labourers were sent to far-flung British, French, and Dutch colonies around the world after signing a contract (the term *Girmit* is a colloquial word that refers to an agreement). Indentured recruitments from India started in 1834 and lasted up till around 1924,<sup>1</sup> despite being officially banned in 1917. People of the Indian subcontinent had been migrating even before the indenture, but under indenture the Indian workers and labourers were transported in large numbers (estimated to be around 1,597,957) according to a structured model of labour supply along definite pathways and fixed destinations. On paper, the indenture system appeared as a voluntary form of labour migration, operating under a bond which ensured a certain amount of income and basic rights for the labourers. Since the anti-slavery groups were active when this system was launched, the British abolitionists opposed the introduction of a system to employ a cheap and malleable labour force. They were also concerned about the pulling down of wages in the colonies due to indenture labourers that might adversely affect the newly freed Africans (Major 2017). Societies like the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFSS) were vocal against the Indentured System through their daily—*The Emancipator*—and even sent investigators on plantations to expose the exploitation of labourers. Therefore, the British Government made extra efforts to project the indentured system as an improved method of labour acquisition under which an agreement was signed with the labourers who were willing to migrate. But in reality, the indenture system was founded on the remains of slavery and operated with the same mindset of the colonial masters and plantation owners. The plantation economy was based on almost the same system as in slave labour (Werges 2018; Tinker 1974). The transition was more in terms of technicalities rather than the practical application. As Punekar and Varikayil state, ‘the coercive behaviour, complete control over the labourers, lack of proper food or living conditions, frequent deaths, punishment/whipping for

Table 3.1 Major Indian Indentured Labour Importing Colonies

Name of Colony	Years of Migration	No. Of Emigrants	Indian Population in 1879	Indian Population in 1900	Indian Population in 1969
Mauritius	1834–1900	453,063	141,309	261,000	520,000
British Guiana	1838–1916	238,909	83,786	118,000	257,000
Trinidad	1845–1916	147,900	25,852	83,000	360,000
Jamaica	1845–1915	36,412	15,134	14,661	27,951
Grenada	1856–1885	3,200	1,200	2,118	9,500
St Lucia	1858–1895	4,350	1,175	2,000	—
Natal	1860–1911	152,184	12,668	64,953	614,000
St Kitts	1860–1861	337	200	—	—
St Vincent's	1860–1880	2,472	1,557	100	3,703
Reunion	1861–1883	26,505	45,000	—	—
Surinam	1873–1916	34,304	3,215	—	101,715
Fiji	1879–1916	60,965	480	12,397	241,000
East Africa	1895–	32,000	—	—	—
Seychelles	?–1916	6,315	—	—	—

Source: Lal 2000

Source: Date Sourced from Lal 2000.

transgressions and several other attributes continued under Indenture' (1989: 100). The system was exploitative right from the journey to the settlement in the new destinations.

How such a large number of labourers could be recruited and under what circumstances they agreed to sign the agreement is a question that has been much debated and discussed. A set of scholars (Scoble 1840; Tinker 1974) emphasise the uninformed recruitment where the labourers were duped into signing the agreement and then transported while the other group of scholars (Bates 2000; Carter 1996; Kumar 2017) emphasise the informed and willing choice because of the prevailing conditions in India (poverty, the caste system, etc.). Between these two binaries I argue that the recruitment and transportation based on misinformation and treachery could not have continued for almost 85–100 years, especially when labourers were coming back from the colonies and getting re-recruited. Information was circulating, regular correspondence was taking place between the laborers and their families back in India, and most importantly the abolition of indenture had become part of the national movement in the 20th century. The issue of exploitative conditions at the plantations, the suffering of indentured labourers, and abolition of indenture figured in almost every Indian National Council (INC) resolution of annual sessions (INC Resolutions; Boodhoo 2019; Bates 2017). It was getting a lot of coverage in the Indian Press, and national leaders were talking about it on public platforms. Therefore, to think that the system could continue for so long based only on coercion or deception and that

labourers were so ignorant and naïve that they could not understand it would be an erroneous understanding. A more nuanced reading of the indenture system would reveal that both coerciveness and choice applied in varying degrees in the recruitment process and, at least in the later years, people were much aware about it (Pande 2020).

However, if we expand the ‘informed choice’ theory a little further regarding the prevailing conditions in India due to which the labourers were opting for recruitment, then colonialism and its impact comes out as a critical factor. The indentured migrations were rooted in the colonial context which was the prime source of the displacement and sufferings of the migrant labourers, and hence it cannot be overlooked in the analysis of indenture (Pande 2020: 7). When the indenture system began, the British rule in India had already existed for more than 200 years during which the country had witnessed major shifts because of the commercialisation of agriculture, the change in agrarian relations and production, the breakdown of traditional village economy, the destruction of local industries, the introduction of cash economy and heavy taxation, the frequent occurrence of famines, floods, diseases, and political upheavals, and disbandment of armies, to name a few (Davis 2001; Chakrabarti 1994; Guha 1983; Klein 1984 as mentioned in Pande 2020). These factors caused extensive and widespread destruction, unemployment, poverty, and displacement (Pande 2020: 3). There is another aspect of indenture recruitments that has been pointed out by M.M. Mani (1996), and that is the shortage of labour and ill health of the returnee labourers in the Madras presidency due to which the agriculture was severely affected. Mani further informs that the ‘Divisional officer of Nagapattanam confirmed that a very large majority of the labourers who emigrated were in debt to their landlords and that the government could not do anything to stop it’ (1996: 698). Thus, it can be said that a combination of factors mostly rooted in colonial policies and its after effects led to such large numbers of recruitments of the Indian population to the unknown colonies.

The other significant feature of the colonial migrations is the recruitment and transport of women both as dependent and independent migrants. Overseas migration of women was a rare phenomenon at that time.

### **Women and Indenture Recruitment**

Under the indenture system women were recruited and transported to various colonies, like men. In the initial years, only single men were recruited for indenture, but the British Parliament decided to encourage family migration to provide stability to the indenture societies at the plantations. The number of women set under the rules of indenture was a minimum of 40 women per hundred men which is 28.6 percent of women with each batch of emigrants. This target was difficult to realise in the beginning and records show that often unscrupulous methods were adopted (McNeill and Lal 1914: 312). In the later years however, the quotas generally got filled with relative ease. As

far as the catchment area for the recruitment of women is concerned it was almost the same as that of men i.e., Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and some districts in South Indian states. In terms of caste and religion too, there was not much difference between women and men; the majority belonged to lower castes, but some upper-caste women were also recruited and transported (Lal 1985; Chatterjee 1997). However, in terms of social class, women were characterised differently than the men and there is a lengthy debate among scholars on the type of women who migrated. A great deal of evidence suggests that large numbers of single women like widows or women from professions considered as dubious like prostitution (also used by British officials) or women trying to escape exploitative family conditions migrated under indenture (Lal 1985; Reddock 1985). Such women were generally social outcasts in Indian society. In the plantations like Fiji and in Caribbean colonies a majority of women who migrated were single (Seecharan 2017; Reddock 1985). Women whose husbands had already indentured at different plantation colonies also migrated as single women. The cases of fraud, kidnapping, and deception (commonly known as *bharmai deis*) were more common among women than men.

About the modes of recruitment, the debate over freedom or recruitment by choice vs recruitment through deceit and deception is common for women as well as for men recruits. On the one hand some scholars emphasise kidnapping and deceit, projecting women as victims of the sexual exploitation and colonial oppression (Tinker 1974; Beall 1990; Kelly 1991; Lal 1985 as mentioned in Pande 2020). On the other hand, some scholars hold the view that emigration was a result of informed choices, which led to liberating experiences for women (Reddock 1994; Emmer 1987; Lal 1985; Carter 1994). An additional dimension was added to this binary, and that was positioning the Indentured women in the sexuality vs morality, or victim vs fallen women debate (Pande 2020; Gupta 2014, 2020; Beall 1990; Kelly et al. 1991).

There can be no doubt that cases of kidnapping and deceit were quite common in women recruitments. At the same time, it also cannot be denied that despite the stories of coercion and exploitation and the misogynous representation of emigrant women, many deliberately opted to migrate (Choenni 2016; De Klerk 1953; Emmer 1987). According to Lal, '[c]ontrary to the popular view and claims of recruiters experiencing extreme difficulty in recruiting the requisite number of women notwithstanding, the stipulated proportion was invariably met in the case of all the colonies' (1985: 57–58). The *Hindu* reported from Madras Presidency that 'from almost every village in South India some women, young and old, had disappeared, sometime or the other, and they could not be traced' (1914). A larger question that arises here is, what were the conditions in which these women chose to migrate and how was it perceived in Indian society? Of course, some of the causes would be the same as those of men's migration but it is interesting to look at some of the additional factors propelling women's migration and also to investigate the prevailing conditions in order to understand the prevalent discourses and

of women's dignity and justice unnoticed (Chatterjee 1997; Northrup 1995). In this context therefore, the idea of indentureship playing an emancipatory role for Indian women can be said to be unfounded. The enslavement and oppression that these women experienced at the plantations were no less or even bigger than the places of origin. According to Pathak and Subudhi,

[w]omen's migration towards these colonies was like a journey from one prison to another. They faced new forms of subjugation that started from the beginning of the voyage and continued until their destination in these colonies. These indentured women bore, both the curse of the colonial plantation-patriarchy and social and customary injustices of that time.

(2020: 3)

The moving story of Kunti, and many other indentured women who were facing rape and sexual abuse at the plantations created a furore all over India (Kelly 1991; Kelly et al. 1991: 45–65; Lal 1985; Sanadhya 1972: 21–22). Since Kunti had to jump in a river to protect her chastity from the overseer, it gave an ethical or moral edge to the whole story as Charu Gupta (2020) suggests. The attack on the chastity of India's own women was like a challenge to its honour. It gripped the imagination of the whole nation and became part of the national movement. According to Tambe, the morality issues of Indian coolie women in overseas colonies of the British Empire were Gandhi's 'initial motivation' to assemble Indian nationalists and protest the colonial government (2009). Periodicals and dailies like *Stri Darpan* and *New India* took up the issue on a regular basis. Dr Annie Besant who was the editor of *New India* gave extensive coverage to the issue. It mobilised the public opinion to a great extent. Several scholars have deliberated and written about it. Ray writes that,

[t]he campaign to abolish indentured emigration, a pivotal event in early Indian protest movements, involved Indian women labourers from its inception to its conclusion. Sometimes "women" and their "honour" served as convenient symbols. At other times, the active political and physical involvement of women was essential to keep the movement alive . . . it was a movement in which Indian women played a role at every crucial stage.

(1996: 127)

Brij V. Lal states that 'the move to stop the degradation of Indian women on colonial plantations attracted more support among the Indian masses than any other movement in modern Indian history' (Lal 1985: 55). According to Charu Gupta the issue of indentured women was put in the context of a larger debate on gendered morality, sexuality, belonging, and what is 'good' for indentured women, without them having any say in it (Gupta 2020).

One of the prime concerns related to the women and indenture system was the shortage of women and the uneven sex ratio among the indentured recruits. The second major concern was the migration of single women. The third issue was the moral degradation of women and sexual exploitation faced by them and the ills prevalent at the plantations. This was seen more as a consequence of the shortage of women and recruitment of single women. There was a proposal to increase the number of women to 50 percent of the total number of recruits, but it was vehemently opposed in India and instead a complete stoppage of women's migration was endorsed (McNeill and Lal 2014: 14). Regarding the recruitment of single women, the general opinion remained negative, leaving them in a precarious situation. Otherwise, also in Indian society, the condition of widows and single women was highly pitiful, and they were considered as the source of all evil in the society. Their recruitment as single independent labourer for overseas employment was considered almost outrageous, outrightly branding them as 'immoral', 'fallen', and 'destitute women'. In these circumstances, marriage became a kind of protective shield for women to escape the misogynous gaze. Many got married at the depots to save themselves from additional exploitation. Overall, the issue of moral degradation of Indian women at the plantations became a cause of a major concern in India. C.F. Andrew compared them with 'a canoe being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand' (1918: 6). Indian media repeatedly stressed the highly 'immoral' lives the Indian women were forced to lead or were voluntarily leading in the colonies, threatening the notions of order, virtue, and civility (Gupta 2014; Hiralal 2020 as quoted in Pande 2020). Though the issue got a wide media coverage, the whole frame within which women's issues were deliberated merely objectified them as victims of multiple forms of violence or as 'fallen' beings inhabiting liminal spaces between sexuality and morality.

In the wake of severe criticism from the Indian intelligentsia, the press, and socio-political activists about the sexual exploitation and moral degradation of women at the plantations, the colonial authorities were left completely on the back foot. The self-perceived glorified grand idea of liberating Indian women from a barbaric culture and having a civilising effect on them was completely demolished. Against this, one of the justifications that the British wanted to present was about the type and class of women that were getting recruited. In other words, the colonial narrative presented these women as morally degraded, who themselves had to be blamed for what they were facing. Amar Wahab elaborates this in detail,

[u]nwilling to admit that the evils like wife murder were caused by the conditions of indenture, colonial officials resorted to Orientalist (i.e., culturalist) and naturalist explanations that explained—wife murder either as an East Indian phenomenon or the result of a high male-to-female ratio. In other words, it was the natural cultural traits of the Coolies, because unchaste women were recruited, and Indian

men were prone to jealousy and are naturally violent, denying any claim that indenture could have any part to play in that.

(2008: 8)

As a result, the recruiters were encouraged to recruit the 'right kind of women' (Reddock 1985). Even M.K. Gandhi, as Goolam Vahed points out,

[i]n his formative years in South Africa had a low opinion about the Indentured Indians and made a clear distinction between them and free Indians. But as his social, political, and spiritual views evolved, he came to the conclusion that the indentured system should be terminated because it was 'an evil thing' in and of itself, harmful to the 'moral well-being' of the indentured.

(2019: 20-21)

The Indian indentured women, therefore, stood at the intersection of Victorian morality, race, Indian patriarchal norms, and gendered sexuality, that completely bogged them down as weak and powerless beings:

Indentured women stood accused in the eyes of both the nationalists as well as the colonialists alike. Overall, the discourse on Indentured women revolved around two major strands that were, in fact, two sides of the same coin. The first remained stuck in the narratives of exploitation, subjugation, and powerlessness of these women who were victims of indenture and forced to live immoral lives. The second view operated within the patriarchal frame of purity, morality, and honour, casting these women as immoral sexual mercenaries and troublemakers. Both these narratives presented women in fixed, objectified, categories rather than as exploited workers. Within these two frameworks both the nationalists and the colonialists validated each other by putting women into a stereotypical frame where her sexuality and nothing else mattered, certainly not her struggle to survive and her achievements and successes as labourers initially and in other fields in later times. Legislations were designed to reinforce the patriarchal and moralistic social foundations to control, guide and protect women but their voice was rendered invisible by the colonialists and the nationalists alike.

(Pande 2020: 10-11)

The attention to such issues deviated the discourse from the real problems and the miserable conditions in which these women were living and working at the plantations. Scholars like Lal (1999), Gillion (1962), Ray (1996), and Gounder (2020) have presented elaborate research on the wretched conditions on plantations under which these women had to live and work and yet face misogynous comments for their role as labourers and mothers (Gounder 2020). Indentured men were equally participants in this exploitation by

physically abusing and selling their wives and daughters into prostitution for which women were squarely blamed (Lal 1985; Fowler 2012).

The overall issue of indentured women was viewed from either the perspective of men or the elite women of the Indian society who frequently wrote on this matter in different dailies and spoke about it on public platforms. Many of these women themselves were trained in the Western feminist thought process and were more concerned about correcting the wrongdoings of indentured women. This was much in line with either the Victorian patriarchal frames or the Brahminical-Aryan customs. Otherwise, the pluralist Indian practices were liberal enough to accommodate practices like divorce, remarriage, and widow remarriage. Many of these customs were prevalent among the communities such as Lingayats, Jats, Maravars, and among the tribes in the northern parts of Bihar, Orissa, and regions from where the indentured labourers originated (Chitnis and Wright 2007). However, the same practices among the plantation societies were considered as extremely low and morally degenerated. This was a reflection of Victorian and Brahmanical order. Moreover, the real issue of sexual abuse and exploitation of women by the Indian men or the colonial officials took a back seat against the so-called concern about the moral degradation and sexual conduct of the indentured women.

As it appears, women's bodies and character became a battleground and a matter of Indian honour which was being ruined in the hands of the British. *New India* reported that 'self-respect of India was hurt by this refined and civilised form of slavery' (1915). Women being vested with the role of protectors of Indian civilisation and culture were further loaded with patriarchal norms. Amongst all these developments the most conspicuous was the complete silence of the indentured women. They never got a platform to speak or express their opinion, were never consulted on any matter, and since they were unable to read and write till the 1940s, their histories remained silent. Though the process itself came under great scrutiny, the women themselves, their concerns, and their voices remained completely marginalised. This trend continued for a long time and women, as a category of analysis, remained absent in the indenture narratives (Pande 2018). Interventions by feminists, subalterns, and the progenies of the indentured labourers led to the broadening and reinventing of historical narratives on the indentured women from their own perspective. It was a significant contribution towards unravelling the complex and diverse layers of indentured women's lives. It took the discourse beyond the skewed understandings of sexuality and morality to highlight the deeper and rich details of their lives and the way they shaped the social, domestic, economic, and political lives of the plantations in the indenture and post-indenture period (Hiralal 2014, 2016; Bahadur 2013; Jha 2010–11; Chatterjee 1997):

The complex and multidimensional realities of kidnap and escape, imperilment and empowerment, enslavement, and liberation, and

above all of the amazing spirit of Indentured women were highlighted. It punctured the myth of a voiceless victim or a re-casted object to bring out a worker who negotiated with the patriarchal norms and exploitative conditions to create a niche for herself.

(Pande 2020: 11)

Numerous aspects of indentured life came to the fore with studies on women, to demonstrate that they had their own ways to deal with the situations. They resisted the colonial as well as the native notions of patriarchy which impacted every stage of recruitment, migration, and settlement. They resisted the day-to-day plantation abuses and became part of the larger resistance movements. While going through extreme difficulties and exploitative conditions they took their destinies in their own hands and could ultimately turn the circumstances to their advantage (Pande 2020). One of the most intriguing aspects of their lives was highlighted by scholars like Chan Choenni in the Trinidadian context. It was the way they turned the paucity of numbers to their favour. It gave them a better negotiating position and protected their position in the family. They could leave an exploitative husband and opt for a new partner. As the social patriarchal norms had collapsed, women found new freedom. They were already earning their income. Several of them became matriarchs of large families, created successful businesses for themselves, and interacted freely in society, even drinking alcohol. Most importantly they were also respected for what they had achieved. However, Choenni (2016) points out that after the abolition of indenture and revival of Indian and Hindu cultural traditions due to the increase in the activities of religious organisations, the patriarchal format was resumed. By the 1930s the cultural notions of *izzat*,<sup>2</sup> or honourable behaviour of women in Suriname, became a dominant trend and restricted women in many ways. The matriarchs themselves were influenced by the patriarchal notions and prescribed *izzadar* behaviour for their daughters and daughters-in-law (Choenni 2016). During the 1930s and 1940s, when the gender ratio became better, the position of women weakened. But by the 1960s the Surinamese women rebelled and rejected the *izzat* concept focussed on the ‘honourability’ of women.

Such women scholars and writers as Peggy Mohan, Ramabai Espinet, and Gaiutra Bahadur, through their writings, have reinstated the indentured women to their stature. They do this through their portrayal of strong, empowered women who were attributed with a sense of agency and were not only victimised women. In their studies and writings, they challenged the colonial records, questioned the stereotypes, and re-positioned the indentured women.

### **Conclusion**

Indian women were part and parcel of the indenture migration and shared space with men at all stages. However, they had to face additional challenges and exploitative conditions as women at the time of recruitment, at the depots, during the journey, and at the plantations. The recruiters adopted

all sorts of fraudulent methods to recruit women, but women also were recruited willingly, either to escape the prevailing social conditions or to look for better economic opportunities. The indenture system was a dehumanising system, and it further degraded the women and, in a way, recast them as sexualised females in such a way that all the other matters relating to them became sidelined.

One of the major challenges that indentured women faced was the public opinion and the discourse related to them in India. Their positioning in the colonial as well as the nationalist discourses revolved around the Indian Brahmanical or Victorian patriarchal order. The nationalist narrative presented them as exploited victims of the indenture system and the colonial narrative presented them as morally degraded women who had to be blamed for what they were facing. So, the Indian discourse remained within the patriarchal parameters of either 'powerless victims' or 'immoral women'.

Within this overall discourse the voices of these women remained silenced and the realities of their lived lives and survival strategies were rendered invisible in the colonial historiographies. In the present, the scholarship has progressively moved on to challenge the hitherto stereotypical, objectified images of indentured women and explores the multi-layered dimensions of their agency in the social, cultural, economic, and political formation of the plantation lives. This is undoubtedly a major development towards the feminist and subaltern epistemology and the re-reading of the indenture history from a postcolonial and decolonial perspective in India.

The process of migration and settlement in the new places, despite constraints and challenges, often offer women new opportunities and financial independence. Women have been considered as the carriers and custodians of Indian culture but at the same time their encounters and contacts with new cultures often enable them to find liminal spaces between tradition and modernity. Standing 'in-between' the two worlds of origin and adoption, women tend to experience dialectic tensions between freedom and subjugation, but they often use this space to assert independence and to redefine their roles and perceptions of self (Pande 2018). In the same way, indentured women, despite all the challenges, had a far-reaching and significant impact on not only the ways in which the Indian socio-cultural trends evolved in the plantation colonies but also on the political economy of the plantations and the formation of the Indian diaspora. Their biggest battle, however, was of the battle of perceptions and ideas that was built around them over the years by the colonial as well as the nationalist historiographies.

## Notes

- 1 Although the indenture system was officially abolished in March 1917 under the Defence of India Ordinances, it continued long after it. The final shipment of workers to Mauritius was carried in 1924. See *The abolition of Indian Indentured Migration to Mauritius* (Bates et al. 2017).
- 2 The term *izzat* means honour, prestige, or reputation. It was, and still is, given a great deal of importance in the Indian Society especially in the context of women.

The women are expected to behave in a particular way which is considered 'honourable'. We even come across instances of women being killed in the name of family honour or *izzat*.

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