Amba Pande *Editor*

Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora

Springer

Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora

Amba Pande
Editor

Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora

Springer

Editor
Amba Pande
School of International Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi, Delhi, India

ISBN 978-981-15-1176-9 ISBN 978-981-15-1177-6 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

Preface

Indian women have shared space with men in almost all the migration streams, including the labour migrations under the Indenture system. As per the rules of Indenture, there had to be a minimum of forty women per hundred men. This ratio was indeed difficult to maintain, and it is widely known that the recruiters adopted all sorts of fraudulent methods, to recruit women. But women also got recruited willingly either to escape the prevailing social conditions or to look for better economic opportunities. On the plantations, women faced the violence and abuses inherent in the system, met with the harsh and relentless work conditions, encountered the authoritarian structure of the plantations which reinforced patriarchal trends, confronted cultural and social prejudices and many other forms of exploitation. Despite these adverse circumstances which, women had to undergo, their positioning in the colonial as well as the nationalist discourses remained within the patriarchal paradigms of either 'powerless victims' or 'immoral' women. Their voices remained silenced and the realities of their lived lives and survival strategies were rendered invisible in the colonial historiographies.

The increasing feminisation of international migration and the recent feminist and subaltern epistemological interventions gave a stimulus to women's voices and perspective in the ongoing researches. The multidisciplinary academic engagements progressively challenged the stereotypical objectified images to bring out the multifaceted realities of women in the indenture and post-indenture period. Indian women developed innovative strategies to cope with the prevailing conditions, often, managing to turn the adverse circumstances to their advantage. They empowered themselves through education, successfully using the liminal spaces to build new identities for themselves. At the same time, they also raised families in often inhospitable circumstances passing on solid foundation to the posterity. Negotiating their way through Indian cultural traditions dominated by patriarchal norms and indentured lives at plantations they were able to recast their mesogenic stigmatization and make a critical contribution in social, cultural, economic and political formation of the fledgeling settlements which transformed into dynamic societies over succeeding generations. In so doing they subverted/transformed several established paradigms and categorizations. Women's agency was evident in

their personalized as well as the collective resistances against sexual abuses by the native as well as the white men; against the exploitative labour laws and working conditions; and against the colonial system as part of satyagraha and recruits of Indian National Army.

This volume aims to capture the voices, experiences and lives of indentured and post-indentured Indian women and map their struggles, challenges, agencies and resistances. The papers included in the volume take a multidisciplinary approach and methodology to locate women at both the spheres of political economy and socio-cultural formations of the plantations of various countries and regions around the world. Such efforts help reinvent histories, loaded with colonial and patriarchal paradigms, by using memories, oral stories and personal accounts of the largely silenced sex.

I take great pleasure in acknowledging the institutions, scholars and friends who have been the source of constant support and encouragement all along. First, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all the authors and scholars who have contributed to this volume. I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues in School of International Studies, JNU and other research organisations with which I am associated in different capacities i.e. India International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (IISECS), Antar Rashtriya Sahyog Parishad (ARSP) and Global Research Forum on Diaspora and Transnationalism (GRFDT). I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to Ambassador Anup Kumar Mudgal and Shri Shyam Parande for their constant support. I would like to acknowledge the help given by my research assistant Swati Singh in referencing and formatting of the book. I also wish to acknowledge the help given by students like David Pradhan and Abhijeet. Finally, I extend my sincere gratitude to my parents, my husband, my children Aarsh and Ishita as well as my fellow practitioners of Bharat Soka Gakkai.

New Delhi, India Amba Pande

Contents

Editor and Contributors

About the Editor

Amba Pande is associated with the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She received her PhD from the Centre for Southeast Asia and South-West Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, JNU. Her research interests include Indian diaspora, international migration and the Indo-Pacific region. She was a visiting scholar at the University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands), University of South Pacific (Fiji), and University of Otago (New Zealand). She has done major projects on Indian diaspora with University Grants Commission (UGC) and Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). Dr Pande is a prolific writer and has published numerous papers in national and international journals. She has two more edited books to her credit, *Women in the Indian Diaspora: Historical Narratives and Contemporary Challenges* (Springer 2018) and *Women, Gender and the Legacy of Slavery and Indenture* (co-editor, forthcoming). Dr Pande holds editorial positions in several journals and book series. She is regularly invited to give independent lectures, present papers, and chair national and international seminars and conferences. She is currently carrying out research on Indians in Myanmar and Fiji.

Contributors

Beebeejaun-Muslum works as Sociology Lecturer in the Department of Mauritian Studies, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius. She has lectured for almost 12 years in the field of sociology. Her research interests are gender issues, contemporary Mauritian society, HIV/AIDS-related stigma and discrimination and social impact of type 2 diabetes among others. She has written many papers and article on these subjects.

Nabanita Chakraborty is Assistant Professor of English at Hansraj College, University of Delhi. Her Ph.D. was awarded in April 2018 by the University of

Delhi on the topic titled 'Rhetoric of Love and Politics of Power: Speeches and Writings of Queen Elizabeth I'. She has been a recipient of Charles Wallace Fellowship of the British Council. Her recent publications include An Essay, 'The Rhetoric of Deliberation and the Space of the Hyphen: Identity Politics of the Indian Women Diaspora in the Fictions of Jhumpa Lahiri'; *Women in Indian Diaspora: Historical Narratives and Contemporary Challenges* (Springer, October 2017); Essay, 'Politics of Language and Silence: Bengali Muslim Diaspora in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*' *Through the Diasporic Lens* ed. Nandini Sen (Authorspress, 2017); Article, 'Rhetoric of Memory and Politics of Identity: A Study of Elif Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul', Akademos* (Kamla Nehru College, University of Delhi, 2017); Article, 'Politics of Equivocation and Deferral: Queen Elizabeth I and the Execution of Queen Mary of Scotland'; and *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, Vol. VIII, No. 4* (2016).

Rajni Chand is Senior Lecturer in academic skills at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji. She holds a Ph.D. in applied linguistics from the University of Otago, New Zealand, a master's degree in applied linguistics from the Griffith University, Australia, and a bachelor's degree from USP. While not researching and teaching academic skills, she reads and writes on Indian diaspora, in particular on the issues and challenges that women in Indian diaspora faced. The greatest inspirations for her interest in Indian diaspora studies come from her grandparents. While her paternal grandparents were Girmitiyas, her maternal grandparents came to Fiji as free migrants. Born with these two historical backgrounds has given her the insight into the differences between the two migratory groups and where the similarities occurred.

Chan E. S. Choenni is Emeritus Professor of the Lalla Rookh Chair on the Indian diaspora, Free University Amsterdam. He has published extensively on the Indian diaspora in Suriname and the Netherlands. Recent publications include *The Vedic Dharma* (2018). In 2019, his book *Hindostani migration 1873–2013* will be published. His current research is on the history of Afro-Surinamese between the periods 1863 and 1963 and on the history of Javanese Surinamese between the periods 1890 and 1990.

Farzana Gounder holds a Ph.D. from Massey University, New Zealand. She is Author of *Indentured identities: Resistance and accommodation in plantation-era Fiji* (2011) and Editor of *Narrative and Identity Construction in the Pacific Islands* (2015). She has been Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Postdoctoral Fellow in Oceanic Linguistics at the University of Waikato, Research Associate at the University of Waikato and the Centre for Advancement of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Visiting Scholar at Avondale College, Sydney. Her research into the social sciences of health has also been recognized through her appointment as a strategic advisor to an Australasian Pacific-focused health board.

Kalyani is Doctoral Scholar at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences (CSSS/SSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She is

presently doing her Ph.D. in sociology. Her areas of interest are gender studies, popular culture and identity politics. She has also presented her papers at several international conferences.

Binarai Makhan received a bachelor's degree in political science, master's degree in urban and regional planning and First degree Economic Science at the University of Amsterdam. She is Teacher of economics at high schools and also works as a civil servant in the provincial government of North Holland. In her own words: In 1974 I migrated with my parents from Surinam to Holland. Here I became interested in my background and the subjects that made me who I am. My culture, being a Hindustani in the Dutch society, makes me very proud of my heritage and motivated me to write the story of my grandmother.

Sandhya Rao Mehta is presently in the Department of English Language and Literature, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. Her research interests include the literature of the Indian diaspora and women of the diaspora. She is Editor of an anthology Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora and Co-editor of Language Studies: Stretching the Boundaries, both published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. She has published widely on the Indian diaspora, particularly in the Arabian Gulf.

David Pradhan is Senior Research Fellow and Doctoral Candidate at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He has been an exchange scholar at the Faculty of Law, University of Zurich and at the University of Bern in Switzerland. He has a background of legal studies and an interest in diaspora studies, on which he has presented papers in national and international conferences.

Gopalan Ravindran has been working as Professor and Head in the Department of Journalism and Communication, University of Madras, since 2008. His previous positions include Visiting Fellow, Graduate School of International Development, Nagoya University, Japan; Lecturer, School of Communication, *Universiti Sains Malaysia*, Penang; Reader and Head, Department of Communication, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, India. His teaching/research areas include critical theories and philosophies, political economy of journalism and communication, spatiality and materiality of communication, film cultures, digital cultures and diasporic cultures. He is General Secretary of the *All India Communication and Media Association* (AICMA) and General Secretary of the *Association of Communication Teachers of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry* (ACT-TNP).

Sarita is Senior Ph.D. Scholar at the Center for South Asian Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Presently, she teaches at the Department of Political Science, College of Vocational Studies, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India. She holds a master's degree in political science from University of Delhi and also holds a degree in Master of Philosophy, and she worked on the Role of UNHR and Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. For her Ph.D. thesis, she is focusing on the Role

of International Agencies in the Emancipation of the Bonded Laborers in Nepal. Her areas of research interests include refugees, international organizations, diaspora and women's issues.

Manju Seth is Career Diplomat and last served as India's Ambassador to Madagascar and Comoros and before that was Consul General in Reunion Island. She has presented papers and lectures/writes regularly on diaspora matters, trade policy, international affairs, public diplomacy and soft power, gender issues, etc. She is Advisor in the Organisation for Diaspora Initiatives (ODI), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and in Aambra Foundation which works on women's empowerment issues. Her interests include music, reading, poetry, art, women's issues and issues of gender empowerment. She has published a book of poems in English 'The Fifth Element'.

Shubha Singh is award-winning Journalist, who has worked in senior positions for two leading newspapers in India, The Telegraph, Kolkata, and The Pioneer, New Delhi. She has been writing a column on foreign affairs for over 25 years, which has appeared in English, Hindi and Telugu. She has lived in Fiji Islands for 4 years, has taken a special interest in the Indian diaspora for several decades and has authored three books on the subject. They are 'Fiji: A Precarious Coalition' (HarAnand Publishers 2001), 'Overseas Indians: The Global Family' (Shipra Publications, 2005) under a fellowship from the Maulana Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, and 'Journeys of Discovery: Ancestral Searches in India' (Shipra Publications 2012). Her latest book is titled 'Media and Foreign Policy in India' (Shipra Publications, 2018) under the aegis of the Indian Council of World Affairs. She has co-edited a book of essays by winners of the Chameli Devi Jain Award for Outstanding Women Journalists titled: 'Making News, Breaking News, Her Own Way: Stories by Winners of the Chameli Devi Jain Award'. She has also produced a 54-min documentary film titled: 'Crossroads—A Fijian Travelogue'.

Goolam Vahed did his undergraduate degree at the University of Durban-Westville in South Africa and his Ph.D. at Indiana University, Bloomington, in the USA. He teaches in the Department of History at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and has published books and journal articles in his key research areas which include indentured labour; identity formation, citizenship and transnationalism among Indian South Africans; and race and transformation in South African sport. His recent book publications include Chota Motala. *A Biography of Political Activism in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands; Inside Indian Indenture. A South African Story 1860–1914, Schooling Muslims in Natal: Identity, State and the Orient Islamic Educational Institute*; and *Blacks in Whites. A History of Black Cricket in KwaZulu Natal*. He serves on the editorial board of journals such as *CASTE: An International Journal on Social Exclusion* and the *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* and on the advisory board of the Gandhi-Luthuli Documentation Centre.

Chapter 1
Indentured and Post-Indentured Indian Women: Changing Paradigms and Shifting Discourses

Amba Pande

Abstract The Indenture and similar systems led to the migration and settlement of Indians in various British, French and Dutch plantation colonies around the world. Women, although lesser in number, formed an essential part of these migration processes and settlement. However, the initial theoretical and empirical discourses on the Indenture and similar systems either downplayed women's voices and experiences under homogenised meta-narratives or they revolved around two major trajectories. The first positioned women in the victim/victimizer frame of reference wherein they were perpetually exploited, subjugated and powerless victims and the second operated within the patriarchal frame of purity, morality, and honour. Located in both European as well as the native patriarchal frameworks, women were projected stereotypically as objectified and sexualized categories. Over the past two decades, feminist and subaltern interventions brought women from margins to the centre and shifted the established paradigms to bring out the multiple facets and agency of indentured and post-indentured women. It highlighted the ways these women negotiated with the exploitative conditions and the established patriarchal norms at the plantations to build a successful life for themselves and for the generations to come. This chapter will situate women within the larger discourse of indenture and other migration systems during the colonial period in India. The chapter will also give an overview of the established discourses in the realm of indentured and post Indentured Indian women and explore the changing paradigms in the epistemological understanding of indenture.

Keywords Indenture system · Kangani and Maistry system · Women · Labour · Agency · Patriarchy

A. Pande (✉)
School of International Studies, JNU, New Delhi, India
e-mail: ambapande@gmail.com

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_1

Introduction

The Indian subcontinent has witnessed human migration since time immemorial. People have been traversing the subcontinent as labourers, peasants, preachers, soldiers and in several other ways. Transoceanic migration was also not unknown, especially from the coastal regions. While Indian traders and merchants established highly successful business settlements throughout Asia and Africa, Indian preachers and scholars established important learning centres and influenced the eastern parts of Asia culturally and philosophically. Migrations—inland or transoceanic—was also very much part of the popular imaginary forming the central theme of several Indian folklores and folksongs.

However, during the colonial period, new dimensions were added to the existing migration patterns and took it new heights and scales. Amrith (2011: 5) calls the second half of nineteenth century as the "start of Asia's mobility revolution," because of the "number of people involved, the distances they travelled, and the environmental and economic transformations they brought about." During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a systematic government-sponsored contractual labour migration was introduced in India leading to massive displacements of people and their settlement in the new lands. It was for the first time that Indians from other than the coastal regions were recruited to be sent to faraway plantation colonies across oceans through various forms of state-sponsored mass labour migration systems (Indenture, Kangani, Maistry, convict, and so forth). Apart from the labour migrations, the expanding requirement of the colonial administration and bureaucracy also initiated migration of junior officers and clerks, semiskilled and skilled service providers, etc., especially to the Southeast Asian colonies. Other than these the ongoing transoceanic migration of traders continued during the British period. All these forms of migrations led to permanent settlement and eventually resulted in the formation of Indian Diaspora (refer Pande 2019).

It would not be imprecise to call the colonial migrations as distress or forced migration. The long British rule in India had created strong "push factors" (especially after the Great Depression of the 1830s) for the outflow of peasants, craftsmen, and labourers which is why such large numbers could be recruited. The nineteenth century India, witnessed major shifts in socio-political and economic spheres because of commercialization of agriculture, change in agrarian relations and production, breakdown of traditional village economy, destruction of local industries, introduction of cash economy and heavy taxation, frequent occurrence famines, floods, deceases, political upheavals, disbandment of armies, to name a few (Davis 2001; Chakraborty 1994; Guha 1983; Klein 1984). These factors caused extensive and widespread destruction, unemployment, poverty, and displacement.

The other specific feature of colonial migrations was that women were part of not all but many of the migration streams. However, they, definitely, got impacted by every kind of migration that was taking place either as co-migrants or as left behind families.

Situating Women in the Colonial Migration Patterns: An Overview

One of the essential features of the labour migrations during the British period was the inclusion of women in the system. This is not to say that the migration of women was completely unknown in India before that. Women were migrating not only due to marriages (which remains to be the highest form of migration for women in India at present also) but also as labourers and workers. Migration of women to tea plantations of Assam, to jute mills in Calcutta and collieries in Bihar, are some cases worth mentioning. Lal in his seminal work Chalo Jahaji (2000: 126), uses the census of India to show that in 1881, females were 29% of the total migrants from UP to Bengal; In 1891 they reached to 33%; and in 1901, to 56%. In 1901, females constituted 40% of the total UP population the Assam tea gardens. Lal posits that 'even if the majority of women migrated as families, some number of female labourers could not be ruled out' (Lal 2000: 126). We also come across some patchy references about Asian female slaves being transported to various overseas British colonies during the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries (Allen 2004; Carter and Wikramsinghe 2019). But under the Indenture and similar systems, transoceanic migration of women as labourers in bulk started to take place for the first time. Apart from the general factors for the increase in migration during the colonial India discussed earlier in the chapter, some additional factors were also responsible for a large number of recruitment and overseas migration of women. On the one hand as the progressive colonial laws like abolition of Sati in 1829 rescued women and gave them opportunity to start new lives, on the other hand the homogenous enforcement of patriarchal *Shastric* Hindu Law by replacing the plural customary practices which ensured some basic rights for women (Agnes 1999) further burdened women with Bramhanical norms. Such disruptions (positive or negative) propelled women to migrate or leave India (Tinker 1974; Mani 1998; Maddison 1971).

Nevertheless, since for a long time gender, as a category of analysis, remained absent in the Indenture narratives, women's voices and experience were completely undermined (Pande 2018). Although the Indenture system has been analysed from diverse angles, little attention was paid to the histories of women particularly from their own perspectives. Feminist and subaltern interventions led to the broadening and reinventing the theory and praxis by not only incorporating gender as a key category of analysis but by engendering the discipline of the migration and diasporic studies from both theoretical and methodological perspectives. New approaches were conceived to juxtapose gender with other socio-cultural and political constructs like race, class, and nationalities (Pande 2018). Several important studies on Indentured women brought the critical issues of gender relations and its impact on social formation, women's encounters with survival and resistance and their agency from the periphery to the center of the historical discourse (Lal 2000, 1985; Hiralal 2009, 2014; Vahed 2017; Desai and Vahed 2010; Bahadur 2013; Samaroo 1975; Hassankhan et al. 2016).

The major migration patterns that the Indian sub-continent witnessed during the colonial period can be categorized as follows:

1. **The Indentured Labour**—Under the indenture, labourers were recruited under an agreement for five years extendable for another five years after which they were entitled to claim a return passage to India or work as free labourers or peasant. They also were permitted to avail the benefits and protection of the existing laws of the colony. The term 'agreement' got abbreviated as 'Girmit,' and thus the indentured labourers came to be known as 'Girmitiyas.' The recruitment of labourers was done through recruiters known as 'Arkatis' who received financial incentives to procure as many recruits as possible. The major catchment areas for recruitment were the present states of UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and some migration prone areas of South India. The major colonies to receive Indenture labourers were: Belize (3,000), British Guiana (238,909), East Africa (32,000), Fiji (60,965), French Guiana (8,500), Grenada (3,200), Guadeloupe (42,236), Jamaica (36,412), Martinique (25,404), Mauritius (453,063), Natal (152,184), Nevis (342), and Reunion (26,505), Seychelles (6,315), St. Kitts (337), St. Lucia (4,350), St. Vincent's (2,472), St. Croix (325). Surinam (34,304), Trinidad (147,900).

   As per the rules of Indenture, a quota was set for the number of women. There had to be a minimum of forty women per hundred men. But this goal was difficult to realise which is reflected in the records of numerous complaints by the emigration agents in Calcutta and Madras, the two main ports from where the journey was set off, about difficulty of recruiting women leading to the delay in departure of ships (Arkin 1981: 50–51; Meer 1980: 4). According to Matthews (1967), "The continuing legitimacy of this new 'free' labour system, therefore, depended largely on increasing numbers of women being indentured." The main spots for recruitment of women were the markets, railway stations, festivals, bazaars, temples and holy cities like Mathura. Women from various castes and professions were recruited. It was harder to recruit women, and therefore the premium for every recruited woman was larger than men.

   Although differences did exist from plantation to plantation, women adopted various professions to survive. At some plantations women received the rations to which they were entitled; on some women were not compelled to work, and employers were not bound to supply ration; yet on other estates, they received half of the rations even if they did not work; and on some women worked as they pleased at a daily rate of six pence (Meer 1980). For task-based work, generally adult males were to receive 1 shilling or more for six hours of steady and women received nine pence or more for four and a half hours of work. Children were paid according to the work performed.

   The indenture agreements appeared fair on paper in terms of free dwelling, rations (at government prescribed rates), fixed work hours and medical facilities provided to labourers. However, several very important studies (mentioned throughout this paper) show that in reality, indenture was as appalling and dehumanising as slavery.

2. **Kangani and Maistry**: Another kind of contractual labour system that was developed by the British was Kangani and Maistry (drawn from the Tamil language meaning overseer or headman). It was based on a network of headmen or middlemen who mobilized and recruited labourers from their own extended families, communities, and villages. These two systems were not completely identical, but in both, the labourers were brought under a debt net by advance payment instead of signing a contract. These systems largely kept migrants within their own communities, fellow-villagers, and caste-men (Lal 2007; Jaiswal 2018; Guilmoto 1993).

   It is estimated that under these two systems between 1840 and 1942, over 1.7 million Indians were recruited to work in Malaya (including Singapore), over 1.6 million to Burma and approximately 1 million to Ceylon. The catchment area for labour recruitment under the Kangani and Maistry systems was the erstwhile Madras Presidency, and hinterlands in Tamil Nadu (Lal 2007: 53). According to Jaiswal (2018: 2), "the colonial state in India was explicitly involved in regulating the Indenture system, resulting in copious documentation of the system. While the 'other' systems of Indian emigration, was less formally regulated, and thus relatively lesser documented… (which)… also explains to a great extent its academic neglect".

   This system, however, consisted mostly of single adult males aged between 15 and 40, who went for comparatively shorter periods. Satyanarayana (2001) appropriately terms them as the 'Birds of the Passage'. There was a tremendous disproportion in sex ratios, generally of four/five to one. In Burma during the period 1921–31, the number of females for every 1000 Telugu males was 208, and among Tamils, it was 430 females per 1000 males. This system often resulted in the widespread practice of keeping mistresses and concubines (Satyanarayana 2001). In the later years, family migration was encouraged, and the circulation of migrants decreased. As a result, families became more stable. By the early twentieth century the proportion of women neared up to 45% (Satyanarayana 2001; Guilmoto 1993).

Other Forms of Government Sponsored Migrations and Free Migrations During the Colonial Period

Apart from Indenture and similar migrations, the junior officers and semi-skilled and skilled labour, recruited directly by the government were also taken to various colonies. There were also categories of soldiers, security personnel and guards (mainly Pathans and Sikhs) who moved with the British army and colonial settlements.

Along with the government-sponsored migrations, there were streams of people crossing India's borders through land or sea routes who paid their own passage fare and were unbound by contractual obligations. They were termed as the 'Free

Indians' or 'Passenger' Indians. Majority of them were from the trading communities from Gujarat, Punjab and other parts of India. Other than the traders there were also semiskilled and skilled professionals who migrated independently for better livelihood options in the colonies where indentured labourers were present. Caste and regional networks played important roles in such migrations and settlements after that and helped the migrants to remain connected to their communities and native places (Pande 2013). This group engaged in diverse occupations: barbers, goldsmiths, teachers, lawyers' hawkers, salesmen, managers, shoemakers, tailors, etc. (Lal 2007). These migrations were largely rotational in the beginning but in the later years' permanent settlements in the respective colonies took place in large numbers.

These migration patterns were dominated by male 'sojourners' who left their families behind (Lal 2007: 179). It is also indicative of the fact that money was being sent back to India in the form of remittances, probably through personalized channels. Much of the very little scholarly works on these migrations have tended to focus on the migration experiences of male immigrants; rather the women left behind. To quote Hiralal (2019) "the histories of South Asian immigrants who arrived as "passenger" Indians or free Indians are yet to be explored from a feminist perspective. Traditional works are ingrained with male perspectives with little exploration of the complexity of gendered relations or the inclusion of women's voices." Nevertheless, Studies (Hiralal 2014; Ramji 2006) point out such migrations rather than leaving women helpless and abandoned, in reality, re-defined and reshaped their roles as mothers, wives, and workers.

The present volume and this chapter are concerned primarily with the women in the Indenture and similar systems. Hence the further discussions will be largely deal with these two sections of women migrants.

Debating Discourses

The historiography on indentured Indian migration is full of conflicting views and divergent discourses. One of the initials debates regarding the indenture system relates to whether it was equivalent or as oppressive as slavery. A closely related discourse is regarding the 'freedom or unfreedom' of the labourers to get recruited and whether they were mere passive victims who were coerced and duped into migration. One of the earliest critics of the indentured system, the British Abolitionist John Scoble, equated it with slavery, based mainly on kidnapping (Scoble 1840). Tinker (1974) takes a similar line, according to whom, the only difference between slavery and indenture was that the latter was a temporary servitude rather than a permanent one like the former. The inherent flaws and the widespread abuses of the system were brought out by the nationalist leaders such as C.F. Andrews, J.W. Burton, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Mahatma Gandhi, Totaram Sanadhya (Kale 1998). Innumerable studies that came up in the later years persuasively highlight, on the basis of records/documents and personal narratives as to how Indentured labourers were

kidnapped, deceived and lured into recruitment and how they were exploited right from the time of recruitment, at the depots, through the journey and at the plantations (Tinker 1974; Laurence 1994; Samaroo 1975; Mangru 1986; Hoefte 1987; Lal 1999; Desai and Vahed 2010).

The counter-narrative to this discourse has been provided mostly by the revisionist scholars who emphasize on the emancipatory role of the indenture system and that it was a process that ultimately transformed the lives of the labourers for better. Notable among these scholars are Emmar (1986), Carter (1996) and Bates (2000). Emmar in her paper on Suriname (1987) gives quite a positive picture of the existing conditions at the plantation. These scholars by presenting an otherwise abusive system into a positive light appear to be justifying or rationalising it and in turn, also the impacts of British colonialism on India and its people. The fact is that the indentured migrations were rooted in the colonial context which was the prime source of displacement and sufferings of the migrant labourers and hence it cannot be overlooked in the analysis of Indenture. As discussed earlier in the chapter, several of the prevailing socio-economic conditions that induced outmigration from India, were the outcomes of the colonial policies itself.

Therefore, a more nuanced understanding reveals that both coerciveness and choice applied in varying degrees in the recruitment process and at least in the later years the labourers managed to manipulate the system to their own benefit and evolve techniques of survival and resistance which is proven by several studies (Hoefte 1987; Mangru 1996; Roopnarine 2007; Lal 2000). The Indenture was not a static system. It continued for nearly a century and crucial changes and amendments were introduced in it from time to time, based on the reports and recommendations of the various commissions that were set up by the colonial government. There are reports of a continuous flow of second and third term recruits from India to the colonies and that the labourers had the freedom to choose their destinations. Constant correspondence took place between them and their families back in India (Roopnarine 2010; Bates 2000; Carter 1996). All kinds of information (though mainly negative) was circulating through the Indian media, literary sources,[1] popular vocabulary, and folk songs about the recruitments and life at plantations. Therefore, to think that the system could continue for so long just based on coercion or deception and that labourers were so ignorant and naïve, that they could not understand the economic and other benefits that they could receive through indenture indicates a central flaw in the understandings about India and its people. Notwithstanding the exploitative nature of the system, the laborers developed innovative ways to challenge it and negotiate their ways to survival and success. In many cases the returnees themselves turned

[1]One of the very appropriate expressions come from the famous writer Premchand in his story Booddhi Kaaki. He writes

"Bhateeje ne sampatti likhwaate samay to khoob lambe – chaude vaade kiye, parantu ve sab vaade keval kulee dipo ke dalaalon ke dikhae hue sabzabaag the. …lekin vastav me boodhee kaakee ko pet bhar bhojan bhee kathinaee se milata that" (When the nephew was getting all the property transferred in his name from the old aunt, he made tall promises, but they turned out to be false dreams like those shown by 'Coolie Depot' middlemen. Later old Kaki seldom got enough to eat.

into recruiters. To quote Vahed (2017: 76), they were "as much agents as they were victims and silent witnesses to unfolding history".

The binaries of 'freedom and unfreedom' with some more added dimensions dominated the discourse on indentured women also. One group of scholars try to locate their interpretation in the neo-slavery framework projecting indentured women as victims of sexual exploitation and colonial oppression (Tinker 1974; Beall 1990; Kelly 1991a, b; Lal 1985). Another set of 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; Shameen 1998). Emmar (1987: 115) writes 'it was emancipation for women who migrated overseas. By so doing they gained many more opportunities than they would have had at home to rid themselves of marital, societal and economical oppression'. An additional dimension was added in these binaries, and that was the official colonial narrative positioning these women as the immoral sexualised females (Gupta 2014, 2019; Beall 1990; Kelly 1991a, b).

Such loaded narratives also dominated the national scene in India at the time freedom struggle. Indentured women's issues had surfaced on the national scene quite early. The moving story of Kunti, an indentured labourer from Fiji who alleged an attempted rape on her by a white overseer in 1913 (Kelly 1991a, b: 45–65; Lal 1985; Sanadhya 1972: 21–2) sparked a fierce reaction throughout India. Kunti's account of protecting her chastity by diving into a river received extensive coverage in the Indian press and gave an ethical edge, to the anti-Indenture campaign and the nationalist discourse (Gupta 2019; Nijhawan 2014). The stories of exploitation and abuse of women coming from the plantations gripped the popular imagination and were used to mobilise anti-indenture activism. Hindi periodicals like 'Stri darpan' became 'a fertile ground for not only 'thinking, speaking, and debating about the indentured women but also putting the context into the larger debates of gendered morality, sexuality, belonging and what is good for indentured women without them having any say in it' (Gupta 2019). According to some scholars (Gillion 1962: 182; Lal 1985: 55), '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, more even than the movement for Independence'. According to Tambe (2009), 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 against the colonial government.

One of the major concerns related to the indenture system was regarding the absence/shortage of women and the sex-ratio among the indentured recruits. Although disputed by feminists, it was considered as the major cause for the exploitation of women and the ills prevalent at the plantations. Another issue of concern was that, to fill the quota of women, the recruiters often adopted various kinds of unscrupulous methods like kidnapping and misleading women under false information and promises (McNeill and Lal 1914: 312). As a result, the proposal for recruitment and emigration of more women could not succeed (McNeill and Lal 1914: 14). In fact, it was vehemently opposed by the Indian intelligentsia because of the stories of moral degradation that was coming from the plantations (Gupta 2019).

The Indenture recruitments included both single women (predominantly widows and unmarried girls) and married women who went with family. Large scale scepticism existed in India as well as in the colonies about the recruitment of single women. They were considered less respectable, even depicted as 'immoral' and 'destitute women'. Writing about the Caribbean, Reddock (1994: 81) informs that 'majority of Indian women came to the Caribbean not as wives or daughters, but as individual women dominated by high caste widows and Dalit (outcast) females.' In other colonies like Suriname most of the migrating women were married (Choenni 2016). Some unmarried women registered themselves as married women and some even married soon after their recruitment, in the depots. In the backdrop of the prevailing insecurities for single migrant women, marriage is seen as a strategy of self-defence by them. Women in indenture belonged to different castes, social backgrounds and professions varying from housemaids, street vendors, and prostitutes, perhaps a loosely used term for women gone astray. According to De Klerk (1953: 147–148), a very small proportion was 'ordinary prostitutes' and 'shamelessly immoral'.

Despite the negative reports about emigration, the stories of coercion and exploitation and the misogynous representation of emigrant women, many chose to migrate. The reasons were various i.e. abject poverty due to the prevailing economic conditions, to escape social oppression, familial violence, eloping lovers,[2] to escape 'Sati'[3] or in search of a better life. According to Lal "Contrary 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". According to (Choenni 2016: 134–135) 'The majority of women had respectable reasons to emigrate consciously…many were recruited to go to 'Sri Ram Desh'. De Klerk (1953: 66–67) also corroborate the view of an informed and conscious choice of women which showed their strength, courage and independent nature.

Nevertheless, the possibility that the women could migrate voluntarily with informed consent, to improve their life condition or to earn wages almost appeared sinful and outrageous to the mind and media in India in those times. The stories coming from the plantation colonies added further disgust to the whole narrative. The famous statement by a very sympathetic nationalist like C.F. Andrew comparing Hindu women on the plantations with 'a rudderless vessel with its mast broken drifting onto the rocks' or 'like a canoe being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand,' speaks a lot about the prevailing conditions and the way this whole issue was perceived. 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 2019). Indentured women stood accused in the eyes of both nationalists as

[2]Similar story was narrated by Pandit Kamlesh Arya about his grandfather, in a personal interview in Suva, Fiji, 2003.

[3]A similar story was narrated by the former Commonwealth Secretary-General Shri Dat Ramphal, about his great grandmother, in his speech on Pravasi Diwas in 2002.

well as the colonialists alike. Shockingly Indian Indentured men were as much part of the degradation of their own women as the predatory colonial officials (Lal 1985).

The focus on the supposed victimisation or the sexual commodification of indentured women often took priority over the real problems and the miserable living conditions in which these women were living and working at the plantations. Women became a 'convenient scapegoats for all the ills of the indenture system' and was blamed for every ill that existed on the plantation including suicides, high rate of murders, and child mortality (Lal 1985; Fowler 2000). Scholars (Lal 1999; Gillion 1962; Ray 1996) have examined these allegations and conclude that the conditions on plantation with no room for privacy, unstable family life with no support of law, non-recognition of marriages, inability to afford absence from work, overtasking, lower wages and fewer food rations, harassment by overseers and sirdars on refusal of sexual favours, selling of wives and daughters into prostitution by Indian men and several such factors, were responsible for which women were blamed. The irony was that the very system that showed concern and claimed to protect women's honour, in fact, worked against her and pushed her into compromises in life or as Desai and Vahed (2010: 6–10) describe, to make use of the 'weapons of the weak'. A good example is a 3-pound tax that was imposed on Indians who decided to stay on in Natal. The tax weighed heavily on women even forcing some into prostitution and subjected them to constant harassment by the police (Indian Opinion, 5 September 1908).

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 projecting women as perpetual helpless victims who were duped into emigrating and living immoral lives. The second point of view operated within the patriarchal frame of purity, morality, sexuality, honour and took the debate onto the gendered expressions of dharma with metaphors like 'Sita' and 'Draupadi'. They invariably cast these women as immoral sexual mercenaries and troublemakers which was substantiated by the official colonial records. Both these narratives presented women in fixed, objectified, categories rather than as exploited workers. Kunti's case well represents this compartmentalized projection. At first, she was a victim who jumped into the river to protect her chastity but later, on investigation her case was dismissed on account of her 'promiscuous' character.

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 achieve and her successes as labourers initially and in other fields in later times. Helping her was considered as an altruistic act and not as her right to work and earn in a respectable environment. 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. The narratives became more complex as both European, and the Indian gender values along with the imperialist notions of civilized and uncivilized were added to recast the female worker into a lowly, immoral and sexualised image.

The inability of women to read and write until the 1940s was also a factor for the silenced voices of the women indentured labourers. It is exactly why tracing their accounts at humanised microlevel through memories, oral histories and personal monographs become extremely relevant in unearthing women's voices and experiences. Thankfully in the recent times the scholars have moved beyond the skewed understandings to dig deep into the diverse facets and rich details of the lives of indentured women to highlight the way they shaped the social, domestic, economic and political lives of the plantations in the indenture and post indenture period (Hiralal 2014, 2016; Carter 1994; Bahadur 2013; Jha 2010–11; Chatterjee 2014). These studies demonstrate complex and multidimensional realities and mixed narratives of kidnap and escape, imperilment and empowerment, enslavement and liberation, and above all of the amazing spirit of Indentured women. 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 at all levels.

The scholarship on indentured women is a dynamic field and continues to grow and break new and exciting grounds. The present volume is a spirited effort in this direction.

Liminality, Agency, and Resistance

As discussed earlier, the focus on the victimhood versus morality debate camouflaged almost the entire discourse on Indentured women so much so that other aspects remained a sidelined subtext. In reality, the presence of women had a far-reaching and significant impact on the political economy as well as on the socio-cultural and familial life on the plantation. The absence of traditional social norms and values of the mother country opened 'bittersweet' (Lal 2004) spaces of empowerment in which women's agency was expressed in several ways.

As scholars like De Klerk (1953) and Hiralal (2019) point out, the women who migrated must be already having some grit and confidence and must have become more self-assured and assertive by undergoing long journeys and earning their own income. In the initial years of Indenture, women were considered as 'unproductive labour by the authorities, who were reluctant to supply food rations for women unless they worked. They were given a lighter variety of work as well as the payments (Lal 2000: 48). By 1886 their demand increased because of the lesser wages, unpaid domestic services, and social stability which they provided. They were fully integrated into the plantation economy and played a crucial role as labourers. There are references that several of them reached to the level of 'Sirdarni' (Female supervisor) (Gunpunth 1984; Emmer 1986). Several women obtained a small piece of land to cultivate after their period of contract was over. They grew vegetables and raised poultry and cows, not only for their consumption but also to earn some extra money.

Irrespective of their meagre earnings, women could save money, send it to their family in India, invest in jewellery or buying property (Meer 1980; Lal 2007; Choenni 2016).

Many of these women especially in the Caribbean became the matriarchs of large families. Chan Choenni writes that these matriarchs were assertive walked freely on the streets, many smoked and even drank alcohol but they were feared and respected for what they have achieved (Choenni and Choenni 2012). Ironically in the post-indentured period when the number of women grew, and patriarchal Indian practices were revived, many matriarchs strived to imbibe the very practices that they had broken. They insisted on their daughters and grand- daughters to imbibe the *izzatdar* (showing honoured behaviour) behaviour. This *izzatdar* revival was a general trend which took a bigger form in the 1920s (Choenni and Choenni 2012). It was an after effect of the revival of Indian culture and rebuilding the Indian identity among the diaspora communities.

The Indentured women were pivotal in this retention and revival of the Indian cultural heritage. Despite the breakdown of traditional Indian cultural patterns in the process of migration, these women continued to be the arbiters of Indian tradition by using Indian mythology and folktales to create a continuity and a sense of identity. Although their participation in the Ramayan recitation (which is one of the major expressions of the Indian identity among the Indentured societies) started very late, they became serious contenders to men in this field. Mahabir sees it as a 'formidable feminist gesture indicating the strength of Indian women who refuse to be suppressed by the barriers of gender' (Mahabir 1995: 6).

The harshness of plantation life and personal empowerment that came as a result of earning their own income had made these women very assertive not only within the private but also in public spheres. They used different means for protest and resist at different levels and invented various means to challenge abusive partners as well as the predator employers. Women activism was visible through the formation of *Mahila Mandals (women's groups)* and women 'gangs' to sometimes even beat their perpetrators (Mishra 2008; Naidu 1980). They were not afraid to violate the discriminatory labour laws and disobey and defy the colonial authority which they did through collective action. Gounder (2019) points out that "the women used the positioning of collective agency a lot more than men". Women also got convicted for several offences such as absenteeism, being insolent, leaving work without permission, theft, assault, willful disobedience of orders and damage to property (Jha 2010–11; Hiralal 2014; Lal 2000).

Other than the personalized resistances women also became part of the resistance movements on the plantations against the discriminatory colonial laws and Indenture system (Ray 1996; Roopnarine 2007). Resistances were common at the plantations as men, as well as women, refused to give into what Reddock calls 'economic designs of local and colonial capital or the state' (Reddock 1985). Although women protestors find no mention in the colonial records, the later studies reveal their active participation in the well-known resistance movements as well in the movements which they build on their own (Roopnarine 2015).

Women also participated in the larger movements like the Satyagraha in South Africa which came to fore during the resistance between 1907 and 1911. Gandhi described the women as "passive resisters," for supporting their husbands and sons (Gandhi 1961: 275). But these women were willing to take a larger role in the Satyagraha, and Gandhi himself recognized that they acted very "bravely," and their work has attracted the "motherland" (*Indian Opinion*, 11 December 1909). Kasturba Gandhi also joined the struggle which became a great source of encouragement for women at large. Women actively participated in the movement against the 3-pound tax and the judgement of Justice Malcolm Searle of the Cape Supreme Court on 14 March 1913 which denied legitimacy to Hindu, Muslim and Parsee marriages. They took the movement from the forefront and got arrested also. Gandhiji wrote, "you…have strengthened us in our times of trials. By your self-sacrifice, you have kept up that ancient standard of Indian womanhood which in our times of glory astonished the world…the heroic examples of patriotism set forth by the ladies of the Transvaal and other martyrs comforted us" (Indian Opinion, 7 May 1910).

The participation of women in the Indian National Army is another glorious chapter in the history of Indentured women. It almost created a social revolution. Women came out from their traditional roles and took mainstream responsibilities fully at par with men (Pande 2016). In 1943, Bose formed the Jhansi Rani Regiment with Indian women and girls from a wide range of ethnic, social, religious and language backgrounds in Southeast Asia. Bose had the view that 'the Army of Liberation would be incomplete unless women also came forward and volunteered for the fighting rank' (as quoted in Rettig 2019: 631).

Indentured Indian women had to redefine and reshape their roles as wives, mothers, women, labourers, protesters and in so many ways. Over time women at the plantations acquired more freedom in their adopted countries than what was available in India. The process of migration and settlement opened liminal spaces where new identities were formed with acceptance for inter-caste marriages, widow remarriage, freedom to choose or change partners, better health and education facilities and property rights for women. Perhaps this the reason that studies show that on an average, lesser women than men returned to India (Emmer 1986; Roopnarine 2009: 79)

Conclusion

The historiography on Indentured Indian women has come a long way from the skewed and parochial colonial narratives to the contemporary feminist subaltern epistemological understandings. From the earlier frames of references of 'victimhood' on the one hand and sexualised beings on the other, the scholarship has now progressively moved on to challenge the hitherto, stereotypical objectified images of indentured women and explore the multi-layered dimensions of their agency in the social, cultural economic, and political formation of the plantation lives. By

deconstructing the system, the process as well as the times through women's experiences, personal anthologies, individual life stories, the myth of a 'docile', 'immoral' and 'passive' women has been challenged to present a subaltern feminist counter-narratives of an empowered labourer/worker who could transform the established patriarchal colonial paradigms to build a successful life amidst extremely exploitative conditions.

The critical mass of indentured and ex indentured women 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 resistances that took place. However, women 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 also became part of the larger resistance movements. Indentured women's experiences highlight that even 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. The story of indenture would be incomplete without the celebration of this triumph of Indian women against extreme adversities. It enables us to listen and understand the silenced voices of these subaltern women and helps to create the transoceanic networks of feminism and a sense of sisterhood among the Indian Diaspora women and the homeland.

References

Agnes, F. (1999). *Law and gender inequality: The politics of women's rights in India*. New Delhi: OUP.

Allen, R. B. (2004). The Mascarene slave-trade and labour migration in the Indian Ocean during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In G. Campbell (Ed.), *The structure of slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia* (pp. 33–50). London: Frank Cass.

Amrith, S. (2011). *Migration and diasporas in modern Asia*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Arkin, A. K. (1981). *The contribution of Indians in the South African economy*. Durban: Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of DurbanWestville. https://books.google.co.in/books/about/The_Contribution_of_the_Indians_to_the_S.html?id=hMtBAAAAYAAJ&redir_esc=y

Bahadur, G. (2013). *Coolie woman: The Odyssey of indenture*. London: C. Hurst.

Beall, J. (1990). Women under indenture in Colonial Natal, 1860–1911. In C. Clarke, C. Peach, & S. Vertovec (Eds.), *South Asians Overseas: Migration and ethnicity* (pp. 57–74). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bates, C. (2000). Coerced and migrant labourers in India: The colonial experience. *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies, 13,* 1–33.

Carter, M. (1994). *Lakshmi's legacy—Testimonies of Indian women in 19th century Mauritius*. Rosehill: Editions de l'Ocean Indien.

Carter, M. (1996). *Voices from indenture: Experience of Indian migrants in the British Empire*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.

Carter, M., & Wikramsinghe, N. (2019). Unsettling diasporas—Negotiation of identities and subversion of categories: Asian women in and beyond slavery at Mauritius, the Cape, and Sri Lanka.

In F. Gounder et al. (Eds.), *Gender and the legacy of slavery and indenture*. New Delhi: Manohar (Forth coming).
Chakrabarti, M. (1994). The Famine of 1896–97 in the Bengal Presidency: Food availability decline or "Exchange" Crisis? *Calcutta Historical Journal, 16*(1), 1–37.
Chatterjee, S. (2014). *Indian women's lives and labor: The indentureship experience in Trinidad and Guyana, 1845–1917*. University of Massachusetts: Amherst Doctoral Dissertations.
Choenni, G. G., & Choenni, C. E. S. (2012). *Sarnami Hindostani 1920–1960*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers.
Choenni, C. (2016). Hindostanis in Suriname 1873–1920: Indenture, plantations and beyond. *Nidan, 1*(1), 48–84.
Davis, M. (2001). *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino, famines and the making of the third world*. London, New York: Verso.
Desai, A., & Vahed, G. (2010). *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story, 1860–1914*. Cape Town: HSRC (Human Sciences Research Council) Press.
Emmer, P. C. (1986). *Colonialism and migration; Indentured labour before and after slavery*. The Netherlands: Springer.
Emmer, P. C. (1987). The position of Indian Women in Surinam. *Boletin de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 43, 115–120.
Fowler, G. (2000). A want of care: Death and disease on Fiji plantations, 1890–1900. In B. V. Lal (Ed.), *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* (pp. 273–290). Suva, Fiji.
Gillion, K. L. (1962). Fiji's Indian migrants. *A history to the end of indenture in 1920*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
Guha, R. (1983). *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India* (pp. viii, 361). New York: Oxford University Press.
Guilmoto, C. Z. (1993). The Tamil migration cycle, 1830–1950. *Economic and Political Weekly, 28*(3–4), 111–120.
Gunpunth, V. (1984). Sex disproportion among Indian immigrants. In S. Bissoondoyal (Ed.), *Indians Overseas*. Mauritius: MGI (Moka).
Gounder, F. (2019). Gender and resistance in Indian Indenture life stories: Oral history and the national stage of memorialization. In F. Gounder et al. (Eds.), *Gender and the legacy of slavery and indenture*. New Delhi: Manohar (Forth coming).
Gupta, C. (2014). Saving 'wronged' bodies: Caste, indentured women and Hindi Print-public sphere in colonial India. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 75,* 716–722.
Gupta, C. (2019) Indentured women and Hindi Print-Public Sphere in early twentieth century India. In F. Gounder et.al. (Ed.), *Gender and the legacy of slavery and indenture*. New Delhi: Manohar (Forth coming).
Hassankhan, M., Roopnarine, L., & Ramsoedh, H. (2016). *The legacy of Indian Indenture: Historical and contemporary aspects of migration and diaspora*. https://books.google.ca/books?id=ERR6DQAAQBAJ&dq=mental+health+indentureship&sourcegbs_navlinks_s.
Hiralal, K. (2009). Our plucky sisters who have dared to fight—Indian women and the Satyagraha movement in South Africa. *The Oriental Anthropologist, 9*(1), 1–22.
Hiralal, K. (2014). 'Rebellious Sister': Indentured Indian women and resistance in Colonial Natal 1860–1911. In M. S. Hassankhan, B. V. Lal, & D. Munro (Eds.), *Resistance and Indian Indenture experience: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 241–270). New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
Hiralal, K. (2016). Gendered migrations: A comparative study of indentured and nonindentured immigrants to South Africa 1860–1930. *Diaspora Studies, 9*(1), 41–52.
Hiralal, K. (2019). Wives across the seas—'Left behind' and 'Forgotten'? Gender and migration in the Indian Ocean region women. In F. Gounder et al. (Eds.), *Gender and the legacy of slavery and indenture*. New Delhi: Manohar (Forth coming).
Hoefte, R. (1987). Female indentured labor in Suriname: For better or for worse. *Boletin de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe, 42,* 55–70.
Indian Opinion, 5 September 1908.
Indian Opinion, 7 May 1910.

Jaiswal, R. K. (2018). *Ephemeral mobility: A critical appraisal of the facets of Indian migration and the Maistry mediation in Burma* (c. 1880–1940). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/.
Jha, M. (2010–11). Indian women's emigration experience: Power, labour, and sexuality in colonial Natal c. 1860–1911. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 71*, 959–972.
Kale, M. (1998). *Fragments of empire: Capital, slavery and Indian indentured labour in the British Caribbean*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Kelly, J. D. et al. (1991a). *My Twenty One Years in the Fiji Islands and the story of the haunted line by Totaram Sanadhya*. Canberra: Suva Museum.
Kelly, J. D. (1991b). *A politics of virtue: Hinduism, sexuality and countercolonial discourse in Fiji*. Chicago.
Klein, I. (1984). When the rains failed: famine, relief, and mortality in British India. *The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 21*(2), 185–214.
de Klerk, C. J. M. (1953). *De Immigratie der Hindostanen in Suriname*. Amsterdam: Urbi et Orbi.
Lal, B. (2004). *Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian experience*. Canberra: Pandanus Books.
Lal, B. (1985). Kunti's cry: Indentured Indian Women on Fiji plantations. *Indian Economic and Social History Review, 22*(1), 55–71.
Lal, B. (1999). Bound for the colonies: A view of indian indentured emigration in 1095. *Journal of Pacific History*, *34*(3), 306–309.
Lal, B. V. (2000). *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*. Suva: Fiji Museum.
Lal, B. (Ed.). (2007). *The encyclopaedia of the Indian Diaspora*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet in the association National University of Singapore. Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies; Sydney: Asia Pacific Publications.
Laurence, K. O. (1994). *A question of labour: Indentured immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana 1875–1917*. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle.
Maddison. (1971). http://www.ggdc.net/maddison/articles/moghul_3.pdf.
Mahabir, K. (1995). *The Indian Diaspora in the West Indies/Caribbean: A cultural history of triumphs and tribulations*. Available on https://www.academia.edu/31281921/The_Indian_Diaspora_in_the_West_Indies_Caribbean_A_Cultural_History_of_Triumphs_and_Tribulations.
Mangru, B. (1986). Indian labour in British Guyana. *History Today*, *36*(4), URL: http://www.historytoday.com/basdeo-mangru/indian-labour-british-guiana, Accessed 31 October 2012.
Mangru, B. (1996). *A history of East Indian resistance on the Guyana Sugar Estates, 1869–1948*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
Mani, L. (1998). *Contentious traditions: The debate on Sati in colonial India*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
Matthews, D. (1967). Abolitionists on slavery: The critique behind the social movement. *The Journal of Southern History, 33*(2), 163–182.
McNeill, J., & Lal, C. (1914). *Report on the condition of Indian immigrants the four British colonies and Surinam or Dutch Guiana*. Simla: Government Central Press.
Meer, Y. S. (Ed.). (1980). *Documents of indentured labour in Natal, 1851–1917*. Durban: Institute for Black Research.
Mishra, M. (2008). The emergence of feminism in Fiji. *Women's History Review, 17*(1), 39–55.
Naidu, V. (1980). *The violence of indenture in Fiji*. World University Service.
Nijhawan, S. (2014). Fallen through the nationalist and feminist grids of analysis: Political campaigning of Indian women against indentured labour emigration. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 21*(1), 111–133.
Pande, A. (2013). Conceptualising Indian diaspora: Diversities within a common identity. *Economic & Political Weekly*, *48*(49), 59–65.
Pande, A. (2016). Bose, beyond the 'Mystery'. *Strategic Analysis, 40*(4), 234–238.
Pande, A. (2018). Women in Indian diaspora: Redefining self between dislocation and relocation. In: A. Pande (Ed.) *Women in the Indian diaspora*. Singapore: Springer.

Pande, A. (2019). Patterns of migration and formation of the Indian Diaspora in colonial India. In S. Dutta & N. Mukherjee (Eds.), *Mapping India transitions and transformations, 18th–19th century* (pp. 77–91). London, New York: Routledge.

Ramji, H. (2006). Journeys of difference: The use of migratory narratives among British Hindu Gujaratis. *Ethnic*.

Ray, K. A. (1996). Kunti, Lakshmibhai and the 'Ladies': Women's labour and the abolition of indentured emigration from India. *Labour, Capital and Society/Travail, capital et société*, *29*(1/2).

Reddock, R. (1985). Freedom denied: Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917. *EPW*, *20*(43), WS79–WS87.

Reddock, R. (1994). *Women, labour, and politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A history*. London: Zed Books.

Rettig, T. (2019). Recruiting the all-female Rani of Jhansi Regiment: Subhas Chandra Bose and Dr. Lakshmi Swaminadhan. *South East Asia Research, 21*(4).

Roopnaraine, L. (2007). *Indo-Caribbean indenture: Resistance and accommodation*. Kingston: University of West Indies Press.

Roopnarine, L. (2009). The repatriation, readjustment, and second term migration of ex-indentured Indian laborers from British Guiana and Trinidad to India. *New West Indian Guide, 83*, 71–97.

Roopnarine, L. (2015). East Indian women and leadership roles during indentured servitude in British Guiana 1838–1920. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 16*(3), 174–185.

Samaroo, B. (1975). Missionary methods and local responses: The Canadian Presbyterians and the East Indians in the Caribbean. In *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the struggle for identity*. A paper presented to a symposium on East Indians in the Caribbean, The University of the West Indies, pp. 93–116.

Satyanarayana, A. (2001). Birds of passage: Migration of South Indian labour to South East Asia. *Critical Asian Studies, 34*, 89–115.

Scoble, J. (1840). *Hill coolies: A brief exposure of the deplorable conditions of the Hill Coolies in British Guiana and Mauritius and of the Nefarious means by which they were induced to resort to these colonies*. London.

Shameen, S. (1998). Migration, labour and plantation women in Fiji: A historical perspective. In S. Jain & R. Reddock (Eds.), *Women plantation workers: International experiences* (pp. 49–65). Oxford: Berg Publications.

Tambe, A. (2009). Gandhi's 'Fallen' sisters: Difference and the national body politic. *Social Scientist, 37*(1).

Tinker, H. (1974). *A new system of slavery: The export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sanadhya, T. (1972). *Fijidwip me Mere Ikkis Varsh*. Varanasi: Pt. Banarasi Das Chaturvedi.

Vahed, G. (2017). *Brij V. Lal: Rooting for history in bearing witness*. In D. Munro & J. Corbett (Eds.). Canberra: ANU Press.

Part I
Theoretical Frameworks

Chapter 2
Gender Performativity in Subaltern Life Stories: Changing Discourses of Indentured Women as Mothers and Labourers

Farzana Gounder

Abstract In the indenture-resistance narratives of the early twentieth century, a pivotal and socially evocative theme was the degradation of women's sexual mores, a discourse sustained through exemplars of indentured women, and which provided a counter-narrative to the colonial positioning of indentured women as "sexual mercenaries". Recent research has also challenged the predominantly negative portrayal of indentured women in colonial discourse; however, the discursive emphasis remains on presenting women as individualised beings. The discourse thus fails to engage with another recurring colonial theme, which positioned indentured women as "negligent mothers". This chapter addresses the significant gap in the field of indentured women's agency through its attention to women's motherhood discourse. The research applies an indenture-centred methodology, Narrativization Analysis Framework (Gounder 2011) to provide a critical analysis of two women's life stories on motherhood and childhood experiences on the indentured plantations. The study demonstrates that within these subaltern narratives, the women resist the hegemonic "veil of dishonour" via positionings of women as mothers vis-a-vis others within social networks to appropriate cause and effect, praise and blame for events in situated time and space. Through the analysis of women as relational beings, the study develops a typology of resistance strategies that women utilised to negotiate agency as mothers within the indenture plantation world.

Keywords Motherhood · Indenture · Life stories · Resistance narratives · Oral history

Introduction

The field of indentured women and agency provides an ideal arena for addressing what has, until recently been a significant gap in indenture studies: the micro-level analysis of women's personal experiences of the indenture (Lal 2000: 222). Such

F. Gounder (✉)
IPU Tertiary Institute, Palmerston North, New Zealand
e-mail: fgounder@ipu.ac.nz

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_2

research provides an essential perspective on women's agency within the confines of the Indian indenture system. In the indentured colonies, women played a vital role as field labourers and domestic servants. In the cane fields, women were tasked with hoeing, weeding, cutting cane and planting cane. Personal testimonies in women's oral narratives (Gounder 2011) provide evidence of the long hours and rigorous work that women performed as labourers on the sugarcane plantations: Ram Sundar Maharaj describes the rigours of women's duties on the plantation:

> The work that we had to do would be for long distances and even the seeds had to be carried from far and wide. Sometimes we had to carry seeds from up to twenty chains on our heads. (Gounder 2011: 141)

In addition to carrying seeds, Jasoda Ramdin recollects the other tasks that the women performed in the cane fields:

> Taking the leaves off the sugarcane…planting sugarcane, hoeing…the soil had to be flattened. (Gounder 2011: 175)

Guldhari Maharaj describes the long hours that women were required to work when they were employed as field labourers on sugarcane plantations:

> When they had to cut sugarcane, it would be nine o'clock at night when they returned. (Gounder 2011: 122)

Despite the indentured women's contributions to the workings of the indenture system, their contribution as workers has been eclipsed in colonial reports through their positioning as sexualized beings.

Research into women's indenture experiences thus also provides a method for countering the colonial discourse, which constructed the indentured women as "sexual mercenaries" (Beall 1990; Faruqee 2018; Gupta 2014, 2015; Kelly 1991). Studies have re-evaluated events and actions on the colonial plantations that brought women, such as Naraini and Kunti to international attention through their representations within the Indian nationalist public sphere (Ali 2004; Bates et al. 2017; Lal 2000; Mishra 2008). The nationalist discourse portrayed Naraini as a victim of the plantation violence, while Kunti was positioned agentively defending her chastity. The women's plight on the plantations of Fiji was used as exemplars of the lives of all indentured women and provided a contrastive voice to the official colonial records.

However, the representations of Kunti-Narani within the public sphere are at extreme ends of a continuum of women's positions and responses to the indenture plantation environment. Moreover, while Naraini and Kunti's case studies are essential to consider in light of their pivotal role in heightening anti-indenture conceptualisations, the women's amplified positionings re-construct them as displaying agency on their own behalf.

The individualised agentive emphasis in current academic discourse overlooks another discursive theme perpetuated within the colonial narrative, which positioned indentured women as "negligent mothers", who "lacked maternal instinct" and were thus, conveniently held to blame for the high illness and mortality rates of infants and children on the plantations (cf. Fowler 2000; Lal 2000 on infant and child mortality

statistics). This study addresses the significant gap. I use the concept of motherhood to explore the intersectionality of gender, race, institutionalised social positions, time and space and the influences of these intersections on indentured women's expressions of the agency as relational beings.

The research presents a critical engagement with two women's personal testimonies of motherhood on the indentured plantation.[1] Through the application of an indenture-specific narrative methodology, Narrativization Analysis Framework (NAF) (Gounder 2011), the analysis provides a conceptualisation of women's configurations of their social networks and how they positioned self and others within this network to appropriate cause and effect, praise and blame for events in situated time and space. Through the analysis of women as relational beings, we can determine the resources women utilised to negotiate agency as mothers in their everyday lives within the indenture plantation world.

Women as Mothers and Labourers

Between 1879 and 1916, 60,965 Indian men, women and children travelled to Fiji under the Indian indenture system. The colonial authorities perceived the gender imbalance in the indentured colonies elsewhere as a significant factor for social problems amongst male labourers. Hence, in the case of Fiji, a strict ratio of 40 (or more) women to 100 men was enforced. The result was that of the 45,439 North India migrant labourers, 13,696 were females (Lal 2012: 108).

However, the sex-based differentiation that permeated every stratum of the indenture system had dire consequences for women and children. Not only were the allocated tasks gender-differentiated but so was the weekly pay. A man was entitled to one shilling per week, while a woman received nine pence; hence, solo mothers had great difficulty sustaining themselves and their children (Annual report 1887: 5, cited in Lal 2000: 205). Moreover, pay was given only for work completed; therefore, during the working week, children under the age of 15 were left in the lines with old women labourers, who functioned as nannies; however, the care and attention given to children is questionable, given the children's accident rates on the plantations (Cole 2000: 328–329).

The indenture plantation environment was also indifferent to maternal healthcare needs. While under the indenture legal requirements, "women were to have two months of leave before birth and 2–3 months afterwards, this practice was not always observed" (Lal 2000: 207), as seen in the case of Naraini, who was forced to return to work five days after giving birth (Harvey 2000). Furthermore, Lal (2000: 207) notes that "during the period of leave, the mother was not provided with milk or rations, which directly led to malnutrition and improper feeding of the infant."

[1]This research is part of a larger project on the role of indenture oral histories in reconstructing collective memories (Gounder 2011, 2017).

The agency of the women protagonists in this chapter is about their enactment of motherhood within the constraints of these systemic structures of the plantation environment, which, as discussed below, viewed the women as labourers first and mothers second.

The Colonial Discourse on Indian Indenture and Motherhood

The official colonial discourse marginalises the Indian indentured labourers as a whole (Naidu 2004; Tinker 1974). Within this discourse, there is the further marginalisation of the indentured women, who formed a minority group on the plantations.

The disregard of the plantation authorities for the indentured women as anything other than labourers is evident from Dr. Hirsche's report on the colonial stance:

> An employer often complains that the women suckle their infants too long and that they could be left behind in the lines much sooner than is usually done. These gentlemen forget that these people have no other means of providing suitable nourishment for their children. (C.S.O. 7395/10, cited in Lal 2000: 208)

The consequences of low pay, inadequate rations and lack of access to adequate infant dietary supplement and healthcare contributed to the disproportionately high number of infant deaths on the Fiji plantations in comparison to the other colonies (Fowler 2000: 283). In fact, the majority of deaths on the indentured plantation were attributed to infants who were under a year old: "61.8% in 1903; 56.6% in 1904 and 57.6% in 1906" (Lal 2000: 206).

Just as the violence on the plantations against indentured women attracted public attention and led to the pressure of official investigations into the workings of the plantation environment, the high rates of infant mortality also led to public outcry and investigations. In response, and in defence, the positioning of indentured women as "mercenary" transferred within the colonial discourse from "sexual mercenaries" to "mercenary mothers".

The colonial discourse constructed indentured women as negligent mothers, laying blame on high infant illness and mortality rates directly on the mother's "want of care" rather than systemic failings within the indenture system and the plantation environment. In the official reports, the alleged negligence was alternatively phrased as the mothers' "want of care", "apathy", "want of cleanliness", "ignorance", "lack of attention" and even "deliberate neglect of their children in order to obtain time off work" (Fowler 2000).

Colonial reports also expressly mentioned that the high illness and mortality rates were "not due to neglect on the part of employers or failure to provide for the care of children" (Fowler 2000: 284). The discourse conveniently detracted attention from the systemic failings within the indenture system such as overcrowding, unsanitary living conditions, malnourishment due to food and water scarcity, lack of trained

midwives and sanitary birthing facilities, which were correlated to high infant and child illness and mortality (Fowler 2000: 280).

Gillion (1962: 79) notes that the planters' increased indifference to the labourers' welfare was the repercussion of falling sugar prices after 1884 and between early to mid-1890s. An additional issue was the shortage of government inspectors, which meant that plantation inspections were few and far between. Consequently, there was greater exploitation of workers through overtasking in the early to mid-1890s and high death rates for labourers, infants and children in the 1890s.

Hence, for the women, there was higher pressure to perform as labourers-then-mothers. In such an environment, women's performances of mothers-then-labourers can be examined through their resistance strategies.

Motherhood and Resistance Practices

The plantation environment within which the women lived and worked played a large part in determining the strategies that the women used in their resistance practices:

> The external constraints imposed by the authoritarian structure of the plantation system and the repressive labour legislation that upheld it was the primary deterrents of collective self-assertion. But the labourers' difficulties were compounded by a lack of cohesion within the Indian workforce itself. The labourers' diverse social and cultural background, their differing aspirations and motivations for migrating to Fiji, their varying individual experiences on the plantations, and the absence of institutional structures within the indentured community, which could have become avenues for mobilisation, all combined to frustrate the potential for collective action.
>
> (Lal and Munro 2014: 125–126)

Lal and Munro's argument concurs with Scott's (1985: 35) analysis of socio-cultural, geographic and structural factors, which in combination create an unfavourable environment for large-scale revolts; however, this is not to say that there was an absence of resistance during indenture. Instead, these constraints produce less overt resistance techniques, which are "mundane and individualistic" and enacted through "everyday acts" (Vahed 2014: 114). Such resistance strategies have been referred to, variably, as "everyday forms of resistance" (Ewick and Silbey 2003), "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985), and "secondary adjustment" (Goffman 1961).

The act of everyday resistance lies at the intersection of power distribution, sense of injustice, familiarity with the institutionalised organisation of resources, and opportunity to utilise these same resources and temporarily subvert power (Ewick and Silbey 2003: 1336–1337). It is the familiarity with the resources that allows the resisters to "identify the cracks and vulnerabilities of institutionalised power" (Ewick and Silbey 2003: 1330), which provide opportunities to subvert the order for "immediate objectives" (Tinker 1974: 226) with a reduced risk of severe retaliation compared to open defiance (Scott 1985: 34–35).

On indenture plantations throughout the colonies, male and female labourers practiced a wide range of day-to-day resistance techniques. These took the form

of absenteeism, desertion, malingering or feigned illness, mouthing off, verbal and physical assault and homicide of plantation authorities, theft, slovenly work, incomplete tasks, refusal to work and suicide (Ali 2004; Hassankhan 2014; Vahed 2014).

Recent analysis has delved particularly into the resistance practices of women labourers across the spectrum of womanhood (Hiralal 2014; Shameem 1990). This study takes a different approach through its emphasis on one particular and salient construction of womanhood, through the analysis of women's daily negotiations of their identities within the interstices of labourers and mothers on the indenture plantations.

Methodology

The life stories which are under analysis here, were produced on the radio documentary *Girmit Gāthā* or "Stories of indenture" to commemorate Fiji's indenture centenary. The program was first broadcast in 1979 on Radio Fiji 2, which at the time was Fiji's only Hindi radio station (Gounder 2011). Individual interviews were conducted with the few indentured labourers who were still alive. Within this program, two women provided personal perspectives on motherhood and childhood experiences on the indentured plantations of Fiji.

The earliest experience comes from **Guldhari Maharaj**, who arrived in Fiji on 23, May, 1893, on *Jumna II* with her indentured parents. Guldhari's narrative provides a child's perspective on indenture. Within her narrative, she provides an eyewitness account of her mother's indenture. Through her re-construction of one day on an unnamed indenture plantation, we understand the typical routine of her mother's indenture:

> I came with my parents, and I was small, so I used to receive rations. And my mother used to go to the field to work.

The second narrator is **Jasoda Ramdin** from Sitapur. She and her husband disembarked on 30, July, 1904, on *Ems II*. She served her indenture first on sugarcane plantations in Lautoka and then Labasa, after which, she and her husband were tasked with building roads and railway lines in Labasa. Jasoda's motherhood narrative focuses on a significant event on her first plantation concerning the welfare of her child:

> I think I was close to eighteen then I had my first child, in Fiji, in Lautoka.

The study employs Narrativization Analysis Framework (Gounder 2011), a methodology designed specifically to analyse indenture narratives. Narrativization Analysis Framework starts from the premise that narratives are cultural constructs, the telling of which occur at the intersection of memory, the cultural norms of what is sanctioned to be articulated in public, and the shared knowledge of Indian indenture present within the community.

The narratives can be analysed at three levels (Fig. 2.1). At level 1, the analysis is on the narrative's internal structure. The sequencing of selective events in time and space establishes a cause and effect relationship within temporal, social and spatial settings. The employment creates moral evaluations of actors. Those actors who facilitate the protagonists' agency are attributed praise, while actors who constrain the protagonists' agency are attributed blame. At level 2, the analysis focuses on the immediate context of the narration. Like the other narrators, Jasoda and Guldhari were interviewed at home by radio announcers. The structure, focus and manner of telling the narratives were, thus, mediated by the interviewer's presence and future audience. Finally, level 3 takes the broader context into account. The motherhood narratives are produced in relation to master narratives, which take the form of official colonial discourses about indenture motherhood. The women's narratives could either align with these master narratives' stance on actors and events or counter the hegemonic perspective to deconstruct identity politics of indenture motherhood.

This study is located at levels 1 and 3 of the Narrativization Analysis Framework. I analyse the narratives to develop a typology of resistance motherhood practices that emerged out of the intersections of systemic structural resources of power and privilege, plantation hierarchy, gender roles and gender relations. When analysing everyday acts of resistance:

> the initial question to be asked…is not what this practice brings to the practitioner but rather the character of the social relationship that its acquisition and maintenance required.
>
> (Goffman 1961: 201)

In the narratives, we not only have mothers as figures in the storied world, but we have the meaningful construction of motherhood through the positionings of mothers in relation to other characters and situated events. Using the framework, I conduct

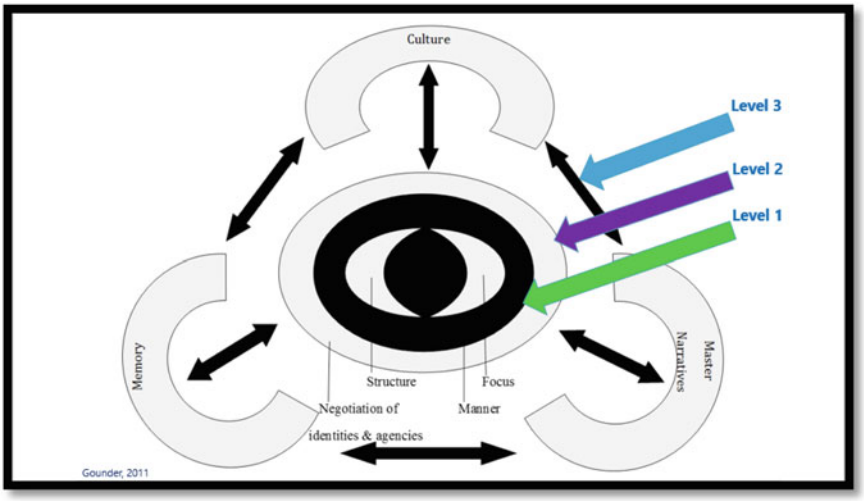


Fig. 2.1 Narrativization analysis framework

"relational and network analysis" of indentured women within their roles of "care-taking and being-in-relations" and thus conceptualise the women as social beings (Somers 1994: 608).

Analysis

The Plantation Environment

The women's stories of motherhood are enacted against the background of the systemic workings of the plantation environment and its constraints on motherhood practices. The colonial iteration was that the women were at fault for the illness and mortality rates of infant and children. When we read the women's narratives against the master narrative, a counter-narrative emerges, which can be read as "evidence" of the importance of the plantation structures to the women's motherhood practices.

The narrators recount the long hours women spent on the plantations:

> The women went to the field. Sometimes they returned early; sometimes it would be nightfall. When they had to cut sugarcane, it would be nine o'clock at night when they returned.
>
> Guldhari

The long hours and hard tasks, in turn, contributed to the women's exhaustion:

> Then again, at only three o'clock in the morning, the bell would sound. Then again, the women would get up and run.
>
> Guldhari

The narrators also describe women's experiences of food scarcity:

> My mother would keep aside some of the food she had made for dinner the previous evening…the women used to take the stale food for their lunch. Sometimes they would eat it; sometimes the food would spoil because of the heat. They would throw it away, and they would go hungry.
>
> Guldhari

The women were further marginalised under indenture through their weekly wage. Under the task-based system of indenture, the women quite often did not receive the wages stipulated in their indenture contracts:

> When Saturday came, payday, some received two shillings, some ten pence, some three shillings. The plantation authorities said, "You didn't complete your full task…" Even the wages they would take away.
>
> Guldhari

The systemic structures within which indentured women lived created a vicious cycle, which took a toll on maternal health and well-being, which in turn, influenced their mothering roles. The lack of adequate food, long hours and hard work contributed to the women's debilitating exhaustion. Moreover, the meagre pay meant

that the women were unable to buy adequate rations, which contributed to their (and their children's) malnourishment. The women's long hours and exhaustion forced them to take stale food to the plantation, the consumption of which increased the women's risk of food poisoning and diarrhoea. As Fowler (2000: 273) notes, dysentery, food poisoning and diarrhoea was endemic to the plantation environment and contributed the most to the mortality rates of the labourers, infants, and children.

In addition to the above factors limiting maternal and child well-being, the narrators portray indenture as a brutal experience for the labourers. The narratives are overshadowed by the ever-present violence of the plantation authorities and the labourers' pain, fear and anguish:

> The Sirdar took the women to the plantation. He said, "Now begin." Now the women had never cut cane. They cut their hand, and the women wailed. …The overseer would come to the field with the waterman at eight o'clock to inspect. The women warned, "When he comes, he will beat you a lot." The sahib comes. He shakes the whip. He doesn't beat anyone, but he keeps shaking the whip.
>
> Jasoda

In such an environment of constant surveillance, with the threat of violence hanging over their heads on a daily basis, and where outright resistance would further impact their working conditions and pay, "open defiance is impossible or entails mortal danger". These factors instead create the need for more covert resistance techniques (Scott 1985: 34–35). It is within this temporal and spatial setting that indentured women's experiences of motherhood and childhood are located, and it is within this environment that their motherhood negotiations need to be examined.

Labourers-Then-Mothers Versus Mothers-Then-Labourers

The women's narratives provide a counter-narrative to the colonial writings on indentured mothers through the demonstration of everyday resistance techniques practiced by the women to renegotiate themselves as mothers-then-labourers.

Guldhari's narrative captures the women's maternal empathy through descriptions of a mother's interactions with her child:

> When the bell sounded, I would wake up and then I would wake my mother. Then she would make breakfast…She would massage oil into my hair and then it would be time.

Jasoda's narrative is about a significant event that occurred during her indenture regarding her child's welfare. She revisits the pain she felt on behalf of her child as well as her sense of injustice as the overseer dismisses her complaints:

> I had a son. I left him at the nanny's house. Then the nanny beat him. She beat him. And she was an old hand. She knew English…My son was crying. Another woman told me. So, a small argument began to happen between the nanny and me. Now, the nanny could read English. She was an old hand from Natal. Then the Overseer, that bastard, he really hit me, like this…. He said, "Why do you argue with the nanny, why do you argue?" I said, "She is beating my son!"

In both Guldhari and Jasoda's narratives, the experiences of motherhood are constrained through the plantation authorities' attempts to subvert the women's agencies and to reposition the women as labourers-then-mothers. This is seen particularly through the violence inflicted on the women:

> If there was any delay, the Sahib and Sirdar would come, carrying the whip. They would growl, "Get out quickly; you need to work." Then unfurling the whip, they used to hit. In fright of this, the women would begin to run.
>
> Guldhari

Similarly, the violence of indenture is a present and prevalent constraining factor on Jasoda's positioning of herself as a mother. The overseer slaps Jasoda as she asserts herself as a mother and he reminds Jasoda of her place as a labourer within the plantation hierarchy:

> Then the Overseer, that bastard, he really hit me, like this…. He said, "Why do you argue with the nanny, why do you argue?"

Despite the plantation authorities' attempts at positioning the women as labourers-then-mothers, the women resist and reposition themselves as mothers-then-labourers through their actions.

Plantation Mothers' Repertoire of Resistance Strategies

1. Tacit Cooperation

Everyday resistance relies on the tacit cooperation of others within the same "class" (Scott 1989: 36). Within the colonial discourse, women were perceived as a homogenous group, with individuals singled out to uphold the generalisations of "bad mothers". The indentured women were also a homogenous group as plantation workers through their positioning within the gendered plantation hierarchy. Hence, the tacit cooperation amongst the women for successful everyday resistance practices needs to be explored.

(a) Foot-Dragging

Guldari stresses her and the other children's distress at being separated from their mothers. The narrative serves a dual purpose. It firstly, demonstrates that the mothers were central to the children's emotional needs. Secondly, the women, who had previously been threatened with physical violence for lateness now delay, consoling their children before leaving for the plantation. The juxtaposition of the women's actions against the plantation authorities' demands creates a tacit display of foot-dragging within the guise of mothering:

> The women would drop the children off at the nanny's quarters. Then I would cry for my mother. My mother would say, "Daughter, now we will go and cut sugarcane." In that manner, she used to comfort me.

> Then my mother would walk away crying. My mother would walk away crying. We would cry. All the children would cry. The mothers would walk on crying.
>
> Guldhari

(b) **Informal Social Networks**

A commonly used strategy during indenture was the development of informal social networks amongst the plantation women workers. These networks served as a pact of solidarity within the gendered plantation hierarchy. The networks, evidenced on plantations across the colonies, were deployed for protection against sexual predation (Mishra 2008).

Importantly, as demonstrated in Jasoda's narrative, the use of these networks was not only for protecting the women as individuals but also for protecting the women's filial bonds. Jasoda's narrative hints at the social resources of solidarity and womanhood that the mothers employed to support each other: Another woman labourer informs Jasoda that the nanny has beaten her son:

> I had a son. I left him at the nanny's house. Then the nanny beat him. She beat him.… My son was crying. Another woman told me.

2. **Individualised Resistance**

Everyday resistance, while a conscious enactment in response to perceived injustice, is temporary, clandestine, opportunistic and generally individualised, rather than collectively organised and enacted on a grand scale for long-term gains (Scott 1989). The narratives demonstrate that for mothers on the plantations, their individualised resistance acts were tailored to situations within which their identities as mothers were challenged.

(a) **Leaving Work Without Permission**

The employers were keen on getting maximum productivity from their labourers. Mothering practices were seen as detracting from women workers' output. Hence, plantation authorities were keen to restrict even necessary acts of motherhood, such as breastfeeding, to the bare minimum (C.S.O. 7395/10, cited in Lal 2000: 208).

A resistance strategy that indentured labourers throughout the colonies employed was work-related defiance, in the form of absence from work or roll call, leaving work without permission, leaving tasks incomplete or refusal to complete allotted tasks (Hiralal 2014; Vahed 2014). Jasoda employs a similar strategy. Upon hearing that her son has been beaten, Jasoda abandons her plantation task and goes to the aid of her son, thus prioritising herself as a mother-then-labourer. Within the output-driven environment of the indenture plantation, such acts of work-related defiance were important statements of dissent.

(b) **Verbal Confrontation**

While strategies such as foot-dragging are non-confrontational acts, indicative of non-compliance, Jasoda's narrative demonstrates that the mothers' resistance strategies could also be confrontational. In her narrative, Jasoda displays agency as a mother, as she argues with the nanny on behalf of her child:

So, a small argument began to happen between the nanny and me.

The women's agencies as mothers cut across the plantation hierarchy. Jasoda argues with the nanny even though she knows the nanny is favoured by the overseer and would, therefore, be ranked higher than Jasoda within the plantation hierarchy:

Now, the nanny could read English. She was an old hand from Natal.

(c) **Withdrawal of Deference**

The women's confrontational strategies also involved withdrawing deference for the plantation authorities. Jasoda's lack of deference is seen in her interaction with the overseer. Through the appended expletive, she underlines her contempt for the overseer's management of the state of affairs. Jasoda's stance demonstrates that at this point she does not acknowledge the hierarchy of worker-overseer. The overseer uses force in an attempt to remind Jasoda of her place in the hierarchy; however, Jasoda refuses to accept the overseer's re-positioning of her as a labourer-then-mother. Instead, she asserts herself as a mother-then-labourer as she defiantly rebukes the overseer for his lack of attention to her son's welfare:

Then the Overseer, that bastard, he really hit me, like this…. He said, "Why do you argue with the nanny, why do you argue?"

I said, "She is beating my son!"

Discussion

This study is centred on the indentured women's experiences of motherhood. The research, thus, moves the discourse beyond the binary discussion of gendered bodies of males and females to social bodies and reconstructs the women and their narratives as liminal spaces of multiple meanings.

The study examined two contrastive perspectives on "mothering" experiences on the indenture plantations through Guldhari's perspective as a child and Jasoda's perspective as a mother. The two women's narratives converge on motherhood themes, creating narrative coherence across temporal and spatial settings to provide evidence of the systemic problems that were endemic to the indenture plantation environment (Gillion 1962), and which adversely impacted maternal and child health and women's expressions of motherhood. The research, thus, finds a counter-narrative to the colonial discourse on motherhood on the indenture plantations. Through their first-hand experiences, the narrators provide evidence that the women were not "wantonly neglecting their children", nor "abandoning their children without care", common themes in the colonial discourse on motherhood (Fowler 2000).

The narratives also present the plantation as a hegemonic male environment. The interactions between the plantation authorities and the women demonstrate that from the plantation authorities' perspective, the women were labourers first, with

little regard for them as mothers. Hence, it is also within these constraining powers of gendered structures that the women were performing their agencies as mothers.

Through the analysis of the women's testimonies, the study builds a typology of the indentured mothers' repertoire of resistance strategies, which they employed in their identity negotiations within the social and gender-stratified plantation environment (Fig. 2.2). The narratives illustrate that the mothers tailored plantation-based strategies to their situations. As seen in Fig. 2.2, the women practiced both collective and individualised resistance strategies. The strategies could be covert and non-confrontational, such as through acts of foot-dragging and maintaining supportive, informal networks. The strategies could also be openly defiant and confrontational, as in the acts of leaving work without permission, verbal confrontation and lack of deference. Moreover, as seen in Jasoda's narrative, one resistance strategy could lead to another and could form a chain of resistance acts.

Such resistance strategies remained of little consequence to the colonial authorities as they did not challenge the system but remained temporary and opportunistic, providing gains only in terms of "immediate objectives" (Tinker 1974); hence, these everyday forms of resistance are not salient within colonial discourse, nor were they the sensationalised acts of resistance amplified within the Indian nationalist public sphere. However, given their prominence within the motherhood narratives, these

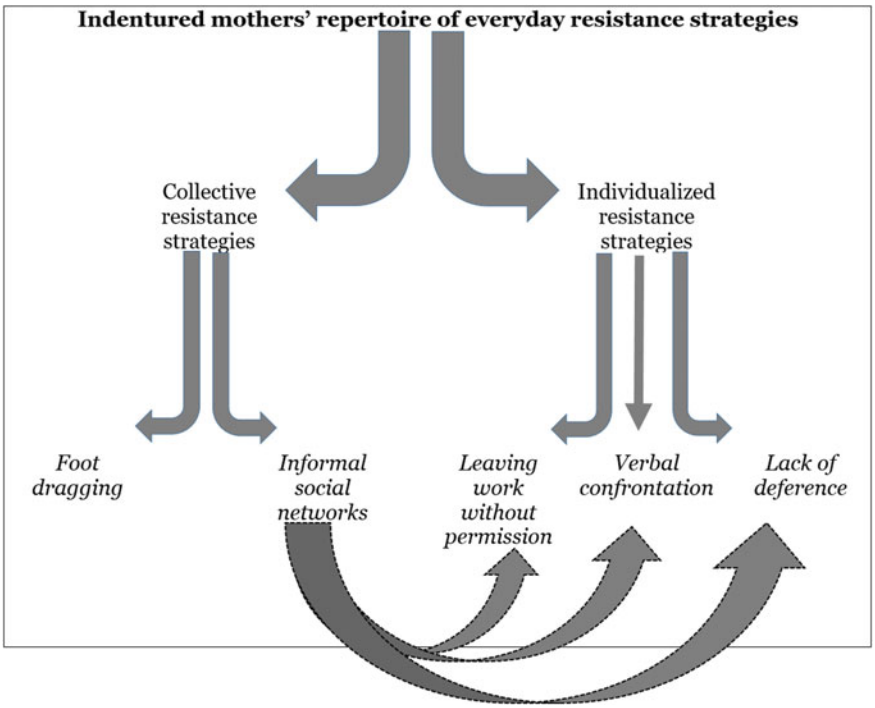


Fig. 2.2 Typology of indentured motherhood resistance strategies

practices were essential for the women to reassert control over their identity and agency as mothers.

References

Ali, A. (2004). *Girmit: Indian indenture experience in Fiji*. Suva, Fiji: Fiji Museum; Ministry of National Reconciliation and Multi-Ethnic Affairs.

Bates, C., Carter, M., & Govinden, V. (2017). *The abolition of Indian indentured migration to Mauritius*. Retrieved October 21, 2018, from http://gcids2017.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Crispin-Bates-Marina-Carter-V-Govinden-Full-Paper.pdf.

Beall, J. (1990). Women under indenture in Colonial Natal, 1860–1911. In C. Clarke, C. Peach, & S. Vertovec (Eds.), *South Asians overseas: Migration and ethnicity* (pp. 57–74). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cole, A. (2000). Accidental deaths on Fiji plantations, 1879–1916. In B. V. Lal (Ed.), *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* (pp. 324–360). Suva, Fiji.

Ewick, P., & Silbey, S. (2003). Narrating social structure: Stories of resistance to legal authority. *American Journal of Sociology, 108*(6), 1328–1372.

Faruqee, M. (2018). Conceiving the coolie woman: Indentured Labour, Indian women, and colonial discourse. In P. Misir (Ed.), *The subaltern Indian woman* (pp. 73–91). Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fowler, G. (2000). A want of care: Death and disease on Fiji plantations, 1890–1900. In B. V. Lal (Ed.), *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* (pp. 273–290). Suva, Fiji.

Gillion, K. L. (1962). *Fiji's Indian migrants: A history to the end of indenture in 1920*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other innates*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.

Gounder, F. (2011). *Indentured identities: Resistance and accommodation in plantation-era Fiji*. The Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing.

Gounder, F. (2017). Restorying Girmit: Commemorative journalism, collective consciousness and the imagined community. *Fijian Studies: A Journal of Contemporary Fiji, 15*(1), 47–62.

Gupta, C. (2014). Saving 'Wronged' bodies: Caste, indentured women and Hindi print-public sphere in colonial India. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 75,* 716–722.

Gupta, C. (2015). 'Innocent' victims/'Guilty' migrants: Hindi public sphere, caste and indentured women in colonial north India. *Modern Asian Studies, 49*(5), 1345–1377.

Harvey, J. (2000). Naraini's story. In B. V. Lal (Ed.), *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* (pp. 337–348). Suva, Fiji.

Hassankhan, M. (2014). The Indian indentured experience in suriname. Control, accommodation and resistance. In M. S. Hassankhan, B. V. Lal, & D. Munro (Eds.), *Resistance and Indian indenture experience: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 199–240). New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

Hiralal, K. (2014). 'Rebellious Sister': Indentured Indian women and resistance in colonial Natal 1860–1911. In M. S. Hassankhan, B. V. Lal, & D. Munro (Eds.), *Resistance and Indian indenture experience: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 241–270). New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

Kelly, J. D. (1991). *A politics of virtue: Hinduism, sexuality, and countercolonial discourse in Fiji*. University of Chicago Press.

Lal, B. V. (2000). Veil of dishonor. In B. V. Lal (Ed.), *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* (pp. 215–238). Suva, Fiji.

Lal, B. V. (2012). Origins of the Girmityas. In B. V. Lal (Ed.), *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* (pp. 99–119). Suva, Fiji.

Lal, B. V., & Munro, D. (2014). Non-resistance in Fiji. In M. S. Hassankhan, B. V. Lal, & D. Munro (Eds.), *Resistance and Indian indenture experience: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 121–156). New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

Mishra, M. (2008). The emergence of feminism in Fiji. *Women's History Review, 17*(1), 39–55.

Naidu, V. (2004). *The violence of indenture in Fiji* (2nd ed.). Lautoka, Fiji: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies.

Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Scott, J. C. (1989). Everyday forms of resistance. *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies, 4*(1), 33–62.

Shameem, S. (1990). Sugar and spice: Wealth accumulation and the labour of Indian women in Fiji, 1879–1930. *Doctoral dissertation*. University of Waikato.

Somers, M. R. (1994). The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach. *Theory and Society, 23*(5), 605–649.

Tinker, H. (1974). *A new system of slavery: Export of Indian labor overseas, 1830–1920*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vahed, G. (2014). Power and resistance: Indentured labour in colonial Natal, 1860–1911. In M. S. Hassankhan, B. V. Lal, & D. Munro (Eds.), *Resistance and Indian indenture experience: Comparative perspectives* (pp. 95–120). New Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

Chapter 3
Normativised Misogyny: A Socio-Legal Critique of Colonial Indentured Labour

David Pradhan

Abstract The rise of feminist scholarship has, in recent times, shifted the focus of the indentured labour discourse towards the gendered subaltern analytical framework. This paradigm has unmasked hitherto overlooked nuances of the experiential counter-narratives and issues of women indentured labourers, revealing the double burden of poverty and patriarchal culture on them. This thematic chapter, based on secondary sources, attempts a critical analysis of the then prevailing colonial legal and social matrix of the plantation colonies. The legacy of the dialectic between the institutional normative legal structures on the one hand and the patriarchal social values on the other is examined. The negotiation of status by the women indentured labourers, and the expression of their muliebrity and agency in praxis, for securing more egalitarian social and gender relations has been explored. The complex dichotomy of historical exploitative subjugation of the women indentured labourers, contra the contemporary emancipation, assertiveness and liberated socio-legal status of women in the erstwhile plantation colonies, and present-day post-colonial States, in the Caribbean, Africa and the Indo-Pacific, has been interpreted through the lens of sociological jurisprudence.

Keywords Gender · Women indentured labourers · Legal structure · Patriarchy · Emancipation

Introduction

The nebulous historical narratives of indentured labour are being progressively clarified through multidisciplinary academic engagement, of which the gendered analytical framework is an increasingly prominent paradigm. It endeavours to frame the hitherto unexplored, feminist facets of experiential subaltern counter-narratives based on muliebrity, thereby richly contributing to the contemporary discourses in diaspora studies for better comprehension of the nuances of the complexities of diasporic life (Pande 2018). The diasporic experience is characterised by the dichotomy

D. Pradhan (✉)
School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
e-mail: david.pradhan@outlook.com

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_3

of geographical dislocation and psychological affiliation. As a result, the conception of "self" of the indentured labourers (henceforth referred to as *girmitiyas*) occupies a liminal space that lies between the duality of identities, cultures, values and histories, wherein the "home" becomes—through idealisation of imagination, memory and replication—the reference point for socio-psychological narrativisation. The crucial role of women as repositories, carriers, preservers and intergenerational transmitters of social values and morals in all societies generally, and in the diasporas, particularly, is usually enforced through patriarchy (Mohammed 2002). The social control of women and their sexuality through patriarchal domination, therefore, acquire the status of social norms. These social norms over time acquire the status of values constitutive of social institutions, including political and legal structures. Social values find eloquent expression in the political arena where through the legislative process, they create the legal frameworks which authoritatively legitimise the normativity of the prevalent values, through State sanctioned and executed, penalisation of deviance and approval of compliance. Law as an applied tool for social engineering may be used, either to preserve or change, perceptions, norms, values, institutions and society itself (Holmes 1897). Law and legal theory, therefore, play a critical creative role in the conception, construction, organisation and transformation of social relations and society (Pound 1910). Despite the fact that women constitute half of society, their influence on the law which regulates social life and social status is barely discernible. Theoretically, law assumes the blindfold of gender neutrality, to ensure freedom from bias and arbitrariness, by disregarding extraneous considerations. Ideally, this position would be beneficial to women if applied with a "*veil of ignorance*" (Rawls 1971) but in reality, laws are conceptualised, articulated, organised, legitimated and adjudicated in the context of the prevalent social values and therefore acquire patriarchal hues. Apart from the special statutory provisions enacted by the legislatures pertaining to women as a class, the classical positivist legal jurisprudence assumes that gender is at best a marginal consideration in adjudication. Thus, historically, gender has not been a primary concern, nor have women been able to exercise a significant role in the normative grounding, theoretical conceptualisation, categorical ordering, legislative content or jurisprudential interpretation of the law. This chapter seeks to locate gender of the women *girmitiyas* in the colonial and post-colonial legal doctrines, statutes and practice.

The Background

The political thought of the enlightenment thinkers like Locke and Hobbes challenged the existing social structures and laid the philosophical foundations for racial and gender equality. Legal philosophy was also influenced by this spirit of liberalism, and Benthamite Utilitarianism provided the catalyst for the translation of the Kantian maxim that "*Every human being is a free, autonomous being and therefore cannot be subjugated to the will of another*" into legal theory when Mill argued that "*the legal subordination of one sex to the other … is wrong in itself, and now one of the*

chief hindrances to human improvement" (Mill 1912, 427; Bentham 1843, 107). The women *girmitiyas* were oppressed through a complex amalgam of native patriarchy, colonial labour exploitation, economic inequality and social discrimination, all of which were legitimised and enforced through legal structures. The postmodernist, third-wave feminist analytical framework for comprehending the interaction between the oppressive intersectionalities, contextualised by the history, culture, economics and society, made it possible for scholars to appreciate diversity, without seeking to universalise the experiential deconstruction of the women *girmitiyas* (Mohammed 2004). Sociological jurisprudence, with its emphasis on law as a tool for social engineering, dovetails into the feminist analysis to address the existing literature gap of a critique of the misogyny inherent in the colonial legal structure governing women *girmitiyas*.

The industrial revolution in the early nineteenth century ushered in the necessary economic, sociopolitical and ideological changes in Europe, giving rise to the modern capitalist system, with State mandated and legally regulated labour–capitalist contractual relations, that made slavery uneconomical (Williams et al. 2014). The abolitionists as a political lobby successfully advocated the legal abolition of slavery, but their political campaigns against slave trade were motivated less by *humanitarian concerns* and more by their faith in the argument of "*Adam Smith that free labour would be* [cheaper and] *more efficient than slavery*" (Northrup 1995, 18). The UK led the socio-economic transition from slavery to formally free labour by enacting the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, 1807, which declared slave trade illegal, although slave ownership was not criminalised. The Slavery Abolition Act, 1833, abolished slavery throughout the British Empire and emancipated all slaves by 1834. Industrialisation, however, was rather limited in the "plantation colonies" of the British Empire where the entire society, economy and politics revolved around the cultivation of cash crops which required intensive manual labour, hitherto provided by slaves. Facing a labour crisis, the influential plantation capitalists lobbied the British Parliament which compensated the plantation owners, for protecting the plantation economies from the shock of slave emancipation. It also inserted a legal clause in the Slavery Abolition Act, 1833, mandating enforced apprenticeship for the emancipated slaves. This was expected to motivate the emancipated slaves to continue working on the plantations as free labourers. But these legal provisions failed in retaining former slave labour on the exploitative plantation estates (Kale 1998, 49–53; Hall 1978). Under these circumstances, the Colonial Government of India (CGoI) dispatched 7000 *girmitiyas* from Calcutta to Mauritius on the request of the Mauritian plantation owners in 1834. Act V of 1837, passed by the Bengal Presidency Legislature to regulate the overseas indentured labour from Bengal Presidency, was extended to all the territories of the British East India Company by the Act XXXII of 1837. However, mere regulatory legislation failed to protect "*the coolies…exported to Mauritius…induced by gross misrepresentation and deceit*" from exploitation. The Vagrancy Act, 1837, and Ordinance 31 of Mauritius legitimised the excesses even outside the plantations since they were designed to coerce the time-expired *girmitiyas* into further tenures, through criminal prosecution for petty infractions, to save on the cost of

transportation of new coolies (Bengal Government 1840). The horrific working conditions and atrocities led to the suspension of overseas indentured labour under Act XIV of 1839. But soon, in deference to the plantation capitalist lobby, the restriction on emigration to Mauritius was lifted by the Royal Proclamation of Ordinance 11 of 1842. Further, the British Parliament passed an act in 1844 for the engagement of the Indians as contractual indentured labourers in the overseas plantation colonies in the Caribbean.

Legal Misogyny in Colonial India

India was then a British colony, and after the Great Mutiny of 1857, the Indian "*natives*" had been granted formal recognition as the subjects of the Queen. However, the revenue and land tenure systems were designed by the CGoI to favour maximum returns on the British capital invested in India, rather than the welfare, or even the basic food security for the Indian peasantry. The British colonial land tenures favoured landholding male gentry over the rights of other traditional stakeholders such as hereditary tenants, non-agriculturalists and especially women (Cain and Hopkins 1993; Economist 1858, 1121; Baker 2005, 16). Irrigation facilities for food crops were largely neglected, and farmers were legally forced to grow cash crops through the Indigo Act XI, 1860, leading to a peasant revolt in Bengal. The domestic industrial sector in India, the traditional employment at the village level and artisan handicrafts, in which a crucial part was played by the women, giving them a modicum of economic independence, collapsed and forced entire communities including women and children to become unskilled daily-wage agricultural labourers (Government of India Reports 1867, 105; Bhattacharya 1978; Kumar 1998).

The civil status of women in India, before British colonisation, was governed by a plurality of quasi-legal norms determined by various religious, regional and caste customs, and complex interactions inter se, which were adjudicated by the community, rather than being State enforced. These customs, while authoritative for those to whom it applied, lacked the positivist legality associated with State legislation and enforcement, and led some British jurists to erroneously conclude that India was a "*country singularly empty of law*" (Rattigan 1885; Kolsky 2005). The quasi-legal *Smriti* treatises associated with the conservative Hindu religious *Shastras* were socially recognised as anachronistic due to their extreme patriarchy, which denied women most civil and proprietary rights. The *Shastric* laws were seldom followed even by the staunchest of Brahmins. This is attested by the fact that significant differences exist not only between the *Dayabhaga* and *Mitakshara* Schools of Hindu Law but even between the regional variants of *Mitakshara* such as the Benaras, Mithila, Maharashtra and Dravida sub-schools. In practice, the rights of women in different communities were protected under customary laws. Pluralism of religious beliefs within the larger Hindu religious identity, and the central role of women of certain castes in agrarian labour and regional customs, gave rise to a variety of proprietary

rights of women including inheritance, as well as other civil rights like the choice of marriage, divorce and remarriage (Agnes 1999).

With the consolidation of British Colonial Rule in India, the codification of laws was taken up by the CGoI. While the British succeeded in enforcing a secular and uniform criminal law in India by 1860, there was stringent opposition of the conservative Indian natives to the codification of secular civil law. The issue of the regulation of civil laws, especially personal and family laws, became an arena for contestation between the colonial administrators and the native religious elites, which over the time acquired nationalist undertones. The colonial laws relating to women became contentious since they were perceived by the Indians as intruding on Indian religion, culture and tradition. Despite the apparent concern of the laws for women as subjects, the colonial discourses and debates were largely led and dominated by men, whether the colonial administrators, Hindu reformers, conservative native religious elites or liberal nationalists. The opinion of women is conspicuous by its absence in the legal discourses. The only concurrence among the men of diverse ideological persuasions was in their unanimous agreement about the weakness and ignorance of women, and their rejection of women's power and agency. The actual motivation behind the colonial legal debates about native Indian women was not the emancipation of women, but a masked confrontation between the patriarchal native elites for reclaiming control of women's sexuality and property through legal recognition of the religious *Shastric* law. This was pitched against the "*civilising*" control over its native subjects that the CGoI regarded as legitimising its sovereignty and colonisation. Colonial legal discourses related to women were therefore negotiated between colonial administrators and native religious elites, excluding the women themselves (Spivak 1988; Mani 1998; Guy 1997).

The initial colonial attempts at the legal regulation of personal civil law of the native Indians were inconsistent and piecemeal. The earlier attempts at progressive legal interventions, in favour of native women, such as the Sati Act, 1829, had been construed by the Indian religious elites as interference in religious affairs and had emerged as one of the motivating factors for the Great Mutiny of 1857. The Queen's Proclamation of 1858 restraining the British administrators "*from interference in the realm of personal beliefs and practices of the natives*" led to the CGoI virtually surrendering civil law to the native religious elites. The legal recognition of patriarchal *Shastric* Hindu Law as canon replaced the plural customary laws which recognised women's rights to property. Despite the fact that there were several communities of other Indic faiths in India like Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, heterodox Hindus and aboriginal tribes, who did not subscribe to the Hindu *Shastric* law, the CGoI chose to define a Hindu inclusively as "*a person domiciled in India who is not a Muslim, Christian, Jew or Zoroastrian*" resulting in a legal homogenisation through subsumption of diversity. The Muslims were allowed to follow the *Sharia* law for civil matters, but Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians were made subject to English laws such as the Married Women's Property Act, 1874, which were comparatively more progressive with regard to women's rights (Liddle and Joshi 1986).

Indian patriarchy is economically pivoted. It is a mechanism through which identities, hierarchies, rights and duties are culturally constituted. In an agrarian society

like India, land acquired primacy not only as an economic resource but also as a source of social status. The social rules for ownership, transfer and inheritance of land defined kinship relations. Social praxis was informed by economic motivations, and the deprivation of women's proprietary rights was achieved through the enforcement of "*barbaric social customs*" responsible for "*unfree and oppressed womanhood of India*" (Chatterjee 1993; Stri Dharma 1936; Everett 1981, 143). By the time of the great famines in nineteenth-century India, the status of Indian women had been practically reduced to legal invalids, economic dependents and social subalterns. Men exercised *de jure* and de facto control even over the self-acquired property of women through the coparcenary system, while women were denied the right to inherit ancestral property or even enter contracts without the permission of a male member of their family. The status of women was aptly summed up by an editorial of a nationalist journal of the period which noted that "*a Hindu daughter is never a welcome addition*" and "*a Hindu widow is an unwanted specimen of human*". Even among south Indian Brahmins "a *daughter …was a liability…a burden*" (Agnes 1999; Tinker 1974, 123; Sastry 1928). Despite the Act XV of 1856, socio-religious prohibition of widow remarriage was staunchly enforced to prevent alienation of the widow's self-acquired property, resulting in the cloistering of widows through *purdah*. Female infanticide (to prevent alienation of property as dowry) was widespread and necessitated the legislation of Act VIII of 1870 to prevent the evil (Togra 2006, 20). Among certain sections of Indian society, daughters were dedicated to temples as *devadasis* which, in practice, was ritualised prostitution. Child marriage of girls as young as eight years old even with adult men, despite laws to the contrary such as the Marriage Act, 1872, and Act X, 1891, was another manifestation of the persistent multifaceted oppressive patriarchal social mechanisms for the control of sexuality of women and denial of their proprietary rights. There are cases of child brides bleeding to death on their nuptial beds because of colonial failure to enforce prevention of child marriages (Sarkar 1993).

Legal Misogyny at the Plantations

India was repeatedly ravaged by droughts and famines in the second half of the nineteenth century which were condemned by the contemporary scientists as "*criminal*" political failures of the colonial administrators resulting from "*an utter disregard for the well-being of the Indian peoples, while taxing them to the verge of starvation*" (Wallace 1898, 339–341). These anthropogenic disasters resulted in the "*avoidable*" death tolls of more than 10 million people in the 1876–1878 famines, 16 million people in the 1896–1899 famines and around 20 million people in the 1899–1902 famines. The number of people who survived the famines but lost all their material possessions and were reduced to utter indigence exceeded the number of those who perished (Klein 1984, 185; Hidore 1996; Davis 2001, 336). The socio-economic impact of these famines was generally devastating, but due to the equivocation of the CGoI in protecting the legal proprietary rights of native women, it was more so for the

women who survived the famine only to be disinherited and made destitute. Under the circumstances, indentured labour, which offered a hope of leasehold land at the end of the tenure (irrespective of gender), seemed an attractive option for the landless unemployed and impoverished in India, especially for women, who having lost everything to famine, and being divested and dispossessed, due to colonial endorsement of patriarchal *Shastric* laws, migrated in substantial numbers, either with their husbands and families, as widows or single women seeking new beginnings (Tinker 1974, 266–267).

Initially, women were considered as unproductive labour by the plantation capitalists, predicated on the supposed "*natural weaknesses*" of women and the risks associated with pregnancy, childbirth and nursing of children. The Annual Reports of the Protector of Emigrants (ARPE) record that the employers were reluctant to supply food rations for women unless they worked. This often led to a situation in the plantations where even common illness forced women into prostitution just for survival (ARPE 1875). There was no legal requirement of proportionate representation of women to men among the *girmitiyas* till 1848. Soon, however, the realisation that employment of women *girmitiyas* on unequal wages subsidised the wages given to men, provided crucial unpaid domestic services and social stability while ensuring the reproduction of the next generation of labourers for the plantation and changed the attitude of the plantation capitalists who sought to import more women to the plantations because "*the health of estates depends on the number of females free to attend to their husbands comforts*" and "*their household duties*" (Reddock 1994, 29; Hoefte 1987; Circular 1908).

Act XLVI of 1860 fixed the gender ratio, subjected to the discretion of the Protector of Emigrants at one woman for every four men. Rule 77 of the Act XXI of 1883 mandated the proportion of 4 women to 10 men. By 1886, women *girmitiyas* were more in demand than men (indicated by a higher commission charged by recruiter *arkatiyas* for women) and attest to the fact that their labour played a crucial role in the plantation economy (Ramnarine 1980, 2 ; Reddock 1985; Bahadur 2013, 79; Weller 1968, 4). This demand for women *girmitiyas* who were paid lower wages than men at all the plantations and could also be employed as domestic servants, was such that by 1914 the number of women *girmitiyas* employed as domestic employees exceeded twice the number of women working as agricultural labourers (Annual Report 1895, 2; Report on Indian Immigrants 1914, 259–260).

The gendered nature of the exploitation and discrimination of the indentured labour system is undeniable. Women faced slander, abuse and the sexual harassment right from the moment they entered the recruitment depot (Hoefte 1987; Hassankhan 2014, 228; Reddock 1985, 79–87). Patriarchal legal sanction for the socio-economic *chattelisation* of the women within the patriarchal family in India was transplanted to the colonies. The gender-based disparity in wages was legalised as in the case of Fiji Ordinance No. XVII of 1887. The wage disparity curtailed the economic independence of women, while the colonial normalisation of violence against women as an Indian cultural phenomenon forced women to affiliate themselves to men. This led to "*depot marriages*" which were relationships for convenience and protection at the depot, during the voyage and at the plantation, rather than genuine affection

(Gillion 1962, 29; Tinker 1974, 140; Hiralal 2014, 246). The plantation economy with its rigid power structure was a locus of exploitative patriarchy, domestic servitude, systemic discrimination, labour exploitation during employment on the plantation and sexual exploitation of women. The sexual commodification of single women was systematised within the plantation (Samaroo and Dabydeen 1987, 30). The skewed gender ratio and the paucity of women provoked degenerate immorality and promiscuity in the coolie lines. Single women were relegated to the lowest status in the native social structure in the plantation, and every single woman was assigned to four men. The inevitable sexual exploitation of the single woman was not only by the *girmitiyas* and *Sirdars* but also by managers who forced "*illicit sexual relations*" through threats or real violence (Beaumont 1871, 74). There are also historical records of single women resisting being "*allotted*" to several *girmitiya* men by plantation authorities (Sonarie's Deposition 1908). Prostitution of women by their own family members has been documented as also cases of sexual assault on women during the voyage (Maharani) and on the plantation (Kunti). Sexual assaults on children were widespread with almost two hundred cases in Fiji alone during the aforementioned period. Though valued greatly, daughters were married off early and child marriage was the norm with no improvement in the status of girl children (Weller 1968, 3; Morton 1916, 185; Andrews and Pearson 1916, 8–9; Bahadur 2013: 75–89).

The inherent misogyny of the legal provisions is reflective of the Victorian European morality which subordinated the "*morally depraved*" native Indian woman to the Indian man within domesticity as a means of control and civilising (Chief Justice 1882). The lack of legal recognition of marriages done under religious rites in the plantation colonies had several legal and social implications. The issue of legitimacy of children who were born out of wedlock, or from relationships solemnised under customary rights, confounded the colonial authorities, who could find "*no definition of what constitutes marriage between Indians*" (Legislative Council Debates 1883). The lack of recognised conjugality weakened the matrimonial bond between the spouses, thereby legally liberating men to abandon wives and women to walk out of disagreeable relationships. While the abandonment of wives by men was widespread, the assertion of a woman to her freedom aroused the "*sexual jealousy*" among the men leading to the murder of women for real or perceived infidelity (Poynting 1987; Mangru 1987, 214). Uxoricide was rife with 68 women being murder victims out of the 96 *girmitiyas* murdered in Fiji between 1885 and 1920. Of the 27 murders committed in Trinidad between 1859 and 1863, all were crimes of passion involving a woman, and out 40 murders in British Guiana between 1885 and 1890, 33 murders were uxoricides (Lal 1985b, 137; Mohapatra 1995). There are colonial reports which assert that the myth of "*loose morals*" of all the women *girmitiyas* was wrong, since most of the married women in the colonies were not "*immoral*", notwithstanding the construct of morality and sexual jealousy as the cause of uxoricide by colonial authorities as an easy explanation for a complex multifaceted problem (McNeill and Lal Report 1916, 313; Samaroo 1982, 98; Lal 1985a, 60). Despite the ubiquitous prevalence of murder of women, which was estimated to be 90 times higher (in British Guiana) than in India, the colonial intelligentsia dismissively trivialised it as "*crimes committed by a population exclusively of the lower classes*" (Mohapatra 1995). The

magistrates were lenient towards the murderers of women, as they empathised with the "*wronged*" husband redeeming his "*honour*" through the murder of the philandering wife in accordance with the Indian "*cultural norms…religious customs of punishing adultery by death*" (Wood 1968, 154; Ramnarine 1980, 2; Murdoch 1873; Kirke 1948).

It was only in 1853 that Ordinance 21, provided for the recognition of Indian religious marriages made in Mauritius. Ordinance 3 of 1856 mandated that Indian marriages were to be recognised in Trinidad only upon registration. Similarly, registration of marriages was made obligatory in Natal in 1872. It must be noted that if even legally registered, the marriage of two *girmitiyas* on different plantations did not alter their labour contracts to accommodate traditional virilocal or even uxorilocal matrimonial cohabitation, thereby forcing marriages to be confined only within the plantation. Even after the recognition of traditional religious marriages by the colonial authority in Trinidad, the patriarchal nature of laws continued unabated. The colonial family laws, such as the Indian Immigrant Marriage and Divorce Ordinance No 6 of 1861 and the Immigration Ordinance of 1889 at Trinidad, provided for imprisonment of the wife for desertion of her husband and evading conjugal restitution. The magistrate, under powers bestowed by Ordinance 12 of 1870 of Mauritius, could direct the policemen to restrain by binding any woman, who resisted being sent to her conjugal home (Mohapatra 1995; Weller 1968). The laws failed to comprehend that domestic desertion often reflected the only escape that a woman had from domestic violence and that the woman's affiliation to another man was a socio-economic necessity, because the gender discriminatory lower wages made it difficult not only to support herself (and often her children), but also to protect her from sexual predation within the plantation. Mere registration of marriages did little to ameliorate the conditions of life for the women *girmitiyas*. It was common for men to abandon their registered wives after a short time and live with another woman, leaving women to fend for themselves and their children.

Many women *girmitiyas* sought divorce as an escape from abusive domestic relationships (ARPE 1876) but could not obtain it legally, because there is no concept of divorce under *Shastric* law which designates marriage as a sacrament and eternal bond. The colonial authorities frequently encountered women who sought divorce due to domestic violence, physical assaults, a threat to life or total abandonment, but the lack of laws for divorce constrained them from any remedial action (Legislative Council Debates 1883). In Natal, an attempt was made by the colonial government to legislate civil laws for regulating the marriage and divorce of Indian *girmitiyas* and address cognate issues such as the age of consent, adultery and bigamy leading to the enactment of Law XXV of 1891. Eventually, the awareness of rights among the women *girmitiyas*, especially in South Africa, and their access to courts for justice played a significant role in ushering social, economic and legal changes in Natal. The case of an Indian woman *girmitiya* (Tulukanum) who "*sued for nullification of her marriage on the grounds that it was polygynous—and therefore against the law of the colony*" (ARPE 1900) proves that, at least in South Africa, the women *girmitiyas* had become adept at wielding the colonial legal system in order to assert their civil rights (Badassy 2002).

Initially, violence and later the law were used for establishing patriarchy and the means for controlling women. In addition to the specific provisions that were directly inimical to them, the women *girmitiyas* were also subjected to various general legal provisions, such as those related to absence from work, which applied to all *girmitiyas*, irrespective of gender. The corpus of laws enacted on the plantation colonies was intended to keep the *girmitiyas* on the plantation as a captive labour force. The positivist interpretation of law failed to recognise the coercive nature of indentured labour despite the appearance of free contract. The magistrates in the colonies failed to appreciate women as a special category and subjected them to the same penalties of incarceration as the men, for underperformance, unauthorised leave, absence from the estate or desertion which were harsher on women due to the prevalent patriarchal norms. Women prosecuted for taking part in strikes or the *Satyagraha* in South Africa included pregnant and nursing women. Sometimes, women were imprisoned by misinterpretation of law by the local magistrates, as in the case of thirteen women *girmitiyas* who were imprisoned by the resident magistrate in 1875 in Pinetown, South Africa, for refusing to work. They were released only after the colonial secretary intervened and ordered their release by declaring the sentence illegal (Ramnarine 1987, 120; Laurence 1994, 143; Tendulkar 2016; ARPE 1875). The prevailing legal structures in the plantation colonies were therefore as responsible for the plight of women *girmitiyas* as the social patriarchy.

Deciphering Emancipation

The Global Gender Gap Report, 2018, ranks 149 countries for women empowerment. While India ranks as low as 108, Mauritius is marginally worse lower at the indices at rank 109. The other former plantation colonies like Fiji at Rank 106, Suriname at Rank 79 and South Africa at Rank 19 fare much better on the indices. There is no data or ranking for Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. Colonial legislations were designed to buttress the moralistic social foundations of the legal system, to safeguard native morality and the legitimacy of the civilising British rule (Ballhatchet 1980). These moralistic notions permeated social consciousness and persist despite the constitution of India mandating gender equality and making provisions for the emancipation of women. The legal jurisprudential discourse relating to women in India is victim-centric focussing on violence to be remedied by the intervention of the State, rather than promoting and actualising social changes which are conducive to women's rights. The patriarchal legal conception of woman as a docile (and hence unequal) creature in need of masculine protection against vagaries and violence has prompted the conservative protectionist amendments in criminal legislation. The laws which seek to protect women from men in India actually restrict the freedoms of the women themselves in a restrictive security centric notion, which is justified under the defensive paradigm, while the State ignores the basic rights of women to equality and freedom. Women are generally expected to be virtuous, submissive, passive and compliant even in contemporary India. Phallogocentric legal discourses

and andronormative social practices have always inhibited the social emancipation and economic liberation of women. In addition, invisible but perceptual barriers have precluded them from political power without an associative relationship with men who wield it, increasing the gender gap.

The code of social conduct that insists on docility of women and sets a value on their chastity in India is comparatively weaker in the former plantation colonies in the Caribbean, Fiji and South Africa (Thomas 1959) where women were able to assert themselves socially. The scarcity of women and the reclaimed control over their sexuality empowered women to negotiate gender relations, which were institutionalised through social norms and later through legislation. Some scholars have identified indentured labour immigration as a "*Great Escape*" to liberty and empowerment availed by the women *girmitiyas* to elude oppressive social subordination (Emmer 1985). Despite the conditions prevailing at the plantations, the single women *girmitiyas* who migrated represented the liberated and self-assured woman, who had left behind the tyrannies of caste and social tradition to seek new beginnings. The harsh working and living conditions on the plantations weakened the traditional Indian social institutions like caste taboos, joint family and traditional gender roles within matrimony. These changes were constitutive of a re-evaluation of the status of the women *girmitiyas* and generated spaces for galvanising women's narratives and navigating their assertions. Forced chastity, based on social expectations, was a burden in the new environs, and casting it aside gave the women crucial leverage, which was justified through the religious approval of polyandry in Indian epic Mahabharata. The stain of immorality enabled women to extricate themselves from the chains of casteist patriarchy and enter inter-caste amorous relations if they wanted (Chowdhry 1996; Ramdin 2000, 218). Such changes fostered greater gender equality and emancipation for the women *girmitiyas* in the plantations as compared to India.

The access of girls to education was much better in the plantations. By 1890, there were 49 schools in Trinidad with an enrolment of almost a thousand girls (Comins 1893, 33). Similarly, in the Dutch colony of Surinam, it was obligatory for all children of the *girmitiyas* aged seven to twelve, to attend the schools at the plantation itself (Hoefte 1987). This momentum of access to education was later accelerated by the Christian missionary schools and Indian schools established by religious reformist movements like the *Hindu Mahasabha*, *Arya Samaj* and the *Islamic Ummah* in the Caribbean, South Africa and Fiji. Access to education, rejection of the shackles of social norms and small-scale but significant entrepreneurial ventures by the women afforded them a degree of economic independence. With economic independence and ownership of property, a new assertive confidence was imbued in the women *girmitiyas*, exemplified in their leading role in labour protests in Mauritius in 1872, in Fiji in 1886 and in Natal in 1913.

By the second half of the twentieth century, the entry of educated women into employment in the rapidly developing economies, the transformation in the work culture in urban areas and the legislation for equal pay for equal work further revolutionised gender status undermining the traditional patriarchal dominance and hierarchies. While no society is free from patriarchy, women in South Africa benefit from the cultural legacy of the women *girmitiyas* who forged their own destiny by

dint of their hard work and assertion of their rights. In Natal, the vacillation of the colonial government to legislate civil law for the *girmitiyas* for almost forty years allowed the women *girmitiyas* to reform the South Indian traditional social practices and develop strategies to resist the patriarchy. Later, large-scale participation of the women *girmitiyas* in the political struggles of Indians in South Africa gave them a clearer understanding of the political and administrative system and the legal ambiguities in colonial civil law. This afforded the women opportunities of accessing the law and asserting their rights. During the apartheid era, the prolonged incarceration of men propelled women to the political forefront. This helped women develop their leadership, and after the end of apartheid, to contest and win elections. The women legislators through gender-sensitive legislation created a more gender-balanced South African polity that has succeeded in closing the gender gap much better than all the other countries being compared here (Swan 1990; Haraksingh 1987; Shephard 1997; Mohammed 1995; Carroll 1998; Beall 1990).

The contemporary formal legal structures for the empowerment of women are extant in India, South Africa, Fiji, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname. The judiciaries have also played a proactive role in the recognition of women's rights. Moreover, the influence of international law and supranational jurisprudence in favour of women has permeated into national legal consciousness. For example, the decision in *Prosecutor v. Akayesu* which criminalised sexual violence against women as a weapon of war is increasingly recognised as *jus cogens*. This, however, has not succeeded in preventing the actual or real threat of sexual violence against women as a political tool. In some erstwhile plantation colonies, the weak implementation of criminal laws and laws for safety of women has been used as a part of racial political strategy and has actually increased the gender gap. In Fiji, political instability, ethnopolitical violence and economic curtailment had led to the retreat of women to domesticity which is slowly being remedied as political participation of women has shown an indication of an increase in the two previous elections. Similarly, the vicious racial violence in Guyana and the rapes and sexual assaults of Indo-Guyanese women engendered a social proscription increasing restraints on the women. Paradoxically, in Mauritius, it was not political instability, but economic prosperity that revived and re-established traditional notions of domesticated feminine virtue through *Sanskritisation* as men equated restrictions on women with values appendant to masculinised social status. The disparity in the contemporary gender gap can be explained by the political trajectory of each of the post-colonial States which produced different intersectionalities of gender, class, race and ethnicity which acted as "*vehicles of oppression of women*" (Reddock 2004, 106; Peake and Trotz 2002, 67).

Conclusion

While the initial social status of women *girmitiyas* in the plantation colonies was atrocious and dire due to legalisation, the social norms in the erstwhile plantation colonies, presently sovereign States, have moved towards gender parity. The reason

for this shift can be located in the intersectoral social negotiation of status by the women *girmitiyas* and consequent snowballing changes in sociopolitical and economic structure mediated through progressive legal reforms facilitated by women legislators in the erstwhile plantation colonies after independence. However, regressive patriarchal forces are also active in curtailing the hard-won discursive and generative spaces of women which can actualise changes in social perceptions, norms and legal structures. History proves that patriarchal forces can be checked only when women can influence the creation and implementation of law to ensure its use as a tool for the protection of rights, emancipation and social change while activating the coercive apparatus of the State to enforce the law. This necessitates the active participation of women in the lawmaking legislative, law interpreting judicial and law implementing executive roles of the State. The indomitable spirit of women *girmitiyas* to overcome overwhelming adversities and their resolute struggle against the patriarchy inherent in all social institutions including the legal structure are an inspiration to all the women of the world. It is also a lesson that only by vigilant assertiveness, rejection of restrictive mores and active political participation for legal structural modification can real empowerment be achieved.

References

Books

Agnes, F. (1999). *Law and gender inequality: The politics of women's rights in India*. New Delhi: OUP.

Andrews, C. F., & Pearson, W. W. (1916). *Indentured labour in Fiji: An independent enquiry*. Calcutta: Star Printing Works.

Bahadur, G. (2013). *Coolie woman*. New Delhi: Hachette India.

Baker, J. M. (2005). *The Kuhls of Kangra: Community-managed Irrigation in the Western Himalaya*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Ballhatchet, K. (1980). *Race, sex and class under the Raj: Imperial attitudes and policies and their critics, 1793–1905*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Beall, Jo. (1990). Women under indentured labour in colonial Natal, 1860–1911. In C. Walker (Ed.), *Women and gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (pp. 146–167). Cape Town: David Philip.

Beaumont, Joseph. (1871). *The new slavery: An account of the Indian and Chinese immigrants in British Guiana*. London: W. Ridgeway.

Cain, P. J., & Hopkins A. G. (1993). *British imperialism. Volume I innovation and expansion 1688–1914 and Volume II crisis and deconstruction, 1914–1990*. London: Longman.

Carroll, L. (1998). Law, custom and statutory social reform: The Hindu widow's remarriage Act of 185. In J. Krishnamurty (Ed.), *Women in Colonial India*. Delhi: OUP.

Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chowdhry, P. (1996). Contesting claims and counter-claims: Questions of the inheritance and sexuality of widows in a colonial state. In P. Uberoi (Ed.), *Social reform, sexuality and the state*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India.

Davis, M. (2001). *Late Victorian holocausts: El Nino, famines and the making of the third world*. New York: Verso.

Economist, Why is Not British Capital More Largely Invested in India? Economist, October 9, 1858. cited in Silver, Arthur W. 1966. *Manchester Men and Indian Cotton, 1847–1872*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 118.

Emmer, P. C. (1985). The great escape: The migration of female indentured servants from British India to Surinam 1873–1916. In D. Richardson (Ed.), *Abolition and its aftermath: The historical context 1790–1916*. London: Frank Cass.

Everett, J. M. (1981). *Women and social change in India*. New Delhi: Heritage Publishers.

Gillion, K. L. (1962). *Fiji Indian migrants: A history to the end of indenture in 1920*. New York: OUP.

Haraksingh, K. (1987). Control and resistance among Indian workers: A study of labour on the sugar plantations of Trinidad, 1875–1917. In B. Samaroo & D. Dabydeen (Eds.), *India in the Caribbean*. London: Hansib Publishing Ltd.

Hassankhan, M. S. (2014). The Indian indentured experience in Suriname: Control, accommodation and resistance. In M. S. Hassankhan, B. Lal, & D. Munro (Eds.), *Resistance and Indian indenture experience: Comparative perspectives*. Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

Hidore, J. (1996). *Global environmental change: Its nature and impact*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Hiralal, K. (2014). 'Rebellious Sisters': Indentured women and resistance in Colonial Natal. In M. S. Hassankhan , B. Lal, & D. Munro (Eds.), *Resistance and Indian indenture experience. Comparative perspectives*. Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

Kale, M. (1998). *Fragments of Empire: Capital, slavery, and Indian indentured labour in the British Caribbean*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kirke, H. (1948). *Twenty-five years in British Guiana, 1872–1892*. Georgetown: Daily Chronicle.

Kumar, D. (1998). The forgotten sector: Services in Madras Presidency, 1853–1947. In D. Kumar (Ed.), *Colonialism, property and the state*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Laurence, K. O. (1994). *A question of labour: Indentured immigration into trinidad and British Guiana*, 1875–1917. New York: St. Martin's.

Liddle, J., & Joshi, R. (1986). *Daughters of independence: Gender, caste and class in India*. London: Zed Books.

Mangru, B. (1987). The sex-ratio disparity and its consequences under indenture in British Guiana. In B. Samaroo & D. Dabydeen (Eds.), *India in the Caribbean*. London: Hansib Publishing Ltd.

Mani, L. (1998). *Contentious traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Mill, J. S. (1912). *The subjection of Women*. London: OUP.

Mohammed, P. (1995). Writing gender into history: The negotiation of gender relations among Indian men and women in post-indenture Trinidad society, 1917-1947. In V. Shepherd, B. Brereton, & B. Bailey (Eds.), *Engendering history: Caribbean women in historical perspective* (pp. 20–47). London: James Currey Publishers.

Mohammed, P. (2002). *Gender negotiations among Indians in Trinidad, 1917–1947*. Hampshire: Palgrave.

Mohammed, P. (2004). Unmasking masculinity and deconstructing patriarchy: Problems and possibilities within feminist epistemology. In R. Reddock (Ed.), *Interrogating Caribbean masculinities theoretical and empirical analyses* (pp. 38–66). Kingston: UWI Press.

Morton, S. E. (1916). *John Morton of Trinidad*. Toronto: Westminster Company.

Northrup, D. (1995). *Indentured Labor in the age of imperialism, 1834–1922*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pande, A. (2018). Women in Indian diaspora: Redefining self between dislocation and relocation. In A. Pande (Ed.), *Women in the Indian diaspora*. Singapore: Springer.

Peake, L., & Trotz, D. (2002). *Gender, ethnicity and place women and identity in Guyana*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Poynting, J. (1987). East Indian women in the Caribbean: Experience and voice. In B. Samaroo & D. Dabydeen (Eds.), *India in the Caribbean*. London: Hansib Publishing Ltd.

Ramdin, R. (2000). *Arising from Bondage*. New York: New York University Press.
Ramnarine, T. (1987). Over a hundred years of east Indian disturbances on the sugar estates of Guyana, 1869–1978: A historical overview. In B. Samaroo & D. Dabydeen (Eds.), *India in the Caribbean*. London: Hansib Publishing Ltd.
Rawls, J. (1971). A theory of justice. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
Reddock, R. (1994). *Women, labour and politics in Trinidad and Tobago: A history* (p. 1994). London: Zed Books.
Reddock, R. (2004). *Interrogating Caribbean masculinities: Theoretical and empirical analyses*. Kingston, Jamaica: UWI Press.
Samaroo, B. (1982). Missionary methods and local responses: The Canadian Presbyterians and the East Indians in the Caribbean. In East Indians in the Caribbean. London: Kraus International.
Samaroo, B., & Dabydeen, D. (1987). *India in the Caribbean*. In: B. Samaroo & D. Dabydeen. London: Hansib Publishing Ltd.
Shephard, V. A. (1997). Indian women in Jamaica, 1845–1945. In F. Birbalsingh (Ed.), *Indenture and exile: The Indo-Caribbean experience*. Toronto: Tsar.
Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*. London: Macmillan.
Swan, M. (1990). Indentured Indians: Accommodation and resistance, 1890–1913. In S. Bhana (Ed.), *Essays on indentured Indians in Natal*. Leeds, Yorkshire: Peepal Tree Press.
Tendulkar, D. G. (2016). *Mahatma volume 1: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting.
Tinker, H. (1974). *A new system of slavery: The export of Indian labour overseas 1830–1920*. London: OUP.
Togra, V. (2006). *Jawaharlal Nehru and the status of women in India—An analytical study*. New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House.
Wallace, A. R. (1898). *The wonderful century: Its successes and its failures*. Toronto: George N. Morang.
Weller, J. A. (1968). *The East Indian indenture in Trinidad, Caribbean Monograph Series, No 4, 1968*. Institute of Caribbean Studies: University of Puerto Rico.
Williams, E., Tomich, D. W., & Darity, W. (2014). *The economic aspect of the abolition of the West Indian slave trade and slavery-world social change*. Minneapolis: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
Wood, D. (1968). *Trinidad in transition: The years after slavery*. London: OUP.

Research Dissertations

Badassy, P. (2002). *Turbans and Top-Hats: Indian interpreters in the Colony of Natal, 1880–1910*. Honours Dissertation, University of Natal.
Hoefte, R. M. A. L. (1987). *Plantation Labor after the abolition of Slavery: the case of the plantation Marienburg (Suriname) 1880–1940*. Dissertation, University of Florida.

Articles

Bhattacharya, S. (1978). The Indigo revolt of Bengal. *Social Scientist, 5*(1978), 13–23.
Hall, D. (1978). The flight from the estates reconsidered. The British West Indies, 1838–1842. *Journal of Caribbean History, 7*(23), 7–24.

Holmes, O. W. (1897). The path of the law. *Harvard Law Review, 10*(8), 457–478.
Jeff, G. (1997). Accommodation of patriarchy. *Masculinities in Southern Africa*, University of Natal, Durban. https://doi.org/10.1080/02590123.2018.1463124.
Klein, I. (1984, Apr–Jun). When the rains failed: Famine, relief, and mortality in British India. *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 21(2), 185–214.
Kolsky, E. (2005). Codification and the rule of Colonial difference: Criminal procedure in British India. *Law & History Review, 23*(3), 631–683.
Lal, B. V. (1985a). Kunti's cry: Indentured women on Fiji plantations. *Indian Economic and Social History Review, 22,* 55–72.
Lal, B. V. (1985b). Veil of dishonour: Sexual jealousy and suicide on Fiji plantations. *The Journal of Pacific History, 20*(3), 135–155.
Mohapatra, P. (1995). Restoring the family: Wife murders and the making of a sexual contract for Indian immigrant labour in the British Caribbean colonies 1860–1920. *Studies in History, 11,* 227–260.
Pound, R. (1910). Law in books and law in action. *American Law Review, 44,* 12–36.
Ramnarine, T. (1980). *Indian women and the struggle to create stable marital relations on the sugar estates of Guiana during the period of indenture, 1839–1917.* Paper Presented to the 12th Conference on Caribbean Historians, UWI, St Augustine, March-April, 1980 cited in Reddock. R. (1985, October 26). Freedom denied: Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917. *Economic and Political Weekly, 20*(43), 79–87.
Reddock. R. (1985, October 26). Freedom denied: Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917. *Economic and Political Weekly, 20*(43), 79–87.
Sarda, Dewan Bahadur Har Bilas. (1936). Hindu women's right to property bill. *Stri-Dharma, 19*(6), 182–183.
Sarkar, T. (1993, September 4). Rhetoric against age of consent: Resisting colonial reason and death of a child wife. *Economic & Political Weekly, 28*(36), 1869–1878.
Sastry, N. Y. (1928). The tragedy of women's life in India. *Stri-Dharma, 11*(9), 146–149.
Thomas, K. (1959). The double standard. *The Journal of the History of Ideas, 20*(2), 195–216.

Archival Documents

Archival Resources researched from: [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/indian-indentured-labourers/;
www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-7/records-of-the-indian-indentured-labourers/;
https://www.nla.gov.au/research-guides/indian-emigration-passes-to-fiji-1879–1916;
https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/ship-list-indian-indentured-labourers;
http://www.mowcaparchives.org/items/show/107;
http://www.natt.gov.tt/node/154] Websites last accessed 12 Jan 2019.
Also archival administrative documents, communiques and legislations researched from:
Sarup, L. G. (2004). *Indentured labour: Slavery to salvation: Colonial Emigration Acts, 1837–1932*. Kolkata: Aldrich International.
Sarup, L. G. (2009–2014). *Colonial emigration in the XIX and XX centuries proceedings volume I to volume 18*. Kolkata: Aldrich International.

Annual Reports of the Protector of Immigrants, (ARPE)

ARPE II 1/141 I452/1900.
ARPE II 8/4/ 1876.
Circular From Protector of Indian Immigrants to Estates. ARPE II 1/160 I1428/1908.
Sonarie's Deposition 17th September, 1908. ARPE II 1/162 I2154/1908.
Telegraph from Protector (Mitchell) to Colonial Secretary & Telegraph to Resident Magistrate Pinetown 24 February 1875. ARPE CSO 509 681/1875.

Other Reports and Communiques

Annual Report on Emigration from the Port of Calcutta, 1895.
Bengal Government 1840, Coolie Export Enquiry 1838, 1839 and 1840, Reports of, Appendix no. 4, UK (HC) 1841, XVI, numbers 287 and 483. Calcutta: Secretariat Press.
Chief Justice to Governor of British Guiana, 3 August 1882, CO/384/139 PRO.
Comins, D. W. D. (1893). Note on emigration from the East Indies to Trinidad 1878–1893, Calcutta: Secretariat Press.
Legislative Council Debates, 1883. Indian Divorce Bill.
McNeill, J., & Lal, C., (1916). Report to the Government of India on the Conditions of Indian Emigrants in Four Colonies, Parliamentary Papers 1914–1916, xlvii (517).
Murdoch, C. 1873. Minute of 18 October 1873.
The Report on the Condition of Indian Immigrants in the Four British Colonies, Part II, 1914.

Internet Resources

Bentham, J. (1843). Plan of parliamentary reform in the form of a catechism in works. https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/bentham-the-works-of-jeremy-bentham-vol-3. Accessed November 12, 2018.
Prosecutor v. Akayesu, Case No. ICTR 96-4-T. https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/pdf/AKAYESU%20-%20JUDGEMENT.pdf. Accessed September 12, 2018.
The Global Gender Gap Report. (2018). https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018. Accessed January 24, 2019.
Rattigan, W. H. (1885). "Customary Law in India." 10 Law Mag. & L. Rev. 5th ser. 1 (1884–85). http://lccn.loc.gov/06020524. Accessed December 17, 2018.

Chapter 4
Writing the "Stigmatext" of Indenture: A Reading of Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*

Nabanita Chakraborty

> *Coolie is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears, defeats, achievements. The word must not be left to die out, buried and forgotten in the past. It must be given a new lease of life. All that they did, and we are doing, and our progeny will do, must be stamped with the name COOLIE lest posterity accuse us of not venerating the ancestors.*
> (Rajkumari Singh, 353)

Abstract "Stigmatext" according to Helene Cixous in her scintillating book *Stigmata* is a text which is "collected and stitched together sewn and resewn" and share the "trace of a wound". Stigma has the capacity to "sting, pierce, make holes, separates with pinched marks and in the same movement distinguishes—re-marks—inscribes, writes." Gaiutra Bahadur's Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture (2013) is such a "stigmatext". Bahadur writes a piercing tale of her grandmother who had sailed from India to Guiana as a "coolie" (Coolie was a term used by the British Empire for indentured labourers in the overseas plantations.). The text explores the predicament of countless coolie women whose indentured lives in the sugar plantation were stigmatized by slavery—both manual and sexual. My paper aims to focus on the complex narratives of two generations of diasporic women—Bahadur and her grandmother—across different spatial and temporal locations. In excavating and writing about the silence in the interstices of public history and public memory of women indentured labourers of the Guiana in the early twentieth century, Bahadur's agency is obvious. However, what is interesting is to trace the agency and retrieve the voices of the coolie women despite their harrowing experiences of labour, dislocation, loss, exploitation, and abuse.

Keywords Coolie woman · Indenture · Caribbean · Stigma · Labour

N. Chakraborty (✉)
Hansraj College, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India
e-mail: cnita.in@gmail.com

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_4

Introduction

The migration of Indian indentured labourers to British Guiana plantations in the nineteenth century has left an unresolved legacy of slavery and servitude. The stigma of indenture was a powerful marker of identity prevailing across caste, religious and communal identities and was transmitted through the lineages. Scholarly attention has been focused on labour laws, terms of the agreement and migration patterns of male indentured labourers known as coolies during the colonial era.[1] However, reading female subjectivity within a discourse of indentured labour system can draw our attention to various agencies and strategies of resistance within an interlocking system of oppression. This paper aims to study the lived experiences of the women coolies inhabiting the male-dominated spaces of labour plantation. *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture by Gaiutra Bahadur* is a compelling narrative tracing the trajectory of the American author's great-grandmother, a high-caste Hindu woman, who had migrated alone to the sugar plantations of British Guiana (present-day Guyana) in 1903 as a 'coolie woman' and given birth to an illegitimate son onboard. In the absence of proper documentation about the lives of the indentured labourers in the colonial archives, Bahadur ingeniously unearths the traces and echoes of the voices of the women coolies from the family genealogies, oral histories and archives to produce a comprehensible narrative. The narrator attempts to navigate around the fractured and unsalvageable multiracial past to come to terms with her present identity crisis. The text explores the predicament of countless coolie women whose indentured lives in the sugar plantation were stigmatized by slavery—both manual and sexual. Since the women were socially ostracized by society as widows, outcasts, abandoned wives, tainted gopis, prostitutes, their status as exploited and stigmatized subaltern coolies could not terrify them further. Bahadur illustrates how the women, however defamed, exemplified courage, defiance and the will to live. Their lives 'carrying a wound' were "collected, stitched together, sewn and resewn". Helene Cixous in *Stigmata* opines that stigma has the capacity to "sting, pierce, make holes, separates with pinched marks and in the same movement distinguishes—re-marks—inscribes, writes." The narrative of *Coolie Woman* exemplifies the way the women coolies reinscribed their status in the indentured community and wore their mark of shame and stigma with resilience and with some amount of courage.

The exigencies of global capitalism, British imperialism and expansionism interpellated the Indians as a cheap, exploitable and available labour force in the sugar plantations in the nineteenth century. The abolition of the slave trade compelled the empire to replace the slaves with hired Indian labourers in the British-owned sugar plantations of Guiana from 1838 onwards. The British Empire institutionalized Indian indenture system whereby the emigrants had to commit themselves to a fixed tenure of labour by signing an agreement or "girmit".[2] While the agreement

[1] Coolie was a term used by the British Empire for indentured labourers in the overseas plantations.

[2] Ashutosh Kumar's *Coolies of the Empire* for a detailed analysis of indentured system under British Empire.

forms mentioned the kind of work, remuneration and facilities like accommodation, ration, and medicine, in reality, the condition of the indentured labourers or coolies were slightly better than the erstwhile slaves from Africa. The coolies faced extensive labour hours, scarce ration, exploitation/harassment at the hands of the overseers/plantation managers, deplorable lodgings without lavatories; the indenture system was a new form of slavery.[3] The condition of the women labourers was worst since they faced harassment, exploitation and physical abuse from their male partners as well as from the white plantation managers, black seamen and brown drivers. There was rampant sexual violence both in the domestic quarters and in the plantation. Needless to say, the women coolies received less wages than the men. Though most men and women recruited for indentured labour migrated out of volition as opposed to the bonded slaves, they were baited, cheated and misguided by the emigration agents. The worst form of suffering for the coolies was the false promise of freedom and a free passage home after five years of work. The policies changed over time, and the planters could not decide whether they wanted the coolies to return to be replaced by new bonded slaves or by the children of the old coolies. Though the terms of servitude expired, there was no free passage available for the immigrants to return to their homeland India. Thus, the indentured coolies, in reality, became labourers in exile with no hope of return. The culture of plantation slavery was so deep-rooted that the planters did not see any difference between the slaves and the indentured labourers, thus renewing the same slave trade in a new form:

> Once in the sugar colonies, coolies suffered under a repressive legal system that regularly convicted more than a fifth of them as criminals, subject to prison for mere labour violations, which were often the unjust allegations of exploitative overseers. (Bahadur, 33)

Invisibilization of Gender in Indenture System

The effacement of gender in the study of indentured labour migration in Guyana plantations is primarily based on privileging social rather than economic reasons for women migration. In other words, the absence of a gendered lens in a macro-economic study on labour migration was due to the inability to identify women as indentured labourers and instead view them as wives or sexual partners of male labourers. Agricultural labour has always been recognized as a male activity although women have contributed equally in this field. It is, therefore, no surprise that the studies on labour reform movement and patterns of labour migration do not recognize the gendered dimension to the issue. Indrani Mazumdar, N. Neetha and Indu Agnihotri were among the few scholars who drew attention to this issue in the context of migration across India. They posit that most women are seen to be migrating for

[3] John Scoble, a British abolitionist, termed the indenture system a 'slave trade' and argued that it was based on 'kidnapping' of "ignorant and inoffensive Hindoos" in his pamphlet *British Guiana: Facts! Facts! Facts!* in 1840. *A New Form of Slavery* was also the title of Hugh Tinker's book about indenture.

social reasons like marriage, unlike men whose primary aim of migration remains employment opportunities. The gender-insensitive methodological assumption and invisibility of women labour in agricultural lands have created huge lacunae in understanding the specificity of the experience of women unskilled workers. This tendency has resulted in "complete statistical silence" on the scale, dimensions, and patterns of female labour migration. Women's role in mobilizing social networks and supporting family structures in the hostland has often been the focus of feminist scholarship but issues like women as part of the indentured labour force, the economic and sexual exploitation of women and the gender-specific experiences of labourers have been overlooked. Bahadur's text has been a major intervention in this current research on migrant women labourers. While most scholars believe women migrated after marriage, Bahadur examines the lives of poor, hapless, socially outcast women from different caste, religion and community barriers who boarded the British indenture ships to the plantations either in the hope of a better future or to escape from ignominy and poverty. Though under the British law, it was imperative for a ship carrying coolies to have at least forty women per hundred men for the sexual and social needs of the labourers, most of the women who consented to migrate saw this as an employment opportunity. The women who opted to migrate were ostracized by society as widows, prostitutes and fallen women. Bahadur's narrative is groundbreaking in its focus on these women's zeal to live and defy social conventions despite all odds. This paper works on the multiple complex dynamics of labour/work, mobility/enslavement, choice/agency, peril/opportunity, physical/sexual labour in the context of the plantation economy in Guyana around 1830s. While women's movement in India underlines women's mobility and emancipation as one of the major concerns for social transformation, transnational migration as a narrow escape route for a group of women has hardly been discussed within the aegis of women's political movement. This paper aims to locate the coolie woman's agency within the liminal space of the male-dominated (including White imperialists, Black sailors/overseers and Brown labourers) plantation work and their immigrant lives. *Coolie Woman* works on a complex narrative of two generations of diasporic women—the narrator and her great-grandmother—representing different 'choronotopes' (Bakhtinian sense) in the novel. In excavating and writing about the silence in the interstices of archives, policy documents and public memory of women indentured labourers of the Guiana in the early twentieth century, Bahadur adds a new dimension to the discourse on indentured labour. However, the agency and voice of the coolie woman despite her harrowing experiences of labour, dislocation, loss, exploitation and abuse complicate issues of paid/unpaid labour, mobility/enslavement and honour/stigma.

Genre and Its Discontents

Gaiutra Bahadur's text takes advantages of the instabilities and gaps in existing forms of historiography, instabilities of three major types: firstly, the challenges posed by the generic competition of historical narrative with novels; secondly, the

question of unreliability posed by feminist scholars due to the exclusion of gender perspective in historical discourse and finally, the problem of relying on the archives of empire to construct a body of knowledge about the oriental coolies. Bahadur treads a fine balance between a personalized narrative and public history; between tracing a feminization of historical practice, of recovering lost stories/disregarded voices and of bringing them into dialogue with her present identity politics. She uses the unspecified and diffuse category, something between fact and fiction because she realizes the impossibility of finding an adequate language or form to represent the violence, trauma, and stigma of the coolies in an unmediated way. She suggests that neither Bahadur the fiction writer nor Bahadur the descendent of coolie woman can represent the stigma without the mediation of her own hyphenated self, her intellect and her fractured psyche. She is an Indian-Caribbean-American woman, a progeny of the Oriental 'coolie', the carrier of a "trace of a wound", an educated elite diaspora woman attempting to stitch the "stigmatext" of her great-grandmother without having access to the language or the culture of her ancestor.

A further problem lies in the unreliability of the archive and limited access to the official documents of the empire to construct a stable historical narrative. Edward Said has observed that however problematic as a body of knowledge, the archive was actually effective in determining the essentialist fictions of the empire (regarding ethnicity, religion, race and gender) and to understand the effective policy directives for the successful operation of colonial institutions. There is a double bind: while there is a need to get certain facts about tools of colonial administration, there is equally a desire to challenge the fabricated construct of the Oriental and rewrite the story of mastery. Most feminist scholars, however, have not approached the archives (including official records of revenue collection, labour collection, immigration, plantation records as well as parliamentary statutes institutionalizing indenture labour system) because the archives gloss over/ignore female subjectivity. Betty Joseph enquires "how can one expose at the same time the history of colonialism and colonialism's disciplining of history, which in turn produced the very categories and ideas that constitute the facts of history?" (Joseph 2006). The challenge lies in narrating a story which will place the gendered subject of colonialism in the forefront. Gaiutra Bahadur has been able to use the official record to write a history of indentured labour in British sugar plantations while grappling critically with the question of the female historical subject. Following Spivak's method, Bahadur reads "a handful of archival material" which Spivak calls "unprocessed historical record" to construct multiple, complex and contending narratives of women coolies of the Guiana. Bahadur does not simply read and process historical record; she finds gaps and poses vital questions about it. This self-referential quality gives her text a loose and diffuse discursive form which is neither fiction nor history.

> The Colonial Office records, unreliable narrators that they are, rarely tell tales of rape and unrecognized children. They leave gaps. Grapple, for instance, with the untold in the report of an unnamed indentured woman found guilty and sentenced to death for killing her newborn on a Berbice plantation on June 19, 1913…no mere single woman, she was a religiously committed celibate, or sadhin… Her story begs the question: what circumstances make a baby unwanted enough to prompt infanticide? And how does a sadhin come to be with child

> in the first place? Was her celibacy a guise to resist sexual service, if not indentured service, in the West Indies? Or was she raped? The records do not say. (Bahadur, 195)

Several times as a researcher and author, she constantly alludes to her own act of reading and segregating facts as arbitrator:

> Could she (her great grandmother Sujaria) have foreseen me someday asking such impertinent questions? What would she have made of my poring over The Clyde's (the ship to Guiana) passenger manifest with gloved hands, examining the emigration passes of 207 of the 225 females aboard, afterwards brushing away the ash from the quiet cataclysm of turning century old pages? (Bahadur, 61)

She also aims to construct a repository of knowledge about the Oriental woman erased violently from the official archives by textual practices of intertextuality, family genealogies, testimonies based on memory and cross-referencing. At times, traces of agency of a coolie woman can be seen in the interstices of two contrasting accounts. In the absence of the voice of the subaltern woman, it is difficult to enquire about the authenticity of any version.

Gender and Genre

Jacques Derrida in 'The Law of Genre' (Derrida 1980) draws our attention to the French term 'genre' which means kind both in the literal sense and in the biological sense of gender. He argues that genre is limiting. Every text has a mark which aligns it to other texts and thus can be grouped together to form a category, a genre. However, the mark of a genre is not itself a part of a group. This identification or adherence to a certain genre implies that the mark is different, outside it. In broad terms, Derrida goes on to define genre not simply literally but with the fundamental difference between two categories or senses including sexual differences or "of identity and difference between the feminine and the masculine". Derrida's formulation provides us with a rich understanding of the danger of limiting formal categories like poetry/prose, fact/fiction or even masculine/feminine. It makes us aware of the instabilities and the gaps in such neat categorization based on the politics of inclusion/exclusion. The generic expectation created by a text like *Coolie Woman* which calls itself an 'Odyssey of indenture' is that it is a saga of adventure, of bravery, truth and justice, albeit all in a fictional construct. The author has to juggle in and out of archival data, reports, logbooks, receipts, memory reconstructions, family genealogies to write a saga of indenture. But the text participates across several genres and does not belong to any specific genre. The inchoate, loose, open-ended nature of the text provides space for questions, self-referentiality, intertextuality, citations and even multiple accounts. In fact, one can even claim that the form of the text echoes the impulse of breaking free from constraints, bonds and genre. In other words, the inherent desire of freedom and resistance on the part of the coolies is replicated in the form of the text. The courageous deed of breaking free from all social and political identities is symptomatic of the author and her coolie ancestor. Sujaria escapes from the role

of a Hindu high-caste wife and ignominy of unwed pregnancy; her progeny Gaiutra Bahadur breaks free from a fixed ethnonational identity herself while her writing moves beyond a definite generic expectation and limitation.

Stigmata

Derrida's generic theory is dependent upon "a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy" and probably "certain participation without belonging". Can the mark of the genre which is based on "contamination" or "impurity" be similar to the stigma of coolie? The very fact that the men and women at the moment of signing the bond of the indenture are stripped of all other markers of identity like caste, religion, community and are labelled as coolies underlines the gap and a fracture in the generic term itself. The coolies denuded of their identities, disrobed, dehumanized and reduced to tools of labour "participated without belonging" in this imperial ideological machinery. The term coolie given to Indian indentured labourers in the British plantations became a stigma, a blemish, a deformity which would be transmitted through lineages and contaminate all members of the family over generations. The derogatory meaning attached to coolie synonymous with a slave was a misnomer since 'coolie' is an individual carrying burden. In this case, the burden is not physical but symbolical since the plantation labourer has to carry the burden of a stigma of abandoning one's family, caste, religion, race, nation and honour. The term stigma originally meant an identifying mark (a burnt mark, a cut) to advertise the moral and social status of a slave or a traitor or a criminal. Later, the physical mark was not important to castigate or discredit the individual; the signifier was enough to discriminate the individual. As Erving Goffman in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* in 1963 notes that construction of a stigma theory is an ideology to explain the inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences such as those of social class." (Goffman 1963: 5). Stigma is not just an attribute but a relationship between attribute and stereotype. Anyone who signed to become an indentured labourer in the British plantation became a 'coolie' and shared the ignominy of losing one's national, religious, caste and racial identities and accepting servitude. The shared attribute of Indian coolies was their class position; they were all able-bodied poor who were ready to cross the Indian Ocean to earn their living as plantation workers. Bahadur posits:

> One scholar of indenture has remarked that the British didn't recruit "coolies" for their sugar cane fields. Rather they made "coolies." By this logic, the system took gardeners, palanquin –bearers, goldsmiths, cow—minders, leather-makers, boatmen, soldiers and priests with centuries-old identities based on religion, kin and occupation and turned them all into an indistinguishable, degraded mass of plantation labourers without caste or family. (Bahadur, 56)

The long-entrenched caste system, familial occupation and religious divide were obliterated from the identities, and new identities as coolies were forged. Interestingly, the women who joined the labour force shared another commonality besides their penury stricken conditions; they were already vilified and stigmatized as kept women, prostitutes, widows, unwed mothers or old spinsters, in Indian societies. Their earlier stigma was reinscribed with new marks of shame but that did not deter them from their will to live. Bahadur's text thus becomes a "stigmatext", a narrative of lives "collected and stitched together sewn and resewn" and share the "trace of a wound" (Cixous 2005).

Women, Labour, Migration

The generic expectation of the term coolie was male indentured labourers although the term itself was gender neutral. This was definitely because of the invisibilization of gender in plantation labour economy. Female migration has been largely ignored since they were seen to be "associational migrants" implying their dependence upon male migrants as husbands or partners. While the British law made it mandatory for all indentured ships to carry a number of women for the needs and demands of the male migrant labourers, the women who chose to migrate were lured to earn a living doing 'soft labour' like sifting sugar and earning a living. Most of the male immigrants left their wives and children behind when they signed the "girmit" hoping to return home soon. The women who signed the contract were single women ready to cross the "kalapani"[4] (the Indian Ocean) for economic mobility. Despite claims that the women coolies were shipped to cater to the social and sexual demands of the Indian male labourers, the former contributed to the unpaid work at home and participated in plantation labour at a cheap rate. Bahadur elaborates how these single men and women "regularly became coupled in the depots, out of convenience or necessity" (Bahadur, 59). Women believed they required a protector while men depended on the women to cook and care for them. Thus without ceremony or priestly sanction, men and women got married across caste and religion, though the partnership hardly remained stable for long. The unpaid domestic work and the low wages in the field relegated the women coolies to marginalized spaces and made them more liable victims of exploitation. The legislation of inclusion of women in the ships carrying coolies became a tool for the colonial state to execute its hegemony over their resources and their sexual bodies. The women were easy sexual targets for the white immigration officers, overseers, drivers, plantation managers and even black crew of the ship. As Bahadur explains, the narrative of economic and sexual exploitation of coolie women is not simple and uniform. There is a complex network of power dynamics which operates on narratives of discipline, of productivity and efficiency in the field. However, a feminist approach to this plantation history provided by Bahadur's text punctures the grand narratives of patriarchal capitalism and civilizing

[4]Crossing the kalapani was believed to denude one of his/her caste.

tendencies to underline the myriad narratives of desire, agency and resistance to violence by women. The text documents the subversive tendencies of several women who catered to the sexual needs of white colonial masters in order to gain some favours. While in some cases, the women were coerced or tempted by the overseers to become mistresses of plantation managers or overseers; in other cases, the women had enough agency to leave their husbands or partners in the hope of economic mobility. This led to mass agitation, violence and revolts by Indian labourers on Guiana's estates in 1869. The government issued a circular to plantation managers forbidding them to maintain intimate relations with female immigrants, but no legal action was taken to penalize guilty overseers. Interestingly, the 1896 Overseer's Manual provided justification for such a practice holding the women coolies responsible for provoking the white men:

> Their bright –hued raiment is highly picturesque. Wearing little clothing, they reveal to the eyes of young and inexperienced overseers more physical charms than young Englishmen and Scotchmen have been accustomed to see, and it is not wonderful that many …have fallen victim to their seductions. (Thomson, 80)

One can also see patriarchal collusion between British officials and Indian drivers or sub-overseers in perpetrating violence and casting aspersions of immorality upon the coolie women. Thus, the misogyny and violence against the Indian Indentured women may have roots in patriarchy that is cross-cultural and is inclusive of race and class.

Women and Spatial Politics

Power, as we know, is spatially determined. Feminists have for a long time focused exclusively on public and private spaces to discuss gendered relations and power politics. It is definitely important to identify how unpaid domestic labour is inextricably connected with forms of oppression of women across the world. Yet, it is important to go beyond these binaries and understand how participation in any space determines one's power or lack of power. Did the women leaving their homeland and domestic quarters to go overseas to work in imperial plantation have more agency to transform conventional gendered spaces? Emmer in 'The Position of Indian Woman in Surinam' argues there is no quantitative evidence to suggest that recruitment of Indian women for Suriname was usually subject to fraud and deception. The women were further saved from marital, economic and social oppression experienced in their homeland (Emmer 2018: 118). Emmer's argument seems too reductive and simple. Indian indentured women suffered abuse from Indian labourers and British planters alike, but studies have shown that they were equipped to negotiate their way through colonial patriarchal tyranny. Marina Carter in *Lakshmi's Legacy* points out women's resistance and assertion of their status through absconding, larceny and violence. Prem Misir in *Subaltern Indian Woman* similarly has recorded the sporadic protests by Indian women in the weeding gang in Guiana (Misir 2018: 3). Bahadur's text

elaborates how some women coolies took advantage of their relations with overseers and drivers to avoid hard physical labour. While most of them formed a part of the labour force in the field, received less wages and worked under harsh conditions, some of them were privileged to do 'feminized work' such as caring and babysitting for the children of the women coolies or work as domestic help in the houses of the planters. The immigrant women were not able to transform gendered social spaces completely but were able to negotiate their ways to gain economic mobility. Despite low wages, the women were able to earn their living engaged in domestic work like child-rearing, cooking and cleaning in houses of colonial officers.

As a postcolonial modern diasporic woman, Bahadur sought to recover the political will, voice and agency of the subaltern coolie woman from the historical archives of the empire. Yet in the process of retrieving, sorting and reconstructing the story of her great-grandmother's journey from the depot in Calcutta to Guyana plantation, Bahadur's own consciousness and agency are questioned as she travels back to her childhood home in Guyana and to an unknown past in India. The author's identity is constructed through "the mediation and contestation of indigenous and colonial patriarchy" and a symbolic "crossing of the postcolonial *kalapani* in search of a recuperated self that transgresses confinement through immigration" (Mehta 2004: 29).

> Was it possible that the magician's box of emigration had set me free as well as cut me in half? Had leaving Guyana liberated me, because I am a woman? And was it possible that leaving India had done the same for my great-grandmother a century earlier? (Bahadur, 19)

The authorial narrator struggles with her feeling of alienation from her culture, language and self as she traverses the route taken by her ancestor three generations earlier. Despite being dressed in Indian clothes, the American author could not avoid the lecherous and roving eyes of the Indian men:

> I didn't wander around in short skirts or tight clothes. I dressed conservatively, trying to pass, in kurtas with loose jeans or in salwar –kamizes. Indeed, my ability to pass seemed to be part of the problem. Because I looked Indian, I was expected to act Indian. I was held to a different standard than other Americans. In Kerala….I sat alone on the beach for hours, reading, staring at the Viking-like fishing boats….for some reason, this attracted an audience: a group of men who gathered around me, standing and staring… (Bahadur, 18)

The author thus has to negotiate the gap between her role as an American tourist and performance expectation as a woman in Indian clothes. She faces a crisis of her power and authority with spatial dislocation while her great-grandmother a century earlier had become slightly empowered by escaping from her home. There is no easy answer to the question of whether spatial mobility can provide opportunities for economic and social mobility for women. Women's mobility is constrained by social norms arising from discourses on gender, religion, caste, class (Sharma and Kunduri 2016: 198). Migration facilitates women to build social networks and support system outside caste, religion or kinship. The text highlights the accounts of various coolie women who were able to choose their partners and build rapport with other women migrants both within the ships carrying indentured labourers and in the colony plantations. The entry of women in the workforce changed the gender

dynamics in the sugar plantations. Despite problems of gender-based wages and occupational segregation and discrimination, women workers could articulate their economic aspirations and agency.

Conclusion

To conclude, Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* has been able to retrieve the lost voices of the subaltern women coolies and bring a gendered discourse in the historiography of indentured labour system. She displays how most of the coolie women, who were social outcasts, chose to migrate for employment opportunities and to escape from their ignominy. They were able to recast their social disgrace into colonial stigma but could subvert oppression through circumventing rules and roles through powerful agency. Bahadur challenges any homogenous, singular representation of migrant women labourers. She celebrates the resilience and agency of them to manoeuver their ways in the plantation economy, negotiating with the white masters, juggling with multiple sexual partners to destabilize an established gendered hierarchy and patterns of behaviour. This text focuses on complex gendered subjects stigmatized by society, occupying liminal spaces within the colonial labour system, owned by native and white men, subjected to manual and sexual slavery, and yet bold enough to articulate their desires for economic mobility and sexual freedom. Gaiutra Bahadur in her discussion of the book calls it her personal journey as she excavates the history of her great-grandmother from the traces and echoes of colonial archives. As a postcolonial, woman diaspora, Bahadur is concerned with a historical narrative of labour plantation in Guyana through the lens of gender and race, but she is equally invested in tracing her own roots and coming to terms with her own identity.

References

Bahadur, G. (2013). *Coolie woman: The Odyssey of indenture*. London: Hachette India.
Carter, M. (1996). 'Lakshmi's legacy: The testimonies of Indian women in 19th century mauritius. *African Studies Review, 39*(2).
Cixous, H. (2005). *Stigmata*. London: Routledge.
Derrida, J. (1980). *The law of genre* (p. 7). Glyph: Translated by Avital Ronell.
Emmer, P. C. (2018). The position of Indian woman in Suriname. In P. Misir (Ed.), *The Subaltern Indian woman: Domination and social degradation*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Simon and Schuster Inc.
Joseph, B. (2006). *Reading the East India Company, 1720—1840: Colonial currencies of gender*. Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman.
Kumar, A. (2017). *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Loes, S.-S. (1995). *Women and seasonal labour migration (alternatives in development)*. Sage Publications.

Mehta, B. J. (2004). *Diasporic dis(locations: Indo-Caribbean women writers negotiate the Kala Pani*. Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press.
Misir, P. (2018). *The Subaltern Indian Woman.*
Scoble, J. (1840). *Hill coolies: A brief exposure of the deplorable conditions of the hill coolies in British Guiana and Mauritius and of the Nefarious means by which they were induced to resort to these colonies*. London: Harvey and Darton.
Sharma, S., & Kunduri, K. (2016). Here we are addicted to 'Loitering': Exploring narratives of work and mobility among migrant women in Delhi. In B. Fernandez, M. Gopal, & O. Ruthven (Eds.), *Land, labour and livelihoods: Indian women's perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Sharpe, P. (2002). *Women, gender and labour migration: Historical and cultural perspectives*. London: Routledge.
Singh, R. (1996). I am a coolie. In A. Donnel & S. L. Welsh (Eds.), *The Routledge reader in Caribbean literature*. London: Routledge.
Spivak, G. C. (1985). The Rani of Sirmur: An essay in reading the archives. *History and Theory, 24*(3).
Thompson, J. (1896). *The Overseer's manual or a guide to the Cane Field and sugar factory*. Georgetown, Guyana: Argosy Press.

Chapter 5
Finding a Voice: Literary Representations of Indentured Women

Sandhya Rao Mehta

Abstract While the complex threads of the historical narrative surrounding indenture continue to be investigated, their representations in the literature have been less comprehensively explored. As much of the pain of indenture is unwritten and undocumented, art comes to the aid of the subject, giving voice to the imagination and recreation of past experiences. It acts as a cathartic experience, capable of facing, questioning as well as coming to terms with the past. The process of remembering, expressing and documenting has created spaces for those whose struggles and narratives have remained marginal in literary history and critique. This paper will explore the multiple ways in which gender in indenture is being documented, archived and represented through a range of writers who have taken on the task of exploring new ways of presenting the past and filling in the silences of the unrepresented. In doing so, new ways of conceptualizing transoceanic feminism are presented, going beyond the binary understanding of Western and Indian models of gender. By giving agency to imagined characters and contexts, the literature assumes a subversive voice and becomes a causal agent for change.

Keywords Indentured women · Jahaji · Kalapani motikor · Oral narratives · Creative sources

Introduction

I sit on the ground and listen
To the waves again and again
I imagine you adorned – red and gold bodice
Nose ring, foot ring, and silver bangle.
Did you board the boat alone at midnight?
Janet Naidu "A Deeper Ocean" (2013, 1)

S. R. Mehta (✉)
Department of English Language and Literature, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman
e-mail: sandhyamehta4@gmail.com

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_5

As narratives of indenture go, Naidu's portrayal of the bejewelled young woman going to a distant and unknown land in pursuit of the unknown is part of the growing work on women in the Indian indenture, a work that has been historically replete with complex stories of victimhood and exploitation while being simultaneously wrapped in the national discourse of purity and native values. This contradictory view of women as being the upholders of social order and religious purity while also being the cause of trouble in the new land owes much to the binary ways in which women have been traditionally cast in fictional as well as official records where the patriarchal accounts of women as troublemakers tread a familiar path. Re-examining the multiple roles played by women, both on the road to faraway lands and once there, is an exercise that has been shrouded in so much male gaze that it has taken a century to re-examine women's experiences in the transoceanic indenture. As has been commonly pointed out, the inability of indentured women to read and write until the 1940s meant that their experiences were silenced and consequently written off the established, official accounts. As Govinden says, "For Indian women writers in South Africa…marginalisation resulted in a cycle of neglect: it has been detrimental, among other things, to the development of a more vigorous culture of writing and publishing, and to a fuller appreciation of the works that have already been produced" (2000: 464). It is exactly why scholars have had to go back to oral stories, unearthing the past through memories and vignettes which could point to the way in which early experiences of travelling across the Kala Pani could be framed in contemporary feminist contexts. This, of course, has been done by Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* (2013), Mohan's *Jahajin* (2008) and other works of poetry which attempt to centre the female experience of indenture.

The meta-narrative of indenture from India has been thoroughly documented by British sources as well as the nationalist movement in the early twentieth century. Following the abolishing of slavery in most of the British-controlled territories between 1803 and 1830, the void created in labour-intensive sugar plantations in the Caribbean and Fiji in 1874 (Lal 2012) was filled by South Asian and Chinese contractual workers who were brought for on a 5-year period after which they could work for another 5 years and be entitled to a free passage home. The journey across the oceans was itself fraught with dangers, and the survival rate was less than half. In her study on indentured women in Trinidad, Chatterjee (2014: 26–27) observes, "[O]ne can hardly envision a scenario where an Indian peasant - man or woman, uprooted from his or her land would have the means, methods, or wherewithal to go to a Trinidadian sugar plantation for work. The means and methods were provided by the British imperial presence in India, through an institutionalized and controlled system of recruitment". The official system notwithstanding, individual tales collected by a variety of scholars suggest that women were also part of the group of workers as they went as wives, occasionally as children of male workers and even as their mistresses. A typical manner of being duped into going away is an account of a British missionary who explained some instances:

> One woman told me she had quarrelled with her husband in anger and ran away from her mother-in-law's house to her mother's. A man on the road questioned her and said he would show her the way. He took her to a depot for indentured labour. Another woman said her

> husband went to work at another place. He sent word to his wife to follow him. On her way, a man said he knew her husband and that he would take her to him. This woman was taken to a depot. An Indian girl was asked by her neighbour to go and see the Muharram festival. While there she was prevailed upon to go to a depot. Another woman told me that she was going to a bathing ghat and was misled by a woman to a depot. When in the depot they are told that they cannot go till they pay for the food they have had and for other expenses. They are unable to do so. (Chatterjee 2014: 42)

However, it is the individual stories of women who chose to travel across the seas that had, for the longest period, been absent from official records as well as male-dominated narratives. This is because women who chose to travel to a distant land were often seen to be "loose" and castaways, dangerous temptresses in the majority male enclave. Whatever "choice" they may have had, evidence suggests that women who joined the ships to go to a distant land were not always related to men in these ships. Sociologist Reddock explains that a majority of single women were widows, separated or abandoned, or prostitutes (although this category was exaggerated by the British to defend their warnings of morality). Reddock (1985: 79) elaborates:

> One of the long-held myths about Indian women immigrants in Trinidad and Tobago is that they migrated with their families under the power, authority, and control of their male relatives and were docile and tractable. These views ignore the historical documentation on the 'Indian Women Problem' which confronted the colonial office as far back as 1845 when Indian indentureship to Trinidad began. Contemporary research in women's history of indenture has revealed that a large proportion of Indian women did make a conscious decision to seek a new life elsewhere. They came as workers and not as dependents.

The consequences of these migrations were many, and the misogyny and institutionalized patriarchal institutions just followed women to the land they thought they had escaped to. Examples of the suffering and marginalization these women faced is well documented in now made familiar the ground-breaking work of Brij Lal in Fiji. In a story entitled "Kunti's cry", Lal (2012) narrates the story of a woman named Kunti who was sent to a remote part of a banana patch in Rewa, Fiji, when she was accosted by a British overseer. In order to save herself, Kunti jumped into the river but was saved by a boy in a dinghy (Lal 2012: 196). This story was reported first by the Indian press which praised Kunti's "bravery, patience, and strength of mind", but Kunti's case was eventually dismissed on account of her "promiscuous" character. This case was subsequently taken up by the growing Indian national movement where, in spite of her "low caste", Kunti is seen as representing the values of "wifely devotion" (Kumar 2013: 512) associated with the upper castes. The story of Kunti is important and relevant because it highlights and marks the most common ways in which women of indenture were portrayed in the official accounts, as well as the media back in India. It is a narrative that sustained throughout the period of indenture, well into the twentieth century. The oscillation in the depiction of women in official and imaginative renderings between being the pure upholder of family values and of her being a loose troublemaker on the plantations is one that continued until women's voices are publicly heard. In its absence, the accounts of women in the official records of the indenture are stereotyped, patriarchal and casteist. As Lateef (1987: 4) documents about Fiji:

> Both official records and social commentators of the day claimed that women were the cause of major conflict between men, sometimes driving them to murder and suicide. The gross disproportion of the sexes supposedly led to intense competition for women resulting in violence between men, and promiscuity amongst women. Violence was of course also meted out to women by men who could not get their own way with them.

While official records represent women as troublemakers, amoral and dangerous to the local communities, emerging literature did little to question or negate such perceptions. The sparse literature available before the twentieth century consisted mainly of British accounts of life in the plantations. Where there was another kind of narrative, it was the mantle taken up by the nationalists in India, or eventually, the rising movements within the indentured colonies. As Pyonting (1986) suggests, the majority of official records consisted of raw data, numbers of women who are seen as the temptress and creating trouble in the plantation, often created by the substantially lower percentage of women against men. Pyonting goes on to give the examples of *The Overseer's Manual* (1887) and *Twenty-five Years in British Guiana* (1898) by Henry Kirke which recounts an incident of a child bride being beaten by her husband who is screaming "Harlot, adultress, take that" (Pyonting 1986: 139). This is furthered by literary renderings of women such as in Charles Kingsley's exoticized description of an Indian woman in his *At last: A Christmas in the West Indies*: "There comes a bright-eyed young lady…hung all over with bangles, in a while muslin petticoat…" (Pyonting 1986: 140). Other Creole fictions which continue to depict Indian women as physically exotic but morally corrupt include W. H. H. Towbridge's *The Tare* (1931), H. G. De Lisser's *The cup and the lip* (1956) and A. R. F. Webber's *Those that be in bondage* (1917). This is followed by the writings of a concerted and influential group of male writers of Indian descent such as Sam Selvon, Seerpasad and V.S. Naipaul, whose depiction of Indian women, to varying degrees, continues to inhabit the space between that of the temptress and the domestic. This has to do with the increasing consciousness of settled communities towards establishing families which echo and reflect the values, morality as well as caste consciousness of the home left behind. In most of this literature, women's voices in terms of social justice, sexuality, opportunities for betterment and growth are all missing.

Narratives of Indenture in the Caribbean

It was not until the 1980s and later that women found publishing opportunities which they used to explore the various layers of their identity in the Caribbean as Indian, indentured as well as woman. In works such as Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003), Lakshmi Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind* (1990) and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), the principal characters are independent and aware of their own complexities. While etching out contemporary concerns and contexts, they also go back to Indian mythology to link their present with a distant past which locates itself in the new home: "The female and male archetypes inscribed in sacred texts like Sita

and Draupadi are constantly being invoked as the role models for Indo-Caribbean women, even though conditions and realities have undergone major transformations" (Mohammed 2012: 8). Mootoo, Mahadai Das, Rajkumari Singh and Shana Yardan have all wrestled with the multiple struggles of gender, ethnicity and their changing roles as descendants of indenture. Yardan's (1972: 113–114) Complex and difficult relationship with India is brought out in her "The Earth is Brown":

Earth is brown, and rice is green,
And the air is cold on the face of the soul
Oh grandfather, my grandfather,
your dhoti becomes a shroud
your straight hair a curse
in this land where
rice no longer fills the belly
or the empty placelessness of your soul.

For you cannot remember India.
The passage of time
has too long been trampled over
to bear your wistful recollections,
and you only know the name
of the ship they brought you on
because your daadi told it to you.

This is in direct contrast to Rajkumari Singh's (1971) prouder tribute to her grandmother who first stepped on foreign soil:

Per Ajie
I can see
How in stature
Thou didst grow
Shoulder up
Head held high
The challenge
In thine eye… (Singh 1971)

As Kanhai (1999: 213) states: "The cane cutting woman, hidden in the cane fields, pitting her will, her endurance, her ingenuity against a system that would grind her through its mills and spit her out as cane trash, is the history and psyche of the Indo-Caribbean woman who wants to write". Rajkumari Singh's activism coupled with her awareness of the troubled past allows her to view the history of indenture as well as the present as experiences that reflect the multifarious experiences of Guyanese women of Indian descent as they negotiate their identity through history, politics and their own changing and changeable society. Mehta (2004: 138) observes that Ajie here goes "beyond mere archetype to indicate their importance as socio-cultural and

historical interpreters who initiate transformative re-evaluations of women's history and cultural resistance" and, as Baksh (2016: 86) suggests, "[t]he poet represents Per Ajie as a pioneer who braves the *Kala Pani* (dark waters). Although Hindu tradition stipulated that Indians who crossed the sea risked contaminating their Hinduness, for Hindu women migration presented the possibility of transgressing rigid patriarchal structures and abusive communal traditions."

The urgency of documenting such oral histories of indenture is seen through Janet Naidu's "Destination" (2005):

> I taste creek water and hear the waves
> murmur of beings in the distance.
> They huddle in sleepless vessels,
> trace bangles and foot-rings of another century
> and make new charts
> carving a space deeply rooted
> the way lines map my palm.
>
> I watch them wading through sea logs,
> arriving knee-deep, unleashing dreams
> holding promises of more
> than a bundle of silver jewellery.
>
> A deep voice wrestles achingly:
> *Suniyo, saavan aayoleave the monsoon,*
> *poverty and shame.*
> *Come here for betterment -*
> *No more caste or outcaste in my face.*

As Baksh (2016: 87–88) concludes on the contrasting yet enduring impact of Rajkumari Singh and Mahadai Das:

> In varied ways, Das and Singh gain a literary voice and claim Guyanese land by connecting to indentured ancestors and employing gendered metaphors to represent landscape. Whereas Singh primarily focuses on the indentured woman as laborer and mother, devoting an entire poem to this figure, Das represents a wider range of women's images as indentured migrants and workers, as wives and as daughters, situating female experiences in poems that offer broad perspectives on working-class nationalism and indentureship history (through references to particular events and figures and through depictions of the multiple spaces of indentured life: ships, plantations, and barracks).

Increasingly, a number of scholars have attempted to contextualize the experience of indenture in the Caribbean, as in other transoceanic spaces to unpack the various ways in which the place of women is understood and framed in the larger context of feminist work. Such studies include Patricia Mohammed's (2002) *Gender Negotiations among Indians in Trinidad, 1917–1947* and Mehta's (2004) *Diasporic (dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani*. More telling experiences of indenture and its aftermath are narrated in Kanhai's (2011) *Bindi: The Multifaceted*

Lives of Indo-Caribbean Women, Bahadur's (2013) *Coolie Woman* and Hosein and Outar's (2016) *Indo-Caribbean Feminisms: Charting Crossings in Discourse, Geography, and Politics*. One of the earliest works on women's writing is *Matikor: The Politics of Identity for Indo-Caribbean Women* (1999) by Rosanne Kanhai which uses the trope of the Matikor, the pre-wedding ritual in a bride's house which acts as an initiation ceremony. By focusing on a particular Caribbean event, Kanhai centres the fledging new identity, which is being sought to be created by women, coming specifically from gendered spaces. This shift in the voice that empowers women's narratives is articulated in a range of works that have sought to establish frameworks with which to document and reflect on the diverse experiences of indenture from gender-specific perspectives. This is aptly reflected in the work of Mahabir and Pirbhai (2012) in their *Critical Perspectives of Indo-Caribbean Women's Literature* where they actively seek out to understand writing that is intrinsically linked to "plantation histories" (40). This is all a part of what Hosein and Outar (2013) call "transgressive storytelling" (11) which allows writers to use platforms to reflect on their art and activism, centring the narrative of indenture as the focus from which present and past oral histories could be narrated.

Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2007) narrates the challenges of Indian women indentures in Trinidad. She narrates the way in which she changed the jahaji, the male traveller to 'Jahajin' as a way of pointing to the absence of their presence, as it were, in male narratives of travel and indenture. Primarily a linguist, Mohan says that her earlier conversations with Trinidadian women of Indian descent were for linguistic purposes of documenting their version of Bhojpuri but that, eventually, what they were saying because became more interesting than how they were saying it and thus the story of travel began for her. Her focus on oral histories and their importance in understanding, archiving and historicizing this perspective is crucial to an understanding of indentured diaspora. As she muses about these families:

> It must have been a shock for villagers from the Bhojpuri heartland to find themselves at sea. It took anywhere up to two months to get to Trinidad, and the hardest part of the journey was at the bottom of Africa. They called it the *pagla samundar*, the mad sea where the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic meet because everyone got royally seasick huddling in the holds while storms and tall waves raged outside.
>
> I always think this was the point when caste got blown away. Who would want to cross that stretch again to go back? The fine distinctions vanished. If there was only one *teli*, oil presser, on board, who could he marry? So more general groups emerged, making it easier for men to find wives. But there was a new hiccup: everyone who had come on the same ship was now family, and family could not marry each other. They even called each other *jahaji-bhai* and *jahaji-bahen*. I still remember my grandmother once explaining why two young people in love were having problems with their parents about getting married.
>
> 'Their families are jahajis.' They had come on the same ship. (Mohan 2018)

As the speaker dwells into the past, she centres the way in which narratives have successfully erased gendered interpretations of migration and indenture. By focusing on oral stories of great grandmothers, *Jahajin* explores the importance of oral histories to fill the silenced spaces of official records. As Mohan says in an interview with Alison Klein:

> It isn't until women started coming to Trinidad that you have any sense of an Indian community. Men either died out because of bad conditions or blended into the larger society without carrying on any sense of their culture. That's really not what men do. The women would sit together and talk. My biggest problem in understanding the tapes was [that] a lot of little grammatical signals were not even there. They knew what they meant because these were things that they had said to each other over and over again. They would tell each other stories about those days, and that reinforced it. Men probably didn't have this kind of social interaction. (Klein 2016: 68)

The sheer range of literary production by women of indenture within the Caribbean is rich and diverse. From among all the islands, Trinidad and British Guyana present the most vocal group combining the various aspects of Western feminism with the more robust, organically emerging forms which reflect the individual realities of this oceanic space. Central to such studies are the ideas of Mauritian poet Khal Torabully and historian Marina Carter of "Coolitude", akin to "negritude". It, in a way, took an inherently offensive term and turned it into an empowering one by wresting it from connotations of suffering and imbibing pride and knowledge of the past. In Torabully's (2002: 150) words, "coolitude posits an encounter, an exchange of histories, of poetics or visions of the world, between those of African descent and Indian descent, without excluding other sources". His idea of bringing out the erased experiences of indenture is echoed across a plethora of women writers who further archive this experience from the point of view of gender, centring a narrative that is potentially lost. This is most particular to the emergence of such concepts as dougla poetics, referring to an Indian-African identity (Puri 1999), *Kala Pani* discourse (Mehta 2004), dougla feminism and *matikor* sexuality (Mohammed 2012). These multiple ways of approaching women's writing create spaces which are more than binary attempts to imitate Western forms of feminism by acknowledging their own specific historical and geographical contexts and conditions.

Indenture and Narrative in Fiji

Fiji became a British colony in 1874, and by 1879, the first batch of indentured labour was brought in, ostensibly, to maintain the traditional, indigenous life of the Fijian villages, but clearly because of the availability of cheap labour under the British recruitment system which was well established by this time. In this period, approximately 13,696 Indian women (and 54, 784 Indian men) were brought, averaging forty women for every one hundred men (Mishra 2016: 48). Women, as in other cases of the indenture, were fleeing violence at home or had been previously abandoned. Lateef (1987: 3) recounts the story of her grandmother:

> While she [my grandmother] was getting water from a well, a recruiter approached her and asked her whether she would like to go to Fiji, a faraway place where there was good weather, picturesque surroundings, easy work and plenty of food. Without telling anyone, she left with him immediately.

Indian labour came mostly from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh because it was a chief recruiting ground for other sugar colonies like Guyana, Trinidad and Mauritius. In Fiji, the stories of exploitation were more widely spread, perhaps owing to the compact geographical area. In fact, Lal (1985) suggests that the suicide rate was high among women and 68 women were murdered between 1885 and 1920. The stories of Kunti (referenced earlier) and of Naraini were actively used by the nationalists in India to protest against the system of indenture, with both narratives having been converted into tropes of femininity and purity of the Indian woman. Kanwal (2016) documents some of the songs which accompanied the labourers:

Bipat Jhiniki ki suunay ko dayia	*There is nobody to hear the troubles of Jhinki*
Sahiba hai bara pittaya	*The boss is a great beater*
Hai apna sadar chuggal khore	*Ram dayia is my enemy*
Vayrun hai Ramdayia	*And Sardar is a backbiter*

Another farm song documented by Kanwal captured the emptiness of their dreams and the absence of an audience for their pain and suffering:

Chhuri kudaari ke sung	*Our days and nights are spent with knives and hoes*
Ab beetay din ratian	*Green leaves of the sugarcane are aware of our woes*
Gannay ki hari hari patian, Janey hamri sab batian	

As communal songs like *baitha baitha hukmam chalay rey bidesia* and *gannay ki hari hari patiyan* became popular enough to be sung over the radio, other songs continue to link generations of Fijians sharing the experience of indenture:

Ambua ki daal pe kooke kolia ho	*On the branch of a mango tree, the cuckoo is singing*
Manua mein aggia laagai rey bidesia	
Hari hari patinan pe likh likh haari mein	
Dil kaa fulwaa murjhai rey bidesia	*She is setting fire to my mind*
I am tired of writing love messages on green leaves	*The flower of my heart is fading out*

The pioneering work of Brij V. Lal in documenting the history of Fiji through his 1982 *Chalo Jajaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* not only evocatively brought out the journeys across the seas which took many lives, but also humanized the journey by dealing with individual voices and people whose experiences could be seen to be emblematic of the larger whole. Lal's narration of the Kunti and Narayani stories which highlighted the trauma of indentured women also focused on the way such narratives were appropriated by the Indian national movement to protest against indenture, by questioning the patriarchal assumptions upon which such protests were

based. The activism of this sort was continued in Margaret Mishra and Shireen Lateef's work on women in Fiji which derives its purpose from the intersectionality of indenture and its tendency to appropriate male narratives at the expense of the erased female ones. In early sociological work on Indians in Fiji, Lateef (1987) concludes that "[f]or the Indo-Fijian female, succumbing to male control and bearing the burden of a woman's life is virtually the only option. The power of the ideology and their economic dependence on males means women are locked in an oppressive system from which it is difficult to escape" (7). Mishra examines records of aboriginal and Indian indentured women to examine ways in which their "deviances" in morality can be traced to the patriarchal "efforts to regulate female behavior and sexuality" (2012: 67) as well as examining the way in which such accounts were couched in particularly moralistic language. By engaging with official documentation, Mishra reveals systematic misogyny whereby any woman who does not subscribe to (male) established rules of morality could be a threat to the world order and thus be worthy of punishment.

The Natal

Records maintain that 341 indentured immigrants arrived in Durban on 17 November 1860 to work in labour-intensive sugar plantations of the African south-eastern coast. From 1874, immigration entered a second phase which continued unabated until it was terminated by the Indian government in 1916. Although women were seen to be an unnecessary addition to the indenture system by the plantation owners who had to provide for additional people, the British government's requirement of sending 40 women for every 100 men meant that the owners had no choice but to oblige. As Beall (1990: 166) suggests: "Indian women were brought to Natal with great reluctance. Their labour power was, however, harnessed in the development of Natal's economy, at a time when they were amongst the most exploited members of the colony's proletariat. Both their productive and their reproductive labour facilitated capital accumulation, particularly on the sugar estates". While such narratives of exploitation, or agency, are much debated, the literature of indenture has also extended to study the women left behind, oftentimes with young children to tend to without any support from the husbands who may have either died or become incapable of helping the families back home. Desai and Vahed (2010) quote a folk song in the context of a record of one such worker, Maistry who left for the Natal, had a family and returned almost forty years later to India only to find that his first wife and most of his family had died:

> All my friends have become mothers,
> And I remain lonely and childless.
> Again and again, I pleaded with you not to go,
> For there live women, who will win your heart.
> For twelve years you haven't written a word:
> How shall I spend the days of Chait? (p. 3)

Meer (1969: 220) points out that art among indentured Indians represented different parts of the country and included different forms like dance, theatre, musical entertainment like avanghm (drums), tat and betat (string instruments), and that groups were locally created to provide entertainment to the community. Other forms which were male-dominated included gazals, qawwalis and bhajans, most of which had women audience but not performers. Until the middle of the twentieth century, there is little writing available by women, although much of the literature existing in terms of popular culture and rituals involved female roles and traditional families. Meer's example of a bridal song commonly sung among the Gujarati families, and surely composed by males, points to the traditional roles to which women had to conform:

Bride's Farewell (Bida)

My behnie leaves today
Leaves for her sasural
Bid your father pranaam
Bid your mother pranaam
Bid your brothers pranaam

……

Gentle as the shade of the mango
Gentle is the care of your parents'
You must leave that care and go this day
You must leave and go your saas's way.

……

Remember life is woven of two threads
One joy, one sorrow, you must wear both well,
When trouble comes, meet it with proud courage.
Our sister goes with her husband to-day,
Our sister goes with her sasural to-day
Her mother's love walks with her all the way
Her father's guidance goes with her to stay.
(Meer 1969, p. 23)

Govinden (2000) suggests that one of the first known, published examples of Indian women's writings in South Africa was actually a collaborative one when women got together to protest the 1895 Act which ensured that indentured workers would leave upon completion of their original contract or pay a residence fee of three pounds. The Indian Women's Association, established in 1908 with the help of Mahatma Gandhi, wrote a petition, published by *The African Chronicle* entitled "Domestic Unhappiness". This was addressed "to the Honourable Members of the Legislative Assembly

of the Colony of Natal" and published on 19 September 1908 (Govinden 2000: 101). Other works such as that of Bharati Lakhani, Muthal Naidoo and Ansuyah Singh helped to centre the Indian experience in South Africa, often using Indian mythology and folk tales to create a continuity and a sense of identity among Indian families through women who continue to be seen as arbiters of tradition. Hiralal (2014: 73) suggests that, while the lives of the "passenger males" have often been included in the historiography of indenture, women's narratives have been insufficiently covered. In cases where they are, they are viewed as dependents and victims, without agency. Hiralal uses letters and historical references to "stimulate a rethinking of the gendered experiences of Indian immigrants in the context of concomitant differences among ethnic groups, social mobility and the processes of acculturation and integration" (2014: 73). Her study includes examples of cases where women had appealed against the officials in the Natal who, for varying reasons, had rejected their right to reside in South Africa following the death of their husbands. Very often, the women were denied entry to South Africa based on the non-recognition of Hindu religious marriages. A literary example of the situation of women left behind in India is interestingly brought out in a piece entitled *Ek Hindi* (One Indian) which was published in *Indian Opinion*, a local (South African) newspaper in 1911. In it, two men discuss bringing over the wife of one of them, while the other laments the lack of infrastructure and the suffering of the women who are already in the Natal as reasons for not bringing her over (Hiralal 2014: 71). Such representations of the women left behind, points to another direction which studies on indenture could take. While indenture undoubtedly affected women in the new land, it had an equal impact on the women left behind but this is an angle which has been rarely explored.

Conclusion

Post-indentured feminism and its literature attempts to look beyond national ethnicities to a transcontinental experience that connects diverse aspects of indentured experience into an interconnected continuum while recognizing the inherent differences and value of each. Negotiating between postcolonial and transnational feminism as well as "regional and culture-specific forms of gendered resistance", (Mehta 2016: 3) writings by women in these spaces have had to necessarily work with different forms of identity constructions. They attempted to create a uniquely individual form of feminism which would reflect their specific historical and geographical complexity. Thus, Indianness now takes a back seat in the centring of indenture as reflected, commemorated and archived in the pan oceanic spaces of Fiji, the Natal, Mauritius and the Caribbean (Hofmeyr 2007). Such a "transoceanic feminism" positions itself outside the Western or the South Asian models, acutely aware of its historical distinctiveness and peculiar cultural predilections. While the literature reflected on the historical ethnicities which brought them to where they are, often replicating class and caste inequalities in the new land, it was only after the 1960s that women's literature began to embrace the various artistic possibilities of their changing identities.

Such embracing of diverse ways of seeing themselves includes the acceptance of coolitude, the carnival, *matikor*, *jahaji* and *Kala Pani* as imperative components of transoceanic feminist narratives.

References

Bahadur, G. (2013). *Coolie woman*. London: Hurst and Company.

Baksh, A. (2016). Indentureship, land and Indo-Caribbean feminist thought in the literature of Rajkumari Singh and Mahadai Das. In G. Hosein & L. Outar (Eds.), *Indo-Caribbean feminisms: Charting crossings to geography, discourse, and politics* (pp. 73–92). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beall, J. (1990). Women under indentured labour in Natal. In C. Walker (Ed.), *Women and gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (pp. 146–167). Cape Town: David Philip Publishers.

Chatterjee, S. (2014). Indian women's lives and labor: The indentureship experience in Trinidad and Guyana 1845–1917. Retrieved from https//scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2252&context=dissertations_1.

Desai, A., & Vahed, G. (2010). *Inside Indian indenture: A South African story*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Govinden, N. (2000). Sisters outsiders: The representation of identity and difference in selected writings by South African India women. Retrieved from http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.833.6425&rep=rep1&type=pdf.

Hiralal, K. (2014). Women and migration in South Africa: Historical and literary perspectives. *South Asian Diaspora, 6*(1), 63–75.

Hosein, G., & Outer, L. (Eds.). (2016). *Indo-Caribbean feminisms: Charting crossings to geography, discourse, and politics* (pp. 73–92). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hofmeyr, I. (2007). The black Atlantic meets the Indian Ocean: Forging new paradigms of transnationalism for the global South—Literary and cultural perspectives. *Social Dynamics, 33*(2), 3–32.

Kanhai, R. (Ed.). (1999). *Matikor: The politics of identity for Indo-Caribbean women*. St. Augustine, Trinidad, and Tobago: University of the West Indies Press.

Kanhai, R. (2011). *Bindi: The multifaced lives of Indo-Caribbean women*. Kington: The University of West Indies Press.

Kanwal, J. S. (2016). *Poem of indenture period*. Fiji times, May 16. Retrieved from https://www.fijitimes.com/poems-of-indenture-period/.

Klein, A. (2016). "Seeing greater distances": An interview with Peggy Mohan on the voyages of Indo-Caribbean women. In G. H & L. Outar (Eds.), *Indo-Caribbean feminisms: Charting crossings to geography, discourse, and politics* (pp. 63–72). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kumar, A. (2013). Anti-indenture Bhojpuri folk songs, and poems from North India. *Man in India 93*(4), 509–519. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/5899982/ANTI-INDENTURE_BHOJPURI_FOLK_SONGS_AND_POEMS_FROM_NORTH_INDIA.

Lal, B. V. (1985). Kunti's cry: Indentured women on Fiji plantations. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, *22*(1), 55–71.

Lal, B. V. (2012). *Chalo Jahaji. On a journey through indenture in Fiji*. Acton: ANU Press.

Lateef, S. (1987). Indo-Fijian women: Past and present. *Manushi: A Journal About Women and Society 39*, 2–5.

Mahabir, J., & Pirbhai, M. (2012). *Critical perspectives of Indo-Caribbean women's writing*. London: Routledge.

Meer, F. (1969). *Portrait of Indian South Africans*. London: Avon House.

Mehta, B. (2016). Feminism, Indo-Caribbean. In A. Nancy (Ed.), *The Wiley Blackwell encyclopedia of gender and sexuality studies*. Naples: Wiley.

Mehta, B. (2004). *Diasporic (dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean women writers negotiate the kala pani*. Jamaica: University of West Indies Press.
Mishra, M. (2012). Between women: Between indenture, morality and health. Retrieved from http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2012/05/01/between-women-indenture-morality-and-health/.
Mishra, M. (2016). 'Your woman is a very bad woman': Revisiting female deviance in Colonial Fiji. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *17*(4), 67–78. Available at https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol17/iss4/5.
Mohammed, P. (2002). *Gender negotiations among Indians in Trinidad*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Mohammed, P. (2012). Changing symbols of Indo-Caribbean femininity. *CRGS*, no. 6.
Mohan, P. (2018, July 18). *Trinidad dairy*. Oulook retrieved from https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/trinidad-diary/300392.
Naidu, J. (2013). A deeper ocean. In J. Mahabir & P. Mariam (Eds.), *Critical perspectives on Indo-Caribbean women's literature* (p. 1). London: Routledge.
Naidu, J. (2005). *Destination*. Retrieved from https://rosalienebacchus.blog/2017/05/01/destination-poem-by-guyanese-canadian-poet-janet-naidu/.
Pirbhai, Mariam. (2009). *Mythologies of migration, vocabularies of indenture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Poynting, J. (1986). South Asian women writers: The immigrant experiences. *Journal of South Asian Literature, 21*(1), 133–180.
Puri, S. (1999). Canonized hybridities, resistant hybridities: Chutney soca, carnival and the politics of nationalism. In B. Edmonson (Ed.), *Caribbean romances: The politics of regional representation*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
Reddock, R. (1985). Freedom denied: Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917. *Economic and Political Weekly,* WS79–WS87.
Singh, R. (1971). Per Ajie. In D. Alison & L. W. Sarah (Eds.), *The Routledge reader in Caribbean literature* (1996) (pp. 304–305). London: Routledge.
Torabully, K. (2002). "Some theoretical premises of coolitude". In M. Carter & K. Torabully. *Coolitude: An anthology of the Indian labour diaspora*. London: Anthem Press (pp. 144–213).
Yardan, S. (1972). *New writing in the Caribbean*. In A. J. Seymour (Ed.). (pp. 113–114). Georgetown: Guyana Lithographic Co.

Chapter 6
Indentured Women and Resistance in the Plantations

Shubha Singh

Abstract Women's experience of indenture was different from men, for aside from harsh work conditions, they were also at risk from male predators. As wage earners, women acquired a degree of control over their personal lives and learned to survive in a hostile environment. They also participated in the protests and uprisings in the colonial territories. But their activist role was simply taken for granted or forgotten once the resistance was over, by both the colonial authorities and the men indentured workers. Post-indenture, the Indian community busied itself in recreating the Indian social and family life that had been severely disrupted during the period of servitude. Women retreated from the workplace, assumed a more traditional role and found other means to supplement the family income. This chapter looks beyond the traditional roles of indentured women and analyses their role in the struggles and resistance movements on the plantations. It is based on my research and interactions with former indentured workers as well as wide-ranging discussions with their families during the four years I lived in Fiji Islands in the 1970s and two subsequent visits. My research and travels to the Caribbean, Mauritius and South Africa added to a deeper understanding of the resistance movements.

Keywords Indenture · Deception · Resistance · Women's strategies

The indenture system was the first organized contract migration of labour from India. It fulfilled the need for agricultural labour in the plantation economies by transporting Indian men and women workers to the imperial colonies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite the government regulations governing the indenture contract, in reality, the five years of the indenture contract were an exploitative period for the workers. The popular impression in India about an indentured woman was of a pathetic and oppressed woman, suffering under a ruthless system. It was the reports of the brutality suffered by indentured women that sparked off the campaign in India to abolish the indentured migration. The image grew from the stories of two women in Fiji, Kunti and Naraini and the open letter written by an Australian missionary, Miss Hannah Dudley, on the plight of indentured women in Fiji Islands.

S. Singh (✉)
New Delhi, India

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_6

Popular cultural depictions have a role in creating what is called imagined realities. Women labourers were seen as "docile and tractable". The colonial administration portrayed the women recruits as women of low caste and low values, abandoned women and even prostitutes, which provided the reason for treating them harshly and with contempt.

In November 1912, Dudley, a Methodist missionary wrote an open letter to Indian leaders in India. She pleaded with the Indian leaders, "I beseech of you not to be satisfied with any reforms to the system of indentured labour" and use their influence against the iniquitous system till it be utterly abolished. She wrote: "After five years of slavery, after five years of legalised immorality—the people are "free". And what kind of a community emerges after five years of such a life? Could it be a moral self-respecting one? Yet some argue in favour of this worse than barbarous system, that the free Indians are better off financially than they would be in their own country!" (Sanadhya 1991).

The letter, which was widely circulated in India, came after two incidents that had created a furore in India. In August 1910, an indentured woman named Naraini was assigned the task of breaking stones barely six days after childbirth. Naraini could not complete her task and the overseer, Harold Blomfield bashed her head on the stones, beat her and left her bleeding and semi-conscious. The incident created an outcry because of the nature of Naraini's injuries. Blomfield was charged for assault but was later discharged by the magistrate. Naraini did not recover from her wounds; she could not work and was repatriated to India (Sanadhya 1991).

In August 1913, the Indian newspaper Bharat Mitra carried an item, "The cry of an Indian woman from Fiji" about the attempted rape of a woman named Kunti, written as a first-person account. The letter was widely reprinted in India and forced the British India government to seek an official inquiry by the Fiji government. Kunti was sent to weed an isolated banana patch. Finding her alone, the overseer tried to assault her, but Kunti freed herself and jumped into the Wainibokasi River. A young boy named Jagdeo on a dingy saw Kunti in the water and rescued her. Kunti complained to the local authorities about the attempted assault.

Kunti's story was also highlighted by an ex-indentured worker, Totaram Sanadhya, who returned to India and wrote about his experiences in Fiji. Kunti's story stirred the conscious of Indians and was a major factor in spurring the Indian campaign to bring an end to the indenture recruitment in India. Kunti was hailed for her courage in relating her story and complaining about the assault to the estate authorities. But Kunti and Naraini's travails marked the depiction of indentured women as passive, harassed women. It is also a truism that Indian indentured women survived the period of servitude and went on to make a new life for themselves and their families.

Who were these women who left their homes in India to work as indentured labourers in a foreign land? Through 1879 to 1919, about 13,696 women and 54,789 men went to Fiji under the indenture agreement. These women travelled across the seas as indentured labourers contracted to work for five years. Some women accompanied their husbands, fathers or brothers; others travelled alone or with a child to a distant land. It was not easy to find women workers, but the British India government had decreed that one in four indentured workers should be a woman. Various

means were used to recruit the women, from deception, trickery, even abduction to persuasion with false promises.

Indentured women do not find a separate space in the history of indenture, even though they were productive wage earners. Single women were described as runaway widows, abandoned women or prostitutes. But what were the push and pull factors that led to the migration of Indian women? Women's stories had more to them than it appeared on the surface. Their reasons for leaving the home and migrating were not always the same as those of the men folk. For those women who accompanied husbands and male members of the family, it was a family migration. But for many women, it was a conscious decision to migrate.

Women who were abandoned by their husbands, widows driven out of their homes, women who were no longer welcome in the family fold for some misstep had a strong push factor. Society had made them outcasts, and they saw in the recruiter's assurances a way of escape. "For some women, the act of migration itself was a form of resistance. Rejection of unhappy home lives or situations of socio-economic marginalization brought a number of women to the emigration depots" (Carter 2012).

Some women were deceived or coerced into migration. The workers agreed to a contract without any real idea of where they were going, beguiled by the rosy pictures painted by the arakatis (recruiter's agents) of an easy, productive life. The arakatis tall tales provided the pull factor. But, women who had left India on their own or with small children were generally more independent minded and aware of the need to secure their own living. The decision to emigrate was in itself a sign of the independent character of these women, and the decision to emigrate alone and as individuals was their strength (Reddock 1985). As Gauitra Bahadur wrote in Coolie Women, "there were glimpses of headstrong women, determined to go or determined not to go". The women's experience of migration and their attempts at adjusting to the changed circumstances were also at variance to the male experience of indenture. Women migrants unescorted by an adult male had to adapt to a hostile new environment. There was pressure on them to choose a mate from among the unattached male migrants; the pressure began at the depot itself.

The Girmit Experience

Girmit as indenture was known by the workers who brought great changes in their lives. Plantations were like a prison; the overseers and sirdars had total power over the workers. Coercion and violence were often used to maintain order; over-tasking, sexual abuse and violence were common. Failure to complete tasks or other infractions was punished by flogging, punitive fines, jail or extension of the indenture term. It was widely believed that the indentured migrants who came to Fiji were of the lowest castes, used to poverty and ill-treatment in India. The European supervisors had an even lower opinion of women workers. They were considered lazy, slovenly and from the lowest strata of society. It provided them the reason to despise the

workers. But research showed that the indentured workers were a "fair cross section of village castes", including high-caste people (Lal 1983).

Indenture was a varied (some bad and some not so bad) and a moulding experience; it taught the women workers the lesson that, first and foremost, they must survive and subsist in this world or else perish. It toughened them and taught them survival skills and instilled in them determination and individualism. They had to be strong, both physically and mentally to work their way through plantation life. A helpful sirdar or a fair-minded overseer could make the difference on the plantation. The sirdars or Indian headmen could be exploitative and harass the workers. "The immigrants who were lucky in their plantation and overseer, and those who were unscrupulous, survived, and some prospered, but many others were brutalized" (Gillion 1977). The plantation hierarchy was headed by the manager with the European supervisors or overseers to assist him in running the plantation. Some Indians were appointed as sirdars (headmen) who monitored the work of the indentured labourers. Some women were also appointed to the position and were known as sirdarines or head women; they controlled the women's gangs for different tasks such as weeding and hoeing. They were the leaders of women, who were often consulted by the women workers over their work and home life.

Indenture allowed women a limited degree of agency. It gave a choice to some women, but it placed them in a harsh system that controlled their life and labour. Indentured women fought to maintain some control over their lives, but it was rarely that a woman could claim freedom under the conditions of indenture. Indentured women, who travelled alone or with young children, had to find ways to deal with a difficult situation. Women were paid less than men for field work; they were usually assigned lighter tasks such as weeding. It was often not sufficient to live on; hence, the women needed a husband to share the daily expenses.

Indenture was a time of violence, both in the workplace and in the home; workers were physically chastised, flogged or beaten for not performing to the satisfaction of the supervisor, and women were beaten for a variety of reasons, from domestic disputes to suspicions of infidelity and adultery. The shortage of women allowed some women to choose their own partners; some women changed partners at will while some men abandoned their partners during the later part of their indenture. This led to violence against the women, as the rejected men often used the cane knife to slash or kill the woman. Relationships between men and women on the plantations were not stable. Sumita Chatterjee held: "The female worker, however, was not a voiceless victim or object of recasting, but negotiated the differing terrains of patriarchal norms at levels of resistance and even coalition". CF Andrews called them Amazon-like in their self-determination, for their hard life had made them hard in character like steel.

In all the research and writings on indenture, the lives of the women indentured workers find mention mainly when they impinge on the lives of the men indentured workers. "Indentured women featured in colonial exchanges, often in passing as a footnote or afterthought, and other times as objects of deliberation when they transgressed the neatly demarcated boundaries of feminity" (Mishra 2012). Even colonial historical records carry minimal information on the indentured women;

most often they appear as mere names in a larger document. It is in recent years that some attention has focused on the life experiences of indentured women. The silence over women's stories and experiences is compounded by the absence of any writings, journals and diaries of indentured women. Women's experiences, the events that affected them, their dreams and recollections were handed down as stories and anecdotes to other women. It was an oral tradition that died down as many of the stories were too painful to retell or belonged to a time which was best forgotten.

There are only legends, family histories, though most women were reluctant to talk about their indenture experiences. In my own experience of talking to women who had served through indenture, the time of indenture was described as "narak" (hell). The aged women, with their work-worn faces, recounted the reasons which made them migrate and their journeys. Some were willing to relate incidents and events during indenture, but others responded that it was not good to remember those days. In the early 1970s, most of the former indentured women were matriarchs, living a peaceful life among their grandchildren; they did not want to be reminded of the narak they had endured. By 2002, when I spoke to Indian families whose grandparents were indentured workers, the grandchildren were aware of the indenture system. "It was narak", they said but had no knowledge about how it worked. By the third generation, indenture had faded into the background, even within the Indian community. It was not discussed, nor was this part of their history taught in schools in Fiji.

Throughout the indenture period and later, Indian women resisted their conditions in different ways. "These were often not overt acts. On the contrary, they were frequently covert acts which sought to redress grievances through various acts of defiance" (Hassankhan et al. 2014). Their strategies were those of oppressed people that sought to improve their conditions. According to Kalpana Hiralal, women displayed independence and assertiveness in Natal. "Women resorted to violent and non-violent means of defiance, such as desertion, insolence, feigning sickness, absence from work, lodging complaints, arson, and even murder" (Hiralal 2014). The workers were not seeking to flout authority but mainly looking at ways in which to make their lives better in small ways. Some of the means used by the indentured workers were not taken as resistance by the authorities, nor were the petty tactics always a form of resistance. "Desertion was, indeed, a strategy that some indentured immigrants used when other means of seeking redress had failed". Desertion and insolence formed 70% of the convictions against women.

Women helped each other, especially when a larger group would be more effective in improving the conditions of extracting revenge. Sometimes, they retaliated by assaulting and humiliating the men who harassed them by throwing muck on them. "The most common form of resistance involved physically confronting men who sexually violated indentured women and beating them up. Sometimes the punishment entailed pinning the overseer down and taking turns at urinating on him or walking over him until he excreted" (Naidu 1980). They even set fire to the sugarcane fields but that was considered as sabotage, a heinous crime and brought swift retribution, including flogging and a jail term.

Resistance in Africa and the Caribbean

There was unrest on the plantations; the Caribbean colonies experienced a series of riots and clashes by plantation workers while sugarcane workers struck work for better wages. Worker unrest was taken as uprisings in the Caribbean colonies and was put down through police and army action. During the period of 1873–1916, about 40 uprisings and riots took place in the Dutch colony of Suriname.

Women took part in the Indian resistance movements in South Africa; they responded to the call of the Satyagraha Association to join the struggle in 1913. The colonial administration had brought in discriminatory regulations, making it compulsory for Indians to carry a pass, imposed a poll tax and banned their movement to the Transvaal. The Supreme Court also invalidated all non-Christian marriages. Women joined Mahatma Gandhi's mass resistance movement and crossed provincial borders. In September 1913, the first group of sixteen women were sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labour for crossing the border. Among other groups of women arrested was 16-year-old Valliamma Munusamy Mudaliar, who died of a fever shortly after she was released from prison (Rajab 2017). She is mentioned in Gandhiji's book, Satyagraha in South Africa.

Domestic servants comprised an important segment of indentured workers in Natal. They were not afraid to violate labour laws and risk imprisonment. Both agricultural workers and domestic workers "resorted to similar methods of defiance: desertion, absenteeism, insolence, verbal abuse and disobedience" (Hiralal 2014).

Indian women participated in the wage strikes on the sugar estates in Guyana, Trinidad and Suriname, but their involvement was underestimated by the European authorities as well as the indentured men. Women had leadership roles, but their roles were ignored or more often considered supplemental to the leadership of men. The role of women was simply taken for granted or they were seen from the prism of their male counterparts, even when they openly engaged in the leadership of protest. They were seen and recorded as supporters of male leadership. Roopnarine quotes from British Parliamentary Paper 1871 to say that "Indian women were involved in a series of revolts and instances of resistance".

Reddock (1985) writes of women in Trinidad and Tobago; "Indian women in the Caribbean in general and Trinidad and Tobago in particular, did not willingly and easily submit to the economic designs of local and colonial capital or the state. Like women throughout history, they resisted and fought to maintain their relative degree of autonomy which in the last instance was in many ways wrested from them". As wage earners themselves, and a group with their own grievances, women were a part of the striking force. "Archival records did show that Indian women were involved in a series of revolts and instances of resistance. The best known was the Plantation Devonshire Castle Revolt on the Essequibo Coast in 1872. An estimated fifty women joined their husbands protesting unfair wages and poor working conditions" (Roopnarine 2015). But, the women protestors find no mention in the colonial records.

Throughout the colonies, workers protested the working conditions, sometimes the protests became violent. All protests were put down harshly. The Rose Hall plantation revolt in Berbice in Guyana has been described as the deadliest indenture-era suppression of unrest in the Caribbean. Conditions on Rose Hall had been poor, but the protests intensified after the manager refused to honour a commitment to give free time in lieu of overtime during the sugar grinding season. A group of seven men were punished for the stoppage of work, leading to further protests. On 13 March 1913, police opened fire and killed 15 workers including one woman while another 39 were grievously injured. The records on the uprising provide details of the weeks long agitation but have little to say about women workers including Gobindei, the woman killed in the police firing (Guyana Times).

Women's participation in protests was not taken seriously. "Indian women's roles in revolts were doubly silenced, first by the colonial regime, and second by indentured Indian men. Their modes of resistance were ostensibly perceived to be more collective and supportive of their male counterparts rather than being individual and idealistic" (Roopnarine 2015).

In the tiny French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, some Indian workers rebelled at the conditions on the plantations, which were starkly different from what they had been promised while being recruited. They refused to work and demanded that they be repatriated to India. The French colonial authorities transferred them to a prison on the isolated Ilet a Cabrits. Among the 35 rebels, who died on the island was a 27-year-old woman, Valiame, daughter of Virapin (India Empire).

In 1896, an uprising took place at Plantation Non Pareil, on Demerara east coast in Guyana where five men were killed. It began after Jamni, a khalauni or childminder, complained of being abducted and raped by the deputy manager, Gerard Van Nooten. Her husband Jangli and a few others complained to the immigration agent who threatened them with deportation. As the protests intensified, Jangli and four others were shot dead and 59 injured by the militia. The sexual assault was pushed to the background, and a marginal increase in wages was given to the workers. But folklore about the Non Pareil riot lionizes Jangli as a heroic figure, as a former sepoy while Jamni who hit Van Nooten across the face with her heavy silver bracelets is forgotten (Bahadur 2013).

On the Plantation Friends, Berbice in Guyana in 1903, Salamea was an unusual woman who had returned to India on completing her contract and then re-indentured. Having re-indentured, she was aware of the rights of the workers and urged an assembly of workers to fight for their rights. The women's protest started from the "weeding gangs" (group of women assigned the task of weeding the fields) and "Salamea and the other women stood side by side with their male co-workers in support of the strike" (Ishmael 2013). The police opened fire on the striking workers, killing six workers and injuring seven others.

Over the years, Indian indenture mythology, instead of acknowledging the role of the women leaders, came to hold the women strikers as responsible for the death of the men killed during the strike. They were not considered heroic figures like the men strikers, but as women who caused the death of male workers. As Aliyah Khan explains: "Salamea, who encouraged the indentured to strike, and Jamni, the

proximate reason for the colonial militia's killing of five indentured men, are construed not as rebels in their own right but as responsible for the deaths of labouring Indian men". Khan points out another instance of women's participation in the 1905 unrest. It began as a dockworkers strike but later spread to the plantations as well. Workers were shot at when they moved towards town. Women rioted when news of the shooting reached them. According to figures quoted by Khan, 41 of the 105 persons convicted after the strike were women. "The majority of women wage labourers involved in the 1905 strike were likely domestics, as according to the 1891 census, the number of domestics was 7,432 out of a female population of 28,355" (Khan 2018).

Two of the main uprisings in Suriname were the riots at the Marienburg plantation and the Zorgen Hoop plantation; 24 workers were killed at Marienburg and seven at Zorgen Hoop. Janey Tetary was among those killed in the Zorgen Hoop police action. Tetary came to Suriname with her ten-year-old son from Patna in 1880. In September 1884, Tetary along with some other workers on Plantation Zorgen Hoop protested when the planters filed a petition to the colonial administration to change the penal ordinance. The protest was treated as a revolt by the administration, and Tetary was shot dead at close range by a policeman. According to Roopnarine, "It is an undisputed thought that many have written on Indian resistance and have never mentioned her name". There is, however, a movement among the Indian community in recent years to recognize her as a rebel leader in Suriname. Stories of resistance by women are legion in oral history but require further investigation.

The 1930s, the decade after the indenture system was abolished was a time of labour unrest in the Caribbean colonies when Labour relations changed from indentured contracts to wage agreements. Workers, including women workers protested the low wages and their working conditions. Sumintra, a weeder, was one of the strike leaders at Plantation Leonora, on the Demerara west coast during the 1939 riot. She was killed along with four others during the strike in the post-indenture period in Guyana when cane prices had crashed during the post-World War depression.

The 1920 Strike in Fiji and Indentured Women

In Fiji Islands, the women workers established a committee to voice their grievances against the long hours of work, pay cuts for illnesses and poor living conditions. The Indian Women's Committee, also known as the Women's Gang, led several protests, including strikes in Suva, Rewa and Navua in the 1920s. Women along with men were actively involved in the great Indian strikes of 1920 and 1921 in Fiji. Prolonged shipping strikes in Australia through 1919 had led to soaring food prices in Fiji. Wages were dismally low, and the strike began when the Public Works Department's Indian employees and other municipal bodies stopped work. The strike then spread to the sugar companies, the main employer in the country. Dr. Manilal was a lawyer sent out to Fiji by Mahatma Gandhi to provide legal assistance to the Indian community. Though not an indentured woman, Mrs. Jaikumari Manilal had

an important role in organizing Indian women in support of the strike. "Observers at the time credited Jaikumari with leading the strike in Fiji in 1920" (Kelly 2004). However, many Europeans preferred to believe that it was Manilal, who orchestrated Jaikumari's public actions. But Jaikumari had a more thorough training as a political activist at Gandhiji's ashram in India and South Africa than her husband. She was a Satyagraha activist who had spent time in Gandhiji's ashram in Sabarmati. She wrote petitions, organized meetings and demonstrations (Kumar 2014). Jaikumari Manilal led a delegation of women to the Governor and handed over the original letter listing the demands of the strikers of 1920. The petition called for an inquiry into the rising price of food items. According to oral evidence, many women did pressure their men not to go back to work; they also taunted those who tried to return to work while the strike was on.

The first act of violence during the strike involved an Indian woman. A special constable on duty in the Toorak area of Suva came upon a riotous altercation taking place. He tried to arrest an Indian woman named Rahiman, who he believed was the ringleader. But, people from the neighbourhood rushed to Rahiman's aid and attacked the special constable. "The crowd dispersed with the arrival of soldiers and guns, 175 men and 14 women were arrested" (Ali 1980). On another occasion, a few days later, a group of women sitting outside an Indian home, talking and singing, got into an exchange of retorts and abuses with two passing policemen. When the constable tried to arrest a woman, a crowd gathered to rescue her, resulting in a scuffle. "Oral evidence shows such gatherings of women were not uncommon" (Ali 1980).

The colonial administration charged Jaikumari of instigating the women. Under Jaikumari's leadership, women learnt the new tactics to call attention to their demands, such as presenting petitions, calling for public inquiries and publication of their grievances. The Fiji government accused Manilal of violence and sabotage and ordered the deportation of the couple from Fiji. Their departure did not bring an end to women's mobilization and participation in political activity that concerned them.

Margaret Mishra writes of "physical attacks against male colonial officials led by indentured women like Fulquhar, Rahiman, Rachael, Sonia, Mungri, Kalan, Ladu, Majullah, Hansraj, Dreemal, Hanki, Dwarka, Junkaom and Etwari" (Mishra 2012). She quotes from the Fiji Times and Herald of a "group of frenzied, kava-drinking, veiled women attacked colonial officials, Constable Reay and Mr. Savage with doga sticks as they chanted 'hit, beat, kill". In another instance, when the Fiji government was terminating the services of a woman doctor, it was indentured women who first collectively and publicly opposed the decision and led a deputation to the Governor, Sir Cecil Rodwell.

The post-indenture years were also the time when the Indian community sought to reorder the gender dynamics that had got unbalanced during indenture. Women were prevailed upon to focus on their traditional roles as homemakers, and there was the attempt to recreate Indian life according to Indian customs and rituals. Many women withdrew from paid work, though they found other means to help supplement the family income. This was encouraged not only by their traditional Indian families but also by the state that was keen to have a stable community that would continue to provide young people for the workforce.

Conclusion

Almost two-thirds of women who were recruited during the indenture period were single or unmarried women, accompanying male relatives or young children. In view of the prevailing uncertain and insecure conditions, an immediate priority for the women was to choose a partner among the indentured men as a protector and also to supplement their income which was often not enough to sustain them or their children. As wage earners, indenture allowed women an element of control over their lives.

Indentured women became victims of predatory overseers and rapacious and greedy sirdars. They had to find means to deal with the conditions on the plantations. Their forms of resistance were different from the men. Whether Tetary, Mungri or Jaikumari, the women used different means for protest and resistance. Tetary was one of the leaders of a protest against low wages, Mungri was among a group that assaulted a European official, and Jaikumari brought modern methods of organization and legal petitions to the women's armoury of protest.

"The indentured mostly sought indirect ways of subverting the system. These were not always obvious and did not overtly challenge the power of employers. Collective resistance, assault on employers and violent disturbances were exceptional but not absent" (Vahed 2014). Women participated in the protests and uprisings on the plantations, but their role was simply taken for granted or forgotten. The colonial administrations completely ignored the women's participation in the protests nor did the women's resistance find a place in the popular narrative of the post-indenture Indian community. After completing their indenture contract, the former indentured workers rebuilt their lives as free men and women, with new ways of earning a living. They tried to recreate the Indian way of life, and women came under pressure to restore the familiar Indian family life. Slowly, the indenture experience was pushed to the background, and popular narratives of indenture histories gained ground where women were rendered voiceless.

References

Ali, A. (1980). *Plantations to politics—Studies on Fiji Indians*. University of the South Pacific.

Bahadur, G. (2013). *Coolie woman: The Odyssey of indenture*. Hachette, India.

Carter, M. (2012). *Women and indenture experience of Indian labour migrants*. Pink Pigeon Press.

Chatterjee, S. *Indian women's lives and labour: The indentureship experience in Trinidad and Guyana 1845–1917*. https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2252&context…1.

Gillion, K. L. (1977). *The Fiji Indians: Challenge to European dominance 1920–1946* (p. 5). Canberra: Australian National University Press.

Hassankhan, M. S., Lal. B. V., & Munro, D. (2014). *Resistence and Indian Indenture Experience: Comparative Perspectives*. Delhi: Manohar Press.

Hiralal, K. (2014). Rebellious sisters': Indentured women and resistance in Colonial Natal. In M. Hassankhan et al. (Eds.), *Resistance and indenture experience*: *Comparitive perspectives*. Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
http://www.indiaempire.com/v1/2013/June/coverstory2.asp.
https://guyanatimesgy.com/who-is-janey-tetary/.
Ishmael, O. (2013). *The Guyana story: From earliest times to independence*. Exliberus.
Kelly, J. (2004). Jaikumari. In B. Lal (Eds.), *Bittersweet*. Canberra: Pandanus Books.
Kumar, A. (2014). *Sarojini Devi*: *The nightingale and freedom fighter*. Hachette, UK.
Khan, A. (2018). Protest and punishment: Indo-Guyanese women and organized labour. *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, (12), 269–298.
Lal, B. V. (1983). Girmitiyas: The origin of the Fiji Indians. *Journal of Pacific History*. Canberra.
Mishra, M. (2012). Between women: Indenture, morality, and health. *Australian Humanities Review*, (52).
Naidu, V. (1980). *The violence of indenture in Fiji*. World University Service.
Reddock, R. (1985). Freedom denied—Indian women and indenture in Trinidad and Tobago 1845–1917. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *xx*(43).
Roopnarine, L. (2015). *East Indian women and leadership roles during indentured servitude in British Guinea 1838–1920. Journal of International Women's Studies*, *16*(3).
Rajab. (2017). https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/news/from-pots-to-politics-sa-indian-women-in-the-struggle-11704034.
Sanadhya, T. (1991). *My twenty-one years in Fiji* (J. D. Kelly & U. K. Singh, Trans.). Fiji Museum, Suva: Fiji.
Vahed, G. (2014). Power and resistance: Indentured labour in Colonial Natal, 1860–1911. In M. Hassankhan & B. V. Lal et al. (Eds.), *Resisteance and Indian indenture experience*: *Comparative perspectives.* Delhi: Manohar Publishers.

Part II
Challenges, Struggles and Empowerment: The African Context

Chapter 7
Indentured Muslim Women in Colonial Natal: Mothers, Wives and Work

Goolam Vahed

Abstract There is a paucity of literature on Indian women under indenture and certainly nothing specifically about Muslim women. Until recently studies of indenture paid little attention to the different migration experiences and outcomes of Indian men and women. In addition to addressing gender-specific migration experiences, this chapter seeks to understand the interplay between gender and religion in its impact on migratory processes, with specific attention to colonial Natal which received just over 150,000 indentured workers between 1860 and 1911. The chapter also examines whether, and how, religion shaped the experiences of migrants with regard to the formation of their gendered work, class, ethnic, and civic identities and practices. There are many stereotypes about Muslim women, and the ways in which religious traditions constructed and reproduced gender rules in the new colonial setting and how they were transformed in the context of migration, is another line of inquiry. A biographical approach is adopted due to the paucity of data. The part-lives of women are reconstructed to understand them in their social context and to highlight broader social processes. This methodology is apposite given that the women's movement emphasised the use of life stories to record women's experiences.

Keywords Muslim women · Indenture · Agency · *Purdah* · Life story · Natal

The British annexation of Natal in 1843 facilitated settler migration, and the establishment of sugar plantations along the north and south coasts of the fledgling colony. Planters were frustrated by the lack of cheap labour because the indigenous Zulus refused to work for white settlers. A solution was found in the Indian indentured system which had already proved successful in colonies like Mauritius, Jamaica, British Guiana and Trinidad following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. This chapter considers issues related to indentured Muslim women amongst the 152,184 indentured workers who arrived in Natal between 1860 and 1911. We know little about indentured Indian women migrants as most stories of women's lives under indenture have never been told. Anecdotal evidence points to how some

G. Vahed (✉)
Department of History, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa
e-mail: vahedg@ukzn.ac.za

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_7

of them were beaten and dehumanised but we will never know the full extent of the 'double burden' of their lives under indenture.[1]

Early studies by Kondapi (1951) and Tinker (1974) provided broad overviews of indenture. Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*, in particular, had strong political overtones in viewing Indian indenture as an extension of slavery, the primary difference being that slavery was permanent whereas indenture was for a fixed time period. Tinker combined empathy for the indentured with solid empirical scholarship, and although his study was well received at a time of heightened Third World activism, it left little room for the agency of the indentured. In this perspective, women appear as a 'sorry sisterhood of single, broker creatures', a perspective reinforced by Beall (1988, 110) in relation to Natal:

> Indenture in Natal can be seen, as a system of forced labour, which rendered the workers ultra-exploitable. Under this system, women were even more exploited than men; women were the lowest-paid workers in the colony, when they were paid at all. Their powerlessness stemmed largely from the labour regimentation and control which applied to the labour force as a whole. But in addition, women endured another set of restrictions that derived from their position as women in India and colonial society. Their role in the labour process precluded them from tasks that might enable them to develop experience and, in turn, bargaining power…. Furthermore, familial resistance to anything that was thought to challenge women's domestic roles prevented Indian girls from being allowed to acquire an education when this became a possibility for the male immigrant child in the early twentieth century. Finally, responsibility for child-bearing and child-rearing further reduced their mobility and thus their potential for finding alternative forms of employment. Choices facing women when phased out of indenture were repatriation, marriage, or some other form of dependence on a male or relative.

Within India itself, Gupta's (2015) analysis of representations of indentured woman in the vernacular Hindi press in colonial north India in the early twentieth century found lively discussions about indentured women migrants who were 'constructed as both innocent victims and guilty migrants, insiders and outsiders'. The field of indentured studies has expanded greatly in the past three decades, particularly with regard to recovering the agency of women. As Misir (2018, 1) pointed out in a recent study entitled *The Subaltern Indian Woman*,

> Western intellectual thought … continues to influence and sustain a biased colonial historiography on the social degradation of the colonized Indian woman. This historiography also effaces the position of the colonized and gendered Indian woman as a human agency, thus camouflaging women's capacity to resist colonial domination.

Marina Carter, Brij V. Lal, Rhoda Reddock, Pieter Emmer, Gaiutra Bahadur and others have challenged the image of a 'sorry sisterhood' by focusing on the ways in which indentured women challenged, resisted and used the system to make new lives for themselves. The Fijian historian Lal's *Chalo Jahaji* (2000) showed the innovative ways in which workers challenged oppressive working and living conditions to

[1] Many women were engaged in economic activities as well domestic work which included cooking, washing clothes, cleaning the home and care work. Women were thus required to work inside and outside the home.

negotiate lives in their new settings. His essay 'Kunti's Cry', first published in 1985, focuses on the attempted rape of an indentured woman and how this incident was used by women to remove the 'veil of dishonour' that hung over them and to mobilise anti-indenture activists. In her 2012 study, *Women and Indenture*, and the earlier *Lakshmi's Legacy* (1994), Marina Carter sought out women's voices in the Mauritian archives to reconsider their experiences of indenture and life in the colonies in the post-indenture period.

While the Tinkerian perspective sees women leaving one exploitative relationship for another, the Dutch historian Emmer (1986) has gone so far as to argue that women left India under indenture to escape the hierarchical caste and social system in India. In my view, this is putting too positive a spin on what was in essence a brutal system. Trinidadian academic Rhoda Reddock has rightly suggested that the 'decision to emigrate was in itself a sign of the independent character of these women and the decision to emigrate alone and as individuals was their strength' (Reddock 1985, 81). Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* (2013) reinforced this perspective by tracing the journey of her great-grandmother Sujaria who emigrated from India to Guyana in 1903 as a single expectant indentured mother, and in the process, highlighted the complex lives of indentured women migrants. Bahadur innovatively excavated sources ranging from poems to oral histories, to the archives and this story of a women 'torn from all family, except for the unborn child she was growing inside her' is clearly one of her independence of character and immense strength. Many of the women who left India were single, and there must be many more 'Sujarias' whose extraordinary journeys are awaiting excavation in the archival records.

Clearly then, the historiography has long moved on from seeing indentured women as passive victims to emphasising women's resistance and accommodation and focusing on their agency. One of the problems facing any historian seeking to reconstruct women's experiences remains the paucity of sources as the women did not record them. This chapter on Muslim women relies on archival records. The most important of these are the reports of the Protector of Indian Immigrants (II), Immigration Department Records (IRD), court cases and estates records of the dead (MSCE). While archival records provide an official perspective and the voices of the indentured are mediated by officials (Stoler 2009), these fragments of information provide glimpses into the lives of indentured women.

The methodology of biographical research proved particularly valuable for this chapter. Biographical research, life history, life story and family history narratives have been employed by researchers as they have been found to be particularly attractive for research concerned with gender and feminist issues, for they help to lay bare the diversity of women's experiences and uncover previously silenced women's voices (see Denzin 1989). While by no means representative of all women migrants, this methodology points to the possibilities that existed for some women.

Indentured Migrants in Natal

The *Truro*, which arrived on 16 November 1860 with the first batch of 342 Indians, had 22 Muslims on board including several women and girls. Janah Bee (colonial number 50) came with her husband Sheik Ebrahim (49) and daughters Sultan Bee (51) and Coder Bee (52), aged four and three, respectively. Fatima Bee (328), aged 13, arrived with her brother Sheik Mustan (327). Mariam Bee (238) of Bengaluru, Mysore, arrived with her month-old child Syed Hassim, whose father's name was listed as Syed Noor but who was not with them. Janah Bee (235), aged 24, from Vijayapatam, was the wife of a 'Gentoo' Moonesammy Pentee. Also, on board was Roshen Bee (237) of Bangalore, Mysore, apparently a single migrant. She was described as having a 'Godna mark on forehead', suggesting punishment for an unnamed transgression. Also, on board were Syed Abdollah (279) and Mariam Bee (238), whose grandson, M. I. Yusuf, would be one of country's greatest cricketers; his 412 not out recorded in *Wisden* as the highest score in any match in Southern Africa (in Meer 1980, 63–68).

Many Indians considered overseas migration as an extreme step for the act of crossing the sea, or the 'kalapani' (black waters), was regarded as defiling for the soul (Clarke 1986, 9). The decision to emigrate may have been due to structural or personal reasons. Some were likely victims of British colonial policies and forced to leave by economic circumstances, while others may have left for personal reasons, their grievances being exploited by unscrupulous recruiters. Around ten per cent of indentured migrants were Muslims. The number may have been larger were it not for the fact that employers and the colonial authorities felt that the recruitment of Muslims and Brahmins should be avoided as they were not accustomed to plantation work and caused a 'considerable amount of trouble' (e.g. see Protector to R. P. Gibbes, Calcutta, 7 April 1910. NAB, II, 1/187, 89/1910).

At the end of their term, Muslims, who came for the same reasons as other migrants, also chose from the same basket of options. Some remained in Natal and took up market gardening, opened businesses or accepted positions as labourers; others returned to India. Of those that remained, most married and had children, and in the process laid the foundation for what would evolve into a thriving Indian Muslim community in Natal. A third of Muslim migrants were female and 56% embarked from Calcutta in the north, with the rest from Madras in the south (Vahed 2001, 193–194). That fewer women migrated was in part due to planters' instructions that young males should be recruited in order to provide labour on plantations and likely return to India when their term expired. Women were seen as 'less productive, less efficient, weaker and more prone to illness than men' (Kale 1995, 82). Roopnaraine (2015, 176) argues that 'if the planters had their way, Indian women would not have been in British Guiana…. They took this position because they thought women would be a burden to the plantation system because they bore and raised children.' The colonies were forced to accept women, however, because the Indian government insisted that at least a third of migrants be female. Planters spared no effort in painting women in a negative light. Shab Jaan's (92457) manager at the Crown Collieries, for example,

complained to the Indian Immigration Trust Board that she was 'simply a prostitute who is giving us considerable trouble' (Natal Archives Repository [NAB], II, 1/109, 16 June 1909). The archives are replete with such examples and inferences by planters and their representatives.

In the category 'caste', Muslims filled in such descriptions as 'Muslim', 'Musalman', 'Mahomed', 'Mahomedan', Fakhir, Hajam, Julaha, Labbai, Mappila, Rawther, Pathan, Sayyid and Shaikh. Most Muslim women had the name 'Bee' at the end of their name. This was a common practice in nineteenth-century India where lower-caste Hindu women who converted to Islam added Bee to their names (*Gujarat State Gazatteer* 1872, 299). Muslim women migrants were diverse. Those from the north likely included descendants of Turks, Afghan and Persian settlers, as well as higher-caste Hindu converts. Women from the south were mostly Tamil- and Telugu-speaking Hindu converts such as the Mappila and Labbais (Omer 1992, 62). Muslim women spoke languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Tamil and Telugu. Over time, Urdu became the lingua franca of the descendants of indentured Muslims in South Africa.

Indentured Indians were followed to Natal by free migrants who began arriving from the western coast of India from the mid-1870s from places like Konkan, Porbandar and Surat and surrounding villages. They included some large traders and many small rural traders, but the majority were workers. They spoke languages like Gujarati, Memonese and Konkani. Natal's Muslims were thus heterogeneous in terms of class, language, regional origin, ethnicity, and religious and cultural practices. Their small numbers made it difficult for Muslims to reproduce features of the caste system such as occupational specialisation and endogamy. However, while indentured migrants had little option but to marry non-villagers, migrants from Gujarat practised endogamy until the 1950s (see Vahed and Bhana 2015).

Indenture and Social Instability

One of the under-studied aspects of the indenture story is the impact of migration on wives, mothers, sisters and daughters who were left behind in India. There was correspondence between the indentured and their family in the form of letters as well as remittances, which were sent through official channels, some of which are in the Natal Archives. For example, Kadar Sahib (127791), aged 32, remitted money to his wife Assan Bibi, aged 35, in Chittoor in April 1891 and was checking if the money had reached her (NAB, II, 1/180).[2] There are countless such examples, but we have little direct evidence of the subjective experiences of the women in India. While remittances were likely welcomed by wives, oral history suggests that separation was a difficult experience. The following lament of a wife attests to this:

[2]NAB is the abbreviation for the Natal Archives Repository; and II refers to the Indian Immigration series.

> All my friends have become mothers,
> And I remain lonely and childless
> Again, and again I pleaded with you not to go.
> For there live women who will win your heart.
> For twelve years you haven't written a word:
> How shall I spend the days of chait? (Carter 1996, 173)

Indenture violated the institution of the family in multiple ways. Migration separated families, while the sex imbalance created additional problems in the receiving colonies. Indentured women were in high demand by men but were accused of creating instability on plantations. Planters, officials and even sympathetic officials saw migrant women as living immorally. The reverend C. F. Andrews, who travelled to several colonies documenting the plight of the indentured, wrote after a visit to Fiji that the Indian woman 'passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so' (Andrews and Pearson 1918, 6). This view has been challenged in recent work, such as that of Bahadur.

The power structure on plantations is often ignored in narrating women's lives. For example, Saliha (29458), a Muslim woman, complained to the Protector on 7 April 1884 that her employer forced her to sleep with some 'coolies other than my husband' (NAB, II, I/19). Hussain Mah (22038), another Muslim woman, was indentured to I. Hill of Verulam from 1879 and lived as a single woman. Her manager J. Woods described her as '20 years of age, good looking, well dressed, and speaks English pretty well. She is dark in complexion.' In September 1882, a Creole named Colen, an interpreter at the Verulam Court, convinced her to go with him. At his friend Nayanah's house, he and Nayanah had 'connection' with her. The following night they stayed at an 'Indian Mussulman's' house. When apprehended, Hussain Mah told the magistrate that Colen had

> promised to marry me and for this reason I left my master's house with him, thinking he would fulfill his promise. He has not done so, and I hear that Colen was married to a Creole girl last Friday…. Colen has in his possession 3 silver armbands and 3 silver rings, which he took off my arms and fingers saying that it will be all right as he was going to get married to me (NAB, II, I/11; Desai and Vahed 2010, 291).

Sheik Khaja Miyan (129483), his wife Jhirabi (129484) and Nain Chetty (99966) worked for the same employer in Gillits in the Natal Midlands. One day in October 1910, Miyan and Jhirabi were on their way to Krantzkloof to visit his brother. Chetty tried to prevent Jhirabi from going and was beaten up by Miyan. In court, it emerged that Chetty and Jhirabi had been having an affair for almost six weeks preceding the incident. Miyan and Jhirabi were transferred to another employer in Durban (NAB, II, 1/177).

Narratives about women often ignore the power dynamics and see their behaviour as confirmation of their 'immoral' character. As Jo Beall has shown, marital problems and high infant mortality rates and other social problems were often due to social and environmental factors (Beall 1988, 94). The paucity of women and the breakdown of institutions like the family and village *panchayats* were the cause of such ills,

and women usually bore the brunt of the persecution and frustrations of males. Yet, the planters and colonial authorities were quick to paint indentured women as being immoral, dirty and even being unfit to rear their children.

There is not much to be gained from focusing on social ills, which have been well chronicled, and ignoring those women who carved out new lives in the colony. That many women came as single migrants or with children suggest that they came first and foremost as workers and not as some male's dependent and that they used the setting in Natal to establish new lives for themselves and their families, with whom they came or made in Natal.

'Marriage' and Family Regrouping

The category 'Muslim woman' was fluid, as some Muslim women may have married outside of the faith while there are many instances of Hindu women marrying Muslim men and converting to Islam in Natal. Goomamy (8071), a Hindu woman, married Hoosen Bockus (10999) in 1884 (NAB, II, 1/23, 1696/84, 11 December 1884). Angie (105829), also a Hindu, met Abdul Gaffoor (105761) on the ship and they registered their marriage upon reaching Natal (NAB, II, 1/167, 1528/09, 5 August 1909). The Protector found Sheikh Ahmed living with Karupai (101637), a Hindu, 'who is living with me as my wife.' Ahmed did not have money to pay for her medical treatment and appealed to the Protector for assistance (NAB, II, 1/175, 1682/09, 23 August 1909).

Secunder (2355) and Khoder Bee (2367) had a son Abdool in Natal, who married a Hindu Parbatheer and they had a daughter Fathima in 1890 (NAB, II, 1/187, 4 October 1912). Emdad Khan (7640) married Pulliah (10344) and they had a daughter Rhamin in 1893 (NAB, II, 1/187, 9 December 1912). Abdul Karim (22411) married Nangama (47940), and they had a son Shaikh Moideen in 1894 (NAB, II, 1/171, 29 January 1910). An interesting case is that of Jeachee, who asked the Protector to void her marriage to Raghoobeer, because he had abandoned her for eight months, and because she and her daughter had accepted the 'Mahomedan religion' and were 'living on the charity of others' (NAB, II, 1/173, S. I. Seepye, Hindustani Interpreter, to Protector, 5 May 1910).

Sheik Hyder (21485), an Indian constable with the NGR, married a Hindu woman Omrah (7073), who changed her name to Cataja Bee. They had four children, Kadir Bee, Ismail, Koolsoom and Sheik Fareed. When Hyder was murdered in August 1901, Cataja Bee ran into legal problems over her name, and explained to the Protector that 'when I was married with Sheik Hyder the priest gave me the name Cataja Bee. Through the priest I am always using the same name when anybody ask me'. She was eventually given the £9.18.6 in Hyder's estate (NAB, II, 1/102, 1450/1901, 19 September 1901).

There are instances of polygamy. Goolam Khader (4505) of Restaling Estate in Alexander County had two wives, one of whom was the daughter of Badul Khan, overseer on the estate (NAB, II, 1/5, 13 August 1878). Relationships were unstable

and women sometimes remained in Natal while husbands returned to India. Hassein Ally (13330) was registered as married to Bathassia (10334) and claimed her effects when she died in 1894. However, it emerged that Bathassia actually came to the colony married to Emamally (10333), who had returned to India in April 1888. Bathassia had two daughters, aged 11 and 6, one from each man. By law, she could not have married Ally, who was denied her possessions which included a pair of amulets, a solid neck ring, one pair of silver bangles, one pair of ankle rings, three gold nose rings and 12 silver rings, with the total value being over £13 (NAB, II, 1/182, 17 July 1894).

Some Muslims returned to India in order to find Muslim spouses from their villages of origin. V. Hudson, Manager of Reynolds Bros., Esperanza, notified the Protector on 25 June 1914 that Syed Rajah Mian (111201), acting on the instructions of his father Syed Karim Saib, was returning to India on 9 July 1914 with his 15-year-old sister Hussain Bee (111204) to get her married. Mian signed a contract to re-indenture for two years upon his return. In his letter to the Protector, Hudson remarked that Mian was 'a Mussulman and, as you know, they are very Clannish and keen on the welfare of their relations. He has been, and is an excellent boy, and we should deem it a favour if this matter can be arranged'. Hudson's comments indicate that employers regarded Muslims as being different from other Indians. Mahomed Khan (95284), who was married to Mian's elder sister, accompanied Mian to India (I/190, 2461/1914).

There are many examples of women establishing a home and family in Natal. Nine-year-old Ameda Bee (56706) of Pateetakka, North Arcot, arrived in Natal in December 1894 with her 30-year-old mother Yasem Bee (56705). They were assigned to the Tongaat Sugar Estates where they served their indentures. We will never know why mother and daughter left India or what happened to Yasem Bee. Ameda Bee, however, married Hussein Saib (1867–1933), himself an indentured migrant, in 1899 and they had eight children. Hussein Saib took up farming and by the time of his death in 1933, owned 224 acres of land. Ameda Bee died in 1940 (NAB, MSCE 31770/1940; Desai and Vahed 2010, 285). Their children were pioneers of the Indian community in Tongaat, helping to build the mosque, school and sports stadium which was for the use of the wider community.

One of the points we can make from the documentary evidence is that where women were married, they were expected to, and did, take care of domestic chores such as child-rearing, cooking, and cleaning the house, even when they worked and contributed financially to the household, what feminists have called the 'double burden'.

Abdul Karrim (142260) was jailed for badly beating Jokhi, with whom he lived, and stealing her jewellery. On his release from prison, Karrim was transferred to another employer despite protesting that he had married Jokhi according to 'Muslim rites' (NAB, II, 1/187, 2458/1912, September 1912). The significant part of this deposition is Abdul Karrim's statement that he had married according to 'Muslim rites'. Muslims and Hindus tended to carry out their religious ceremonies but not

register their marriages in court. Non-recognition of Hindu and Muslim marriages by the state was a cause of family instability and galvanised women's support for Gandhi's Satyagraha movement of 1913. There were other grievances, such as a tax on free Indians, the prohibition of interprovincial movement, and restrictions on trade and immigration but the 1913 judgment of Justice Malcolm Searle which invalidated non-Christian marriages was the lightning rod that drew women into the struggle (Desai and Vahed 2016, 170–174).

Gandhi wrote in an editorial in his *Indian Opinion* (1 October 1913) that the non-recognition of Hindu and Muslim marriages was 'an insult to our religions and an attack upon our national honour…. A nation that cannot protect its women's honour and the interests of its children does not deserve to be called by that name. Such people are not a nation but mere brutes.' Various South African states failed to address the status of Muslim marriages, and it was only in September 2018 that the Western Cape High Court made a landmark ruling giving the South African government two years to pass legislation that would create a framework to recognise Muslim marriages.

It was the non-recognition of marriages that brought some women into the political sphere, with several Muslim women becoming involved in Gandhi's 1913 passive resistance movement because of the marriage question. One was Bai Fatima, who was married to Sheikh Mehtab, Gandhi's childhood friend, who had followed him from Gujarat to Natal. Mehtab famously compiled poems which his students sang at ceremonies to welcome back passive resisters. Mehtab's wife Fatima, of indentured descent, joined Gandhi's campaign in October 1913, accompanied by her mother Hanifa Bibi and an attendant, Akoon. They left on 8 October for Volksrust, the border between Natal and the Transvaal, to cross illegally into the Transvaal. They were arrested on 14 October, and Bai Fatima and Hanifa were each sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labour. Fatima notably refused to give her fingerprints. According to one report, 'the Sergeant… desired the lady to give her finger impressions. This she declined to do so, whereupon the officer roughly addressed her, seized her by the arm and pushed her forward so that she almost fell' (*Indian Opinion* 26 November 1913). Political organisations in South African as well as sympathisers in India and Britain seized on this incident to publicise Gandhi's movement.

During her incarceration, Fatima's son was separated from her and placed in the custody of a local family. Fatima and Hanifa spent more than three months in prison, and were eventually released on 12 January 1914. They were met outside the prison by a large crowd of well-wishers, garlanded and then sent from Pietermaritzburg to Durban by train where they were given another public reception which had a large turnout (*Indian Opinion* 14 January 1914). The outcome of the satyagraha movement was the Indian Relief Act of 1914 which, amongst other things, allowed Hindus and Muslims to bring their spouses (just one wife as polygamy was not recognised) from India, though they were required to register the marriage before a magistrate for it to be recognised.

‘Purdah’ Amongst Muslim Women

There are instances of some Muslims practising *purdah*.[3] Such requests are not surprising. Many indentured Muslims were from the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh where, E. H. A. Blunt observed, *purdah* was practised amongst Muslims: ‘The poorer classes in spite of their poverty observe purdah. The Mohammedan community contains a very large portion of poor gentle folk, who are as proud as they are poor, who would die rather than let their women appear unveiled’ (Blunt 1931, 107). For example, when Mohammed Ibrahim wanted to register his marriage to Beesha Bee with the Protector in Natal, he wanted to avoid the ‘necessity of the woman going to court to register’. The Protector agreed on 19 July 1909 that they could sign a declaration before Deputy Protector Dunning who would register the marriage with the Protector (NAB, II, I/167).

Mahomed Dooma, who described himself as ‘an Arab storekeeper residing at Duff’s Road’, made a similar request to the Protector. His wife Jumni (30020), daughter of Deo, arrived in Natal as a baby on the *Sophia Jookin* on 14 August 1883. She was adopted by Abdool Latiff, an interpreter in the office of the Protector and changed her name to Coolsum Bee. Abdool Raman, a clerk in the Protector’s office, was related to Coolsum Bee through Abdool Latiff. Coolsum Bee married Mahomed Dooma in 1899 ‘according to the Mahomedan rights’. They had five children: Fathima, born October 1900; Dawood, born 27 November 1902; Katheeja Bee, born 1 December 1903; Ismail, born April 1907; and Essop, born January 1909. Dooma was writing to apply for a pass for Coolsum Bee. But, as he explained to the Protector, ‘as we are not accustomed to take our wives with us on an errand of this kind, so beg you will please forward the pass or I shall call for it on hearing from you’ (I/171, 2324/09, 10 November 1909; Desai and Vahed 2010, 291). This particular incident is also significant in providing a rare instance of a marriage between a passenger and indentured migrant.

Contrary to ideas of *purdah* and of Muslim women being homebound, there are examples where caste and class restrictions were lax, and they were able to achieve upward social mobility on the basis of their knowledge and skills.

[3] *Purdah* (from Persian, meaning ‘curtain’) refers to the practice of female seclusion prevalent amongst some Muslim and Hindu communities in South Asia and more generally amongst Muslims in many parts of the world. It includes the physical separation of men and women, and the requirement that women cover their bodies so as to cover their skin and conceal their form.

Sahidon (29024)[4]

Most indentured women were forced to work to take care of their homes and families, and some continued to do so into the post-indenture period. For many, hawking represented a transition phase following the end of indenture. The Natal government wanted to maximise the labour it got out of its contract workers and included a clause in the contract that migrants had to remain in Natal for an additional five years after completing their indentures in order to receive a free passage home. Most migrants set up 'home' in that period and chose to remain in Natal. By the 1893, when the colony of Natal received self-government, white settlers realised the consequences of a large Indian population in the colony for their racial project and tried to get the indentured contract changed to force Indians to return to India on completion of the contract, but the British government refused to accede to such a request.

Sahidon (29024) was the daughter of Feda Hosseni and Zuhoorun Khan (29023). She was born in Moradabad in 1877 and arrived in Natal in June 1883 with her mother. They worked for sugar producer Acutt, Courtney & Co. She married Abdulla Minda (27534), also of Mooradabad, who had arrived in July 1882 and was assigned to the same company. Sahidon, who would come to be known as Mrs. Abdulla Shadazadee, and Abdulla bought vegetables at the Durban Market and hawked these in Durban. Abdoolla and Sahidon had eight children. After a period of hawking and then having a stall at the market, Sahidon became one of the first Muslim women to enter business when she opened *Sahidon & Sons* in Overport in partnership with her sons Roshan and Yassin Mahomed. The business included a general dealer's store, butchery and refreshment room, and she owned two large plots of land. At the time of Mrs. Shadazadee's death in July 1939, the family had built four homes. Sahidon also donated land for the Islamia Madressa in Overport (NAB MSCE 3204/66).

Haleema Bee, who lived at 390 Greyling Street, Pietermaritzburg, ran a 'Native Eating House' on property that she rented from a J. Barnes. Her husband was old and unable to work and she supported her family. In December 1899, for example, she requested permission from the Colonial Secretary to sell yeast to Africans. She had been selling it as a non-alcoholic drink. She explained that for every pint of yeast she added one-and-half gallons of water and sugar, so that it was not intoxicating. Her product had been tested by the municipal authorities and was found not to contain alcohol. The new Liquor Act No. 36 of 1899 included yeast under the term 'liquor' and made it illegal to sell to Indians and Africans. This had affected her business considerably as many Africans continued to sell yeast in the locations. The yeast, 'sold by me, was a great support for a large family, and by which I made my living and supported so large a family. However, the Colonial Secretary turned down her request' (NAB CSO 9352/99).

[4]Each indentured migrant was allocated a number, starting from 1; Sahidon was migrant number 29,024. This made it easier to identify migrants and their families as the number was always attached to descendants.

Sheriffa Bee: 'Queen' of Tongaat

The Rajmahomed family was one of the most successful post-indenture families on the north coast of Natal. In 1960, *Condensor*, a monthly magazine published by the Tongaat Huletts Sugar Company, featured a story on Sheriffa Bee Rajmahomed, one of the most prominent women entrepreneurs of indentured background. Sheriffa Bee's parents were born in India. Her mother Kassim Bee (6031) came from Bangalore, the capital of Mysore State, and her father Mukdeen from Hyderabad, though she was not sure which town or village. 'In Africa gold could be plucked from *brinjol* (aubergine or eggplant) bushes, they were told; so they indentured', giving some credence to the agency perspective. The five-year-old Kassim Bee arrived in Natal in May 1866 with her mother Hossein Bee (6030) on the *Helen Wallace*. They worked for William Joyner's Ellanowan Sugar Estate and were amongst the many single women who migrated as indentured workers, usually accompanied by children.

Kassim Bee met and married Mukdeen in Natal, and Sheriffa Bee was born in 1891. Sheriffa Bee married Rajmahomed, an indentured migrant of South Indian origin. After their marriage, they purchased land at Cranbrook, Stanger, on the Natal north coast, which eventually grew to a 900-acre farm. They subsequently opened a small cafe in Tongaat called *Mzimuga Trading Co.*, which mainly catered for an African clientele. The hardworking couple managed the business and Sheriffa Bee personally cooked food for sale in the café, and also grew vegetables for sale, all while bringing up their seven children. Sheriffa Bee was widowed in 1929, a week prior to the birth of her seventh child, Ebrahim. Her five sons became partners in the family business.

The early years were extremely difficult for the Rajmahomed family, particularly during unfavourable farming seasons. Under the watchful eye of the matriarch, the family became large-scale cane growers and sent their youngest son Shaik Ebrahim to University College, Dublin, where he qualified as a medical doctor. Dr. Shaik Ebrahim Rajmahomed returned to South Africa in 1957 and opened a successful practice. He took his mother Sheriffa Bee for pilgrimage to Makkah that same year. And so Sheriff Bee travelled in an aeroplane for the first time (*Condenser* December 1960, 13–14). A reporter who met Sheriffa Bee in 1960 wrote:

> In spite of her age – she is sixty-nine – and the malady from which she suffers, she still observes the five daily recitals of prayers between sunrise and midnight. She still supervises the home and on occasions the farm. Since the death of her husband, Rajmahomed, she has been the driving and the cohesive force of the family. No one can remain long in Tongaat without hearing the name, Sheriffa Bee. Like Queen Victoria, she is diminutive in stature, but determined, if not imperious, in character. (*Condenser* December 1960, 13–14).

Sheriffa Bee went twice more for *hajj*, in 1960 and 1963. Her family built an apartment block *Sheriffa Bee Manzil* in Main Road, Tongaat, as a tribute to her (Desai and Vahed 2010, 283–294).

'Raboobee of Durban: Indian Mahomedan Woman'

In official correspondence, including her death certificate and Estate records, there is a woman listed simply as 'Raboobee of Durban: Indian Mahomedan Woman'. From piecing together fragments of oral and written information, she emerges as an extremely powerful and wealthy businesswoman. She arrived in Natal from Madras in January 1864 as nine-year-old Rabos Bee (2397), as her name was recorded in the Immigrants Register with her parents Sheik Mustan (2395) and Hyath Bee (2396), and brother Sheik Ryman (2398). They worked for Noon's Sugar Estate in Isipingo. Her father died in 1888 in a railway accident while the whereabouts of her mother and brother are not known.

Raboobee married Goolam Hoosen (1230) in 1867. He was the son of Hyder Bux and Cader Bee who had arrived in Natal in 1861. Goolam Hoosen and Raboobee returned to India shortly after the marriage and reportedly performed another ceremony in India in March 1868. They were likely unable to make a home and emigrated to Mauritius and from there returned to Natal in the early 1870s. Raboobee and Goolam Hoosain had three sons, Shaik Emam, Shaik Suleman and Shaik Ansari. Raboobee joined the Railway Department where she worked for almost ten years. With her savings, she bought a property in Victoria Street in 1882, opened a general dealer's business in Victoria Street in 1885, another in Field Street, and bought a second property in Alice Street, all in her name, as was a property in Overport. In 1896, Raboobee converted the general dealer's store into a butchery and had three butcheries by 1900 which her sons ran. She also built homes and stores in Alice Street, Victoria Street and Overport (Desai and Vahed 2010, 77).

Despite being a successful businesswoman, Raboobee apparently did not object to Goolam Hoosen having a second wife, Carim Bee. They had five children. Goolam Hoosen, Raboobee and Carim Bee lived in the same house, and Carim Bee looked after the children and attended to housework, while Raboobee managed the businesses. It appears that Raboobee also took an interest in politics. The Annual Report of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), the organisation started by Mohandas K. Gandhi in 1894, lists Raboobee and Lubchminia as the only two subscribing women members. Raboobee went for *hajj* in 1902, an arduous and expensive undertaking at the time. She was also involved in several cultural ventures. In 1906, for example, she applied for permission to bring an Indian theatrical company to Natal (NAB, IRD 1336/1906).[5] The family also gave me a photograph of 'Raboobee's *Tazzia*'. She was the only known Muslim woman to have her own *tazzia* during the Muharram festival, which was extremely popular in Natal. Raboobee died in December 1916 (MSCE 218/1916).[6]

[5]NAB is the abbreviation for Natal Archives Depository; IRD refers to Immigration Department Correspondence and 1336/1906 refer to correspondence 1336 of 1906.

[6]MSCE refers to an estate file.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter provided a cursory glance into the lives of indentured Muslim women migrants to Natal. There was probably little that was distinctive about their experiences strictly on the basis of their religion in comparison to other migrants. Most women would have come for the same reasons as their mainly Hindu counterparts, faced similar struggles, and tried to carve new lives in Natal just as the other women did. The literature on indentured women migrants is divided between those that see them as ultra-exploited passive appendages of men, often subject to sexual violence, and those that portray them as brave women using indenture as a means to escape the strictures of life in India and carve new lives in Natal and other colonies. Recent studies on women's agency have shown the ways in which they resisted and accommodated patriarchy and used indenture to free themselves such that many were likely better placed than would have been the case had they remained in India.

More importantly, while we know little about religious life on plantations, this chapter examined the ways in which some women helped to establish Muslim 'community' in all its facets in the post-indenture period, resulting in the shaping of a distinctive Muslim identity in Natal. The cultural and religious practices, marriage patterns, child-rearing and so on were not simply carried over from India but shaped by the imperial context in Natal which was distinct from those in India. Here, Indians had to deal with an African majority population, an economically and politically dominant white ruling elite, confinement to plantations and racial restrictions in the post-indenture period. While indenture was undoubtedly a traumatic experience, many began reconstituting their societies almost immediately upon disembarking in Natal. The scope of this chapter means that there are limitations. Women's experiences were extremely diverse, and some assumptions and generalisations were necessary.

While their small numbers would have made the practice of Islam difficult on plantations, in the post-indenture period, religion was the 'glue' that forged Muslim society in Natal in shaping a distinct Indian Muslim identity based on mosques, madressas, shrines and festivals, much of it mediated through the Urdu language (See Vahed 2000). This is not to suggest animosity with Hindus on the basis of religion. The policy of successive white minority governments was to divide people according to race and Indian migrants, whatever their religion, were categorised as 'Indians', and a sense of Indianness was forged in Natal. This racial identity would only begin to unravel in the post-apartheid period, partly in response to the rise of Hindutva in India and global Islamic influences reaching South Africa (Vahed and Desai 2018).

References

Andrews, C. F., & Pearson, W. W. (1918). *Indian indentured labour in Fiji*. Madras: Anti-Indenture League.

Bahadur, G. (2013). *The Odyssey of indenture*. Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.

Beall, J. (1988). Women under indenture. In S. Bhana (Ed.), *Essays on indentured Indians in Natal* (pp. 89–116). Leeds: Peepal Tree.

Blunt, E. A. H. (1931). *The caste system of northern India with special reference to the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*. London: Oxford University Press.

Clarke, C. G. (1986). *East Indians in a West Indian town. San Fernando, Trinidad, 1930–1970*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Carter, M. (1994). *Lakshmi's legacy: The testimonies of Indian women in 19th century Mauritius*. Rose Hill Mauritius: Editions de l'Ocean Indien.

Carter, M. (1996). Voices from indenture: experiences of Indian migrants in the British Empire. London: Leicester University Press.

Carter, M. (2012). *Women and indenture: Experiences of Indian labour migrants*. Rose Hill, Mauritius: Pink Pigeon Press.

Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. London: Sage.

Desai, A., & Vahed, G. (2016). *The South African Gandhi. Stretcher-bearer of Empire*. Stanford: Stanford University Press and New Delhi: Navayana.

Desai, A., & Vahed, G. (2010). *Inside Indian Indenture. A South African story, 1860–1911*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Emmer, P. (1986). The Great Escape: The migration of female indentured servants from British India to Surinam, 1873–1916. In P. D. Richardson (Ed.), *Abolition and its aftermath* (pp. 245–266). London: Frank Cass.

Gujarat State Gazetteers, Surat District. (Original 1872, Reprint 1962). Ahmadabad: Government Printing, Gujarat State.

Gupta, C. (2015). Innocent' Victims/'Guilty' migrants: Hindi public sphere, caste and indentured women in colonial North India. *Modern Asian Studies, 49*(5), 1345–1377.

Kale, M. (1995). Projecting identities: Empire and indentured labour migration from India to Trinidad and British Guiana, 1836–1885. In P. van der Veer (Ed.), *Nation and migration. The politics of space in the South Asian Diaspora* (pp. 73–92). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kondapi, C. (1951). *Indians Overseas, 1838–1949*. New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs.

Lal, B. V. (2000). *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*. Suva: The Fiji Museum.

Lal, B. V. (1985). Kunti's cry: Indentured women on Fiji plantations. *Indian Economic and Social History Review, 22*(1), 55–71.

Meer, Y. S. (Ed.). (1980). *Documents of indentured labour in Natal, 1851–1917*. Durban: Institute for Black Research.

Misir, P. (2018). Introduction and overview: Indian indentured women as human agency. In P. Misir (Ed.), *The subaltern Indian woman. Domination and social degradation* (pp. 1–46). Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Omer, M. (1992). Conformity to caste traditions against Islamic Shariah. In F. R. Farid & M. M. Siddiqi (Eds.), *The social structure of Indian Muslims* (pp. 64–75). New Delhi: Genuine Publications.

Reddock, R. (1985, October 26). Freedom denied: Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917. *Economic and Political Weekly, 20*(43), 79–87.

Roopnarine, L. (2015). East Indian women and leadership roles during indentured servitude in British Guiana 1838–1920. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 16*(3), 174–185.

Stoler, A. L. (2009). *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Swan, M. (1988). Indentured Indians: Resistance and accommodation, 1890–1913. In S. Bhana (Ed.), *Essays on indentured Indians in Natal* (pp. 117–135). Leeds: Peepal Tree.

Tayal, M. (1978). Indian indentured labour in Natal, 1860–1911. *Indian Economic and Social History Review, XIV*(4), 419–448.
Tinker, H. (1974). *A new system of slavery. The export of Indian labour overseas 1830–1920*. London: Oxford University Press.
Vahed, G. (2018). The protector, plantocracy, and indentured labour in Natal. *Pacific Historical Review, 87*(1), 101–127.
Vahed, G. (2001). Uprooting, rerooting: Culture, religion and community amongst indentured Muslim migrants in colonial Natal, 1860–1911. *South African Historical Journal, 5,* 191–222.
Vahed, G. (2000). Indian Muslims in South Africa: Continuity, change and disjuncture, 1860–2000. *Alternation, 7*(2), 67–98.
Vahed, G., & Bhana, S. (2015). *Crossing space and time in the Indian Ocean: Early Indian traders in Natal. A biographical study*. Pretoria: UNISA Press.
Vahed, G., & Desai, A. (2018). Networks, caste and transnational identities. In R. S. Hegde & A. K. Sahoo (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of the Indian diaspora* (pp. 61–84). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
Waetjen, T., & Vahed, Goolam. (2014). Passages of Ink: Decoding the Natal indentured records into the digital age. *Kronos, 40*(3), 45–73.
Watson, R. G. T. (1960, December). Sheriffa Bee Rajmahomed. *Condenser*, 13–15.

Chapter 8
Challenges and Evolution of Indentured Women Diaspora in Reunion Island

Manju Seth

Abstract This chapter, based on participatory primary research and literature from secondary sources, analyses historical indentured labour through a gendered lens with a focus on the women indentured labourers brought to Reunion Island from different parts of India. The challenges, exploitation, subjugation and discrimination, faced by the indentured women and the process of emancipation of their female descendants have been critically examined to trace the evolution of the contemporary status of women in the Réunionese Indian diaspora. The social engagement with historical experiences of women indentured labourers is underscored by a dismissive marginalisation which glosses over the structural abuse inherent in society. This chapter examines the grit and determination of the Indian Origin Réunionese women inter-generationally, to overcome adversity and transmute it to create a new paradigm for themselves while executing their role as the carriers of cultural markers and customs which were crucial for the preservation and perpetuation of Indian culture even as they grappled with questions of insidious and persistent patriarchy and their own identity in an atmosphere of "unbelongingness", as they seek to locate their roles in the two seemingly contradictory dichotomies of French and Indian cultures, attitudes and outlooks. Extensive personal interviews with scholars, professionals and policy makers inform the exegesis of this chapter.

Keywords Women indentured labourers · Reunion island · Inter-generational emancipation · Women empowerment

Introduction

The economic contribution of the labour of women to colonial empire-building enterprise is an ignored and underrated subject in traditional historical studies; their experiences, opinions, roles and contributions often marginalised to the footnotes, and their voices lost in the cacophony of academic debates. The dismissive academic discourse which ignored women has been sought to be addressed by a growing body

M. Seth (✉)
Former Diplomat, New Delhi, India
e-mail: manju.seth54@gmail.com

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_8

of scholarship by intrepid feminist scholars whose work has added significantly to our understanding of the past (Pande 2018a, b, c). While their work is significant, it concentrates mainly on indentured labour within the Anglophone sphere. This chapter seeks to address this gap in scholarship by analysing the experiences of indentured women labourers in the Francophone region particularly in Reunion Island, an Overseas Territory/Department of the Republic of France.

Reunion Island was an uninhabited island in the Indian Ocean, and the French were the first to colonise it, and apart from a brief British colonial occupation of five years, it has been a French Territory since the seventeenth century. It is believed that Indian immigration to Reunion commenced in the seventeenth century when a group of Indian Women was brought from Portuguese India (Goa) to marry the French settlers in 1669. The development of labour-intensive coffee and sugar plantations at Reunion soon necessitated importation of labour, and it is estimated that between 1672 and 1810, about 20,000 slaves were brought from the French Indian Territories of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Chandernagore, Yanam and Mahe to Mauritius and Reunion. The French East India Company also recruited some free craftsmen and transported Indian Prisoners of War to Reunion. However, the harsh working conditions led to widespread mortality, and by 1808, only 1955 slaves from India were enumerated amongst the 54,000 slaves in Reunion and Mauritius (Sharma 2011, p. 216). In addition to slaves, free workers from French Indian territories were also encouraged to migrate to Mauritius and Reunion commencing in 1827 as contract labour. There were reports of exploitative treatment and violation of contract by the plantation owners leading to the official discontinuation of the policy in 1831, but a trickle of migration continued till 1860. Voluntary Indian immigrants called "passenger immigrants" comprising traders, merchants and craftsmen predominantly from the Bohra Muslim and Hindu Baniya communities of Gujarat also migrated to Reunion in 1850 (Blanche 2008). Slavery was abolished by France in 1848, and the crisis of labour forced the French Government to sign the Franco-British Convention with the British Indian Government at Paris in 1860 which provided for the recruitment of six thousand indentured labourers annually for work on the plantations at Reunion. While the contract of indenture provided for return passage after five years, the French Government in 1899 offered citizenship to the children of those Indians who chose to stay on in Reunion. More than 1,20,000 Indian indentured labourers were brought as "*engagees*" to Reunion till the abolition of the indentured labour system in 1917 (Government of India 2011, Part II, p. 235). The term "engagees" is used henceforth in this chapter to refer to Indian indentured labourers brought to Reunion Island.

While both men and women were part of these early labour migrations, the number of women was significantly smaller numerically due to the patriarchal social culture in India and nineteenth-century France. The harsh realities of the lives of the engagees in general and of the women engagees in particular who had to face the double burden of systemic subjugation and exploitation of their labour by the capitalist plantation owners and social domination of the Indian men engagees have received scant attention. The situation of the women descendants of the engagees has certainly improved substantially over the generations, and Reunionese women of Indian origin

have proven their leadership in all aspects of present-day life. However, the grit and determination of their ancestor women engagees in the face of adversity, combined with their ability to capitalise on the prevailing conditions despite the ubiquitous hardships and challenges, are the actual origin of the legacy that has emancipated and empowered the women of Indian diaspora in contemporary Reunion.

Women Engagees in Reunion

The women engagees have largely been ignored, and their experiences and perspectives subsumed or side-lined in the narratives and studies on migration and on diaspora, which tend to be androcentric. Several push factors in India compelled women to migrate as labourers. The economic marginalisation of women in colonial India, the rigid patriarchal social structure of Indian society, the collapse of the traditional socio-economic institutions of India resulting in widespread unemployment, poverty and hunger due to natural as well as anthropogenic famines and misogynistic social practices such as consecration to deities as ritual prostitutes during times of economic hardship have been identified as major causes (Reddok 1985, pp. 79–85). The emigration of women engagees from India was the last resort to escape hunger and starvation, the stifling patriarchy and judgmental social discrimination that women faced in Indian society. The women engagees represent a section of Indian women who dared to choose to rebuild their lives by dint of hard work in the face of overwhelming odds. They chose emigration and honourable hard work over its only alternative of "promiscuous prostitution" (McNeill and Lal 1914).

Despite their choice to work even in distant lands, persistent patriarchy assailed the women engagees throughout. Most of the women engagees were those who were married and migrated with husbands, or if single with their parents. Most single women engagees who chose to migrate were widows, deserted or trafficked women, or prostitutes who chose to change their lives. A minimum sex ratio was fixed by the British Indian Government for the indentured labourers, and the ships were required to ensure the numerical ratio of one woman for every two men for ships departing for French colonies. All engagees were lodged for some time at depots adjoining Calcutta port before departure.

Shipping Vessels bound for various colonies tarried till the requisite number of labourers was collected to fill a ship. The journey of the women engagees from Calcutta to the plantation colonies on the ship was not only uncomfortable with lack of privacy and basic dignity, but instances of sexual assaults on women in ships are also recorded. The solution arrived at was to have "marriages" performed on the ships under the authority of the Captain. Many women married men even while at the depots to ensure safety during the journey and at the plantation colonies since unmarried young women were more vulnerable. Marriages were promoted since women could cook and perform other chores for their husbands. Thus, the social role of the woman was always conceived and enforced as an adjunct to a man and not as an individual free labourer. The very identity, role and concerns of women

engagees were socially grafted to the discretion of the menfolk, whether as fathers, guardians, husbands, overseers or employers.

With an emphasis on profit-making, the labour at the plantations allowed no respite to women engagees, and any leave from work was penalised through wage reductions. The opinions and needs of women were ignored, and despite working on the plantations under the same harsh conditions of work, they were paid lower wages than men. Moreover, upon arrival at the plantations, the women engagees were expected to perform domestic duties in addition to labour in the plantation. In several instances, the women engagees were obliged to work as servants in the European planter's homes, in addition to their work on the plantations at odd hours with little or no rest, and often with no time for their own children. Apart from the exploitation of their labour, women engagees faced a more sinister gendered exploitation. Given the gender hierarchy prevalent in India and also in France at that time, their plight was not even noticed as being a violation of human rights. The Indian women migrants found themselves in a strange land and were subjected to a harsh environment having often to sleep in the open fields and face subjugation and exploitation at the hands of both, the Indian migrant menfolk, as well as the plantation managers and owners (based on author's interaction with women diaspora in Reunion Island). The living conditions, in the labour lines, were appalling, and some women engagees lived in abject conditions with the men folk, at times "*shared by two or three men*". Given their small numbers, the women engagees were treated as "objects" rather than sentient human beings. There are reports of rampant sexual exploitation of women by overseers and European planters as well.

Marriage within the Indian community in the plantations was preferred, and the few rare instances of marriages with African or Chinese immigrants were frowned upon. While most Indian men voluntarily avoided marital relations with African or Chinese women, the prohibition on interracial marriage was strictly enforced on the Indian women engagees. Religious and cultural differences are an oft-cited reason for the prohibition although the small number of women engagees and the scarcity of women in the plantations which created intense competition amongst the Indian men for women could also be an underlying factor. While the women engagees generally encountered far greater disapproval for marrying outside the community, the racial segregation of marriages has reduced considerably in contemporary Reunion and the gallicisation has contributed to a French Reunionese identity across racial divisions.

The women engagees encountered far more exploitation within the Indian community at the hands of the male engagees, the relationship of women with men of other races were viewed as extremely offensive by the Indian men since it somehow signified the rejection of the masculine virility of the Indian man in comparison with the men of the other races. Even within the Indian community, there were some instances of men killing each other over women as patriarchal husbands were incited to "sexual jealousy" to protect their wives from the other males. Strict control on the fidelity of women within marital relationships was enforced, and transgressions were dealt with summarily through violence or murder of the women (Reddock

1985). However, the concubinage of Indian women engagees to the European Plantation Owners was not as strongly resisted, and there are several records of marriage between Europeans and Indian Women engagees.

While women engagees in Reunion were labourers struggling to make a living, they also had to shoulder the crucial role as carriers, preservers and inter-generational transmitters of social values and morals which is a role traditionally assigned to women in all societies generally, and in diasporas, in particular, which is enforced through patriarchy (Mohammad 2002). In the intensely patriarchal diasporic Indian society at the plantations of Reunion, the burden of "upholding the glory and values" of an ancient civilisation was laid on the women engagees. The women engagees were seen as the personification of the honour of the community and were expected to protect their "honour" from the "others". This was the common feature in the experienced reality of all indentured women migrants, and their subjugation and exploitation at the hands of the men were not even spoken about or much written about as it was the male perspective that was predominant. Women diaspora voices were silenced to the extent that many were in denial that there had been any exploitation. There was a hesitation amongst the men engagees to acknowledge the liberty of women since the choice of women was seen as the powerlessness of the men, and the construction of virtuous women in Religious texts as role models was socially enforced. An element of shame was associated with women choosing partners outside the Indian community of engagees. It was perceived as a rejection of Indian masculinity by the Indian women in favour of men of other races, and the blame was sought to be transferred onto the "characterless, fallen" women even when they were victims through stigmatisation. Contemporary French scholarship on history fails to acknowledge the exploitative nature of the engagee system, especially for women based on a misconception that it was a benign and voluntary system, while in reality, it is an issue around which a conspiracy of silence has obscured the exploration of the real circumstances. This is the reason why a large number of cases of women being exploited, ill-treated and subjected to violence is invisible and in many cases, their very existence denied, as these issues have been consigned to the dustbins of history. The challenges, including exploitation, subjugation and discrimination, faced by the indentured women in Reunion Island are not well recorded as most people, both men and women, wanted to forget the travails they had faced in the initial years and wanted only to move on and somehow ensure a better life for their children.

In 1899, France granted citizenship to the children born in Reunion and 1920 to those Indians who had stayed after the termination of their contract of indenture. This was seen as positive by the Indians as they would get access to some facilities as well as probably a sense of belonging. Even after the system of indenture was stopped in 1917, most engagees could not return to India as the cost of sea passage was exorbitant, while a few decided to stay back voluntarily and managed to get permits to set up small businesses, shops or acquire land. The geographical isolation of Reunion Island and the tenuous communication links based on passing ships which were few and far between coupled with the lack of communication even through letters led to the Indian engagees losing contact with their kin in India. Many of them

had lost touch with their families in India and felt that going back would be a loss of face as they had no money.

Moreover, India was passing through tumultuous political times, and some engagees felt that staying on in Reunion was a better option, though in reality they had little choice but to stay on and eke out a living in Reunion Island. The 1946 Constitution of France adopted the policy of Laicite, and all the details of the place of origin of the Indians taken to Reunion were expunged from official records which merely state their place of origin as India. Also, the popular perception was that India was a distant and poverty-stricken country and hence resulted in a reluctance to acknowledge their Indian roots. This created a disconnect resulting in a prolonged hiatus and mutual neglect of engagement between India and the Indian diaspora in Reunion. Indian-ness in everyday life gradually fell into disuse in favour of French identity in an attempt to fit in and be French.

The Catholic Church was active in proselytisation, and the French were more active in the imposition of their culture and religion, much more than the British, and converting the Indians to Christianity. The French sought to convert the Indian engagees to Christianity and discouraged them from worshipping Hindu Gods; children of those who converted were given access to education, which served as an incentive. In line with the official policy of the time, French names were promoted, and even Indian names were Gallicised. For instance, Krishnan became Kitchen and Ganapathy became Canabady, etc. As the Indians were prohibited from practising their religion and praying to their Hindu Gods, and compelled to adopt Christianity, some embraced it as it gave them a sense of belonging and identity and access to education, health and other government facilities. After having been in demeaning situations and being discriminated against, the Indians had the desire to get the best for their children; embracing Christianity, and the consequent access to a good education was seen as gateways to ensure a better life.

The engagees, especially the women, brought along with them their cultural moorings, including images/small statues of their Gods, turmeric, spices, lentils, rice, along with their traditions and religious practices and their gold jewellery as a safety mechanism against hard times. They also brought seeds of the jackfruit, neem, curry leaves, spices, etc., which they planted on the plantations. All these elements found their way into the culture, cuisine, costumes and traditions of Reunionese society, a "mettissage" of many cultures. Hinduism, though suppressed, did not go extinct however since most Indians kept the small images/statues brought from India/handed down from their parents and practised Hindu rituals and offered prayers privately in their homes. Often the men prohibited any Indian religious activity or display of idols of Indian deities in their homes as they wished to be seen as having completely integrated into the French lifestyle. However, the women defied these controlling and dictatorial attitudes of their husbands and quietly pursued their religious practices and kept idols of deities hidden in their rooms and passed these on to their children, along with some of the mantras and prayers, though the meanings were lost due to the fairly strict imposition of the French language and way of life. Early migrants were allowed to build small temples on the sugar plantations, and later as they prospered, some built small temples in their homes. Interestingly both men and women,

while outwardly French and practising Christians, did follow some Hindu customs and practices in their homes and regularly visited both the church and temples after they were permitted by the local authorities to build the temples.

Gradually, the women engagees were able to overcome their circumstances and assert themselves and address the challenges and complex issues faced by them in the host country as they gained economic and personal freedom, providing an opportunity to assert their independence and redefine their roles within the prevailing patriarchal gender hierarchy (Emmer 1986). They adapted to their new environs including unfamiliar food, clothes and customs with a degree of elan. Some old photographs show the diaspora women in Reunion Island dressed in smart western clothes of the time, including elegant hats (Author). Though most were vegetarians at the time of migration, there was not much option but to adopt a non-vegetarian cuisine due to the predominant prevalent culture of the French owners as well as amongst the African and Chinese migrants.

Indian and European racial miscegenation also became widespread as many Europeans took Indian women as their concubines and later as wives. In a way, these women were victims of their circumstances with little scope for amelioration and in spite of their subjugation and discrimination and their dignity and sense of self trampled upon, they somehow held on to their cultural and religious moorings though at a substantially reduced level. These women struggled to create spaces for themselves and to find ways to end their pathetic state of existence, and some did succeed when they married the white owners or even became concubines as this helped to raise their status and led to their being given certain privileges and meant an end to the endless hard labour on the plantations and in the homes of the plantation owners.

After Reunion Island became an Overseas Department of France in 1946, things further improved for the descendants of the Indian slaves/contract labour/indentured labour engagees, who were now at par and able to have the same rights as the mainland French citizens. Added to this, the emphasis on education together with hard work helped the Indians, both men and women, to get good jobs and actively participate and integrate into the social, economic and political life of Reunion Island and saw them rapidly rise in the political and social hierarchy in Reunion Island. Most of the second-generation women did not have much access to education and continued to work on the plantations and look after the home and continue to be subjected to the exploitation and discrimination prevalent on the plantations.

Subsequent generations of Indian women had better access to quality education and were able to move out of the plantation life and even get decent employment. The third and fourth generation Indians were well educated by and large and were the first to visit India and assert their Indian identity and were instrumental in the setting up of the first properly built Hindu temple. Women took the lead and played an active part in temple-related activities and in celebrating festivals in the temples at a community level. The third and fourth generation diaspora also sets up Cultural Associations and actively promoted and celebrated Indian festivals and established a strong connect with India and actively participated in and promoted Indian dance, music, yoga, etc. There was an urge to reclaim their Indian-ness and retrieve and safeguard Indian values, culture, traditions and customs of their ancestors including traditional cuisine

and keep these alive and transmit these to future generations. Unfortunately, many of the younger generation, while being aware of and interested in these rituals, etc., is no longer practising these; this can be attributed, probably, to the general global trend amongst young people of being "irreligious". It is also a manifestation of the intrinsic desire to conform to the local milieu rather than be seen as the "other". The fourth- and fifth-generation Indian diaspora has had the best education in the schools and Universities in Paris and other cities of France, but at the same time, they have a feeling of "unbelonging" and have sought to return to their roots seeking to learn more about India and about their religion; many families have their small family temples and also visit the many temples that have been set up in Reunion Island over the years. Many do not know if they are French or Indian from the inside and are somewhat confused as regards their actual identity. The young Réunionese of mixed parentage, Indian and French, feel somewhat confused and struggle to belong even as they have the best education and try and visit India to understand their roots, but there is a degree of duality in their persona. Other young people of Indian parentage, while less confused, nevertheless feel a sense of "unbelongingness" and yearn to have one identity of being Indian or French while being happy with their French lifestyles and benefits of being French. Participation in politics or the government by Indian women diaspora, including in Reunion Island, was rather limited given that political identities of the diaspora are shaped by their experiences and further by the patriarchal atmosphere prevalent in France as well. Social and cultural aspects along with conditioning often prevent the participation of women in local political life and the government. This is happily changing but again on a very insignificant scale and far too slowly but increasingly, we have more and more instances of Indian diaspora women attaining positions of power in the local government and in the French National Assembly/Senate.

But despite the adoption of French, there was an urge, especially in the third and subsequent generation of Indians settled in Reunion, to define their identity by reconnecting with their roots. In the last four decades, the People of Indian Origin (PIO) in Reunion Island, with many women at the forefront, formed Cultural Associations and built temples and mosques, often using Indian artisans and craftspersons to do the fine carvings and incorporate the religious elements of design in the temples and mosques, to assert their distinct identity and cultural ethos. This cultural revival led to the re-establishment of their links with India, and some travelled to India to reconnect with the land of their origin. These links were further strengthened after the opening of the Indian Consulate General in 1986, after much lobbying by the Indian diaspora. PIOs currently comprise about 40% of the population of Reunion Island, numbering approximately 2,80,000 and are involved in all spheres of the economy and in the local government in Reunion Island.

Many of the Indian origin third and fourth generation descendants have fascinating stories to recount of how, through their forefathers mostly came to Reunion Island as either slaves or contract/indentured labour, but most overcame their inhibiting circumstances and bettered their lot through sheer dint of hard work and education, integrated into Reunnionaise society, adopting a French lifestyle while privately retaining a connect with their religion and cultural essence and handing it down from

one generation to the next. On the other hand, some of the Indians did not want to acknowledge their Indian ancestry especially those who had not done well and was probably descendants of those brought as slaves or of those who had married African or other slaves.

It is interesting to observe that though the well off Indian Diaspora (third and fourth, even the Younger fifth generation) considers themselves as completely French having studied in the elite French Ecoles (Schools) in the mainland and having limited connect with India, and somehow the process of cultural and linguistic integration has its limits and does not exclude the recognition of their different heritage and cultural specificities; this is a somewhat contradictory and difficult situation to be in and there is, thus, an urge to forge closer ties with the country of their origin. They realise that the tag of their Indian origin would not disappear despite complete assimilation on their part and the unquestioned acceptance by the French remains a distant dream.

Indian cultural influence, strong family connections and community feeling amongst the Indians were fairly strong, though this has seen a gradual waning down the generations. The first and second generations spoke mainly Indian languages, Indian names were kept and some memories of their origins and customs were retained. Conditions improved overall for the third generation who were French citizens, were generally well educated, had both French and Indian names but very little knowledge of their original language (mother tongue), spoke French fluently and adapted to a French lifestyle, gradually integrating into the social milieu in Reunion. The fourth generation, however, integrating further, had only French names (as apparently Indian names were not permitted), no knowledge of any Indian language, spoke only French, was highly educated and professionally qualified and actively involved in the economic and socio-political life of Reunion. After some of the Indian community leaders took up the issue with the French authorities, Indian names were permitted, and the fifth and sixth generations have both Indian and French names, speak French and English, are interested in learning Indian languages and connecting to India.

Challenges that remain for the young women and men pertain to their wanting to integrate fully in their host country and yet retain their Indian values and traditions and cuisine and reclaim their identity and reconnect to their ancestral land India; they are generally unaware of the travails and problems faced by their ancestors as that aspect is generally neither spoken about in the family nor taught in schools. The French in any case do not acknowledge nor mention this negative aspect of their history in Reunion Island and present a rosy positive image of the indenture system and believe it was beneficial for the poverty and drought-stricken Indians at that time to be given work in their colonies and have food to eat. Women in French history were usually just a footnote, and similarly, women in the history of the indenture system were likewise ignored.

Testimonies[1,2]

Memories passed down the generations tell the stories of those who survived the tough journey by sea, the confinement and quarantine on arrival at the Lazaret in Reunion, the very difficult times the male and female labourers lived through, of exploitation, non-payment of dues, no accommodation, of sleeping in the open, surviving on very little food and water, with very little clothing, working hard in the sun, many dying due to illness, disease and the plague.[3] At the end of the five-year contract/indenture period, most of the labourers were not permitted to return to India by their employers and forced to continue living in their miserable conditions. There are some very few stories, however, of some employers who treated the labourers relatively better, giving them small parcels of land, basic accommodation, etc., but at the same time "renewing the contract" after five years and discouraging them from returning to India. Today, the Indians are amongst the economic elites in Reunion, and the memories and oral histories of a few of these families indicate a predominantly male narrative even now. While the females in the families are empowered and educated, they still take a back seat in the socio-economic and political life in Reunion Island. For instance:

The Canabady family: Based on oral evidence and memories, research and matching these with archival information, it was determined that Saminadin Canabady, the great grandfather, of the late Gilbert Canabady (or Ganapathy) came around 1831, as a contract labourer, along with a hundred thousand others and worked on the sugar plantations of St. Pierre. The grandparents lived in pathetic conditions, prayed in a

[1] A large part of the paper has been prepared based on my interactions and conversations with some of the prominent families, academics, youth, etc., in Reunion Island during my tenure as the Consul General of India in Reunion Island between October 2011 and January 2013. As Reunion Island had around 40% of Indian origin population, I became interested in finding out more about this little known Indian diaspora and hence naturally delved deeper into the subject to find out their history.

[2] Later, I got further inputs for another paper through email correspondence based on a short questionnaire with the members of the Armoudom family in 2016 and recently in March 2019, for this paper, from Ms. Sabine Paulic Armoudom and her daughter Coraline Paulic.

[3] The challenges faced by the first, second and subsequent generations of the diaspora, and the testimonies are based on my conversations/interactions, during my stay in Reunion island (2011–2013), with, amongst other things:

(a) Mr. Daniel Minienpoulle, President of the Tamil Federation;
(b) Late Mr. Gilbert Canabady (or Ganapathy as he liked to say), prominent businessman, as also on his book and video on his travel to India to discover his roots, his son Mr. Gerard Canabady;
(c) Mr. Axel Kichinen (or Krishnan), former mayor;
(d) Dr. K. Chanoumagame, President of the Tamil Sangam Association;
(e) Mr. Jean Regis Ramasamy, journalist and historian;
(f) The Armoudom family members (mother Aarthy Charline, daughters Charline Leela, Sabine, Regine, daughter in law Dr. Lena Armoudom and granddaughter Coraline Kusum Paulic);
(g) Late Prof. Sudel Fuma, University of Reunion;
(h) Prof. Yvan Combeau, University of Reunion.

Also I had spoken to many others and to young people who were a part of the Diaspora Youth Club in Reunion Island to understand better the conditions and evolution of diaspora in general with specific emphasis on women diaspora in Reunion Island.

small temple on the plantation. The next generation, his father, too worked on the same plantation, but the late Gilbert Canabady started a small business. He was the first to trace his roots in India and has written a book and made a film on the history of his ancestors and his rise in Reunion society to become one of the richest businessmen in Reunion. In 1981, a 150 years after his great grandfather arrived in Reunion, the late Gilbert Canabady bought the estate, Mon Caprice, and the plantation, in St. Pierre, on which his great grandparents/parents worked as contract/indentured labour and built a beautiful traditional Ganesh temple on the premises, where regular prayers are offered in traditional style. The family, including his daughter, continues with the traditions and practices handed down and has embraced their Indian identity and is happy to have located their origins in India. However, not much is spoken about the evolution of the women of the family except that they maintained some cultural and ritual traditions in the home while outwardly embracing the French way of life including the clothes and the language.

The Armoudom family: Most members of this family are well educated, are professionals and have established a strong connect with India; they have been able to trace their ancestry, but not their exact roots in India, through memories passed down along with available archival records. The Armoudom sisters Charline or Leela, Sabine and Regine and their sister in law, Dr. Lena Armoudom, whose forefathers came as indentured labour from Andhra and Kerala, all have a special connect with India and still practise some of the traditions handed down over the years. The Armoudom family history has been traced back to the great grandparents, Tilak Tulsi and Poupia Gokalsing (Maya), who were contract/indentured labour from Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), grandfather Siva Gokalsing Poupia, who set up a small business, married a Tamilian, Atchapa Antoinette, and mother Aarthy Charline was married to Gabriel Armoudom, probably a Tamilian, who spoke Hindi and Tamil, though the exact place of origin is uncertain. The family says it has a spiritual connection, which led them to visit India and embrace all things Indian. They wear both Western and Indian clothes and cook Indian food regularly. They grew up on stories related to the Hindu religion, legends relating to Lord Murugan, Arjuna of the Mahabharata, etc., visited temples regularly and participated in, and attended all Indian festivals. Their mother, Aarthy Charline, practised Hindu religious rituals learned from her parents at home, though their father discouraged this; the children witnessed these without understanding much except that they were also Hindu while being Christian. Their mother wore Indian clothes occasionally, but now the family, both young and old, wear Indian clothes regularly especially during festivals. The special connect with India took Charline (Leela) to Kalakshetra in Tamilnadu to learn Indian classical dance (Bharat Natyam), and she now teaches classical Indian dance in the Conservatory in Reunion; Sabine visited India and stayed on to study and practise yoga, while Regine also learned yoga in India and both teach yoga and organise other Indian cultural activities regularly in Reunion Island. Dr. Lena, a professional dentist, is actively involved with GOPIO and visits India regularly. The women in this family have been able to overcome the tragic histories of the past and emerge as strong and fairly independent professionals.

Other families like the Ramasamy family, the Minienpoulle family, the Virapoulle family and the Kichenin family have somewhat similar histories, and the today, the women in these families are mostly professionals and feel a sense of self though a degree of pain and a deep-rooted sense of unbelongingness lingers. All these diaspora feel a special attachment to India with a yearning to be able to go back and trace their roots in India. Their families, like all the others, practise some Indian religious and cultural traditions handed down in their respective families, and women often lead the enthusiasm and eagerness to participate in all the Indian festivals in Reunion Island.

Conclusion

It is important to take note of the possibility of an element of amnesia, distortion and maybe some exaggeration intermingling with the memories and stories, as they have traversed from one generation to the next. The enforced gallicisation and Frenchification led to the extinction of Indian languages along with the records of the Indian roots, characterising the Reunionnaising experience as one of abandonment and rootlessness. The Indian diaspora managed to retain and later embrace Indian culture while being simultaneously integrated into French culture and social lifestyles. Today, the women diaspora descendants are well educated and well integrated into the socio-economic and political fabric of Reunion Island, contributing to the development and economic growth of the island equally as the men. This is possible in the case of rituals and traditions too. The present-day generation/s sometimes feel resentful towards the French for what their forefathers did to their Indian ancestors and for destroying records, preventing them from being able to trace their roots or relatives in India. This is especially so when, on the other hand, they look across the sea at Mauritius, where the British kept full records of the Indian, and other, indentured labour. The Indians in Mauritius have been able to trace their roots in India, reconnect to their villages of origin and even meet their relatives. Also, the British allowed the Indians to follow their religious practices and traditions, speak their native languages and customs, and these thrive in Mauritius even today and mainly sustained by the women diaspora. This has given the Indians in Mauritius a sense of identity and rootedness enabling them to easily connect with India and their Indian-ness.

The evolution of and contemporary status of women descendant diaspora in Reunion Island is underscored by a “best forgotten” past of abused and suppressed persona which is somehow embedded in their subconscious minds. Their ancestors went through an arduous journey through the tough and difficult times of slavery/contract labour and indentured labour, and the descendant women diaspora has found their space and agency to a great degree through sheer grit and determination to overcome adversity and transmute it to create a new paradigm for themselves and their families. The undercurrent of conflict of identity and culture is present even after the Indians completely adapted to the French lifestyle, language, had French

names and adopted western wear. Church weddings are the norm but increasingly being followed by Indian wedding ceremonies inspired to some extent by Bollywood and Tollywood (Tamil) films. The Indian diaspora in general, and the women more so, had a deep-seated feeling of separateness and unbelonging as they could not reconcile their Indian origins with their French identity and sensibilities, creating a disconnect in some way. They belonged but still did not belong to Reunion Island/France. Many had never ever visited India, but strangely they felt a strong and inexplicable connect with India and their "Indian-ness", through the memories of their parents, folk tales and traditions passed down through the generations. In essence, they retained their "Indian-ness", deep down and many had stated that they felt a comforting sense of belonging when they visited India for the first time. The young Indian diaspora, though completely French in every way, still feels a strange sense of "unbelonging" and connecting to India helps them to better deal with their dual identity of being French and Indian at the same time.

References

Emmer P. C. (1986). *In colonialism and migration: Indentured labour before and after slavery*. In P. C. Emmer (Ed.). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

Government of India. (2011). *Report of the high-level committee on the Indian diaspora*. New Delhi: Indian Council of World Affairs. Retrieved from http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/diasporapdf/chapter6.pdf.

Journal.re; documentary film: La Memoire des Canabady Diaspora Studies, Journal of the ODI. Blanche, S. (2008, January). *The impact of political, economic and juridical context on identifications in Indian Gujarati "Diaspora": Example from western Indian Ocean islands and France*. Paper presented at the international conference on Gujarati diaspora, "Global Gujarat and its Diaspora". Patan: Hemchandracharya North Gujarat University.

McNeil, J., & Lal, C. (1914). *Report on the condition of Indian immigrants in the four British Colonies: Trinidad, Guiana or Demerara, Jamaica and Fiji, and in the Dutch Colony of Surinam or Dutch Guiana* (Appendix 21, pp. 180). Allahabad: Government Press.

Mohammed, P. (2002). *Gender negotiations amongst Indians in Trinidad, 1917–1947*. Hampshire: Palgrave.

Pande, A. (Ed.). (2018a). *Women in the Indian diaspora historical narratives and contemporary challenges*. Springer.

Pande, A. (2018b). *India, and its diaspora: Charting new avenues off engagement, international studies*. Sage Publication.

Pande, A. (2018c). Unpacking the Indian diaspora. Chennai: Yathumahi Publications. Retrieved from indiaviewsblog.wordpress.com/2014/2/11/diaspora-indians-in-the-reunion-rediscovering-cultural-pridelittleindia.com/life/12041-an-indian-reunion.html.

Reddock, R. (1985, October 26). Freedom denied: Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917. *Economic and Political Weekly, 20*(43), 79–87.

Sharma, J. C. (2011). The Indian communities in overseas territories of France: Problems of identity and culture. In N. Jayaram (Ed.), *Diversities in the Indian diaspora: Nature, implications, responses*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Chapter 9
The Experiences/Struggles of Indian Indentured Women in Nineteenth-Century Mauritius

Beebeejaun-Muslum

Abstract The struggles and life stories of the Indian women who came to Mauritius in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century are inspirational. These women had migrated either as dependents, spouses or as single females and were labelled as timid, unskilled or as characterless females. They were often mentioned only as 'accessories' in population movements, leading to their conceptualisation as 'unproductive individuals'. However, the nineteenth-century Indian contractual migration has been categorised as the 'new form of slavery' where women, although unequally, were fully integrated into the capitalist system of production and the plantation economy. The earlier perspectives on indentured women asserted that these women were largely tricked into going abroad, or were from a very marginal social class, 'single, broken creatures' which led to a demoralised and even a deprived life for them, overseas. In reality, the role of women in the indentured migration, whether as individuals or as part of family groups, has always been significant. Between 1835 and 1875, around 75,000 Indian women arrived in Mauritius. The purpose of this chapter is to reappraise the roles and experiences of the Indian indentured women, who eventually settled in Mauritius and played a pivotal role in its development.

Keywords Women · Diaspora · Struggle · Indian immigrants · Indentured migration

Introduction

Since long, Asian women have been depicted being dependent, timid, unable to work and perform. The role of women in migration whether as individuals or part of family groups was limited. They were only meant to be present as 'accessories' and were referred to only in population movements otherwise they were considered unproductive and dependents (Tinker 1977, p. 47). The nineteenth-century Indian Diaspora has been indeed categorised as 'new form of slavery' and the number in which the new labour force was incorporated into plantation life bore much resemblance to the

Beebeejaun-Muslum (✉)
Department of Mauritian Studies, Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Moka, Mauritius
e-mail: zaanish@yahoo.com

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_9

senile institutions it replaced. The role of women differed completely from that of their slave predecessors. These women were faced with unequal treatment by the capitalists. Through migration, women had the choice to escape and enjoy their freedom from the higher demands of the patriarchal society. On the other hand, studies have shown that women were very lonely, vulnerable and were exploited and sexually harassed when they arrived on the island (Crumpston 1969, p. 20).

Journey to Mauritius

During the years 1834–1839, the slaves were being released from the plantations and the colonists. The first Indian Indentured women were brought to Mauritius by private importers. New field and domestic labour were needed, and female recruits were engaged primarily as childminders and general household servants (Cohen and Phyllis 1979, p. 69). The mobilisation of female recruits was limited because planters, who were the chief employers in Mauritius, were notoriously reluctant to pay the costs of introduction of the families of male field workers. In the 1930s, therefore, women formed only 12% of the immigrant population. From 1843, migration was placed under government controls which were henceforth to regulate every aspect of the lives of Indian labourers under indenture. The Mauritian state sponsored an increased recruitment of Indian women to meet perceived social rather than economic needs, thus the introduction of fixed sex ratios on emigrant ships. As a result, from 12% ratio of male to females in 1842, the scale of female to male immigration rose from 45 to 50% in the 1860s (Public Records office, 1834–74). The presence of women within the indenture system was in this way dependent on state subsidies, when they declined and employers bore the greater financial burden for immigration, the recruitment of women fell.

The numerous complaints presented to the immigration officer upon arrival in Mauritius demonstrate that women were particularly susceptible to abuse by the ship crews. For some women, the voyage was unpleasant and very distressing (B1A Census Reports 1851). The treatment and conditions of women on the ships on which these women travelled highlight both the particular vulnerability and the ambivalent attitudes of European officials towards them. Whilst legislative reforms were enacted to enhance their comfort and to protect women from the importunities of the crew and passengers with whom they were obliged to remain close continuously for several weeks, actual conditions and treatment aboard the sailing ships demonstrated the impunity with which such laws could be disregarded. The transference of Indian women to the plantation entailed an initial loss of authority by men over their female partners as migrants struggled to re-establish relationships in the new setting (Sticher 1985).

Most of the Indian women who migrated to Mauritius in the nineteenth century were not required to sign indenture contracts and they were primarily valued for their role in fostering the permanent settlement of the community in Mauritius that is as reproducers of labour power, rather than as labourers per se. Thus, they were

seldom given a chance to a regular income, and as a result, they financially relied on men with whom they lived with. They were in a liable position because of their dependence on men. Those men were themselves at the mercy of their employers who had the power to imprison them at their own will. All these placed stains on personal relationships (Sooriamoorthy 1978). The petitions written to the authorities in the nineteenth-century Mauritius, and the court cases in which they were involved show the stories of girls who were forced into unwanted marriages or had to physically oblige men and employers.

The small number of women who accompanied the first recruits was one of the most striking features of the early Indian labour diaspora. Immediately after abolition of slavery, Mauritius began to import Indians on a very large scale and initially outside the jurisdiction of the imperial authorities. Between the 1834 Act of Emancipation and the liberation of apprenticeship in 1839, upwards of 15,000 male Indians had been introduced (Benedict 1967a, b). They were accompanied by only a few hundred women where the latter was used to reproduce the workforce locally. Nevertheless, the importance of those Indian women was quickly recognised by the Mauritian state. The latter were used to lower labour costs as they would hold the male workers on the state. Some employers even used them as an advantage of setting a friendly environment on the estates, and some even personally sponsored the worker's wives to Mauritius. However, other employers could not bring more women and new recruits, thus making women migration quite low. Finding their employees acting on their own initiative was unlikely to promote female recruitment by establishing bounty payments (Deere 1979). The fact that employers were not so willing to recruit more and more Indian women, the Mauritian government under pressure from London, tried to encourage the recruitment of females by establishing bounty payments to recruiters of women to the Mauritian colony. For example in 1852, a bonus of one pound was paid to every men who would bring a married couple or the wife of another immigrant to the colony (Ly-Tio-Fane 1958).

Characteristics of Indian Women Migrants

By the nineteenth-century, the community of free and enslaved Indian women was considerably outnumbered by a new generation of migrants who settled on the island through the indenture system. Around 75,000 Indian women were estimated to arrive in Mauritius between 1835 and 1875 (PB series immigration MGI). The majority of them were married and were accompanied by their husbands, and some were widowed and others single. The main reasons behind their migration just like the menfolk were the choice of freedom, marginalisation of traditional livelihoods and the inducements offered by the emigration depots. Moreover, some women migrated because of early widowhood and the fact that their parents or parents in law could not support them. Thus, migration became an escape for them to evade from the difficult life circumstances that prevail in India. Also, evidence shows that the women were either tricked into migrating, and unscrupulous methods were sought to meet

government-imposed targets. Some of the recruiters were women themselves and therefore directly involved in the mobilisation of labour for the Mauritian sugar plantations.

The Indian women who migrated to Mauritius were not pre-eminently or predominantly single women with dark pasts, as emigrate official's intent on reduced government quotas tended to suggest (Lal 1980). If the numbers of women migrating as single mothers with their children (often young widows) was relatively high, this was indicative of the harsh demographic relatives of nineteenth-century rural India, where low life expectancy and early marriage produced many casualties. Even those women who migrated alone or as single parents were not necessarily marginalised or socially outcast. The figures of women and children claimed form the depot show that a significant number of lone female migrants came to rejoin male family members who had decided to remain in Mauritius. They were not escaping from an oppressive family life, nor were they socially marginal, but were migrating to re-enter established family relationships, mainly to reunite with family. Some women, like Bukhoty the mother of Khedoo and Goordyal, who came to Mauritius in 1852 even paid their own passage (Mangru 1987). However, not all of them arriving to rejoin their husbands and relatives were lucky enough to locate their spouse or family.

Contemporary officials thought that women who first migrated would do so to escape from famine (economic exigencies) and also social marginalisation (escape from enforced conformity). Researchers and historians have also emphasised on the opportunity these Indian women had to emancipate themselves from an illiberal, uncivilly and very hierarchical social system in India (Omvedt 1979).

Exploitation and Unequal Treatment of Women

Women performed a vital supportive role both financially and emotionally, helping men to weather the hardships of the indenture system and to create and sustain a lifestyle which became increasingly separate and independent from the plantations which had caused Indians to come to Mauritius. However, one of the cultural paradoxes of the female immigrant experience in Mauritius is the fact that Indian women were brought as part of a labour importation scheme and yet were considered marginal to the production of the crops for which indentured labourers were required. In the 1830s, Indian women who came to Mauritius were traditionally engaged as domestic servants and ayahs which provided them a degree of economic independence (Prasad 1987). Bibee Juhooram, a female Indian immigrant found that distinctions between duties performed by the ayahs and the sweepers in India were not maintained in Mauritius. She consequently found the tasks she allotted unpalatable:

> "I was made to sweep the rooms and do the methranee's work and I complained to the police." (Parliamentary papers, 1849-1873). Lakshmi had a similar experience in the plantation house where she was engaged. Mauritian employers had indentured employers who were not accustomed to dealing with slaves and thus inevitably failed to appreciate the differing requirements and expectations of the new workforce. Lakshmi's testimony which

described how she was hit on the face with a shoe reveals that in this early period, women were subjected to punishments similar to that of the menfolk as harsh and severe. Both Lakshmee and Bibee spent time in prison 'breaking stones' through a regime of hard work and physical punishment. These women were pioneers and whilst later arrivals who worked on the estates, their contractual position was not necessarily comparable. In fact, after 1842, Mauritius was the only colony which failed to engage Indian women as Indentured labourers (Mauritius papers 1874).

The numbers of women formally employed on estates was consequently never very high even in the principal sugar-growing districts.

Mauritian employers bore some responsibility for the failure to engage women because they preferred to recruit men for the heavy work of harvesting and processing the canes. The ambience of recruiting new women migrants in India certainly suggests that new women immigrants visited to be given the chance to earn their own wages by being contracted as indentured workers. However, they faced additional obstacles because of the opposition of male migrants and colonial officials who considered women's right place to be in the home. The petitions of Indian men suggest that they welcomed the opportunities offered to them to bring their spouses without having to indenture them (Emmer 1986, p. 118).

Even though some women contributed in such ways to the family economy and by the sale of vegetables and dairy products, the allowances and earnings of non-indentured women were more insecure than those engaged Indian men, and the failure to engage women in India increased their economic periphery. In the Mauritian context, women were far from occupying an equal place with men Vis-a-Vis opportunities for waged labour. If capitalism has been showed to be notoriously average to the equal comparison of women in the workplaces, migration could force women into even more marginalised roles (Reddock 1985). The cost of importing labour had to be balanced. Women were kept at margins of estate life, and their help was needed and taken partially, mainly when specialised tasks were available. In the case of the isolated island like Mauritius, the cost of importing labour had to be balanced against the likelihood of wage bargaining by experienced local workers and planters, who generally remained ambivalent about the advantages of encouraging the reproduction of the workforce in Mauritius itself. It was in the employer's interest to keep women at the margins of estate life, only particularly supported by them when specialised work was available.

The wives and female migrants had to look elsewhere for economic independence since they faced discrimination in the plantation economy. In the nineteenth-century Mauritius, women's domain lays outside the cash crop economy, principally in food production and retail. The rearing of animals was evidently a common and fairly lucrative occupation of women (Deere 1979). General statistics indicate that the numbers of livestock and poultry kept on estates was fairly extensive and that women played a large part in the upkeep of such animals.

On the other hand, women were also exposed to violence of the estate regime. Many Indian women were assaulted and even murdered by planters and their hired men. Despite their marginal position in terms of wage labour, women still feature prominently in estate life. Some women became 'sirdars' in their own rights, and

others who had family ties with plantation foremen could influence on their behalf, acquire independent positions of power (Beall 1990). Women played an important role as transmitters of information because of the frequent incarceration of indentured labourers.

In Mauritius, young women and girls were also made the victims of trafficking by those who sought financial gains from marrying them to one or more suitors. Consistently more male than female Indians arrived but the proportion of women settled in Mauritius increased more quickly because fewer women left the colony. One of the central paradoxes of the female immigrant experience in Mauritius is the fact that Indian women were brought as a part of a labour importation scheme and yet were considered marginal to the production of the crop for which indentured workers were required (Prasad 1987).

In the 1830s, Indian women who came to Mauritius were habitually engaged as domestic workers. Despite the evidence of a common accord against the engagement of women, as large members of Indian women settled on the island, the danger of their economic dependence on men became increasingly apparent, and steps were belatedly taken to promote engagements for them. By 1861, 40,000 Indian women had arrived in Mauritius, and the professor Betys, a special commissioner sent to Mauritius to review the emigration establishments proposed limited arrangements for newly arrived females (Allen 1983). Rather, unfairly, he blamed Indian women for their failure to work stating that they viewed labour 'either' as superfluous or unnecessary or as actually injurious to their interests. Later, Betys announced his full agreement with the opinions of the Indian agents who believed that women's physical comfort and moral well-being would be improved if they were indentured but noted that only fourteen women arrivals had been engaged in 1862 (Sticher 1985).

However, the willingness of women to work was demonstrated by emigration agents (once the French colonies, Natal and the Carribbean had begun to compete with Mauritius in the recruitment of Indian workers in the 1860s) who asserted that they were losing ground in refusing engaged women. In practice, the general failure of women to be engaged in Mauritius had more to do with the reluctance of estate authorities to recruit or unplay them, then with any prejudices of women migrants (B1A Census Reports 1851).

In 1872, the issue was still unresolved for Betys again questioned whether women ought either to be made to engage or repay the cost of their passage from India. However, the figures of women engaged on the estates and the campaign of Betys, both of which suggest minimal participation of women in agricultural pursuits were misleading in so far as the actual burden carried by female labour is concerned. Many women worked on sugar estates, whose temporary or verbal contracts did not figure in official statistics. Women performed many specialised tasks on sugar plantations throughout the year such as weeding and the application of fertilisers (Morrissey 1989). At crop time, they helped in carrying and drying sugar or sewing Vacoas bags for six pence per day and a rice ration in the 1870s, and some worked side by side with their menfolk cutting canes. In general, women played an important role in assisting indentured family members to complete task work. They could also be regularly engaged and subjected to the same treatment as indentured men as Carpaye,

an Indian women working on Savania estate found. She complained to the inspector of immigrants that despite the expiry of her engagement, she could obtain neither her ticket nor a certificate of discharge from her employer. The integration of Indian women into plantation working life was such that a few even reached the status of *sirdani* that is female supervisors of cane cutters. Reporting on Clementi estate in 1872, inspector Cladwell noted that the woman Sukonea was a '*female Sirdar who has a band of 16 men*'.

At LeVal, in the same year, inspector Jenner reported that 'two men are engaged on this property as Sirdarines,[1] one at 14 and the other at $13.50 monthly (Gunpunth 1984). They do not work but are heads of bands. Some women were regularly engaged on plantations as washerwomen. Even those whose labour was continued to the 'domestic sphere' were far from idle. The typical working day of an Indian women on an estate camp in Mauritius is amply illustrated by the reported daily routine of 'Mookeah', a female Indian immigrant. When her husband leaves for work at six in the morning, she had several tasks to accomplish such milking the cow twice (morning and evening), preparing lunch and dinner for the kids and husband, washing clothes and so on. Even though some women contributed in such ways to the family economy and by the sale of vegetables and dairy products, the allowances of engaged Indian men and the failure to engage women in India increased their exploitability in Mauritius.

Migration could force women lay precisely in their ability to subsist on a very low income, and payment of a family wage was resisted by planters. In the case of an isolated island like Mauritius, the cost of importing labour had to be balanced against the likelihood of wage bargaining by experienced local workers and planters generally remained ambivalent about the advantages of encouraging the reproduction of the workforce in Mauritius itself (Bissondoyal 1984). It was in the employer's interest to keep women at the margins of estate life, only partially supported by them when specialised work was available.

Some planters used women as a blatant means of tying male labourers to the estate, particularly when men's contracts were due to expire. They contracted nominal engagements with the women which paid two shillings monthly. Critics claimed that this was tantamount to forced residence without real remuneration (Pike 1873). The colonial authorities dismissed objections to these practices by revealing that the engagement was used to check the 'very common' of desertion on the past of wives and that it was asked for by their husbands.

The authorities rarely examined the extent to which the conditions of indenture in themselves mitigated against the maintenance of stable relationships on estates. Indentured men were themselves vulnerable to long spells of imprisonment for contractual workers, and this increased the difficulties for their dependents. Women whose husbands were incarcerated could expect very little support from the men's employers (Sticher 1985). Inspector Mitchell (Marimoutou 1981) wrote that when their husbands were imprisoned, Indian women were not always in a position to

[1] Head of a group of workers.

procure a sufficient supply of food. They often had no choice than to seek an alternative male protector. When there were no work for men, women suffered also. In the 1867 crisis, numbers of women and children were found starving in the street of Port-Louis, the capital of the Republic of Mauritius.

Contribution and Raised Status of Women

Faced with marginalisation within an insecure sugar economy, the wives and female dependents of indentured men looked to economic opportunities elsewhere (Bush 1990). In the nineteenth-century Mauritius, women's domain lays outside the cash crop economy, principally in food production and retail. The rearing of animals was evidently a common and fairly lucrative occupation of women. General statistics indicate that the numbers of livestock and poultry kept on estates was fair and that women played a large part in the upkeep of such animals. In Chamoonee of Beau Sejour estate enhanced an already powerful position with the keeping of a cowshed (Carter 1992).

It may be well imagined that the activities of women and their role in some cases as alternative sources of economic strength and even authority would have antagonised the estate supervisory personnel. Certainly, plantation managers made every effort to impede women's work of collecting firewood for cooking and grasses for animal feed. A number of imposed fines for such activities effectively criminating women for carrying out their daily household tasks. This system of localised penalties was designed to boost the coffers of the estate at the expense of the workforce. Arrangement could be made for persons living in the estate camp, but outsiders could be 'arrested' by estate guardians, and large sums of money would be extorted from them (Beckles 1989). In some cases, the employments women undertook placed them even further outside the bounds of the law. Many judicial cases refer to Indian women implicated the sale of Gandia (marijuana).

Whilst not indentured, life on the plantation exposed women to much of the harshness of the pass system. After 1867, the vagrancy law affected the female sex also, on one occasion 11 (eleven) little girls taking lunch to their fathers who worked at the docs in Port-Louis were taken into police custody. Like men, women who had no papers risked arrest and delay. Women were also exposed to violence of the estate regime. Many Indian women were assaulted and even murdered by planters and their hired men. It has been contented that the marginal status of women meant that they were 'super exploited' in the plantation context, relied upon as reproducers of labour power without receiving adequate remuneration. A pair of casual labour on estates, they were easily incorporated into the workplace, easily dismissed and poorly paid. Off the estates, women cultivated gardens, reared animals, worked as domestic servants and engaged in petty trade. In spite of being in scare supply, women's lives were not highly valued in Mauritius. Migration was in no sense 'a great escape' for the majority of women under indenture.

Despite their marginal position in terms of wage labour, women could still feature prominently in estate life. Some women became sirdars in their own right and others who had family ties with plantation foremen could yield influence on their behalf and acquire independent positions of power. Women played an important role as transmitters of information because of frequent incarceration of indentured labourers. When the wife of a Sirdar found that a member of her husband's band has been arrested, she rushed to the cane field to inform him of this. Because the estate functioned as private dispensers of justice, or worked in league with local magistrates, Indian women took it upon themselves to inform the authorities of the imprisonment of the male relatives. Women certainly would seem to have played a key role in influencing more family member's attitudes to work (Carter 1992).

Historians of indentured labour have argued that the planter's lack of interest in reproducing the workforce in the colonies contributed to the instability of the migrant's personal relationships on the estates. The difficulties of the sugar economy contributed to a settlement process in Mauritius which successively moved those Indians who had completed their indenture period onto plots of land acquired by breakup of the large plantations. The creation of a quasi-independent and separate Indian family and communal life in Mauritius acted as a vehicle of resistance at the workplace, fostering an anti-employer socialisation and providing an alternative cultural dimension. The introduction of significant number of Indian women following implementation of government ratios inevitably injected a new dynamism to the cultural activity of the indentured population and a re-establishment of at least some of the norms of family life. The coming of women in larger numbers permitted men to seek spouses who were as similar to them.

Conclusion

The struggles of Indian women in Mauritius demonstrate above all the capacity of relatively powerless female immigrants to initiate change and to react to injustice. In effect, the Indian women in Mauritius faced a triple oppression: state laws, plantation codes of conduct and communal sanctions or family controls; all functioned to limit their mobility. The colonial state and plantation authorities acted in concert with Indian men to establish, in the colonial context, the legitimacy of marriages which were based on a simple declaration made, thus immobilising women in conjugal households. The socio-cultural lives of immigrants lay largely outside the official domain based on stereotypes which portrayed female migrants as social outcasts of India whom became the amoral profiteers of sexual scarcity on the colonial sugar plantations. As more evidence of the complexity and diversity of women's roles in indentured migration is collected, the bias and incompleteness of such assumptions and generalisations will be increasingly recognised and rectified. Finally, this chapter has focused on the important and rich contribution of the first generation of Indian women in Mauritius in terms of its settlement, development of the communities and the history of the island in general.

References

Books

Benedict, B. (1967). *Indians in a plural society*. London.
Beckles, H. (1989). *Natural Rebels: A social history of enslaved black women in Barbados*. London.
Bissondoyal, U. (Ed.). (1984). *Indians overseas: The Mauritian experience*. Mauritius: Moka.
Bush, B. (1990). *Slave women in Caribbean society*. Kingstion, London: Heinemann Publishers.
Cohen, R., & Phyllis, (Eds.). (1979). *Peasants and proletarians: The struggles of third world workers*. London: Hutchinson University library for Africa.
Crumpston, M. (1969). *Indians overseas in British territories*. London: Cambridge University Press.
Ly-Tio-Fane, M. (1958). *Mauritius and the spice trade*. Mauritius: Mauritius Archives Publications.
Morrissey, M. (1989). *Slave women in the New World*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas.
Pike, N. (1873). *Sub-tropical rambles in the land of the Aphanapterryx*. London, New York: Harper and brothers.
Sooriamoorthy, R. (1978). *Les Tamouls a l'ile Maurice*. Port Louis, Mauritius: Henry & Co.
Sticher, S. (1985). *Migrant labourers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Tinker, J. (1977). *A new system of slavery*. London: Oxford University Press.

Articles

Allen, R. B. (1983). Marronage and the maintenance of public order in Mauritius. *Slavery and Abolition, 4*(3).
Beall, J. (1990). Women under indenture in colonial Natal, 1860–1911. In Clarke et al. (Eds.), *South Asians Overseas.* London.
Benedict, B. (1967). Caste in Mauritius. In Schwartz, B. (Ed.), *Caste in Overseas Indian communities.* California.
Carter, M. (1992). Strategies of labour mobilisation in colonial India: A case study of returnee recruiting for Mauritius. *Journal of Peasant Studies, 19*(3–4).
Deere, C. (1979). Rural women's subsistence production in the capitalist periphery. In Cohen et al. *Peasants and Proletarians*. London.
Emmer, P. (1986). The great escape: The migration of female indentured servants from British India to Surinam 1873–1916. In Richardson (Ed.), *Abolition and its aftermath.* London.
Gunpunth, V. (1984). Sex disproportion among Indian immigrants. In Bissoondoyal (Ed.), *Indians Overseas*. Mauritius: MGI (Moka).
Lal, B. (1980). Kunti's cry: Indentured women on Fiji plantations. *Indian Economic and Social History Review xxxxii*(i) (1985a).
Mangru, B. (1987). The sex ration disparity and its consequences. In British Guiana in Dabydeen & Samaroo (Eds.), *Indian in the Carribbean.* London.
Marimoutou, M. (1981). femmes Indiennes et engagement au xixe siècle a la Reunion, conference paper, Reunion.
Omvedt, G. (1979). Migration in colonial India. *Journal of Peasant Studies*.
Prasad, S. (1987). Emigration of Biharis to Mauritius, 1859–70. In S. Bhattacharya (Ed.), *Essays in modern Indian economic history*. Delhi.
Reddock, R. (1985). Freedom denied: Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917. *Economic and Political Weekly, xxx*(43).

Manuscript Sources

B1A Census Reports 1851, 1861, 1871, Government of Mauritius.
CO 167—Correspondence between Governors of Mauritius and the Secretaries of State for the Colonies, 1834–74.
Mauritius Papers: Cases relating to the Royal Commissioners Visit to Mauritius, 1874.
PB series Immigration, Mauritius Archives Coromandel.
Public Records Office, Kew.
Selected Parliamentary papers, British Government.

Part III
Indentureship and Emancipation in the Asia-Pacific

Chapter 10
Under the Shadows of Girmit Era

Rajni Chand

Abstract From documentations about the plight of Kunti and Naraini (the two indentured women) to writings about indenture system and its similarity to servitude and slavery, one can imagine the lives of women during the Girmit era or the indentured period in Fiji. The end of misery for all, including women, was through the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi, CF. Andrews, W. W. Pearson and Totaram Sanadhya that led to the abolition of the indenture system in Fiji. Post-indenture period saw the emergence of a group of people free from the tentacles of slavery who worked hard to create an identity for themselves and a place in the nation-building process. Women, in all these efforts, played an important role in the post-indenture Fiji. However, a cursory look at the documents and record on Indo-Fijian women in Fiji shows a scant reference to their efforts in the overall success of Indo-Fijians and their role in nation-building. Are the Indo-Fijian women still living in the shadows like they did during the Girmit era in Fiji? The following chapter looks at various sources on Indo-Fijian women and highlights their roles in post-indenture Fiji and why there is a need to recognise these unsung heroines of the likes of Kunti and Naraini.

Keywords Indenture period in Fiji · Post-indenture period in Fiji · Challenges facing Indo-Fijian women in Fiji

Introduction

Indian women in Fiji faced various forms of discrimination during indenture period. Their sufferings have been documented in writings by Lal (1985), Nicole (2011), Shameen (1998), Munro (1994/95), Kelly (1991), to name a few. Writings about Indian women in the post-Girmit era provide scant coverage on their lives, effort in nation-building and personal growth. It is a non-denial fact that life for Indians after the end of Girmit in Fiji was a challenging phase. The ex-Girmitiyas had to fend for themselves for education, health, religious and political rights. Due to their agricultural expertise in sugar plantation, Indians took agricultural land leased by

R. Chand (✉)
University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji
e-mail: Rajni.chand@usp.ac.fj

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_10

Colonial Refinery Company Limited (CSR Limited)[1] or Native Land Trust Board (NLTB).[2] With a source of income and place to settle, the ex-Girmitiyas began establishing temples, mosques, gurudwaras and schools in rural localities. Mayer (1963 and 1973) mentions that daughters were often married off early, whilst sons inherited their parents' house and farm. Thus, the traditional lifestyle similar to that in India was seen amongst Indians in Fiji (Lateef 1987). Since girls were married early, they had little education and had no say in the inheritance of their families' property. Even the Indians who had migrated as free migrants after 1920s had very similar family lifestyle. Girls had little education and were married off early. Under such circumstances, it is obvious that for a very long time, Indian women in Fiji had limited access to education and little say in their personal and national decision-making. Unfortunately, their contribution to Fiji's agricultural, social, education, legal and political rights has been given scant mention, unless they were well connected or from influential family background.

Economic Status of Indian Women After Indenture

As mentioned earlier, most ex-Girmitiyas took up leased land to begin cane farming. Most ex-Girmitiya women had lower pay during indenture, thus for them to toil the farm independently after indenture ended was close to impossible since end of indenture meant the loss of independent income for them. These women were left with no other choice but to marry men who were able to acquire leased land from CSR Limited or NLTB (Lateef 1987). This also meant greater control on women by men.

> This factor worked to the detriment of women in the long run as the family not only meant the reimposition of traditional power relations between men and women but also that even more stringent controls were placed on women. This legacy is visible today in the stringent control of women's sexuality, behaviour and physical space. The maintenance of traditional forms of marriage and household arrangements amongst Indo-Fijians still provides the crucial link with their culture of origin. It seems that it is through the practice of religion and traditional form of marriage and household arrangements that Indo-Fijians maintain and reproduce their cultural traditions to the present day. (Lateef 1987, 6)

Indian women were married much earlier than Fijian women, thus their economic independence was jeopardised. Additionally, the traditional Indian assumption of

[1]Colonial Refinery Company (CSR) was established in Sydney in 1855. In 1882, it began sugar production in Fiji after establishing its first sugar mill in Nausori. When the indenture system ended in 1920, CSR began a tenant farming system in 1924 to reduce the labour problems in Fiji's sugar industry. It remained as the company responsible for sugar production in Fiji until 1974. See http://archivescollection.anu.edu.au/index.php/colonial-sugar-refinery-limited and (Hooks and Stewart 2007) for more details.

[2]Native Land Trust Board was established in 1940 to safeguard native land. Close to 87% of Fiji's land is managed by NLTB. Native land cannot be sold, rather leased for 30 (for agricultural purposes) and 99 years for other uses.

women only as child-bearers and childrearers left women with little choice and space for economic empowerment. Whatever meagre income they had earned during indenture period soon diminished. Being married off early into traditional Indian families left many women in situations where it was impossible for them to venture outside the family home to seek employment. A typical lifestyle of Indian women after indenture was that of a woman married at a very early age, having children and working on the family leased farm. During early post-Girmit period, most Indian women were married off very early, as early as 13 years of age (Srivastava 2004). Whilst Indian women's marriage data showed a slight increase a decade later, they were still married off much earlier until 1960s when there is data showing an increase in Indian women in employment sector. Table 1 gives the age group of marriageable women in Fiji a few decades after the end of indenture system.

Burns (1963, 170) describes post-indentured women in Fiji as someone who is rarely spoken of and is economically, socially and morally dependent upon her husband for life. Their absence from the previous economic sphere ensured their continued subordination (Lateef 1987, 67). Women and children were seen working on the farms as unpaid family labours. Shameem (1990) states that Indian women's contribution as unpaid labours could be seen as economic exploitation. Indeed, this was worse than during the Girmit era where they at least had some income. In the post-indentured lifestyle, they did not possess property titles and were totally dependent upon the men of the household who had total control over the family. There was little choice given to women to seek employment outside this household. As such, Indian women's employment figures continued to fall over that period. Table 2 gives the ratio of Indian and Fijian women in paid employment between 1926 and 1940.

Thus, Indian women's economic or agricultural contribution was limited to their household farmland. There is little data to identify how many land leases were taken

Table 1 Married women, 1936 and 1946

Age group	1936		1946	
	Married women		Married women	
	Fijian	Indian	Fijian	Indian
13–14	–	504	–	400
15–19	539	3,483	728	4185
20–24	2,711	2,894	3,410	4271
25–29	2,976	1,984	3,857	3720
30–34	2,508	1,555	3,113	2604
35–39	2,021	1,231	2,419	1648
40–44	1,764	1,542	1,840	1240
44–50	2,785	1,869	2,588	1895
55 and over	1,697	893	1,736	1598
Total	17,001	15,915	19,691	21,561

Source Srivastava (2004)

Table 2 Numbers of Fijian and Indian Women in paid employment, 1921–46

Year	Fijian				Indian			
	Commerce	Industry	Domestic	Total	Commerce	Industry	Domestic	Total
1921	2	74	98	174	21	84	83	188
1936	13	73	182	268	38	52	120	210
1946	55	421	449	960	54	150	56	260

Source Gittins (1946)

up by Indian women after Girmit ended. Whilst they toiled the land side by side with their family members, inheritance of land leases passed from fathers to sons. In very few cases, land leases were transferred to women. The women who made a difference in the lives of Indians in Fiji were those who toiled the land next to their family members with a large family to look after. A classic example would be those who worked in cane and rice fields from the break of dawn and only took breaks to cook and feed their families and return to work in the fields late into the afternoons. Unfortunately, even today agricultural land leased to Indo-Fijian women is very few. Gender has indeed played a role in ownership and control of agricultural land for Indians in post-Girmit era since men predominantly held the titles of land leases and cane contracts. Women who had contracts or titles for agricultural land were usually widows. The family and tradition did not provide the right environment for Indian women to inherit property. A woman without a lease title with her name had no right and control over the use of the land. This acted as a disadvantage for women during divorce settlements since distribution of property is based on economic contribution only (Jalal 1997).

Education for Girls

Education opportunities for post-Girmit women in Fiji were limited due to many reasons. No arrangements of secondary schools had been made for Indian girls by the colonial government due to its protectionist education policy.[3] As such, parents removed their daughters from school after primary education and married them off early. Had the government provided opportunities of education for Indian girls, they would not have been married off at such an early age. Apparently, this factor could have also reduced the concerns of the colonial government regarding the rapid increase in the population of Indians. Partial and biased policy of the Fijian government against the education of Indians, particularly the education of Indian girls,

[3]Missionaries set up schools as early as 1930. However, Indians and in particular, Indian girls stayed away from education due to a number of reasons—the Indian settlement was different from Fijian village structure, Indians refused to attend schools set up by Christian missionaries and Indian children's engagement in farm and domestic did not give the educational opportunities for girls. No government school was set up specifically for Indians.

was to a large extent responsible for the increase in Indian population. C. F. Andrews (quoted by Srivastava 2004) stated that education, increasing average age at marriage and the consequent decrease of population are interlinked.

Women lived under conditions decided by men in their lives. Before the end of Girmit, organisations such as Christian missionaries had begun setting up schools. In particular, schools only for girls were established, for example, Dudley High School was established by a Methodist nun Hannah Dudley (Tavola 1990; Woods 1978). It cannot be denied that Hannah Dudley, due to her experience of working in India, had compassion for Indians working under the indenture system. Her efforts in campaigning for abolishment of the indenture system have been discussed in many indenture writings (Tavola 1990; Woods 1978). She assisted in improving the lives of many Indian orphan children and establishing the first school for Indian children teaching them Hindi and Urdu. Regardless of the fact, that Indians were hesitant in trusting the missionaries (due to their efforts to convert them to Christianity), most of the education facilities for both Indians and Fijians were started by the churches. Most of them remain, though single-sex school numbers have gone down over the years.

The negligence of the colonial government's non-commitment towards providing education for Indians was evident during many Legislative Council sessions where requests for Indians to be permitted to enrol in schools predominately set aside for European and part-European were ignored (Tavola 1990). Schools were located in urban areas or not in areas close to Indian settlements. Thus, Indians were hesitant to send their daughters to distant schools. A few organisations set up hostels attached to girls' schools, which included schools such as Methodist schools in Suva and Lautoka, DAV girls' school in Suva and Anglican schools in Labasa and Suva. With the absence of colonial funded schools for Indian community, Indians began setting up schools all over Fiji and getting teachers from India (Gounder 2007). Even after a few decades, a review of number of students in schools in Fiji showed a lower number of Indian girls in schools. Whilst numbers of Fijian girls in schools were also low, there were more opportunities for them since the government-run schools had been established with Fijian education interests in mind (Department of Education Report 1960; Gounder 2007). Overall, Indian women were far behind others as far as education opportunities were concerned. Until 1935, hardly any girls (both indigenous Fijian and Indian) had received secondary education. However, by 1980s, most women regardless of their ethnicity had attained secondary education and even surpassed their male counterparts in percentage (Fiji Bureau of Stats 2011).

Women's Organisations

One of the areas where women's voices and presence have been acknowledged is the social movement in Fiji. Even during indenture era, women movements (or gangs) activism have been documented (Mishra 2008; Naidu 1980). Lal (2004a, b) states that whilst men did not recognise the changed roles of indentured women, these women

who came to Fiji as indentured labourers were like their counterpart men labourers and had a control over their own income. This gave them power, which many of these women had been denied in India. This independence gave them the courage to fight for their rights. Like in any bonded labour situation, exploitation of labourers cannot go unnoticed; similarly, the Girmitiyas too were exploited. Unlike their men counterparts, women working as labourers during the indenture period in Fiji were sexually as well as physically violated. Incidences of violence and suicide rates between 1885 and 1920 included more cases of women than men. Out of 96 cases of those murdered during this period, 68 were women whilst 28 were men (Ramesh 2004). In order to fight against such savagery, women formed 'gangs' and used to beat their perpetrators. The perpetrators, in such cases, were not only other Indian men, but also the overseas and colonial bosses who always sought opportunities to abuse these women. Even after the Girmit ended, the women gangs had to operate to self-guard themselves since violence against them did not seize.

Dr. Manilal and his wife had arrived in Fiji in early 1912 as the first Indian barrister to Fiji. Mrs. Jaikumari Manilal's earlier experience of working with Gandhi's *satyagraha* activism had given her the knowledge and experience in protest and fighting for one's rights (Lal 2004a, b). When the 1920 strike occurred as a protest against meagre wages, Mrs. Manilal organised the Indo-Fijian Women's Committee to protest against the inconsideration of the then Governor on the living conditions of Indians. Whilst both Dr. and Mrs. Manilal were later deported from Fiji, the seed for women's movement had been planted by Mrs. Manilal. The 1930s saw an increase in Indian women's participation in activities rather than them just as homemakers. With limited education and early marriage, Indian women in Fiji struggled to gain an identity for themselves apart from being a homemaker. A few industrious women began organising women's groups that assisted women from not so well-off background get trained to make a living for themselves. Some of these initiatives included the historical formation of Stri Sewa Sabha in 1934, with which the shift from economic rights to empowerment begun for women in Fiji. This organisation started by wives of Indian businessmen is still in existence. Today, the prominent women's organisations such as Women's Rights Movement and Women's Crisis Centre exist that fight for women's political empowerment and social rights, education attainment and violence against them. However, there still exists the small mother's clubs in most rural areas. Though initiated by the religious groups, they continue to remain an avenue for women to raise their voices. These women's groups (also called *Mahila Mandal*) usually meet on a regular basis to participate in religious rituals such as recital of religious books, sing hymns or to teach religious rituals to younger women. Apart from such religious activities, these organisations are the congregation for women where they share their personal and family issues, console and provide guidance to each other. Such organisations are not only limited to Hinduism, women's or mother's clubs, but also can be found in Islamic and Christian organisations in Fiji. Most of these women's groups are avenues for larger women's organisations for their networking and hubs for workshops on health, education, economic and social issues. Additionally, *Mahila Mandals* organise and generate income through activities such as catering for functions like weddings and engagements and

are involved in income-generating activities through handicrafts, pot plants and food sales. Thus, women activism in post-Girmit Fiji not only is visible just in the large popularly recognised women's organisation, but also exists in these small unknown unrecognised *Mahila Mandals* in rural, remote and isolated areas as well.

Women in Other Sectors

There were also wives of free migrants who had arrived after 1920 to begin a life for themselves as entrepreneurs after the indenture period. Wives of most of these free migrants who became travelling salespersons/businessmen woke early in the mornings to prepare lunches for their husbands and other family members. Additionally, they prepared pickles, sweets, savouries and pappads for sale. These women contributed equally making lives better for their young families. Many such women are no longer with us, yet they ensured that their daughters had better opportunities for education than them. Many of the second-generation women of these business families can be seen taking lunches and afternoon teas for their husbands to the shops, even today. Later section will discuss the contribution of these women in family business. These women are contributors for family income, but were not registered in the labour force, similar to those women who toil in the family farmlands. Not all women had a comfortable family life. Many struggled with limited education and no economic empowerment, had no space to voice their concerns, or no avenues to share their grievances. One can say that Indian women in Fiji faced the most challenging period of their life immediately after the indenture period until they had more education opportunities.

Case of Mrs. Patel

An anecdotal account would be of Mrs. Patel. Mrs. Patel ('Baa' as she was known by) was married at an early age of 13 in Surat, India. Mr. Patel had earlier travelled to Fiji with a group of Gujarati young men to establish themselves as business people in early 1920s. As was the tradition then, the free migrants who had come to Fiji as business people returned to India to get married and returned later to take their brides to Fiji. Her husband returned after 10 years to take her to Fiji. For someone who had never seen sea, travelling on a three-month sea voyage, with a passage through cold New Zealand waters was a harrowing experience. The couple moved to Labasa to expand the business that Mr. Patel had established few years earlier. Unfortunately, after 15 years of marriage, a few child deaths, Mr. Patel died leaving a very young widow alone with a three-year-old daughter. An illiterate young widow in her early 30s was left to manage a large business comprising of a few properties in Labasa. Little does it register to one that the life of young widows in early 1940s in Fiji was one full of challenges, vulnerability and problems. Even amongst business

people, asset inheritance rarely went to the widows. Added to the scenario, a female child inheriting property was rarely heard of. In this case, after years of litigation against the pseudo property claimants and the Public Trustee, Mrs. Patel managed to obtain the ownership of the property. Yet, before the property entitlements could be finalised, one needed to fend for oneself and the young child. Mrs. Patel took up sewing clothes and subletting the building to another tenant. Mrs. Patel had no close family members in Fiji. Her husband's relatives could not be seen anywhere to provide support to her. One is forced to become brave, responsible and meet all challenges in life. Mrs. Patel took up all challenges put across to her with a very brave face. Many old folks in Labasa remember of Mrs. Patel sleeping with a 'lathi[4]'on her bedside and a cane knife under her bed to ward off thieves and intruders. She successfully managed the property after her husband's death as well as ensured that her daughter attained highest level of education possible for girls during the 1950s in Fiji. Such women go unnoticed unless someone shares their stories.

Case of Mrs. Bihari (Rukhmani)

Mrs. Bihari (Rukhmani) arrived in Fiji as a five-month-old baby with her mother during Girmit era (year unknown). Speculations remain about her mother arriving with a baby and her missing father. Later her mother married, and Rukhmani had other half brothers and sisters. Like many Girmitiya's, those travelling by the same ship called one another *Jahajis and* later formed relationships. Rukhmani was married to a fellow Girmitiya in a marriage arranged by her family. She toiled in cane fields with her husband in an area in Labasa known as Korotari. They had ten children; five of whom died during childbirth. After Girmit ended, the couple with their children went back to India and stayed for a couple of years in Calcutta before returning to Fiji in 1928. When CSR Limited began leasing land in Fiji, the couple invested in a piece of land in Nagigi, Labasa where the family settled for a whilst. Rukhmani's husband using his skills learnt during his return trip to India began selling clothes as a roaming salesperson in rural areas of Labasa. This meant the family had additional income, making it possible for them to send a son for education. One of her sons's studied at All Saints School in Volubi Labasa until class 8. Attaining education to that level in early 1900s meant he could get a job outside the canfields. He managed to acquire a job as a salesperson in one of the shops in town, invested in agricultural land for the family and started a business for himself in town. Rukhmani spent her time between the households in Nagigi and in town until her demise in early 1970s. Rukhmani's early childhood, years of struggles during Girmit, childbearing and losses are no different from many who struggled silently during that period. Her life only improved when one of her sons attained education. She could be seen lamenting the loss of her five children, her mother and thinking about her missing father even much later in her life.

[4]Lathi: a heavy pole or stick.

Free Women and Medical Issues

Apart from the indentured women, free female migrants too faced numerous exploitations, including being outnumbered by men, which in itself led to various kinds of physical and sexual abuse and subjugation. Women were overworked, earned meagre wages and had harsh working conditions. Added to these entire colonial, political and cultural plights were the medical facilities for the indentured workers and in particular, where women's health was concerned. For the colony, indentured women were there to work and not to bear and rear children. The total indifference of the colonial masters towards Indian women's health led to many infant mortalities and stillbirths. Incidences such as those of Narayani (Sanadhya 1991: 44–5) and Gangya (Luker 2005) have been discussed in the indenture literature. Medical conditions for Indian women even in the later years did not improve either. Whilst CSR Limited provided some medical care for their staff and workers, this was totally missing after Indians ceased to be contracted labours.

Most of the cane farming areas were in the western and northern parts of Fiji. Thousands of Indians resided in the western part of Viti Levu, but there were no hospitals for them. The Methodist Church had set up dispensaries in some of these areas such as those in Navua and Nausori. However, western Viti Levu was still left out. The Methodist Church, with the efforts of Hannah Dudley, raised the issues of medical negligence with the colonial government but in vain. Eventually, in 1926, the Methodist Church opened its hospital for Indian women in Ba and named it Ba Mission Hospital. Currently, it is funded by the government of Fiji and is the main medical facility in Ba.

Even when the Methodist hospital was established, many Indians still dependent upon the skills of the *daaii (midwives)* for assistance during childbirth and aftercare. There are still many such *daaii* all over Fiji, who provide their skills, guidance and support during and after childbirth for Indian women in Fiji. The total inconsideration of the colony to provide the infrastructure for their medical services especially for Indian women was filled in by the continuous efforts of these traditional midwives to save women and children's lives amongst the Indian population. These women had brought skills with them during the indenture, with expertise and herbal medicines for all ailments known to humans. Using the traditional knowledge, they saved the lives of many women during childbirth. The *daaiis* too are unsung heroines, and their skills continue to live on. Even in India, they are still revered in all places where western medical facilities are scarce.

Stories about the courage shown by women during the 1920s–1960s have been shared orally but remain undocumented.

The New Generation of Women

With the emergence of more schools between 1930s and 1950s, Indian girls took up education to attain a profession. Like in most countries prior to 1950s, professions, which saw more women employment, included nurses, teachers, librarians, sales assistances, secretaries and stenographers. Yet, even until 1960s, it was rare to see a woman drive a vehicle in Fiji. The Indian belief of educating their children in order to give them a better life cannot be exaggerated beyond a point. Indians in Fiji made an effort to encourage their children to pursue education. Whilst most traditional cultural values, similar to those in India, are practised by the Indians in Fiji, Indian women are now marrying later in their lives and can be found to be more educated and in well paid employment. Whilst women's mobility may be restricted in some traditional families mostly in rural areas, most Indian women have become very liberal and independent. More and more women of younger generations are participating and fighting for rights and justice and voicing their concerns against violence committed against women in general. Examples would be in the number of women found working and volunteering themselves for women's organisations such as Fiji Women's Rights Movement, Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, and femLINKpacific. There is no ethnic segregation, and both Indian and Fijian women are seen working together on issues that challenge all of them. However, the struggle for women to voice their views as decision-makers continues to remain. There still remain challenges where violence against women in Fiji, employment in all sectors, and in economic empowerment is concerned.

By 1990s, Indian women (who are all Fiji born) had found means to make an income for themselves and their families. Whilst still behind their male counterparts and the ethnic Fijian women, Indian women were increasingly found to be in employment. It took close to three decades for Indian women in Fiji to show some progress where employment was concerned as can be seen in Chandra and Lewai' (2005) data on employment.

Currently, there are more women employed in the manufacturing sector in Fiji than men. Unfortunately, the manufacturing sector in which many Indian women are employed has historically been a sector where the salary has not increased for many years. For as many as 15 years, most women still earn as little as $2.52 per hour. With around $50.00 as weekly income, these women are living in close to poverty level. It needs to be noted that Fiji has a high cost of living and is a very import-dependent economy. These women are also vulnerable to exploitation at

Table 3 Labour force participation rates by sex and ethnicity

Sex	Percentage of economically active population, 1996		Change 1986–1996 (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Fijians	79	48	(6.6)	21.1
Indo-Fijians	80	27	(5.7)	10.7

Source Chandra and Lewai (2005), based on 1996 and 1986 census data

their workplaces, dependent upon their partners for maintenance payments in cases of separation and divorce, and lack rights over land due to traditional inheritance views. Women married into business families face similar situations. Most of these women do not hold a property title to their name, may have limited education and are thus totally dependent on their partners. Indian women staying in rural areas suffer more due to lack of subsistence production and lack of economic opportunities. Fijian women can be seen fishing and selling traditional handicrafts and souvenirs. However, unless an Indian woman is involved in a *Mahila Mandal*, or a mother's club, knows how to stitch clothes or has excellent cooking skills, she may be totally dependent upon her family for her living.

In 15 years since the last data collection (1996), in both urban as well as rural areas, Indian women are less in the labour force than Fijian women. Even in subsistence work, Indian women are less likely to be involved. Indian women, even today, would toil in the family-owned farms rather than work in paid employment in someone else's farmland. As a result, unemployment rate amongst Indian women is higher than the Fijian women (Table 4).

There are fewer Indian women in labour force than Fijian women, in both rural and urban, and in subsistence employment.

Women in Politics

Fiji saw the emergence of an Indian woman politician in the form of Mrs. Irene Jai Narayan who had migrated to Fiji in 1959 after marriage. She joined as the first Indian woman member of the Legislative Council and later as a member of the House of Representative after the Fiji's independence. Being educated had given Mrs. Narayan the edge over many other Indian women in Fiji since, as already discussed, even as late as 1950s Indian women in Fiji were struggling to gain education beyond primary school. The number of women actively involved in politics and voicing issues close to women in Fiji, remains, distant. Whilst the number of women represented in parliament has increased to 16% in 2014 from 11% in the 2006 election, whether they are real advocates of women's issues remain to be seen. The 2014 election saw inclusion of two Indo-Fijian women as parliamentarians. The recent 2018 general election in Fiji has seen a further increase in the number of women representations in the parliament. At present, three out of ten women in the parliament are of Indian descendant. In 2014, the portfolios allotted to women were related to health and women affairs, and it remains to be seen which portfolios they receive in future. At local level, however, local council elections have not been held since 2005. As such, at local level, women regardless of their ethnicity have not been able to voice their concerns in Fiji. Women and especially Indian women's participation remains the most difficult in Fiji. It may be due to the patriarchal nature of Fiji's society, or the historical subordinated manner, in which Indian women had been treated in the past.

Table 4 Key labour force indicators, age 15 and above, by ethnicity, 2010–2011

	Ethnic Fijian Women			Fijians of Indian descent		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Total population aged 15+	330,000	169,000	162,000	241,000	124,000	117,000
Labour force (employed + unemployed)	224,000	139,000	86,000	142,000	99,000	43,000
Employed	215,000	134,000	82,000	135,000	94,000	41,000
Unemployed	9,000	5,000	4,000	7,000	5,000	2,000
Not in the labour force	106,000	30,000	76,000	99,000	25,000	74,000
Labour force participation rate (%)	68.1	82.6	52.9	58.9	79.6	37.1
Urban	59.8	75.8	43.6	58.7	78.9	38.0
Rural	74.7	87.9	60.5	59.2	80.5	35.9
Employment to population ratio (%)	65.2	79.4	50.5	56.0	75.6	35.2
Unemployment rate (%)	4.2	3.9	4.5	5.0	4.9	5.1
Not in labour force (%)	32.0	17.4	47.1	41.1	20.4	62.9
Subsistence foodstuff producers (included in employed)	58,000	32,000	26,000	18,000	6,000	12,000
Subsistence foodstuff producer (% of employed)	27.0	23.8	32.4	13.0	6.2	28.3
Subsistence foodstuff producer (% of population)	17.6	18.9	16.4	7.3	4.7	10.0
Living in rural areas (% of total population)	55.7	56.5	54.9	40.7	41.5	39.9

Source Fiji Bureau of Statistics (2011). Fiji Employment and Unemployment Survey 2010–11. Suva

Conclusion

Indian women in Fiji have gone through a kaleidoscopic experience for the last 139 years. Their indenture miseries were similar to autocracies faced by many in slavery. Surviving in unliveable, unhygienic conditions and back-breaking work environment, with no escape had left many women broken, close to suicide and depressed. Post indenture had seen no improvement in their living conditions for a few decades. For many, it was moving from one tyrannical life to another since many did not have a penny in their name. Women had to struggle more than their menfolk due to their physical, social, religious, cultural and economic situation. Understanding that they did not have a choice in the given circumstances, these Indian women in Fiji courageously endured all the sufferings and tried their best to improve their own as well as the lives of those close to them. Education became the key element in improving their lives. With education, confidence and networking with other women, the Indian

women in Fiji gained their bearing and began to gain recognition. It may have taken women from India, who had come in the later years, to inspire these broken women to some extent and the missionaries that set-in motion the self-liberalisation of Indian women in Fiji. It was in late 30s that more women gained education and began working outside their household and getting married later in life. Women's organisations were formed, and their participation in business, politics, judiciary, education and health sectors was seen. Whilst women participation in politics is still less than men, a slow but steady increase is being noted. Similarly, women are getting more education and are now equally represented at all education levels. As the ancestors had predicted, progress for Indians would only be possible with education, progress of Indian women in Fiji is an example of that. Yes, there still exists shadows of the Girmitiya life in Fiji, due to the political environment and the perceptions based on patriarchal mindsets. Although one cannot be removed from the shadows of the past, the pains and struggles of the Girmit era have given lessons to women in Fiji, and they are progressing with confidence and leaving their legacies behind.

References

Burns, A. (1963). *Fiji*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office.

Chandra, D., & Lewai, V. (2005). Women and Men of Fiji Islands: Gender statistics and trends. Demographic Report No. 10. Suva: University of the South Pacific and Fiji Bureau of Statistics.

CSR Limited. (1976). *120 Years*. Publicity Department. A chronological summary of CSR Limited 1855–1976. Australian Dictionary of Biography, http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/knox-sir-edward-573. Accessed February 4, 2018.

Department of Education. (1960). *Department of Education Annual Report*. Suva: Government of Fiji.

Fiji Bureau of Statistics. (2011). *Employment and Unemployment Survey, 2010–2011*. Suva: Government of Fiji.

Gittins, J. W. (1946). *Report on the Results of the Census of the Population*. CP (command paper) 34, Sydney: A, Mitchell library.

Gounder, P. (2007). Education and integration in Fiji: A historical perspective. *Fijian Studies, 5*(1), 69–87.

Hooks, J. J., & Stewart, R. E. (2007). The geography and ideology of accounting: A case study of domination and accounting in a sugar refinery in Australasia, 1900–1920. *Accounting Historians Journal, 34*(2), 143–168.

Jalal, P. I. (1997). The status of Fiji women and the constitution. In T. R. Vakatora & B. V. Lal (Eds.), *Fiji in transition*, Fiji constitution review commission research papers (Vol. 1). Suva: University of the South Pacific.

Kelly, J. D. (1991). *A politics of virtue: Hinduism, sexuality and counter colonial discourse in Fiji*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lal, B. (1985). Kunti's cry: Indentured women on Fiji's plantations. *Indian Economic and Social History Review, 22,* 55–71.

Lal, B. (2004a). *Girmitiyas: The origins of Fiji Indians*. Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Studies.

Lal, B. (Ed.). (2004b). *Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian experience*. Canberra: Pandanus Book.

Lateef, S. (1987). Indo-Fijian women: Past and present. *Manushi, 39,* 1–10.

Luker, V. (2005). A tale of two mothers: Colonial constructions of Indian and Fijian maternity. *Fijian Studies, 3*(2), 357–374.

Mishra, M. (2008). The emergence of feminism in Fiji. *Women's History Review, 17*(1), 39–55.

Munro, D. (1994/95). Debate on the Queensland labour trade: Introduction. *Journal of Pacific Studies, 18,* 105–109.
Nicole, R. (2011). *Disturbing history: Resistance in Colonial Fiji*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
Naidu, V. (1980). *The violence of indenture in Fiji*. Suva: World University Service.
Ramesh, S. (2004). After 125 years, Fiji's Indo-Fijian in retreat, Pacific Islands Report. http://www.pireport.org/articles/2004/05/05/after-125-years-fiji%E2%80%99s-indo-fijians-retreat. Accessed February 4, 2019.
Sanadhya, T. (1991). *My twenty-one years in the Fiji Islands and the story of the haunted line* (J. D. Kelly and U. K. Singh, Eds., Trans.). Suva: Fiji Museum.
Shameem, S. (1990). Sugar and spice: Wealth accumulation and the labour of Indian women in Fiji, 1879–1930. Thesis, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10289/12119.
Shameem, S. (1998). Migration, labour and plantation women in Fiji: A historical perspective. In S. Jain & R. Reddock (Eds.), *Women plantation workers: International experiences* (pp. 49–65). Oxford: Berg Publications.
Srivastava, S. (2004). Indo-Fijian women and the fertility debate, 1920–1950. *Fijian Studies, 4*(10), 95–123.
Tavola, H. (1990). *Secondary education in Fiji: An investigation into school effectiveness in a changing society*. Unpublished thesis, London: University of London.
Wood, A. H. (1978). *Overseas missions of the Australian Methodist Church, Volume III: Fiji-Indian and Rotuma*, Victoria: Aldersgate Press.

Chapter 11
Spatialities and *Structures of Feelings* of Burmese Tamils During the "Long March" of 1942: A Gendered Perspective

Gopalan Ravindran

Abstract Among the forgotten narratives of Tamil diaspora, the stories of the exodus of Tamil men and women from Burma during early 1940s are bristling with what Raymond Williams termed as "structures of feelings" (Williams in Marxism and literature. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 131–132, 1977). The "impulse, tone and restraint" of these narratives live on in the spatial, filmic, literary and other traces of past and present lives of Burmese Tamils and their descendants in far flung geographical locations such as "Tiruchirappalli", "Thanjavur", "Moreh (Manipur)", "Vyasarpadi" and across numerous places in Chennai where they live today. Tinker (J SE Asian Stud 6(1):1–15, 1975) calls the exodus "a forgotten Long March" and terms the event as one that teaches the historical lesson of human endurance. More often than not, diasporic narratives are about the struggles of entry by indentured people into treacherous, alien territories and the struggles of survival in such lands. Accounts of the struggles of people of Indian origin, especially Indian women, who were forced to relocate to the homeland are rarely part of the mainstream diasporic scholarship. Such accounts are almost absent in the case of "the forgotten Long March" back home of Burmese Tamils. This paper seeks to fill the gap in a small way by engaging with the spatialities of the journey back home as captured in the diary of journalist/writer, Sarma (March on foot through Burma. Valavan Publication, Chennai, 2006). As far as possible, a gendered perspective of the spatialities is unravelled from these writings with the application of Raymond Williams' framework of "structures of feelings" and Lefebvre's (Schmid in Space, difference and everyday life-reading Henri Lefebvre. Routlege, New york, p. 41, 2008) framework of production of space.

Keywords Burma · Tamil diaspora · Women · Forgotten long march · Spatialities · *Structures of feelings*

G. Ravindran (✉)
Department of Journalism and Communication, University of Madras, Chennai, India
e-mail: gopalanravindran@gmail.com

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_11

The Forgotten Dimensions of Burmese Tamils' 1942 Exodus

Tamils of different lands and their attendant cultures present their own profiles, which rarely share universal characteristics and defy the logic of the mainstreaming term, "diasporic Tamils". The case of Myanmar Tamils is more unique in this respect, and it militates against the universalizing tendency of the mainstreaming logic of the term, Tamil diaspora. Here is a case of an ethnic group that calls Myanmar its home for several centuries, though their population is small. Sarma (2006, 175) notes that "2000 years ago, people from India, China and Mongolia started settling in Burma. The admixture of the blood of the natives of Burma and these settlers eventually resulted in numerous ethnic groups who spoke different languages. Those who remained in northern Burma were known as *Burmese* and those who remained in southern Burma were known as *Mons.* The former had land based relationships with northern India and the later had sea based relationships with southern India. …Especially, the contacts between southern Burma and Tamil Nadu were good. The *Cholas* had used their political influence more in this region. Even today, the population of Tamils in southern Burma is on the higher side".

The population of Burmese Tamils swelled when the first Tamil settlers of the colonial period entered Myanmar after 1850. According to Sarma (2006, 193–194), during 1930s, the population of Burma, after its separation from British India, was 14,667,146, which included 1,219,191 Indians or people of Indian origin (i.e. Indians, Indo-Burmese and Anglo-Indians). No break-up of people from different regions of India is given in this table. In the table on population of *Rangoon*, he provides the figures for the population of different regions and languages of India. The total population of *Rangoon* was 400,415 of which people of Indian origin were 235,456. While 107,041 were from southern India, the rest of the Indian population were from northern and eastern India. Telugus and Tamils comprised 68,591 and 38,450 of the south Indian population of 107,041. According to the 2014 census of Myanmar, the total population is 51,486,253 (MIMU). The census does not mention the size of people of Indian ethnicity and Chinese ethnicity in the official list of eight major ethnic groups. According to unconfirmed reports, the population of Tamils across Myanmar is likely to be in tens of thousands. The postings by social media savvy persons from this small population reveal an intensely passionate diaspora group that is not willing to give up the cultural roots of their ancestors, even though their Tamil language skills are suffering because of the lack of opportunities to learn the language in government schools.

During the Second World War, the aggressive geopolitics fostered by Britain and Japan in the region caused mayhem in Myanmar, and in the first instance, the Tamils were forced to leave in the wake of the bombings by the Japanese during the end phase of the war in 1942. In the second instance, after the antipathy towards the Indians that grew heavily on account of the growing affluence and moneylending practices of certain Indian communities, the military government of Myanmar nationalized all the assets and belongings of Tamils and the final straw came in the form of their leaving the land in three ships chartered by the Indian government. The land which

they helped to grow as they grew became out of bounds suddenly and they had to journey back home. The journey back home, in most cases, did not take them to their homes, but to refugee camps in cities like *Chennai*, where they had to fend for themselves in conditions of isolation, poverty and very poor living conditions.

Tamils have had trade contacts with the southern part of Myanmar, particularly *Pegu* for several centuries. The victory stone of *Rajendra Chozhan* at *Pegu* is one of the evidences that attest to the ancient contacts between the two regions (Ramakrishna Rao, 2017). During nineteenth century, members of the *Nagarathar* community, who are famous for moneylending as well as philanthropic activities, entered Myanmar. During the later decades of the century, the people from the arid regions of *Ramanathapuram* moved into Myanmar as farm and manual labourers. Many went on foot from their home and many returned on foot when the Second World War happened. Many entered Myanmar through the sea route and returned through ships provided by the Indian government during 1960s. This paper captures the narratives of the people who were forced to leave as refugees to their homeland in 1942. The narrative is found in the diary of the famous Tamil journalist/writer, V. Samynatha Sarma. The diary covers the period between 12 February 1942 and 13 May 1942.

The present work engages with the travails of the Tamils who took their journey back to their homeland in 1942 after tasting success, prosperity (as in the case of those in business, government and moneylending sectors) as well as livelihood challenges (workers in agriculture, industrial and service sectors) for several decades in a foreign land which appealed to them more because of the uncertainties of life back home. Due to constraints of space, this paper does not include the contexts of the 1962 exodus of Burmese Tamils. The narratives of the 1942 exodus have registered themselves in popular media such as Tamil films during the 1940s and 1950s in numerous versions. These travails have also been registered in the diaries of authors such as V. Samynatha Sarma, a *Rangoon*-based Tamil journalist working for the magazine *Jothi*. The travails are still etched in the memories and everyday life contexts of the people who escaped death and their offsprings in the intermediate diasporic context they found as their new place of settlement, in places which are known as "Burma Colonies" in Tamil Nadu. The present work seeks to uncover the travails of the Burmese Tamils, in particular, the location of the women in the narratives of journalist/writer Samynatha Sarma.

The old name of Burma is used in this paper where required to do justice to the usage employed by Samynatha Sarma and the descendants of the people who took the "Long March" to India. The notion of "forgotten Long March" by Tinker (1975) is meant to draw the attention to the three dimensions of the travails of ordinary Burmese Tamils who took the journey to India leaving their homes, friends and relatives, personal belongings, including gold ornaments, bought with their savings.

- The first dimension is (what was forgotten, even in the narrative of Hugh Tinker), manifold. The mainstreaming of people of diverse ethnic groups as Indians in the narrative only adds to the problematic of the forgetfulness. Forgetting the *Long March* of Indians from Burma is as problematic as mainstreaming the *Long March*

of people of different ethnicities as each would have had their own challenges while living in Burma and while leaving Burma.

- The second dimension relates to the mainstreaming category of "Burmese Tamils". They were/are not a homogenous entity in terms of their demographic profiles. For instance, the accounts found in the diary of Samynatha Sarma reflect the travails of a family and its peers who were literate and connected well in the official circles. Their travails cannot be compared to those who were working as manual labour in the industrial and agricultural sectors, as Samynatha Sarma himself mentions.
- The third dimension relates to the mainstreaming of the mode of exit from Burma. People who were in the upper echelons had the advantage of flying out or taking tickets in ships without any hassles. Those who were fortunate to get berths in ships regardless of their humble economic backgrounds were the second group. The third group comprised ordinary people who had to walk through northern Burma towards Manipur.

In the absence of any other account of the exodus of Tamils during 1942, in concrete terms, the account of Samynatha Sarma is an invaluable source to relate to the forgotten dimensions of the *Long March* of Burmese Tamils.

Exploring the gender mediation of spatialities and the *structures of feelings* in the exodus of Tamils is a challenging task for two important reasons. The absence of a good male—female ratio of emigrants to Burma and the absence of written narratives by Tamil women on the exodus. The secondary status of women in the narratives such as the one this paper deploys is not surprising given the secondary status of women in the ratio of males and females who entered Burma as workers. The available figures for the Telugu and Tamil emigrants in Burma, as cited by Satyanarayana (2001, p. 11), for the period 1921–1931 point to the secondary status of women in statistics on the movement of people from southern India to Burma. There were 430 women for 1000 Tamil males and 208 Telugu women for 1000 Telugu men who entered Burma as workers. Satyanarayana (2001, p. 11) says that this was in contrast to what he terms as "family-oriented" migration of labour to Malaya. "Surprisingly, Telugu migration to Malaysia was more family-oriented; 717 women for every 1000 males, compared to 515 among the Tamil labour communities in 1931" says Satyanarayana (2001, p. 11).

Certainly, these figures only point towards the disparity in the movement of males and females as workers or companions. However, they do not speak of the living conditions of the women who migrated as a consequence of this non-family-oriented migration or the women who were left behind in their villages by their male partners. There are narratives to engage with both categories of women as well as women who transited between the homeland and the settled land in the case of Malaysia. A case in point is an epic narrative by Inba Subramanian titled *Vaiyasi 18* (2016). This work serves as a narrative by a female writer of Malaysian origin on the travails of a female emigrant, Meena, in war-torn Malaya. After the death of her husband when she was 32, Meena encounters a hostile male-centric world and marches on bravely despite setbacks in her domestic, private and public spaces.

Similar narratives, written or oral, have to be unearthed or made possible in the case of the Burmese Tamil emigrants. The ongoing field work of the author among the Tamil women of Burmese origin in North Chennai, who migrated back to India in 1962, represents one such attempt. Their narratives unravel what the macro-narratives caused by the Japanese bombings during 1942 and the forced migration of Tamils in the post-independent Burma during early 1960s do not reveal. For instance, Easwari (personal interview, 19 02 2019), who is in her 80s, gave a different context to the antipathy between Burmese and Tamil emigrants. Said Easwari: "We do not accept marriage between our men and Burmese girls. Some of our men took Burmese girls. Problem arose because of that only. Just as we go with certain protocol, when we want a bride for our groom, they also started coming in the same manner and wanted our girls. Many left their villages fearing reprisals for their refusals to marry their daughters to Burmese."

The Relevance of Raymond Williams' *Structures of Feelings*

According to Raymond Williams, social forms are of two kinds. Those that are fixed and institutionalized and those that are lived and articulated. Every age undergoes a change and such a change cannot be attributed to only dominant ideology or any such framework or the relationships between such entities. The changes in the qualitative characteristics are the result of the transformation of the *structures of feelings* of individuals and not institutions. According to Williams (1977, 131–132), "The methodological consequence of such a definition, however, is, that the specific qualitative changes are not assumed to be epiphenomenon of changed institutions, formations and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations between and within classes. At the same time they are from the beginning taken as social experience, rather than as 'personal' experience or as the merely superficial or incidental 'small' change of society. They are social in two ways that distinguish them from reduced senses of the social as the institutional and the formal: first, in that they are changes of presence (while they are being lived this is obvious; when they have been lived this is still their substantial characteristic): second, in that although they are emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to wait definition, classification or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action. Such changes can be defined as changes in *structures of feelings*. The term is difficult, but 'feeling' is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of 'world-view' or 'ideology'".

As Williams posits, feelings are not against thoughts and vice versa. The feelings are to be read as feelings of thoughts. When such feelings are lived and articulated, they echo the qualitative changes of the presence and they move on from being expressions of personal consciousness to expressions of social consciousness. They are unlike the *epistemes* of Foucault in that they are not about the self-contained nature of changes or the periods they stand for, but are sites of emergence of a new change or a new period.

Spatialities of Structures of Feelings

Spatiality, like its counterparts—materiality, visuality, aurality, temporality, tactility—are key sites of communication. These sites exist as a web and co-produce themselves socially, culturally, economically, politically, and more importantly, as historically contingent processes. These webs draw their sustenance from their everyday non-institutionalized contexts, as well as the institutionalized contexts that seek to influence our everyday contexts. These webs may also be read as dialectical sites where they also produce and reproduce themselves as sites of prevailing ideologies and their emerging alternatives.

As a simplistic notion, spatialities are the qualities of being spatial. At a more substantive level, the quality of being spatial is the consequence of the co-production of the qualities of being temporal, aural, material, visual, etc. These qualities do not exist in their solitary states. There is a simultaneity about these qualities to inhere in their counterparts. The spatiality of a highway restaurant is made possible not only by the restaurant's spatial dimensions, but also by the visual, aural, temporal and material dimensions. These individual qualities cannot be torn away from their co-locations. In the conventional sense, scholars working in different areas have sought to privilege their locus of attention over other loci which make possible their locus in a discursive manner.

For instance, works on visual culture have a tendency to privilege visuality as the locus of attention over spatialities, temporalities, materialities and auralities. Even if there are exceptions, the exceptions do not walk the extra mile and seek to connect the seemingly impossible qualities such as visuality and aurality. What makes the visual in the aural sense or what makes the aural in the visual sense is not a question of enquiry. This work seeks to avoid such approaches and would make efforts within the available scope of this paper to engage with other qualities that made/make spatialities of the Burmese Tamils possible.

Among the Marxist philosophers of the last century, Henry Lefebvre made a seminal contribution to the making of the spatial turn in social sciences, particularly in revealing the spatial dimensions of everyday life. His spatial triad is a nonlinear one as it seeks to be linguistic, phenomenological in its nature and dialectical in its approach. At one level, the triad is constituted by *spatial practices, representations of spaces* and *representational spaces*. At another level, the triad is constituted by *perceived space, conceived space* and *lived space*. The first level of the triad is made meaningful by the linguistic version of the approach to the production of space socially in everyday life. The second level of triad is made meaningful by the phenomenological version of the production of space socially in everyday life. They can be approached as sites of production of materiality, knowledge and meaning. As Schmid (2008, 41) argues, "The core of the theory of the production of space identifies three moments of production: first, material production; second, the production of knowledge; and, third, the production of meaning. This makes it clear that the subject of Lefebvre's theory is not "space in itself," not even the ordering of (material) objects and artifacts in space. Space is to be understood in an active sense as an intricate

web of relationships that is continuously produced and reproduced. The object of the analysis is, consequently, the active processes of production that take place in time".

There is also a possibility to envision another web outside the webs of spatialities, materialities, temporalities and auralities. This is the web of *structures of feelings* made possible by the former web. To advance Henri Lefebvre's conception to the next level, one may posit a production plane of the webs which includes Williams' *structures of feelings* as a part of the webs which are co-producing themselves as spatialities, temporalities, auralities and materialities. In such a case, we need to speak of the *structures of feelings of spatialities* as well as the *spatialities of structures of feelings* in the same vein. A small attempt has been made in this paper in this regard.

In the following sections, the diary of Samynatha Sarma which narrates his "march on foot" is examined to provide meaningful contexts of explorations of the *spatialities* of the *structures of feelings* of the Burmese Tamils. The narrative of Samynatha Sarma remains a seminal source of details on the geography of the *Long March* on foot. It is a comprehensive, single-minded chronicle of the plight of Burmese Tamils as war victims and refugees. It is a story about the gruelling and seemingly never ending unchartered road journey through foreign lands and inhospitable natural terrains.

Spatialities *of* Structures of Feelings *of the "Long March" of Burmese Tamils*

"Those who came from Burma on foot did not have any thought about their lives. They were the ones who reached their destination alive. Those who were conscious of living were the ones who died on the way. As they say, fear of death is more fatal than death itself. This fear of death has taken away their lives. There are others who valued their belongings and were bemoaning the loss of their belongings. They too died. There were others who carried on their bodies the few belongings they valued very much, but could not carry them till the destination. There were thousands of people like these who were forced to leave for India", writes Samynatha Sarma, in the opening paragraphs of his diary of the "Long March" from *Rangoon*, where he worked as a writer/journalist. This is the most detailed narrative with which we can engage with the travails of the Burmese Tamils as they left their loved homes, friends, relatives and belongings, when the Japanese planes started bombing the capital city, Rangoon, two days before Christmas on 23 December 1941.

According to Samynatha Sarma, they had been forewarned about the "Christmas prize" by the Japanese, but it happened sooner than the date fixed. The bombings continued on 25 December 1941. More than 80 Japanese planes dropped bombs around 11.00 am on *Rangoon*. After this second attack, majority of the Indians living in *Rangoon* felt it was time to leave by any means.

The British regime was becoming shaky, and the exit options through the *Ayeyarwady* river transport were becoming uncertain with every passing day. The ships to India were carrying more passengers beyond their capacity. Those who could

not find tickets in the ships, decided to take trains or river boats towards the northern part of Burma *en route* to India. "Those who could not take the ships, boats or trains were the ones working as manual labour in harbour and railway stations or pulling *rickshaws*. They decided to walk soon after the bombings on 23 December 1941. They had the objective of reaching India, but did not know the route, nor the nature of the route or the hurdles to be crossed. They had the single objective of leaving *Rangoon*", wrote Samynatha Sarma. The attacks by the Japanese planes resumed on 04 January 1942.

Samynatha Sarma also had to leave *Rangoon* eventually as the situation became worse for him, the office staff and the relatives and friends. He went to *Rangoon* in 1937 to take charge as the executive editor of a monthly magazine, *Jothi*. He continued to edit the magazine till his departure in February 1942. In fact, the last issue was also published by him in February 1942 despite the hardships caused by the war. His office was located in the famous *Kalabasti* area of *Rangoon* city, and he was living on the outskirts in a place called *Bagdo*.

As the bombings intensified, the antipathy by the locals towards the Indians also intensified. The women at home bore the brunt of the worsening situation. Samynatha Sarma was living with his life partner and he was keen that she should leave at the first available opportunity. When his friend offered to take her to India, she declined and said she would stay with her husband.

Recounting her plight, Samynatha Sarma wrote: "On many days, myself, and the other two males, my friends, *V.K.S* and *V.Ve.Ra* used to leave home for office. My life partner was alone at home. There were no neighbours with whom she could talk. Most houses were locked up. The streets wore a deserted look. Those who remained on the streets were the Burmese youth who were raising slogans against the Indians. Moreover, the Japanese planes used to circle above and drop bombings. Some of them were brought down by British tanks. The deafening sound of these happenings were more like the thunders during summer. In this situation, my life partner did not lose heart and was brave enough to endure all these by staying calm. I am wondering how she managed to be like this". Here is also a story of a journalist/writer who had the ethical framework of equality writ large in his descriptions of the plight of his life partner. He never once referred to her as his "wife".

Samynatha Sarma's "D" day for leaving *Rangoon* was set as his friend, V.K.S, boarded the ship on 20 February 1942. After he left, Sarma was informed by well-wishers about the worsening situation and urged him to leave immediately. The final emergency call came from a high official, Hari, who came on his motorcycle to his office and urged him to leave. He said: "Are you still here. The military has announced that people should leave *Rangoon* by 4 pm today. The army will also desert the city. The fate of *Rangoon* after the army leaves is not known. You better leave this place and eke out a living somewhere". He dropped him at his suburban house and told his wife, "Please, save sir and take him away. Let him use his talents somewhere else and survive. It is your duty to save him. Please do not tell anyone that I conveyed this information to you as I am doing this secretly and my superiors would punish me if they learn about this visit".

Samynatha Sarma leaves his home on the early morning of 21 February 1942, in a car which belonged to his friend V.K.S, who left for India, along with two other cars and each carried four passengers. Their destination was the city of *Mandalay*. His diary records the happenings during 12 February 1942–13 May 1942, the day when he reaches *Madras* by train from *Calcutta*. Samynatha Sarma had to leave his dearest lifetime collections of books and precious unpublished manuscripts, beside other belongings in his home.

There are departures of many kinds for diasporic persons. The most traumatic is the departure from their beloved home and its spatiality. This spatiality is imbued with three sites of Lefebvre's triad and their attendant materiality, knowledge and meaning on account of the spatial practices, representations of spaces and representational spaces. Normally, the tragedy of this departure at the microsite of the home is made to be eclipsed by other kinds of departures such as the one from the place of dwelling, a village, town or city. In many cases, the mainstreaming point of departure that is privileged over others is what is euphemistically referred as the "settled land" or the country that made it impossible for them to live. The point of destination is the "mother land" or the country that is meant to receive them back.

"It was time for sunrise. My life partner lit the *Kuthu Vilaku* in the centre of the hall. She kept the well boiled milk before it as the offering. That became the offering for the luminous God. The light was standing still like the God it represented. I offered prayers. We left the keys of the bureaus and cupboards in their places. We did not use the iron planks to close the main doors. We do not have any regret about the belongings we are leaving behind. We are not thinking about living here or how we will live in the days to come. Where is the time to think?" This is the concrete movement of departure for a fleeing person and his life partner on a route that would be strewn with untold dangers and hardships in a land that had become alien and dangerous within two months since the "Christmas prize" was dropped on 23 December 1941 by the Japanese planes.

Spatial practices such as the lighting of the sacred lamp (*Kuthu Vilaku*) by women on auspicious occasions or during daily prayers are common in Tamil households. But this instance of lighting of *Kuthu Vilaku* on the eve of the unchartered journey in a house that is going to be empty still provides a context where two kinds of materialities come together to structure a spatiality of the moment of departure. The first kind of materiality is the material contexts of *Kuthu Vilaku*, the visible light, the symbolic light of the luminous God; the offering, the boiled milk; and the place, the centre of the hall. The second kind of materiality is what Daniel Miller (1987, 85–108) posits as the "humility of things"—a site of invisible relationships between the material things and the human beings. The second-order materiality can also be likened as Heideggerian *facticity* (Heidegger, 1999, p. 5). These materialities come alive because of the spatial practice of women lighting *Kuthu Vilaku* as a symbolic invocation of the omniscient God as a form of light.

This spatiality is sustained by the obvious relationships between the sites in the Lefebvre's triad. The materialities mentioned above are also emerging as the site of knowledge, spiritual and everyday life centric, even as the meanings that make possible such a site of knowledge link back with the materialities of the spatial

practice. The meanings could have been as many as Samynatha Sarma and his life partner visualized in their minds as they were enacting the ritual of *Kuthu Vilaku* prayer. There is a need to rethink spatial practices such as the lighting of *Kuthu Vilaku* as communication rituals with a transformative capacity. As Wagner (1984, 143) says, quoting Christopher Crocker (1983), "Ritual always involves moral issues, and has a definite outcome, whether positive or negative … Above all, ritual has, or seeks to have, a transformative capacity…" (6, p. 160). Thus, if we choose to approach ritual as communication, the differential, or relation, across which communication takes place for its performers amounts to the kind of difference that, in the words of Bateson, "makes a difference" (3, p. 110). This ritual may also be likened as the site of transformative spatial practice at home which seeks to make the future spatial practices more safe.

These spatialities also harbour intensely what Raymond Williams terms as the elements of "impulse, tone and restraint" in the emergence of the *structures of feelings*. Any ritual of this nature is driven by the impulse that doing the ritual is necessary and good in order to safeguard oneself from unforeseen dangers and to be in the safe envelope of spiritual environment. The impulse that drives the ritual of *Kuthu Vilaku* ritual is as much a feeling as the tone and restraint of the spatial practices associated with it. The offering of boiled milk expresses the tone and restraint as much as the location of the *Kuthu Vilaku* in the centre of the hall. The tone is as much temporal as it is spatial. The temporal quality of the tone is to be associated with the unfortunate context and time of departure from their beloved home at the time of sunrise. It is a tone tinged with hope and uncertainty. The restraint is to be read also as spatial as the ritual was not performed in the prayer room of the house, but in the centre of the hall. The lighting of *Kuthu Vilaku* during routine daily prayers has its spatial location fixed, unlike the lighting of *Kuthu Vilaku* during the final moment of departure from their beloved home. This calls for a restraint of the routine of the spatial practice and the impulse of doing it differently and in a more powerful symbolic location, the centre of the hall.

Samynatha Sarma and his co-travellers were supposed to go via the city of *Pegu*, which is 45 miles north-east of *Rangoon*. "*Pegu* was once a thriving port town. Traders from Tamil Nadu used to come here and exchange goods. They had an influential status in the Burmese royal government according to Burmese history", wrote Samynatha Sarma. But, as the Japanese troops were likely to come through *Pegu*, they were advised to avoid *Pegu* and move to the town of *Prom* to reach *Mandalay*. *Prom* is 150 miles from *Rangoon* on the train route. "We reached *Prom* well past 10 pm and were received by a national school teacher, *Na.Sa* and taken to his home. People at home received us warmly despite the odd hour and made us feel at home. They packed lunch for our travel when we started from *Prom* next morning".

The group reached *Mandalay* after four days on 25 February 1942 via *Macdela* and *Sowsa*. On reaching *Sowsa*, they were searching for food in the railway station even though it was difficult to get Tamil food in Burmese railway stations. As a pleasant surprise, a Tamil friend transferred from *Rangoon* to *Sowsa*, *L.M.C* approached them warmly when they were waiting in the car and said: "Please come home and have

food". They reached the home of *L.M.C*, but were feeling the discomfort of going as a group of more than ten people and disturbing the women at home for food. "Our hunger did not mind this and pushed us into their house. The women of the house warmly welcomed us. It was very heartwarming for us at that moment. The son-in-law of the house was not well which would have caused anguish for the housemates. But they did not reveal even an iota of that and served us food within 30 min. on a plantain leaf. How did they get the head leaf at that time? They served *Vathal Kuzhambu, Papad* and *Butter Milk*, and it was a feast for us. The *Vathal Kuzhambu* tasted as a heavenly elixir for us, who have been tormented by travel and hunger. They served us handsomely. …Yes, during this Burmese march, how many humans have degenerated into human animals and how many rose to become humans from being human animals. …Those who treated us with *Vathal Kuzhambu* at *Sowsa* appeared as mature human beings in our mind. They will live there as long as our minds are alive".

According to Raymond Williams, social forms are of two kinds. The institutionalized, fixed ones and the non-institutionalized individual ones which are lived and articulated. The later make possible the emergence of a qualitative change in every age when the personal and the social coalesce and becomes the social experience. The arrival and departure of Samynatha Sarma and his group in key geographical sites become sites of spatialities as well as social forms that are made possible by the qualitative change experienced by the refugees as they transit between points of consolation and desolation. The point of desolation appears when they depart from the caring environs of their friends and take the road again for the next destination. The point of consolation appears when they are made to live and articulate the familiar entities—Tamils, Tamil food and Tamil hospitality.

The warm hospitality of Tamil women, who made possible the arrivals (thus far) pleasant, worked with their favourite traditional food varieties such as *Vathal Kuzhambu, Papad* and *Butter Milk*. What makes a refugee's life a lived and articulated social form is not only the macro-challenge of reaching the final destination, but the immediate challenge of living life, if not as comfortably as before the war, on a familiar cultural ground in an unfamiliar geographical landscape. The spatialities of the unfamiliar geographical landscape are made attractive by the non-spatial dimensions such as the moments when the refugees visualize and encounter a familiar cultural environment in the house of a Tamil-speaking family. The visuality of the spatial becomes a site of lived and articulated social forms of the refugees. The wafting smell of the traditional Tamil food varieties pushes forward an olfactory dimension of the social form even as the sounds of their mother tongue transform the spatial as aural. These are the feelings which come ahead of thoughts when the social form is emerging as a lived and articulated experience at the moments of arrival into familiar domestic spaces. They slip back into thoughts at the moments of departure when the group hits the road for an unfamiliar journey. Between these two points, the quality of being spatial is co-determined by the quality of being temporal. In these webs of transforming and contingent spatialities lie Raymond Williams' webs of social forms that are raring to work their way as *structures of feelings*. These two

webs come together and constitute what this chapter terms as the *spatialities of structures of feelings*. In short, the spatialities of the unfamiliar transit points are made more familiar by the non-spatial dimensions of encounters such as the traditional Tamil food and the combined *structures of feelings* the coming together of the spatial and non-spatial dimensions make possible. The noteworthy point to remember here is the gender mediation provided by unfamiliar women in these encounters.

From *Sowsa*, they went in car to *Mandalay*. *Mandalay* is 400 miles north of *Rangoon*, and it took four days to reach on road. It was well past 6 pm on 24 February 1942. They stayed in a temporary accommodation for a few days and moved to a rented house on 28 February 1942 along with friend, *V.Ve.Ra.* They started cooking their own food from the next day. Samynatha Sarma had a special interest in visiting the local market, *Jikeo bazaar,* and was touched by the aesthetics of selling goods by the Burmese women. "The fresh vegetables, variety of greens, baskets full of tomatoes, pods of green peas, groundnuts and mounds of rice were sold by Burmese women in a clever and polite manner. The mode of arrangement of these goods by the Burmese women expressed their aesthetic sense. At the time of war, the goods were very cheap. … When Japanese bombers were bombing, in *Rangoon* 4 1/5 measure of rice cost only Rs. 1".

Raymond Williams was very particular about the nature of implication of *structure of feelings*. Obviously, implications imply change, but change here is a qualitative change, expressed as a measure, quality of change. The *structures of feelings* are about the webs of objects, subjects and the relationships between them in a dynamic, lived and articulate mode. The webs in the case of the *structures of feelings* made possible at the encounters in *Jikeo bazaar, Mandalay*, are instructive as they nurture the thread of the gendered perspective of Samynatha Sarma in relating to women in their everyday life contexts. So far, we have been only introduced to his gendered perspective woven around his life partner, life partners of his friends who were showering warmth and kindness when they served him and his friends. There was an aesthetic dimension in the minor details and the unsaid in his descriptions of these encounters. These aesthetic dimensions came alive when he described the spatial practices of his life partner at the time of the departure from their home on the suburbs of *Rangoon*. The relationships between his life partner, the *Kuthu Vilaku*, its symbolic and real light, the centre of the hall, the temporal context of the sunrise brought alive not only the symbolic context of the ritual done by his life partner, but also a certain aesthetic dimension that lurks mostly in the feelings of the persons doing the ritual, rather than in the objects or their ordering in a space.

Similarly, the description of what he felt on seeing the selling of goods by Burmese women at the *bazaar* brings alive not only the symbolic meaning of the objects on display and their relationships with the buyers and sellers, but the aesthetic meaning of the relationship. Lefebvre's spatial practices are as much about the materiality of the objects and contexts as about the knowledge and meanings one derives from them.

The materiality of "the fresh vegetables, variety of greens, baskets full of tomatoes, pods of green peas, groundnuts and mounds of rice" that were put on display by the Burmese women has an intangible dimension of their relationship with a gender that

is known for ordering them "in a clever and polite manner". This is the social form of Raymond Williams. A social form that is at once lived and articulated by both the buyers and sellers. This becomes a social form as it transcends being a personal experience and becomes a social experience. Aesthetic experience is as much a personal one as it is a social one. Aesthetic experience is not about the quantity of the objects on display in the spatialities of the *bazaar*, but the quality of change they express in terms of their coming together, not on their own, not by themselves, but in their handling by a particular gender of a particular culture in a particular country. His simplistic description that "the mode of arrangement of these goods by the Burmese women expressed their aesthetic sense", reveals much more in the spatialities of the *bazaar* than said.

As news of the fall of *Rangoon* came, many dropped the idea of returning to *Rangoon* and wanted to move ahead towards the Indian border. Samynatha Sarma, his life partner and friend *V.Ve.Ra*, found a berth in a train to *Moniwa* with the help of his contacts in the postal dept. and started their journey on 17 March 1942. They reached *Moniwa* on the same day around 7 pm. They had to leave by steam boat to the next station, *Kalewa*, on 22 March 1942. The journey was arduous as the boatmen were cruel and made the passengers to pull the rope tied to the boat alongside the shore. "Many of the passengers led a good life. They were forced to travel in these boats as they were keen to reach their destination. During normal times, they would have hired cars or other vehicles. They were not used to this hard labour. Can such people pull the boats loaded with passengers while walking on the river sand? Many of them bled to death and fell flat on the sands. On seeing this horrible scene, the women and children in the boat used to cry aloud. Would the boats stop on account of their cries? They continue to move on. On the banks between *Moniwa* and *Kalewa*, the bodies of those who bled to death were seen by us".

From *Kalewa*, the arduous journey took them to *Damu* in lorries. In *Damu*, they had the good fortune of not staying in the refugee camps as their postal dept. friends, guided them to the house of the post master, who was a contributor to *Jothi*. As before, the woman of the house was kind enough to provide them hot water for bathing and sumptuous food. The group already had two women, two men and three children. The life partner of the postmaster was tipped to be the third woman to join the group in the journey ahead as the postmaster wanted to send her home because of the worsening situation. Said he: "I am rid of a big worry. Who can be a better support for my wife than you in this journey. I need not worry once I sent her with you. I also will follow suit". When women of similar cultural backgrounds and orthodoxy travel together it also provides them a bond that is not likely with strangers of dissimilar cultural backgrounds.

The notion Raymond Williams' *structures of feelings* finds application in such situations when the very feeling of the thought about such gendered possibilities, even as human beings are fleeing, acts as a powerful factor. This is well attested by what Samynatha Sarma notes in his diary. "Like us, the lady practices traditional rituals. She is a believer. Because of this, she and my life partner quickly became sisters in arms. This was very advantageous during the travel by walk".

From *Damu*, the last milestones of the journey were covered on foot on the hilly terrain via *Vaxa*, the border village on Manipur side and finally to *Wansing*. These stretches were covered with five *tollies,* which were carried by four persons each. In total, there were 28 people, including eight *coolies* to carry the refugees and their goods. The three women were given three *tollies* and the three children were given one *tolli*. Samynatha Sarma was given one *tolli*. The routes to *Wansing* were two and they were decided on the basis of the discriminatory policy of the British. Those whose names figured in the Government gazette such as officers, doctors, lawyers and Anglo-Indians had the right to travel on the shortest route (30 km) with good refreshment facilities *en route*. This route was known as the *white route*. The *black route* was circuitous (50 km). It was steep with very poor gradients and facilities.

They reached *Wansing* on foot on 16 April 1942 and *Dimapur* in trucks, the last railway station on the Indian border, on 21 April 1942. In *Dimapur*, they were accommodated in a refugee camp which was visited by Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru enquired about the facilities available to refugees and gave suggestions for improvement. This came as a joyous moment for the inmates. Samynatha Sarma translated Nehru's speeches into Tamil when he visited Burma with his daughter, Indira Gandhi during July 1937. He moved with him closely during this visit. Nehru also sent a felicitation message to *Jothi,* when it was started in August 1937. However, he was reluctant to get near him and introduce himself, despite the prodding of his friends in the camp. "I was shy, weak and impoverished. It is more than a week since I bathed. My clothes were dirty. My mustache and beard have grown well. I was not sure whether he would recognize me in this state. …Even though, I had a close acquaintance with him, I was shy to meet him in *Dimapur* camp. He also left in a hurry".

"Not a Wife, but a Life Partner"

Samynatha Sarma's accounts of the travails of the Burmese Tamils who took the land journey to India in 1942 are replete with details about the gendered spatialities and *structures of feelings*. The same has been revealed in the preceding paragraphs. At first reading, these details did not reveal much. But on closer scrutiny, with the application of Lefebvre's and William's prisms of spatialities and *structures of feelings*, the sketchy details about the gendered locations and mediations of the those who were fleeing became very significant and give birth to a canvas that becomes instructive to learn about the sufferings and determination of the Tamil women who undertook the arduous journey with their male life partners. The male life partners, in particular, Samynatha Sarma, were more than sensitive in ensuring that the gendered spatialities do not work against women. His life partner was not seen as a wife, but as a life partner throughout the recorded account of the gruelling journey, in words and the deeds.

The spatialities of *structures of feelings* of Samynatha Sarma and his life partner and other women and men in the "Long March" were sustained by the obvious relationships between the sites in Lefebvre's triad and the attendant materialities. These spatialities of *structures of feelings* were also revealing themselves as sites of a social experience rather than as personal experience, as Raymond Williams envisioned. These spatialities were also emerging as the sites of knowledge, spiritual and everyday life centric, even as the meanings that made possible such sites of knowledge link back with the materialities of the spatial practices of the fleeing men and women.

References

Easwari. (2019). Tamil woman who migrated back to India in 1962, personal interview, 19 02 2019 at B V Colony, North Chennai.

Heidegger, M. (1999). *Ontology—The hermeneutics of facticity* (p. 5). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Miller, D. (1987). *Materiality* (pp. 85–108). Durham: Duke University Press.

MIMU (Myanmar Information Management Unit). (2019). http://themimu.info/census-data. Accessed March 17, 2019.

Ramakrishna Rao, K. V. (2017). The victory pillars of Rajendra Chola: Missing from Pegu (Myanmar), Kedah (Malaysia) and Mauritius. In *Proceedings of the 37th Annual Session of South Indian History Congress*, Salem.

Sarma, S. (2006). *March on foot through Burma*. Chennai: Valavan Publication.

Satyanarayana, A. (2001). "Birds of passage"; Migration of South Indian labour communities to South-East Asia; 19–20th centuries, A.D. IIAS/IISG CLARA Working Paper, No. 11 Amsterdam.

Schmid, C. (2008). Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space: Towards a three-dimensional dialectic. In K. Goonewardena, S. Kipfer, R. Milgrom, & C. Schmid (Eds.), *Space, difference and everyday life-reading Henri Lefebvre* (p. 41). New York: Routledge.

Subramanian, I. (2016). *Vyasi 18*. Yavarum: Chennai.

Tinker, H. (1975). A forgotten long march: The Indian exodus from Burma, 1942. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 6*(1), 1–15.

Wagner, R. (1984). Ritual as communication: Order, meaning, and secrecy in Melanesian initiation rites. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 13,* 143.

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature* (pp. 131–132). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chapter 12
The Voice of 'Silent Majority': An Indentured Subjugation of Kamlari Women in Nepal

Sarita

Abstract 'Conjecturing the Indian Diaspora' in the context of the homelands is to be constructed by the diasporic imaginary of 'perceived moments of trauma' and diasporas as 'exemplary communities' of the transnational world of post-modernity. The discourse of nationhood and borders, the grounds on which communities defend the land of origin and assert their cultural identities in the countries of settlement, assumes the patriarchal cultural traditions as the norm, especially in the context of Indian Diaspora. Such narratives then play a central role in defining the codes and conventions of femininity and womanhood. The women, under the Kamlari system, had been subjected to bonded servitude in the Terai region of western Nepal, who got legal liberation in 2013. This paper reflects on the difficulties of the young Tharu 'Kamlari' women after that. This study assumes that the much-awaited freedom could not overcome the legacy of the evils of bonded servitude that existed from historical times, specifically, victimising the young women of 'Tharu' indigenous community. This paper also discusses how the historical and systemic injustice and the socio-economic disparity occurred on a multidimensional level, forcing these young Tharu women, into bondage, thus continuing their oppression till date. Additionally, these women have also been victims of bonded servitude owing to the intersection of multiple oppressions based on their ethnicity, class and gender.

Keywords Trans-nationality · Post-modernity · Kamlari · Servitude · Indigenous community · Nepal

The word silent majority first used by the 37th U.S. President Richard Nixon in his speech and afterword this phrase carryforward for the group of people who are not outspoken and who are not consider to constitute a majority.

Sarita (✉)
School of International Studies, Centre for South Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
e-mail: sarita88_ish@jnu.ac.in

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_12

Background

Slavery is one of the most exploiting institutions that ever existed in the history of humankind. It has existed across time and place as one of the most enduring institutions and conditions found among people (Stevenson 2015). The inhuman practice includes bonded labour, debt peonage and other such similar conditions. The root causes of slavery have often been described through socio-cultural, political and economic conditions. In explaining the slavery from an economic perspective, Karl Marx called slavery as the market-oriented arrangement for the benefit of the capitalists, and the slave-owner buys his labourers [slaves] as he buys his horse. If he loses his slave, he loses the capital. This argument not only explains the exploitative nature of the slave system but also indicates the historical and civilisation connotation of the practice. Historically, slavery has been an integral part of the civilisation evolution of societies.

Almost all the countries in the world have legally abolished the slavery, yet it prevails in different forms, and it is often justified on the grounds of extensive poverty and unemployment as well as ignorance and unawareness among the people. Meanwhile, over the years, international organisations, public movements and law enforcement have compelled the societies to abandon slavery and provide all sense of individual dignity and self-respect, purely to keep their self-esteem, and their body and soul together. The anti-slavery movements in the past century began from the late '1950s and until the 70s, in the form of civil rights movements in the USA paralleled the burgeoning of the historiography of the slavery in the plantation economies of the eighteenth century and nineteenth centuries' (Chatterjee and Eaton 2006). A similar kind of revolution emphasising on outlawing slavery was seen in South Asia in the early years of the twentieth century. A leading protagonist of the anti-slavery movement, Mahatma Gandhi was shaken by the spread of slavery for centuries in South Africa. During his stay in South Africa, his experiences with the existing discriminatory laws and practices in the country forced him to voice against the practice. After his comeback from South Africa, Gandhi wrote that 'God laid the foundation of my life in South Africa and sowed the seed of the fight for national self-respect' (Desai 1995).

Going by the numbers, 'of the 40 million victims of modern slavery worldwide, almost two-thirds are exploited in Asia and the Pacific' (Nishimoto 2018). Specifically, in South Asia, slavery has existed in various forms. In South Asia, 'there is no single story of slavery…there is no overreaching master narrative, no tidy sequence of evolutionary stages… (and) each instance of slavery in South Asia was shaped by unique conjunction of contingent factors' (Chatterjee and Eaton 2006). In the region, countries like India have an estimated 7,989,000 people living in modern slavery with an estimated proportion 6.10/1000, resulting in vulnerability to modern slavery by 55.49/100 (GSI 2018). The numbers provide an alarming data on slavery in the modern-day world. The second country in South Asia with the largest numbers includes Nepal. The country has an estimated 171,000 number of people living in modern slavery with a global ranking of 55 in a total of 167 countries (GSI 2018). It is

one of the worst-hit countries where slavery has/had existed with the underpinnings of the economic and cultural conditions.

A Case of Nepal

Nepal, like many other states, was formed by the people belonging to different races, castes, classes, communities, tribes who are believed to have migrated broadly from all the four directions (Bista 1967) including the people who came from Himalayan foothills, some from Tibetan region and the Indian plains. The reasons behind these migrations included the search for better agricultural land, religion, economic empowerment, etc. However, the search for employment and other opportunities led some communities to engage in the labour works which over the years became the form of tradition. One such tradition that emerged out of long servitude towards landowners was known as the Kamaiya system.

> Kamaiya is the oldest living traditional system of bonded labor in southern Nepal. The people who work as laborers under this system are also called Kamaiyas. This system was similar to most of the bondsman systems in the 17th century, where people without land or work could take land in loan (saunki) from landowners, giving them a source of income to sustain minimum livelihood in exchange to working and living in the landowner's land as slaves until the time the loan was cleared, which took generations. The exorbitant debts charged made them bonded to their lenders and were forced to sell labor to repay the loan taken. Following the plague that affected the southern Terai region of Nepal in 1950, the area saw a great number of migrants from hilly regions. Naturally resistant to Malaria, the Tharus lived undisturbed for generations in the swampy marshlands of Western Nepal. The hill tribes moved to the fertile marshlands and displaced the Tharus, taking their land. This marginalized the Tharu tribe which traditionally owned the land, since they had no records of their land ownership. The settlers registered lands in their names and got the Tharus to work as farming laborers. The practice of getting the people from the tribe to help in the family business was gradually transformed into a forced labor system. This system was most prevalent in the central and western region of Terai, where there are more indigenous tribes living in the areas. This system most affected people from ethnic groups Tharu and Dalit. (Slavery 2018)

The 'Tharu' groups inhabited the plains or the Terai of Nepal.[1] The Terai region, during the eighteenth century, was a place of wilderness, rich in dense tropical forest consequently hits with the epidemic of malaria. As Guneratne explains, Terai in the mid-eighteenth century gradually emerged as an area for potential economic prosperity for various aspects of forest products, timber, elephants and most importantly its fertile soil for cultivation and hence for revenue of land (Guneratne, Modernisation, the State and the Constitution of a Tharu Identity in Nepal 1998).

In the later years, because of the fear of malaria, the hill people were unable to settle in the Terai region, so the Tharus were the only immigrants there as they

[1]Tharu is one of the major indigenous communities living in the southern plains of Nepal known as Terai that is rich in grainy soil appropriate for the cultivation of various types of crops. Tharu people represent 6.6% of the total population of Nepal.

were the only people described as genetically immune against the malaria infection (Gutiérrez 1990). Then, the Nepal government required a large number of human labour to take advantage of the Terai region since the Tharu people alone could not meet the labour need. Therefore, in order to flourish economic activities in this region, the government encouraged the migration of people from India (Regmi 1999). The migration was one of the reasons responsible for the humiliating condition of the Tharu people. 'The indigenous Tharu people had been drawn into bondage since the 1960s. By the year 2000, whole families of the Kamaya lived and worked on the land and could be passed from one creditor to another-effectively sold' (Miers 2003).

The Rana Period

With the eradication of the Malaria in the Terai, the region was identified as a 'Naya-Muluk' which included Banke, Bardiya, Kailali, Dang and Kanchanpur. It was during this phase in mid-nineteenth century that countries around the world were witnessing the end of colonial rule. While Nepal was never under the control of any colonial establishment, country had been a tributary to the Chinese emperor until the early 1920s. The tributary system had come into effect after Tibet fallen weak to the territorial expansion of the Gorkha ruler. As a result, Tibet had asked the Chinese emperor to mediate and limit the Nepalese influence on its soil. In its claim to powerful empire, China had forced Tibet and Nepal to be indebted by playing the role of a peacemaker between Nepal and Tibet. However, with the decline the power and prestige of Chinese empire, British emerged as a superpower. Meanwhile, Nepal was unable to play their China card to limit British interference. This led to surrender by the Rana regime in Nepal which offered his army to fight for British to please them. Previously, as a gesture to Nepalese manpower during the 'Sepoy Mutiny'[2] in India, British gifted Nepal with Terai regions in 1860 which form the present-day western part of Nepal (Mishra 2000).

This arrangement between the British Empire and the Nepal was an official agreement between Nepal and the East India Company. During this period, the British agreed to hand over Terai land to Nepal which was given to civil servants and military personals, royal people and to the hill migrants as a gift so they could start living there and clean that area for the best use. This system was better known as the land revenue and the native Nepali, and it is called as Birta. Because of such division, a big social inequality was structured, and with this, Tharu community lost the legal ownership of their lands. Then, there were people who became Jamindars (landlords) and people who lost their lands were deployed bonded labours. The hierarchical division of caste began to exploit the Tharu community to their interests. Before and after the

[2]Indian Mutiny, also called Sepoy Mutiny was a mutiny by the Indian soldiers in the East India Company (British rule) in India in 1857–58. The company had used the Gurkha soldiers who were offered by the Rana Prime Minister of Nepal as an acknowledgement to the British Empire to suppress the Mutiny.

Rana regime, Jamindars were predominantly the mediators between the landowners and the state for collecting taxes where the Tharus came last in this hierarchical structure. The settlers who belonged to the high castes became economically stronger and dominant. In the contemporary world including Nepal, the land has always been considered as one of the most important productive resources that not only determine the economic aspect of people but also determine the social hierarchy and political power which remains true till date (Karki 2002).

Tharus became indebted to the landowners and were bonded in unequal social relationship to sell labour instead of the loan is taken for sustaining a minimum livelihood. By the time, in 1854, laws ere were introduced for the first time named as *Mulki Ain*[3] where Tharus were counted as 'enslaved' and 'alcoholic drinkers' (Guneratne, Modernisation, the State and the Constitution of a Tharu Identity in Nepal 1998). With the mindset of higher caste people that Tharus could be easily used or kept for the domestic works and exploited slaves, Tharu people worked hard, and their labour was used mostly in clearing the forests to make them useful for farming purposes. Over the time, the social relations of production and reproduction became the genesis of the 'Kamaiya' system in its present form, especially in the form of 'pure' bonded labour (Paudel 1998).

Kamaiya System as Debt Bondage

After the exile from their established land forced by the high caste Hindus, there was no other option left for Tharus but to work as bonded labourers in the farms of Jamindars because they had to borrow money for their survival from the money lenders. Indirectly, Tharu people were always encouraged by the landowners to spend money on marriages and cultural festivals, so that they were forced to borrow the money from them, leading them to the circle of paying the debt back. Hence, Tharus started to repay the debt by making their services available by living in the landlord's house and serving them round the clock. However, the borrowed amount remained to be paid, resulting in a permanent debt for the generations. While the generations failed to pay their forefathers borrowings, this cycle of the exploitation did not stop, and this gave birth to the cruelest form of slavery known as bonded labour.

A common understanding of debt bondage labourer is those who agree to work for the same employer for a long period in exchange for a loan or cash. The word 'Kamaiya' phrased out of the Tharu ethnic community; according to the local language, the word Kamaiya is invented from the word 'Kam' which refers to 'work'. It

[3]Under the Hindu, Monarch is not possible to deal with all transactions only through religious literatures (Shastra). Over the course of time, alterations and amendments were made into the domestic laws, to the tune of the country, time and circumstance, from time to time, and it was known as the *Muluki Ain* (General Code), which was prepared by an order issued by our great ancestor the then His Majesty to then Prime Minister and came into force on the seventh day of the month of Poush of the year 1910.

is usually used by the Tharus as 'hardworking' labour. Therefore, during the eradication of malaria from the Terai region, only Tharus could work and were preferred by the landlords due to their immunity to malaria. There is very less information about the Kamaiyas at the national level, but it as per the Informal Sector Service Centre all the Kamaiyas are not bonded labour (INSEC 1992). They are classified in two different categories based on different type of works and as Kamaiya with *Saunki* (debt) and Kamaiya without *Saunki*. The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare of the Government of Nepal defines 'bonded labour' as follows:

> a person working in the field for a landowner, looking after his animals and doing other agricultural works in landowner's field and his household chores, relentlessly either taking or not loans from the owner can be considered as a bonded labourer. (MOL 1995)

However, Kamaiya without *Saunki* could choose their masters in the festival of 'Maghi'.[4] During the festival, Tharus worship their Kuldevta (family deity) and celebrate it by drinking, eat special food and dance for a duration of three to seven days. In this festival, the Tharus are free to choose their masters in Maghi festival, and most importantly, it is the time to 'Renew the Contract' between the masters and labour. This process of exchange is called as *Khujuni-Bhujuni*[5] in Tharu language, and from this exchange, all the Kamaiyas along with their family members including women and girls began to start working in their master's house. In return to their work, they received certain amount of grain as wages, and this process continues for generations and, later it is passed on to new generations. Although this system of the bonded labour is traced back by the anthropologists in 1960s, it was first to come in a notice in 1990s after the establishment of democracy in Nepal (Robertson 1997).

Generally, Kamaiya worked as a farmer, but there is a division of labour by their age and gender. Kamaiya children are involved in the animal herding. Similarly, the children involved in goat herding are called *Chegrawaha.* Girls involved in household works were called Kamlari. Theoretically, at the time of changing contracts, both the parties agreed not to be involved in the practice of bonded labour. But it is a compulsion in case his/her grandson or son dies so the other family member continues work as labourers to pay off the debt till the complete repayment is made which could hardly be the case. According to Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) data, about 33% of the Kamaiya were from four generations and 21% from three generations and 28% almost from two generations (INSEC 1992).

The Genesis of the Kamaiya System

During the Licchavi Dynasty between 100 and 800 AD, the origin of the Kamaiya system can be traced back as a bonded labour system. Most importantly, this system

[4]Maghi is the biggest festival of Tharus, also called as the *Maker sakranti* festival in the month of Magha of Nepali calendar. This festival also called as a new year of Tharus.

[5]The term *Khujuni* means search and *Bujhuni* is to agree.

was exaggerated by King Jayasthiti Malla, who forced to imply caste hierarchy in Nepal where people were forced to work in trade activities, and this was institutionalised during eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the unpaid and forced labour introduced, and workers were bonded to pay their labour to Rana rulers. This came under the categories as *Jhara*, *Begari*, *Rakam* where *Jhara* symboled the general obligation to work for the government which was made compulsory and unpaid. *Begari* was another form of compulsory and unpaid labour for public structure, landlords and village officials. *Rakam* was on the other hand was aimed for unpaid labour, provided to landlords instead of cultivating landlord's land in Nawalparasi, Rupandehi and Kapilbastu districts during the Rana regime (Regmi 1977). Additionally, M. C. Regmi mentions other forms of hierarchy as Jamindars, *Talukdars* (intermediaries) and *Birtawala*, *Raja*, *Jagirdars* (landowners) who were officially authorised or informally used unpaid workers as their tenants (Regmi 1999).

Even so, the Kamaiya system cultivated from everyday practice of obtaining a 'helping hand for family commerce', it also meant public work. This was the tradition especially in the Tharu community as norms that every house or the family member must give his/her labour in a year into the landowners' house and to Guruwa (priest of the village). Apart from this, there was no government interference, so the land of Terai was undeveloped, and thus, there was Begari (unpaid labour) and Jharali (one member from each house). With this, it was used as an exploitative form by the *Bahun* and *Chhetri* landlords.

Guneratne explains that in 1991, the leaseholders had to provide labour in Dang valley for the landlords. The duration of the labour was thirty-six days in a year. In western Dang, Begari included agricultural work of every kind, house construction, work on village road and bridge at the behest of the landlord. They were also made to work as caretakers to carry a palanquin when a member of the landlord's family wished to travel to a neighbouring village or bazaar, and if a labour (Tharu) denied working, they were punished, harassed by the police and faced non-cooperation by the government and even the loss to access to land (Guneratne 2002).

Jhanga (traditional culture of marriage) also exaggerated the Kamaiya system because, in weddings, engagements, ceremonies and all traditional norms, they required money to celebrate, and for that Tharu, Kamaiya borrowed money from their landowners (Gautam 1994). Generally, all the Tharus came into the Kamaiya system because of the verbal tacit contract which was made at the time of debt for one year, and it was renewed in the month of Magha. Kamaiya were not only exploited by the landlords but also by the wealthy farmers because most landlords did not involve themselves in the farming, so they gave their land on lease to farmers for agricultural work, and Kamaiya also worked with them on the same land.

However, ethnically Kamaiya worked for all the communities but mostly they worked under *Pahari Jamindars* (Hill Landlords) because they did not understand the respect of Kamaiya and became more exploitative (Rankin 1999). Kamaiya were not only responsible for agricultural work, but they had to work in any other fields too. The work was divided by the age, group and gender, but it was not as harsh as a 'Kamlari' because as a Kamlari, a female servant has to be available round the clock

in the house of landowner where the duration of work of Kamaiya depended on the weather and land fertility.

‘Kamlari, a Women Only’ Bonded Labour System

For centuries, their contributions to society were ignored, and their household jobs were considered under the structure of family, culture and society. Hence, their works always fell under the tradition. Meanwhile, in many societies, they formed the largest work group as the labours, most importantly as bonded labours. Also, their work did not limit them to household works, and they have been exploited to extreme conditions including as sex slaves. The ‘Kamlari’ system in Nepal runs on the similar lines as of a bonded labour and finds similarity with the Kamaya system. The only difference Kamlari has is that it is a gender-specific system limited to women and girls only. Kamlari, a ‘Gender Basis Servitude’ continues the slavery for leading the lives of Kamiaya families as an alternative way. The system was correlated with the daughters of bonded Kamaiya labours.

The word Kamlari signifies to the hard-working women, especially a girl child who is consigned to work in the landowners’ house as a ‘Domestic servant’. As in the Kamaiya system, Kamlari also based on the stated contract and get recommenced every year. Kamlari system was introduced along with the Kamaiya system. Since the male members of the family used to work as Kamaiya in the landowners’ field, their children and other members of the family do the same and work on his/her house as labourers, and the system of Kamlari was institutionalised afterwards.

Moreover, due to the speedy growth of population, Kamaiya felt the need for more land for agriculture, and to get land for agriculture from the landowners, a competition use exists. Those who had more daughters were given the land for share cropping and the landlords used to get more Kamlari as a domestic slave for their household work and for others who had no daughters got no land for work, and this made their lives so difficult.

The Kamlari girls are the recognisable domestic victims of class, caste, gender and race. Moreover, they neither had agencies to recognise them, nor they have resources to voice themselves. They have been vexatious in the hitherto evils of bonded slavery. They are considering such difficulties for women who been cuffed in the bondage. The system of slavery has its multiple effects, and the ripples of its effects affected to men, women and children; however, there are circumstances of slavery-like practice that are gender-specific and poverty and marginalisation of women of minority groups along with the ‘social complicity’ and lack of political will to address the issues, is central to slavery’s existence (Hezfeld 2010). In this context, Gutierrez argues that the women specifically from marginalised communities often fall in a ‘double jeopardy’ like in the case of Tharu Kamlari women. They have been judged with the state of powerlessness that has deprived them of having access to the social resources imparting direct impact on their livelihood and experiences (Gutiérrez 1990).

Kamlari women belong to the Tharu indigenous people, as mentioned the historically marginalised groups. They faced high stage of discrimination based on their ethnicity, gender, caste and class, and they come into very economically deprived. Hence, they always are the victim of discrimination based on their status and subjected to be as bonded labour and its harsh impacts.

The theory of indigenous people suggested to the element of the race with the other aspects like gender and class which shapes the living experiences of the women. Nepal, as a multi-ethnic country, has a long history of categorisation of people into their different caste groups. Hierarchy based on caste system, Nepal has been expressed through the hierarchical system, and it has transformed into social system, where it took discrimination so deepened that if the indigenous people faced as exploitation, discrimination and humiliation and boycott, and further they restricted by any opportunity and faced discrimination-related poverty and dependency on landlords (Upadhyaya 2008). Tharu people have been subjected to the systematic oppression of the existing hierarchical categorisation. For Tharu, Nepal's caste system was the most suppressive force in their lives (Calato 2015). Therefore, Kamlari always faced exploitation because they came from lower caste, landowners belonged to a higher caste, and even their children do the same as they taught by their parents.

In Nepal, women have been suffering in their every aspect of life. Gender-based discrimination shows their traditional cultural bias which deep-rooted and also has the hierarchical way of discrimination between male and female (Pokharel 2008). Tharu women have been the victim of historical suppression. Before 1950s, Tharu women of post-marriageable age were regarded to be witches by the people of another caste. It was also believed that the Tharu women could change a stranger into wild animals and even kill them by injecting high fever (Guneratne 2010). This harassment of women within the community showed a way to outsiders to consider their image negatively. Besides this, birth of a girl child especially in Tharu family is linked with the household work. She always gave the duty of domestic work. It is considering as a compulsion, so that they can send their daughters as a Kamlari, and after marriage, they can run their house properly. The reason behind sending them in domestic bondage rather than their sons is due to their parents expected their girls to learn household and agricultural skills in both the ways, rather than their family income (Grir 2010).

For slavery, if the male or the head of the family decides to send his daughter into bondage, they send them as domestic labour, women cannot interfere in their decisions, and their daughters cannot deny head of the family's decision. Women are not only victimised in slavery, but they also discriminated in the labour market in Nepal, but they are also not paid equally with their male partners, and sometimes they subjected to abuse and violate in the work area. Tharu always used Kamlari as a meal provider who never got paid for their works, and the wages in any form went in the hands of the male members.

The government of Nepal outlawed the *Kamiya and Kamlari* bonded labour system in the year of 2000. Meanwhile, the testimonies of the victims of such an inhumane system are more horrible than they could be portrayed in a research format. During personal interactions with a number of ex-Kamlaris, several victims of this system

shared their plight and narrated that legally the system might have been outlawed, its brunt has continued from the year 2000 onwards. Shanta Chaudhry, a former member of the Constituent Assembly of Nepal, was one of the victims. During an interview with the author of this study, she narrated that:

> I was born in the Dang district of Nepal. In a large family and under the prevailing poverty, I had no other option but to help my parents in whatever way I could so when my family was approached by a wealthy landlord for me to be leased as a Kamlari, my parents had agreed to send me off to that family. I was only eight and could hardly understand the challenges of a Kamlari. Since these were the struggling times for my parents and family, the assistance of any kind from a third person could keep us indebted for the rest of our lives. In this case, the landlord had come with a good amount of bottles of expensive alcohol which was near to impossible for my father to buy. In the gift box, there were new clothes and as a teen, what best I could expect in my life and my parents were promised an annual amount of Rs. 700 (approx. USD 100) in return to my services. It was in the year of 1989 that I left my home and started working as a Kamlari. In the initial days of my servitude as a Kamlari, I fell sick due to harsh work conditions and workload. Above my work hardships, I was accommodated in a temporary shelter which was a horrible place during rainy seasons. I was often beaten by the wife of the landlord for missing on work in case I fell sick. Like every other young girl, I aspired to study and go to school, but it always remained a dream. In the search for the safety of my life, I got married to my friend so the unwanted advancements from other males could be avoided. I have a specially challenged child and my second baby had died of malnutrition. However, unlike many other Kamlaris, I decided to raise my voice against the system, so I joined the social movements. In 2006, I was freed as a Kamlari, and due to my background as a social activist, I joined the Unified Marxist Party of Nepal. After joining the mainstream politics of Nepal, I decided to become the voice of thousands of the women who have been victims of the inhumane Kamlari system. I was nominated to the First Constitution Assembly in 2008 after Nepal had began to walk on the path of democracy after a decade long Maoists movement and People's War against the feudalistic Monarchy which rule the country for past several centuries. While being in the politics, I have realized that even the political system has its own way of dealing with the social challenges. Hence, till date, you will come across thousands of such stories who have remained Kamlari for their life, and many of them have met the uneventful conclusions.

In another interview, Ms. Sangeeta narrated her story as:

> I am a 25 year married woman. Currently, I am working as a Kamlari, and I got into this system at the age of five. When I was leased as a Kamlari by my present landlord, he had promised a meagre annual amount to my family. Since the government has abolished Kamlari system in the year 2000, my contract was changed from verbal one to a written one. Due to illiteracy of my parents, they could hardly understand the terms and conditions of the contract. The landlord made me to stay since the new contract was legal which he used to his benefit. Today, I am a married woman and my husband live in the village and I am working in the sub-urban are of Bhaktapur, one of the major cities in Nepal. However, due to the intervention of the NGOs, I have been going to skill developments programmes and sometimes go to school but mostly I go to school to appear for examination as the workload in the house is very much I have to take care of the landlord's children and do the daily work without skipping on any duties. Compare to other landlords in the locality, my present landlord is a better than others but he would not like me to go out of his house. I have been exploited sexually in the past, and now and then, male members of the family make advances and its really scary for me. Also, due to my financial situation and an unemployed husband, I am the sole earner of my family; hence, it is really difficult for me to stop working as a Kamlari.

In these two interviews, the outcomes are different. In the case of Shanta Chaudhry, she is a free woman and participating in the civic and political life, but in the case of Sangeeta, she is still in the clutches of poverty, and as a result, she has not been able to move out of the system.

Slavery: Outlawed Yet Exists

In the due course to abolish the slavery in any form from the country since the emergence of the 'Modern Nepal',[6] the civil society has played an important role in voicing the discrimination, exploitation of the indigenous communities across Nepal. With such efforts, it was only in the year 2000 that government took cognisance of the slavery system by bringing laws in this regard. Meanwhile, in the year 2000, male centric slavery was outlawed. The women centric slavery was still prevalent in practice. Almost a decade later, the voice of the woman was herd, and Kamalari-like systems were abolished in 2013. After the abolition, government started rehabilitation and starts giving land titles for cultivation only to the males, and women who also survived in bondage were not considered at all for land (Upadhyaya 2008).

In the rehabilitation phase, lack of ability took women into chronic poverty. They yet again were forced to borrow money from landowners, and in paybacks, they once again got enslaved for generations. While in the past, these inhumane practices got institutionalised as a system of bonded slavery in the name of Kamaiya and Kamlari, and poverty kept the land masters high on sprit to carry on with the practice. Hence, poverty became one of the most significant factors in hat pushing Kamlari women into the circle of debt bondage. As a result, condition of the freed bonded labours never improved even after the practices like Kamlari was abolished constitutionally. It has always been pursued illegally behind the doors, and Tharu women are left as marginalised in an intersection of oppression.

All over the world, domestic work irrespective of the age of hour limits is pursed behind the closed doors. Children, under age five or six-year, are engaged in the domestic works, often in terrible conditions for long hours. International Labour Organisation (ILO) has made efforts to differentiate between domestic work or child domestic labourers. According to ILO, children under the age of 12 are classified as child labours, and it prohibits their deployment in any form. Also, children under the age of 18, working in adverse conditions for more than 43 h a week, are also categorised under inhumane labour practice. Meanwhile, several countries in the world, especially in the developing nations employ children and exploit them to their benefits. In many a cases, it is question of the family survival that the young children of delicate age are employed as labours. Hence, it is unsurprising that despite efforts made at the international level by the organisation like ILO, child slavery is very much prevalent in the contemporary time. Similarity, Kamaiya and Kamlari

[6]The term is used to mark the end of the Rana rule in Nepal and reinstatement of the Rana rule in Nepal in 1950.

system are ingrained into the societal model of societies like Nepal, and every new mechanism to outlaw them is bypassed in some way or the other.

Conclusion

To conclude, with so many struggles and efforts in the year 2000, Nepal abolished Kamaiya system of bonded agricultural labour, where families of indigenous Tharus would be put to work to pay the never wind-up interest on the chronological debt. However, as per the survey conducted by the Plan International, around 10,000 to 12,000 girls were working as domestic servants under the Kamlari system in 2011 (PIN 2011). These girls worked as domestic slaves, long hours, without education, without family and subjected to abuse and harassments. In May 2013, a great number of activists, campaigners and with few former Kamlari girls got united them and carried a significant mass movement for two weeks in a row to put pressure on the Nepalese Government for speedy remedy to the victims of this inhumane practice and a complete execution of the laws, so no future practices could be evolved. The United Committee for the Elimination of Kamlari Practice (UCEKP) led the protest on the streets, roadblocks, strikes to recognise the continuation of the Kamlari system and to act accordingly.

The Kamlari system was officially banned by the Nepal government on 18 July 2013. However, in 2012, Nepal government proposed many laws and government policies as the Kamlari Education Guideline to provide education and accommodation to the Freed Kamlaris. Although, laws remain in order, a systematic exploitation behind the doors has not stopped which is done by misinterpreting the laws to the interests of the landlords. In the later phase of rehabilitation, it was found that many Kamlari did not have identification cards, and without cards, they could not apply for the governments welfare schemes for girls including scholarships to enrol themselves into any academic programmes. However, all the implemented projects with ILO, Nepal government showed all the efforts to make freed bonded labourers, especially Kamlaris to give them a good livelihood, and it is the primary need to support families that are free from bondage.

References

Bista, D. (1967). *People of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

Calato, C. (2015). *Where the pains and hills collide: Understanding Nepal's political tension through Tharus in Chitwan*. Durham: University of New Hampshire.

Chatterjee, I., & Eaton, R. M. (2006). *Slavery and South Asian history*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Desai, M. (1995). In M. Gandhi (Ed.), *An autobiography or the story of my experiments with truth* (p. 33). Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House.

Gautam, R. (1994). *Tribal ethnography of Nepal* (Vol. II). New Delhi: Book Faith India.

Grir, B. (2010). The bonded labour system in Nepal: Exploring Halia and Kamaiya children's life-worlds. *Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, 29*(1), 29–41.
GSI. (2018). *The Global Slavery Index*. Retrieved January 11, 2019, from Global Slavery Index: https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/data/maps/#prevalence.
Guneratne, A. (1998). Modernization, the state, and the constitution of a Tharu identity in Nepal. *The Journal of Asian Studies, 57*(3), 749–773.
Guneratne, A. (2002). *Many Tounges, one people: The making of Tharu identity in Nepal*. New York: Cornell University.
Guneratne, A. (2010). Tharu-state relations in India and Nepal. *Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, 35*(2), 19–28.
Gutiérrez, L. M. (1990). Article navigation. *Social Work, 35*(2), 149–153.
Hezfeld, B. (2010, July 02). Slavery and gender: Women's double exploitation. *Gender and Development, 10*(1), 50–55.
INSEC. (1992). *Bonded labour in Nepal under Kamaiya System*. Kathmandu: Informal Sector Service Center.
Karki, A. (2002). Movement from below: Last right movement in Nepal. *Inter Asia Cultural Studies, 3*(2), 201–217.
Miers, S. (2003). *Slavery in the twentieth century: The evolution of a global problem*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.
Mishra, C. (2000). *Seasonal agricultural labour migration from India to the Nepal*. Kathmandu: Center for Nepal and Asian Studies.
MOL. (1995). *Study report on the social and economic conditions of Kamaiyas*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Labour.
Nishimoto, T. (2018, July 20). *Modern slavery and child labour: Asia's unacceptable record*. Retrieved November 11, 2018, from South China Morning Post: https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2119890/modern-slavery-and-child-labour-asias-unacceptable-record.
Paudel, M. (1998). *Gender and child issues under Kamaiya System in Mid and Far-Western Terai neighbours*. Kathmandu: Action Aid Neopal.
PIN. (2011). *Plan Youth Kamalari Project*. Retrieved April 12, 2015, from Plan International Nepal: http://planyouth.ca/projects/kamalari-abolition-project-kap-nepal.
Pokharel, S. (2008). Gender discrimination: Women's perspective. *Nepalese Journal of Development and Rural Studies, 5*(2), 80–87.
Rankin, K. (1999). Kamaiya practices in Western Nepal: Perspectives on debt bondage. In H. O. Skar (Ed.), *Nepal: Tharu and Terai neighbours* (pp. 27–46). Kathmandu: EMR.
Regmi, M. (1977). *Landownership in Nepal*. New Delhi: Adroit.
Regmi, M. (1999). *A study of economic history of Nepal (1768–1846)* (Vol. 2). Varanasi: Nath Publishing House.
Robertson, A. (1997). *The struggles Coome against the Kamaiya System of bonded labour*. London: Anti-Slavery International.
Slavery. (2018). Retrieved January 11, 2019, from Slavery: https://sites.google.com/a/mtholyoke.edu/slaveryinnepal/kamaiya-2.
Stevenson, B. E. (2015). *What is slavery?* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Upadhyaya, K. P. (2008). *Poverty, discrimination and slavery: The reality of bonded labour in India*. Anti-slavery International: Nepal and Pakistan.

Part IV
Sexuality, Liminality and Agency: The Caribbean Context

Chapter 13
Hindostani Women in Suriname: From Coolies to Matriarchs

Chan E. S. Choenni

Abstract Between 1873 and 1916, more than 34,000 indentured Indian labourers arrived in Suriname of which one-third were women. Despite the shortage of Indian women, the Indian population—labelled as 'Hindostanis' in Suriname—increased rapidly. Because the absolute numbers of 'Hindostanis' were relatively small, intermarriage not only between the various castes but also between Hindus and Muslims was normal. Moreover, older men married younger women, and almost all widows and so-called destitute women who emigrated to Suriname had (new) relationships and bore children; some even having multiple partners. The shortage of 'Hindostani' women resulted in a better bargaining position vis-a-vis the 'Hindostani' men, but many were threefold overloaded. They worked on the land or had jobs to earn money; they took care of their spouse and children and also did the housework. After their labour contract ended, the adult women who settled in Suriname obtained a free from rent, allotment of 1.5–2.0 ha of cultivable land for six years. Furthermore, many acquired so-called wild (not cultivated) land for free when they agreed to cultivate it. Almost all 'Hindostani' families became, in due time, small farmers. 'Hindostani' women had agency, and many became matriarchs. But interestingly, they promoted the 'izzat' (honourability) of their (grand) daughters and were stringent on their behaviour in public.

Keywords Indentured women · Suriname · Hindostani women · Agency · Honourability

Introduction

The impact of the gender imbalance on the gender relations and the (bargaining) position of the indentured Hindostani women in Suriname will be explored in this chapter. These women had to work hard in a harsh climate to survive. They also were exploited due to the plantation system and the overall prevailing conditions in

C. E. S. Choenni (✉)
Free University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: c.choenni@kpnmail.nl

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_13

Suriname. Besides these negative factors, there were some differences in their conditions compared to the Indian women in the British Caribbean colonies. Important to mention is that emigration to Suriname started in 1873. Suriname along with Fiji was the last colony to receive indentured labourers (Tinker 1974). By this time, several improvements had already been introduced in the indentured system as well as in the maritime transport technology.

As per the system in Suriname, the labourers could return to India after five years of service or could settle there. The difference in five- and the ten-year term was an important one because the labourers preferred Suriname over Trinidad because of the shorter period of the contract (Sanderson Report 1910). On the other hand, in the case of women, the Trinidad and Guyana offered only three years of contract against Suriname's five years. The period of five years was more favourable for the women as they had a guaranteed income for two additional years. Furthermore, since 1895, all 'Hindostani' adults or households settling in Suriname obtained a plot of fertile Crown land, free and without yearly rent for six years. Those who wanted to return after finishing their five-year contract received 100 *guilders* (comparable with 125 Indian rupees then) in lieu of their return passage.[1] Moreover, the British appointed a consul in the capital Paramaribo to protect the Hindostani indentured labourers and pressurise the Dutch planters to treat her British Majesty's subjects well. The consul reported yearly on this matter to the Imperial British Government. When almost twenty per cent of the indentured labourers died between 1873 and 1874, the emigration to Suriname was curtailed temporarily. It was resumed in 1877 after the Dutch government promised to create better arrangements and allowed the British consul to monitor these improvements. Housing and cooking facilities and the free medical provisions were also improved (Colonial Report 1880). Furthermore, the Dutch Colonial Government's policy in Suriname was focused on retaining the culture of the 'Hindostanis' because this was considered conducive for the agrarian orientation. Since 1875, child education was made compulsory in Suriname. Most of the children and young girls who immigrated to Suriname received some years of schooling, although many parents were not inclined to send them to school.

At the time of recruitment in India, it was harder to recruit women for emigration than men. Therefore, the premium for every recruited woman for Suriname was higher than the men. It was thirty-five rupees for women, as against twenty-five rupees for men. Moreover, it was more difficult to persuade persons to emigrate to the Dutch colonies than the British colonies. As a result, the Suriname Agency in Calcutta paid the highest average premiums for recruiting emigrants. The planters in Suriname, who had paid in advance for their labourers, preferred single female labourers. However, it was hard to recruit single women in India for emigration because almost all women got married at a young age (Pitcher 1882; Grierson 1883).

The proportion of the arrivals in Suriname was seventy per cent men (23,405) and thirty per cent women (10,232) of the total of 33,637 indentured 'Hindostani' labourers. This rate was slightly higher than the minimum required rate of 100 men to 40 women (28.6 per cent). Among the children (4,360, totalling 13 per cent),

[1] One rupee was then around 80 cents or 0.8 *guilder*s (Dutch *guilder*) (Wiersma 1903).

the gender balance was better (2,458 boys and 1,902 girls). The majority of women were among 20–30 years of age when they arrived in Suriname.[2] The large numbers of single women emigrating alone proved that they consciously chose to emigrate. Reddock (1986: 81) concludes, '*the majority of Indian women came to the Caribbean not as wives or daughters but as individual women*'. Although it was hard to recruit single women, still the recruiters succeeded because the premium for recruiting women was higher than for men, and the Suriname agency had a preference for single women above married women. The pressure to meet to the required rate of 40 women on 100 men was high, and recruiters were pressed to recruit single women (Wiersma 1903). Furthermore, there were negative images of women in the colonies. It was asserted that they were forced into prostitution, while a small proportion was 'ordinary *prostitutes*' and '*shamelessly immoral*'. Mc Neill and Lal (1914, 313) conclude about Suriname that:

> Approximately one third consists of married women that migrated with their husbands; others are often widows and women who left their men … a small percentage are ordinary prostitutes…the large majority, however, are not as often as is stated, the shameless immoral. They are women who had faced trouble and emigrated to escape their lives as prostitutes in India.

Mangru (1986, 97) argues that 'many of the 'runaway' women risked of dying from hunger, and they seized the opportunity to emigrate. Most women who wanted to emigrate were unmarried women, in particular widows. Some unmarried women registered themselves as married women or married soon after their recruitment, in the depots.'

Two Types of Women

It meant that two types of women migrated to Suriname. One type was the married women who were considered the respectable group of women. These women were depicted as: '*right kind of woman*', '*honourable women*', '*right women*', '*moral types*', and '*useful women*' (Hoefte 1987, 57; Reddock 1986). But even among the married women, not everyone belonged to the so-called docile types. In some cases, these married women were the instigators for emigration.

An example:

> My maternal great grandmother (Parnani) Sitabia gave birth to a son on the ship Erne I in 1890 (De Klerk 1953, 72, 80). This son Sewpersad became an Interpreter and real estate agent in Paramaribo. Sitabia became a businesswoman and a modijain (moneylender). She was a dominant personality and from a high caste and mother of four sons and three daughters

[2]In terms of age group, seventy percent were between 16 and 35 years, almost two-thirds were between 20–30 years, a quarter was under 20 years. Very few labourers older than 40 years have migrated to Suriname; slightly two percent of the total. Concerning the skin color, ninety percent were brown or dark brown, the rest were light brown or (almost) black (Hira 2000, 27).

in Suriname. She became the ancestress of numerous descendants, i.e. women who had her dominant characteristics.

Hence, the first type of indentured women was what we call the *ízzatdar* (respectable) 'Hindostani' women who were married and often obedient towards their husband, a kind of 'ideal type' Indian women. On the other side, two-thirds of the indentured women were the single women and those who married in the depots. They were considered less respectable, even depicted as 'immoral' and 'destitute women'. These women, due to the circumstances, became very self-assured, and in the process of surviving the long journey to Suriname, they became assertive personalities. Hence, most women who immigrated to Suriname were not passive and docile females. We call these women *the 'assertive Hindostani women'*. They had been single before their recruitment, but most of them became matriarchs in Suriname gaining respect in due course of time, while they also succeeded in constituting an extended family.

We must also keep in mind that the majority of the, approximately 12,000, returnees from Suriname to India were men (61%), while one-fifth were women (21%). It is clear that fewer women (30% of arrivals vs. 21% of returnees) returned to India than the men. For widows and 'fallen women'—prostitutes or those who had committed adultery—for example, it was better not to return to India and to their villages, where they were often, despised and mobbed or had to spend significant amounts of money to be reinstated in their caste. Many had suspended relations with India.

We assume that the more assertive types of Indian women settled in Suriname. Beside married women (members of families), single women were recruited, in particular, widows who often consciously chose to emigrate. Reddock (1986, 81) states that high-caste widows and *Dalit* (outcast) females comprised a significant proportion of the majority of females migrating alone. Their determination to emigrate was itself a sign of the independent nature of these women; the decision to migrate alone was a sign of their strength and courage.

The main areas of recruitment in India were the markets, railway stations, festivals, bazaars, and temples. The Hindu holy city of Mathura was the main area for the recruitment of females. It is possible that some women recruited from this location were widows and perhaps *Devadasi's* or outcast females dedicated to temples as dancers/prostitutes (Reddock 1986). Furthermore, poor women and those who had lost their husbands and sometimes also their children during disasters like storms, flooding, severe droughts also choose to emigrate. Starvation due to frequent famines was a high risk in India at that time.

Because the rate of 28.6 per cent women on each transport batch of emigrants to Suriname had to be met, sometimes women were tricked and misled, but these were exceptions (Sanderson Report 1910, 9–10; De Klerk 1953, 66–67). However, the majority of the 'Hindostani' migrant women had emigrated consciously and had respectable reasons to do so. The myth of inveiglement (*Bharmai deis*) to the holy land of Rama (*Sri Ram Desh*) where one would eat from golden plates was used as a rationalisation by many recruiters (Choenni 2016b, 134, 135). Some used the trick of portraying Suriname as *Sri Ram Desh,* but the majority of the emigrants were not

naïve. Furthermore, there was information from returnees and negative propaganda against emigration, but still many choose to emigrate in search of a better life outside India. Others fled with or without their husbands, escaping the oppression by their in-laws.

An example:

> A woman was married to a Hindu man, but she secretly practiced the Muslim faith. She did her namaaz (prayers), and when her mother-in-law became aware of this practice, she had beaten her and oppressed her. She decided to flee with her husband and her three sons. She was recruited for Suriname. But in a hurry, they could not collect the money they had saved. The Hindu husband went back to collect the money but did not return. He never reached Calcutta. This woman arrived in Suriname and became a pious Muslim and a matriarch. This woman became a businesswoman in Suriname and had a better life than in India. She gave her sons Muslim names, and these names became surnames. These sons were progenitors of three large Muslim families in Suriname. (see: Choenni 2016b, 86–133)

Around only one-third of the women who migrated to Suriname were married. One-third married in the depots in Calcutta or after arrival in Paramaribo, at the Coolie depot. Marrying meant that they choose a man with whom they would have a stable relationship. A provisional wedding/engagement (*sagaai*) was concluded, and the single women were in this way assured of a partner and especially of male protection during the sea journey and beyond. They formed a family. Also in the Coolie depot in Paramaribo, such marriages were arranged when a relationship developed during the voyage. These so-called depot marriages were encouraged by the authorities. (This para can go in the previous section as it does not talk about occupation).

Women Agriculturists

Because it was hard to find female labourers who wanted to emigrate, the information about the wages and all the arrangements like free passage, free housing, and the food was emphasised. Sometimes the (illegal) recruiters stated falsely that they would get work as housemaids or that they would not work as labourers. They even advised registering under false names and as labourers or agriculturalists (Mc Neill and Lal 1914, 312). Therefore, many women who were recruited for Suriname were not labourers but had other professions (Emmer 1985, 280). The Emigration Agent for Suriname in Calcutta E. Van Cutsem stated in 1877, that he had rejected:

> … a batch of dancing-girls and women of a similar description, with their male attendants. These people laughed at the idea of labouring as agriculturalists'. (IOR, V/24/1209, Annual report 1877–1878, 10)

He stated in 1879:

> … the class of women willing to emigrate consists principally of young widows and married or single women who have already gone astray, and are therefore not only most anxious to avoid their homes and to conceal their antecedents, but are also at the same time the least likely to be received back into their families. (IOR, V/24/1209, Annual report 1879–1880, 3)

Besides the widows, the single women who emigrated to Suriname had a wide range of professions varying from housemaids, street vendors, to prostitutes. Only a quarter of the indentured 'Hindostani' women (2,064 of the 8,527) had worked in the field of agriculture in India.

Gender Relations

The shortage of 'Hindostani' women and the aversion among Hindostani men to marry or have sexual relationships outside the 'Hindostani' group resulted in strengthening the position of 'Hindostani' women over time. Hence, the single women and widows could rather easily find a male partner and even quit from a relationship and choose another partner. In Suriname, they acquired more freedom than in India with regard to marriage or remarriage as well as earning their incomes. Widows could remarry in Suriname and gain respect.

An example:

> The mother of the Head Interpreter and Hindostani leader Sitalpersad Dube who emigrated from India as a young man, was a Brahmin widow. She remarried in Suriname and had children with her new husband. She became a respected woman and became the matriarch of a rich and influential family in Suriname. Curiously, her husband had a young co-wife who regularly visited his house to collect money for her 'services'. (Interview with a 100-year-old niece in 2013, see: Choenni 2016b, 638)

Many single women chose mostly strong men who could protect them and also demanded some kind of compensation for the relationship, like jewellery. Moreover, polyandry was accepted, meaning that some Hindostani women had multiple partners (Lamur et al. 1993, 126–127). There are some cases recorded. Sometimes the women had two husbands, and they were living together in one house; in some cases, two brothers 'shared' one woman (Choenni and Choenni 2012, 559–560).

An example:

> In one case on planation Kroonenburg, an Indentured 'Hindostani' woman lived with three men. In another case, an Indentured 'Hindostani' woman lived alternatively in the houses of both her husbands. (Sitaram 2017)

Also, some 'Hindostani' women changed male partners when they were not satisfied with the relationship (Debipersad 2001, 134–135; Lalmahomed 1992, 71). Hence, they could independently choose a male partner or exchange partners.

Other consequences of the shortage of 'Hindostani' women were that *inter-caste* marriages were common; the skin colour became less important as did religion in choosing a partner. Low-caste and outcast women married middle- and high-caste men and sometime otherwise. Thus, the caste system lost most of its base in Suriname. Also, mostly darker-skinned women married lighter-skinned men and otherwise.[3]

[3] In the photographs of single Indentured 'Hindostani' women we see often short and dark-skinned women. This intermingling of skin colour lead to families with children of different skin colour.

Furthermore, Muslim men married Hindu women, and often these women became Muslims. Conservative Muslim women wearing the *hijab* or women who had *purdah* could not migrate because they were not recruited. Despite all hardships, many Hindostani women, especially of the lower castes and widows experienced some improvement compared to life in India, where they were often despised and with little hope of betterment in life, while in Suriname, they had a family of their own and became matriarchs.

Also, the girls had, compared to the situation in India, a strong bargaining position. Although they often were 'married' at a very young age—sometimes even on 8–10 years of age—and went to live with their in-laws (*gauna*), their parents had a good bargaining position. Remarkably, the practice of giving *dahej* or *dowry* (money, jewellery, clothes, and cattle) to the family of the bridegroom was reversed. The (family of) bridegroom had to pay often a price for the bride. Older men married younger women.[4] It also happened that fathers sold their daughter(s), sometimes by force. In some cases, these girls ran away from home avoiding such a marriage.

Women's Agency

Although many women had a strong position vis-a-vis 'Hindostani' men, as mentioned earlier, many 'Hindostani' women were threefold overloaded. They worked to earn money, took care of their husband or spouse and children and were also responsible for the housework. These women had to wake up very early in the morning preparing the food before going to work, on the plantation. After their work, they returned to their home to prepare the food and do the household chores and also take care of the children. They worked very hard and not only survived but overcame challenges. Their average pay was lower than the men, that is, 40 cents a day against 60 cents for men. Their work was considered 'physically' less heavy. Even with this low wage, they succeeded in saving money because they were very frugal and even greedy (Fokken 2011, 41). Many also earned money from producing and selling agricultural dairy products and invested their savings in jewellery. Some also sent money for their families in India. Those who arrived as young girls from India became adults, married and became mothers often of many children. They could survive and raise their children because almost all adult indentured labourers acquired a piece of land of 1.5–2.0 ha.

Sometimes women were falsely accused of adultery because the skin colour did not match with her skin colour, while she had genetically ancestors (invisible for those who do not know it) with another skin colour.

[4]A remnant of this practice reflects in a saying in Sarnami-Hindostani language-while visiting somebody and enquiring if her husband is at home. "*Bhurawa he ghare*" (is the old man at home)?

Janey Tetary: A Woman of Courage

In Suriname, there were about forty collective resistances and uprisings between 1874 and 1903, against the staff on the plantations. In 1884 and 1902, massive resistances resulted in the killing of not only 'Hindostani' ringleaders but also bystanders. 'Hindostani' women were also active in resistances. In 1884, 'Hindostani' labourers on plantation Zorg-en-Hoop complained massively against the severe tasks and the low payments. They resisted the arrest in the *coolie lines* (the housing barracks) of four leaders and armed with cutlasses and sticks waited for the military police. When the military drummers reached the *coolie lines*, they tried to intimidate the 'Hindostanis' with drumming who responded with: '*Awa, Himat hai to awa*!' (Come if you have courage). The ringleader Ramjanee along with Janey Tetary had mobilised the labourers. Tetary[5]? the *obstinate one,* was well known for her toughness against injustices. She was asked to mobilise the women to attack the military. The women had collected dry mud pieces, stones, and bottles.

Despite repeated warnings to hand over the leaders and solve this problem without violence (the 'Hindostani' interpreters communicated these messages), they refused to surrender. Then the military approached the *coolie lines*, but they were bombarded with stones, bottles, and dry mud pieces. The military was startled by the fierceness of the insurgents. A real battle took place. In particular, Tetary was very brave. She was shot dead from behind, and six other 'Hindostani' labourers were gunned down while some military men were wounded. According to the *post-mortem* report, she was shot twice, on her upper arm and the back of her head. The last shot had wounded her brain, and she died instantly (Archive Agent General, inv. no. 1047; Colonial Report 1885, 7; see also Bhagwanbali 2011, 77–99). In September 2017, a statue of Janey Tetary in a heroic posture was erected in Paramaribo near the President's Palace.[6]

Although there were exploitation and oppression retaliated by resistance, the majority of the indentured 'Hindostani' women aspired for a better life for themselves in Suriname and for their offspring. This resulted in accommodating behaviour, and the majority survived in coping with the harsh climate conditions and low wages. Although the wages for women were low (8 *anna's*—nickels—a day against the 1 or 2 *anna's* in India), it was still a far better income than in India. The Hindostani indentured labourers had the right to food rations, free housing, free medical help, and free drinking water for the first three months. Often, they obtained, during the indentured period, a small piece of land of 100 m (20 by 50 m) to cultivate. They grew vegetables, and some raised poultry and cows, not only for their own consumption

[5]Janey Tetary emigrated in 1880 and arrived with the ship *Ailsa II*. She had the immigration number 491/I, was aged 24 with a height of 1,465 m. She had a brown skin colour and hailed from the village Moniar, near Patna (Bihar). While she was a Muslim, she had adopted a Hindu child. See for rebellious Indian women in other colonies the study of Hiralal (2014).

[6]The bust of the second Agent General Barnet Lyon in Suriname that was erected in 1908 by Indentured labourers was removed and Tetary's statue was placed on the same spot. This act was motivated with the argument of 'correcting the colonial history.'

but also to earn some extra money. Owing to their thrifty lifestyle, many could save money, and some even sent to their families in India (Choenni 2016b).

Cultural Retention

The Hindus had 32 and Muslims 16 recognised religious holidays besides the national (Christian) holidays. On these days and on Sundays, they had free time. Numerous religious festivals (*Phagwa/Holi, Divali, Bhagwat*, and *Muharram/Hosea*) were celebrated by Hindus and Muslims together. Because it was a small group, the religious differences were less important, so marriages between Hindus and Muslims could happen. Others were accepted as family (*palwar banawe*), i.e. as brother or sister for performing the (wedding) rituals. Children and orphans were often adopted by childless partners. Through intermarriage within the 'Hindostani' group, new family relationships developed (Choenni and Choenni 2012).

Because the overwhelming majority of Hindostani indentured labourers in Suriname hailed from Western Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, they could retain their common culture easily. From *Hindi*, *Bhojpuri,* and *Avadhi* (the Indian languages spoken), later the Sarnami Hindi language evolved. Women did have a pivotal role in cultural retention. Some celebrations were for women only, like '*matikor*'. The indentured women had intense friendship and solidarity and visited each other regularly. *Matikor* women had also their own cultural space (Kanhai 1999). It is remarkable that Sarnami Hind(ustan)i flourished and is still widely spoken in Suriname.

Women as Matriarchs

Although many indentured 'Hindostani' women in Suriname have been exploited and oppressed, the majority had *agency*. They were survivors, but also self-assured and very assertive and not behaving like victims of the indentured system. Indentured 'Hindostani' women could compare their lives in Suriname with their dismal experiences in India. They survived the plantation life in the sparsely populated Dutch colony but with the abundant fertile land. They capitalised on the opportunities offered by the Dutch Colonial Government who was satisfied with the 'new Hindostani colonists'. In fact, many despised 'Hindostani' women from India, gained respect in Suriname through their hard work and perseverance and prospered in due time. Furthermore, these very self-assured and assertive women played a pivotal role in retaining the Indian culture, they earned their own income, walked freely on the streets, and many smoked and even drank alcohol. The 'fallen' women were perceived as less respectful but had enough freedom to work and hand become economically independent, but since they could not become '*ízzatdar*', they decided to raise their (grand) daughters to behave '*ízzatdar*'.*Because* of the high birth rate, the shortage of 'Hindostani' women was reduced over time, and the position of women

weakened. Indian oppressive practices against women, like '*izzat bachaw*' (keeping up your honour) was restored; remarkably with the cooperation of many women themselves. They strived that their (grand) daughters must become *izzatdar* (showing honoured behaviour) with all the limitations in public life. This '*izzatdar*' movement peaked during the 1920s when a more balanced proportion in gender emerged. The religious organisations were founded in Suriname (Choenni and Choenni 2012). It must be emphasised that the daughters born before the 1920s were allowed to behave like these matriarchs. These matriarchs had extended families and did their best to keep the family together and often oppressed their daughters-in-law. Thus, they had a big stake in the revival of *izzat*, resulting in oppressive practices against women and restoration of patriarchal relationships starting in the 1920s. Interestingly, the assertive and independent behaviour of these matriarchs co-existed at the same time with the *izzatdar* behaviour of their (grand) daughters. Although this was a culturally contradicting behaviour, these matriarchs were seldom criticised but were rather feared and respected for what they had achieved. The revival of *izzat* was related to the homogenisation and building of a 'Hindostani' community and regaining respect for 'Hindostani' women in Suriname. It was not until the 1960s that an emancipation process started among the 'Hindostani' women in the urban area (the capital Paramaribo), combatting gender-based oppression. Further research is needed to explore the position of Hindostani women in the twentieth century and in particular their emancipation in Suriname.

Conclusion

The indentured Hindostanis in Suriname were a relatively small group compared to indentured Indians in most British colonies. One-third of the indentured Hindostanis were women. Because there was a shortage of Hindostani women to some extent, these women had a strong position vi-a-vis Hindostani men. One-third was married, while two-thirds were single women when they were recruited in India for Suriname. Most of these indentured Hindostani women were very assertive and had agency; we name them *the 'assertive Hindostani women'*. Although they were threefold overloaded, these women succeeded in constituting extended families. Because the Dutch government wanted them to settle in Suriname as small farmers, they obtained land for free and were allowed to retain their cultural heritage. Many indentured women became matriarchs, and their (grand)children had many children. Hence, these women became respectful (grand)mothers, while they were considered in India and also in Suriname during the indentureship period as less honourable women. Therefore, these women promoted honourabilty among their daughters and in particular their granddaughters. Most of them demanded that their daughters and granddaughters became and behave '*izzatdar*' (showing honoured behaviour) with all the limitations in public life, while they participated fully in public life. In the 1930s, when religious revival started and patriarchical norms became dominant and especially in 1940s and 1950s, most Hindostani women of third and fourth generation

were oppressed. It was not until the 1960s that young Hindostani women rebelled against these oppressive norms as honourability and emancipation of Hindostani women took pace. All in all, the emigration of Hindostani indentured women from India to Suriname ended in a success story, despite the fact most them who became matriarchs oppressed their (grand) daughters by enforcing honourability on them that resulted in limitations in public life.

References

Alber, J., O'Connell, D. C., & Kowal, S. (2002). Personal perspective in TV interviews. *Pragmatics, 12*, 257–271.

Bahadur, G. (2013). *Cooliewoman: The Odyssey of indenture*. London: Hurst and Company.

Bhagwanbali, R. (2011). *Tetary, de koppige. Het verzet van Hindoestanen tegen het Indentured Labour Systeem in Suriname, 1873–1916*. Den Haag: Amrit.

Cameron, D. (1997). Theoretical debates in feminist linguistics: Questions of sex and gender. In R. Wodak (Ed.), *Gender and discourse* (pp. 99–119). London: Sage Publications.

Cameron, D. (1985). *Feminism and linguistic theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Choenni, G. G., & Choenni, C. (2012). *Sarnami Hindostani 1920–1960*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers.

Choenni, C. (2016a). Hindostanis in Suriname 1873–1920: Indenture, plantations and beyond. *Nidan, 1*(1), 48–84.

Choenni, C. (2016b). *Hindostaanse Contractarbeiders; van India naar de plantages in Suriname*. Volendam: LM Publishers.

Colonial Reports (Koloniale verslagen) 1870–1930. Den Haag.

Dabydeen, D., & Samaroo, B. (Eds.). (1996). *Across the dark waters*. London: Mac Millan.

Debipersad, R. (2001). *Emancipatie van Hindoestaanse vrouwen*. Paramaribo: CERDES.

De Klerk, C. (1953). *De immigratie der Hindostanen in Suriname*. Amsterdam: Urbi et Orbi.

Emmer, P. C. (1984). The great escape: The migration of female indentured servants from British India to Surinam 1873–1916. In D. Richardson (Ed.), *Abolition and its aftermath: The historical context 1790–1916* (pp. 271–292). London: Frank Cass.

Emmer, P. C. (1987). The position of Indian women in Surinam. *Boletin de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe 43*, 115–120.

Emmer, P. C. (2000). A spirit of independence or lack of education for the market? Freedman and Asian labourers in the post-emancipation Caribbean 1834–1917. *Slavery and Abolition, 21*(2), 150–168.

Fokken, M. (2011). *Dutch interest and South Asian lives. South Asian men and women in the Suriname Colonial Reports between 1873–1917*. MA-thesis, University of Groningen.

Grierson, G. A. (1883). Report on colonial emigration from the Bengal Presidency. In L. G. Sarup (Ed.). (2011), *Facts about Indian indentured labour*. Kolkata: Aldrich International.

Hira, S. (2000). *Terug naar Uttar Pradesh*. Den Haag: Amrit.

Hiralal, K. (2014). 'Rebellious sisters': Indentured women and resistance in Colonial Natal, 269. In M. Hassankhan et al. (Eds.), *Resistance and Indian indenture experience* (pp. 241–269r). New Delhi: Manohar.

Hoefte, R. (1987). Female indentured labor in Suriname. For better or for worse? *Boletin de Estudios Latinoamericano y del Caribe* 42, 55–70

India Office Records (IOR). *Relevant files, British library*. London: British Library.

Kanhai, R. (Ed.). (1999). *Matikor: The politics of identity for Indo-Caribbean women*. St. Augustine: UWI.

Lalmahomed, B. (1992). *Hindoestaanse vrouwen: De geschiedenis van 6 generaties*. Utrecht: Van Arkel.

Lamur, H. et al. (1993). Demografische structuur en reproduktieve rituelen bij Hindostaanse contractarbeiders in Suriname (pp. 118–139). In L. Gobardhan-Rambocus & M. Hassankhan (Eds.), *Immigratie en Ontwikkeling*. Paramaribo: ADEK.

Mangru, B. (1986). Indian labour in British Guiana. *History Today, 36*(4), 43–48.

Mc Neill, J., & Lal, C. (1914). *Report on the condition of Indian immigrants the four British colonies and Surinam or Dutch Guiana*. Simla: Government Central Press.

Mohammed, P. (2002). *Gender negotiations among Indians in Trinidad, 1917–1947*. Hampshire: Palgrave.

Nationaal Archief. *Gouvernementsblad van Suriname 1873–1920*. Depot: V 53, Den Haag.

Pitcher, D. G. (1882). Report on colonial emigration from the North West Provinces and Oudh. In L. Gujadhur Sarup (Ed.). (2011), *Facts about Indian indentured labour*. Kolkata: Aldrich International.

Reddock, R. (1986). Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845–1917: Freedom denied. *Caribbean Quaterly, 20*(43), 79–87.

Report from Commissioners, Inspectors and others. (1910). *Emigration from India to the crown colonies and protectorates* (Vol. xxvii), Part I and Part III (Appendix), Westminster. Also known as Sanderson Report

Report Minutes of Evidence. (1910). *Part II*, Westminster (Sanderson Report).

Sitaram, T. (2017). *Hindostaanse contractarbeidsters.* MA thesis*.* Paramaribo: ADEK.

Tinker, H. (1974). *A new system of slavery: The export of Indian labour overseas 1830–1929*. London: Oxford University Press.

Wiersma, P. (1903). *Verslag eener zending naar Britsch-Indië*. Paramaribo: Eldorado.

Chapter 14
Strong Daughters of the Kalkatiyans: A Tribute to My Nani Jagdei

Binarai Makhan

Abstract Oral histories and personal accounts have become important sources of history writing in the present times. This paper is a narration of a granddaughter about her maternal grandmother, who was the daughter of an indentured labourer in Suriname. 'My nani, whose name was Jagdei, was born on 1 July 1915 in Suriname. Her father was wanted by police for his obstructive behaviour as a panchayat leader in India, and her mother was a widow. When Jagdei was nine years old, she was given away for taking care of the grandparents of my maternal grandfather. Jagdei was very fond of reading the Ramayan (Indian epic: The story of Lord Rama.) and looked after the well-being of every member of the household. At the same time, she was the one who ruled the estate and made the calculations of the profits. She practiced supernatural healing and sang in 'bhaitak gana'ensemble groups. (Bhaitak gana is Indian folk music evolved in Suriname in the 1920s after the indentureship period. The musicians and the singer sit in an 'U' formation. The main instruments are a harmonium, a dholak and a dhantal. There were female bhaithak gana music groups then.) Jagdei treated her daughters and daughters-in-law very well, laughed and joked with them and got a lot of respect in return. Challenging the established patriarchal norms, Jagdei allowed her daughters to go to school and sent four of five of her daughters to Holland to study. These daughters saw the harsh lives that the wives of 'Hindostani' men had in Suriname and chose Dutch husbands instead refusing to return to Suriname and got full support from Jagdei who never discriminated girls against boys. She often travelled alone and managed to find her way even when she did not speak Dutch or any other foreign language. Jagdei passed away at the age of 76 years old in Holland. Jagdei lived a life of a matriarch and this chapter is an ode to her illustrious life and her successes.

Keywords Indentured women · Suriname · Grandmother · Oral history

B. Makhan (✉)
University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: makhanb@noord-holland.nl

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_14

Introduction

Between 1873 and 1916, more than 34,000 Indian indentured labourers emigrated from India to the Dutch Colony of Suriname. Around one-third of them (12,000) returned to India with their savings after finishing their indentureship in Suriname. The Indians who settled in Suriname obtained land from the Surinamese Government for free and mostly became (small) farmers. Furthermore, they retained their Indian culture and re-established Indian society in Suriname. The British Government had required stringent measures from the Dutch Government concerning the treatment of their British subjects, after a high death rate at the beginning of the emigration (De Klerk 1953; Choenni 2016a, b). The Indians were British subjects but became Dutch subjects in 1927[1] (Choenni and Choenni 2012: 51). The Indians in Suriname referred themselves as *Hindostanis.* Among the Hindostani indentured labourers, less than one-third were women. Hence, there was a shortage of Hindostani women vis-à-vis Hindostani men in Suriname, but in due time the gender balance became better in the Hindostani community.

We see that in 1923 for example on 100 Hindostani women, there were 129 Hindostani men. The gender balance became better, and in 1970 it was almost equal; 100 Hindostani women against 101 Hindostani men. On the other hand, among the Creoles, there were more women than men; on 100 Creole women, there were only 88 Creole men in 1923. The gender balance among the Creoles became also more equal, but still in 1970 there were on 100 Creole women 96 Creole men. The gender balance in the total Surinamese population on the average was better because of the contrasting gender balance in the Hindustani and Creole groups.[2]

However, the Hindostani population increased rapidly because the daughters born in Suriname used to have many children. They were prosperous enough to feed and raise them. The number of women also increased because the medical services were good, and thus the infant mortality rate was low. Moreover, since the Hindostanis were recruited stringently back in India, they turned out to be hardworking and resilient people. My nani [3] Jagdei Soeknandan-Sitaldien, a daughter of *Kalkatiyans*,[4] is an example of these second-generation Hindostani women in Suriname.

[1] By 1910, Suriname was already accepted by the Hindostanis as their new home as they had decided to settle there because life was better here than in India.

[2] In 1915, there were 20,498 Hindostanis in Suriname, comprising 12,294 men and 8,204 women. These lopsided numbers still existed in 1920, when the indenture system ended. In that year 26,096 Hindustanis were in Suriname, 15,600 men and 10,496 women. Gradually, the ratio changed, as shown in Table 1.

[3] Maternal grandmother.

[4] The term the indentured labourers used among themselves because all of them left India from the port of Calcutta (now Kolkata).

Many Children and Many Skills

My nani, whose name was Jagdei, was born on 1 July 1915 in Suriname. Her father, who was a panchayat (local council) leader in India, was prosecuted by the British *Raj* (Government) for his obstructionist behaviour. Jagdei's mother was a widow and decided to flee from India to Suriname. Their daughter Jagdei was born in the countryside, in Livorno, a village south of the capital Paramaribo. By the age of nine, Jagdei was already 'married'. She was sent to Nieuw-Amsterdam (New-Amsterdam) to take care of her husband's grandparents. New-Amsterdam was a harbour village opposite the capital Paramaribo. Although it was in the countryside, New-Amsterdam was more of an urban area where Creoles and Javanese also lived. While Livorno was a Hindostani area, it must be underlined that caretaking responsibilities were normal for Hindostani young women at that time, but not for girls at the age of nine.

Jagdei had a special gift; she was very fond of reading the Ramayana in Hindi. That love for reading and her eagerness for learning were conducive to acquire the skills later to run the estate of her husbands' grandparents. Soon, she started looking after their money lending business and profits thereof. She acquired the position where she was responsible for the welfare of every household member and later also for her daughters, daughters-in-law and sons. This earned her a kind of respect as a young Hindostani woman during those times. Apart from her new role as a matriarch, she also practiced faith healing and sang in '*bhaitak gana*' groups. She was a multitasking, competent woman who could well organize all her responsibilities and activities.

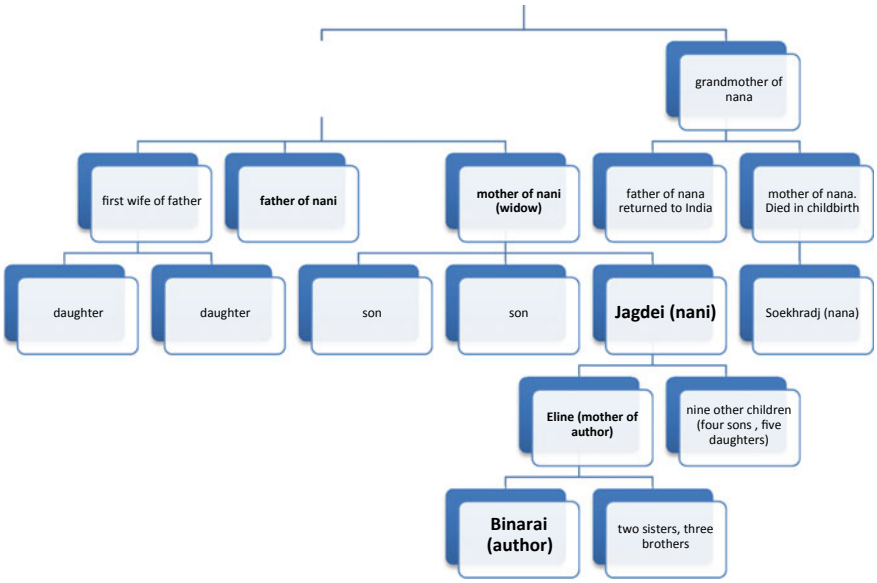
Jagdei did not discriminate between girls and boys. Her daughters were allowed to go to school, and four of her five daughters were sent to Holland to study. These daughters compared the harsh lives that the wives of Hindostani men had in Suriname to the relative freedom of women in Holland. As a result, these daughters chose Dutch husbands and did not return to live in Suriname. I always admired my nani but realized later—after her demise—how special she was… How difficult her life had been because she hardly had been allowed to be a child!… How unusual it was that she became the caring and very responsible person despite her short youth period! Moreover, that she did not express the suffering, she felt over the loss of one of her ten children.

What I saw was an independent, strong woman who was gentle and generous. Even though she was very loyal to Lord Rama, she tried to understand my questions about him—in my perception—inconsistent behaviour towards his wife, Sita. Her happiness while reading the Ramayana made me realize that Hindu scriptures can give us solace and satisfaction. I want to thank her for being an example to me to overcome difficulties in life and believe in my own strength.

Birth and Family Tree

To elucidate her short biography, it is useful to depict her family tree.

Family tree



My nani's mother was a widow with a young son. She was a Brahmin, which meant that her widowhood was considered shameful; she was desperate to start a new life in another country. She emigrated to Suriname with her elder sister and brother-in-law. That brother-in-law also had a reason to leave India; as already said, he was being prosecuted as an obstructionist panchayat (local council) leader by the British. In Suriname, the three of them shared a household but had separate homes on the same property. In due time, their relationship shifted; she became the co-wife of her brother-in-law. Nani's mother had three children with her new husband (brother-in-law): one daughter (Jagdei, my nani) and two sons. Her husband also had two daughters with his first wife, Jagdei's elder sisters. In those days, it was quite exceptional for a husband to have two wives because of the shortage of women. The family decided that Suriname was their country now, and they had to adjust according to the circumstances. They cooked food on one '*chulha*' (mud cooking stove), which was in the kitchen attached to the two-storeyed house. The large room on the ground floor of the two-storeyed building was used as a storage place for *pad*dy (rice) and other agricultural products after harvesting. Another smaller house was for the younger sister (my nani's mother). Nani's father did not eat rice or the different kinds of tuberous foods, which are nowadays very popular food in Suriname. He only ate *roti* (Indian flat bread) with vegetables and some fish. The other members of the family preferred rice and ate tuberous foods like sweet potatoes and yams.

My Nana Soekhradj

As said, nani was born in Livorno, in a rural district of Suriname. She was married to my nana Soekhradj who lived in New-Amsterdam, a town along the Suriname River that was almost one day of travelling by boat in those days. After the Second World War, the infrastructure in Suriname had improved tremendously. Then, a ferry crossed every half hour from New-Amsterdam to Leonsberg near Paramaribo, the capital. My nana's mother had died in childbirth and since his father could not bear the loss of his wife he returned to Benares in India. He left his son with the parents of his deceased wife, hence, his maternal grandparents. They were moneylenders in Suriname and had a good business there[5] (Choenni 2016b: 238). He wrote letters from Benares to his son, but never saw his son again. My nana was the only grandchild of his grandmother, and he inherited all the wealth and land in New-Amsterdam. I asked my nani at what age she married nana.

> I was nine years old when I was married to your nana and was brought to live in the house of your nana. I was always busy in and around the house. The grandmother of nana could not see (she was blind) so I had to help her to go to the bathroom. I lived with many people in the house of your nana but not with him in one room. I slept on the same bed as the grandmother of your nana. One day I looked at my underwear and saw that I was bleeding. I was terrified and put clothes there to hide the bleeding. I washed my clothes, and no one saw the stains. The bleeding came every month, and I managed to hide this until I was 15 years old. When I was cutting grass for the cattle, a woman saw that my skirt had a big bloodstain. She went to the grandmother of my husband and told her that I was bleeding. From that day on I was supposed to sleep with your nana.

She told me that she had to take care of the grandparents of nana and help them with the cattle. When nani became seventeen years old in 1932, she gave birth to her first child, and when she was nineteen years old, my mother (her second child) was born. In total, nani gave birth to ten children. The sixth child (a daughter) died at the age of three; this girl suffered from epilepsy and died of an epileptic attack. At the age of thirty-three in 1948, she gave birth to her last child. Thus, nine children were alive, four sons and five daughters. It was considered normal for Hindostani women in Suriname to bear many children. They were able to feed and raise these children because they had enough property. The formally indentured labourers obtained farming land from the Dutch Government when they settled in Suriname. Furthermore, the medical services for Hindostanis were—as already mentioned—excellent (Choenni 2016a). The Hindostani population increased immensely in the period after 1924. For example, in a period of 30 years, the Hindustani population in Suriname tripled from 31,477 to 97,247 persons in 1960, and between 1960 and 1970 the Hindostani population increased to 142,049 persons (Table 2).

[5]Not only poor people came to Suriname from India. Around 140 emigrated as free emigrants paying their passage. Many indentured labourers made plans beforehand to do business in Suriname after their contract period because they were told in India that it was possible to earn money there. Almost every person, especially the women invested in silver and gold jewels. Wearing jewellery was part of the old Indian culture.

Table 1 Gender ratio: number of men per 100 women 1923–1970 in Suriname

Year	Hindostani	Creole	Suriname (average)
1923	129.0	88.1	101.4
1931	118.0	85.6	99.3
1940	108.5	89.9	98.4
1950	105.5	86.7	98.3
1960	101.9	91.7	98.1
1970	100.4	96.4	99.3

Source Choenni and Choenni (2012: 53)

Table 2 Increase of Hindostani population in Suriname 1910–1970

Year	Hindostani	Total population	% Population
1910	19.638	92.142	21.3
1925	28.087	102.755	27.3
1930	31.477	116.480	27.0
1940	42.538	142.225	29.9
1950	62.570	178.078	35.1
1960	97.246	256.526	37.9
1970	142.049	349.637	40.6

Source Lamur (1973: 142, 143)

I did not dare to ask my nani how she managed not to get pregnant after the birth of her last child. My mother had six children. She told me that she was sterilized when she was twenty-seven years old after the birth of my youngest sister.

Businesswoman and Manager

My maternal grandparents—nana and nani—inherited the property of nana's grandmother after her death. Nana was her only grandchild. In those days, sons as well as daughters inherited the property legally according to Dutch law in equal proportions. She was a moneylender and had acquired some profits out of her business. But a steady source of income was needed to feed the household that grew in numbers, through births and later marriages. In those days, it was not possible to make big investments with the income from the agriculture alone (Choenni and Choenni 2012, 103). In order to provide extra income, nana bought a long horse pulled cart on big wheels, to be used for freight transport, a safe bet in an agricultural society. Around 1945, nana thought it was a good thing to invest in a motorcar for taxi services. But nana could not drive the car, and the hired driver drove the car in a ditch.

Nana was a soft-hearted man and so left the management role of the business for nani. Nani decided that they should invest in different kinds of economic possibilities

like subletting houses on their plot nearby the manor where her family lived. Nani bought tractors, horses, cows and pigs for various agricultural businesses. As the time passed, her investments proved fruitful. Around 1965, she invested in a *combine* and a big area to plant rice. A good example of her business skills is how she made money from leasing the fruits of the mango trees of the outdoor museum of New-Amsterdam around 1965. She made a deal with the museum to ensure that all the mangos on the plot belonged to her, and she paid a yearly price for it, to the museum. She then organized a team of young men who were hanging around at the central market of Paramaribo to pick the ripe mangos. The ripe mangos were laid in a wooden box filled with hay and transported by small motorboats to the central market of Paramaribo. She sold the mangos herself on the market. When she used to come back to her home, the sacks in her skirt used to be bulging with money, while she also brought a lot of delicious things from the market.

When the fruit season was over, she organized the rice planting on the rice fields. She leased a vast area and bought a *combine* to harvest the rice. Those investments were very profitable. Two of her sons, who were able students, were sent to schools in Paramaribo and became schoolteachers. The two other sons who were not interested in studies helped her with running the estate. Nani from being a manager also became a matriarch; just as many Hindostani women of the second generation in Suriname became matriarchs. Her sons never questioned her decisions. Nani thought big and was very good in making the right decisions for the economic wealth of her family. Moreover, nana was always following her advice and gave her permission to act according to her insights. Nani kept her money in the house and bought gold ornaments as investments. In that time, people did not trust banks to put their money in a saving account because many *kalkatiyans* had been cheated (Choenni and Choenni 2012). When nani needed money for investments like buying a tractor, she took some of her gold ornaments and went to the pawn shop to pledge them for cash (Choenni and Choenni 2012, 31). After earning profit, she used to not only retrieve but also buy more gold ornaments as investment. If someone of the household needed money, they asked her, and she gave the needed amount after questioning about the reason for the expenditure.

'Vakantie Khai'

A very nice memory I have is of the visits we made to my nani's home 'nani's huis' as we called it. In those times, children living in Paramaribo went to the countryside during the school holidays, it was called 'vakantie khai' (Choenni and Choenni 2012, 592). During every school holiday, my nani used to have about eighteen grandchildren around. Me and my brothers and sisters visited my nani's home for school holidays until I reached the age of puberty. My uncles also brought my cousins along to visit as well. She was always very happy when we came and loved to pamper us with money and delicacies. In the afternoons, you could hear the children shouting 'they are coming back from the market'. The boats docking on the pier that was called

'landing' at New-Amsterdam were tied with a strong rope on the wooden pillar, and we knew that nani would step out and handover the bags with '*sauda*' (groceries) to us. My uncles carried the delicious food like different kinds of Danish rolls and Surinamese black pudding. In a big procession, we walked happily, laughing and kidding to nani's house where the food was handed out.

Raising Children and Education

The daughters-in-law were treated by nani as her friends; she received a lot of respect from them. Everyone in the extended family household had his/her own tasks. When nani was fifty years of age, in 1965, she had a household that consisting of nineteen people. Upstairs were three bedrooms. Nani and nana had one bedroom, a bedroom for the two unmarried aunts, and a bedroom for the oldest son with his wife and two small children. Downstairs were three bedrooms, one for the other son and his wife and two bedrooms for their four children. The sons that were schoolteachers became later heads of primary schools and had their own household. They lived in houses made available by the government of Suriname in other districts. Two daughters were married and lived in their own houses, one in Paramaribo and one in Holland. One daughter lived in Paramaribo with a single older woman teacher who had asked nani if she could let her live with her so that she had company and my aunt could go to the pedagogical academy and become a teacher too[6] (Choenni and Choenni 2012, 485). Nani was very keen on letting her children receive a good education so that they could support themselves. She invested in the studies of her sons and daughters who liked to go to school. My mother did not like to go to school because the teacher had shouted at her, and she could not bear the humiliation. But all of her four sisters and two brothers received a good education.

Nani was not very strict with her daughters. Her daughters were allowed to go to school, and four of her five daughters were sent to Holland to study. These daughters, as said, compared the harsh lives that the wives of Hindustani men had in Suriname to the relative freedom of women in Holland. As a result, they chose non-Hindostani men as husbands. However, these daughters were married with the Hindu rites when they came for the first time to visit their parents in Suriname with their husbands. The Dutch husbands of my aunts felt very welcomed and paid their respects by undergoing every aspect of the rituals.

Nani was always soft-hearted towards her children and grandchildren. Although she did not think that boys were more important than girls, yet she taught her daughters to respect their husbands as Sita did to Rama. As stated before, education was very important for nani, and she was convinced that higher education gave a person more

[6]Good education was only available in Paramaribo before 1949. For education after the primary education, school fees had to be paid. The students needed books, and other school supplies, good clothing, proper shoes. From the school year 1948–1949, the pupils after finishing the primary school could do entrance exam tot the 'MULO' secondary education. Only a fraction passed this exam.

respect. That is why she allowed her two sons to live with their elder sister (my mother) in Paramaribo to be able to go to the pedagogical academy and sent four of her five daughters to Holland to become nurses. She thought that it was important that her children got higher education and invested money in their education. She did not demand a return for these investments, and all her children were very grateful to her.

Recital of Ramayana

My nani Jagdei was very fond of reading the Ramayana. In the morning, she always sat on the same spot in the balcony 'palthy mar ke' (legs crossed over) and read loudly. Once I asked her why she read so loudly because I was accustomed to reading in a soft tone or without making any noise, she told me the reason was that the sound of the holy text purifies the house and blesses everyone who hears it. She was very pious. When she saw a picture of one of the Hindu gods, she always folded her hands and bowed her head. There was a big 'Tulsi' plant (basil) near the big stone rainwater tank, and the children were not allowed to pick its flowers. I was very fond of the lovely scented seeds. Nani told me that the 'Tulsi' was a holy plant and that I should not touch the plant if I was menstruating.

Nana did not bother about religion. He was not fond of Brahmin priests and always said that he was an *Arya Samaji* (a reformist and modernist Hindu stream with sober rituals) because he did not like the behaviour of Brahmin priests. But nani was very determined to tell her grandchildren about Ram and Sita. Once I asked nani how it was possible that Ram abandoned Sita even when he knew that she loved him so much and she was kidnapped by force, nani looked at me with bewildered eyes and said nothing. But she never grew angry with me, and in a kind voice, she told me that Lord Rama was wise and knew what he was doing. Later on when I grew up, I understood that she was perplexed by my question and had no answer to it.

The Faith Healer

Besides taking care of the estate, nani looked after the well-being of all household members. That responsibility also extended to 'healing by faith'. Once, her eldest son was behaving disturbingly and spoke incoherently in a strange tone. Nani made a fire over which she burnt pepper and some spices. She fetched her eldest son and made him inhale the smoke. Then, her son said that he was her late elder brother and had a message for her. In those times, spiritual beliefs permeated everyday life. My nani believed that one of her granddaughters was a Devi. Her touch or advice was very important to nani. If she was going outdoors to a business meeting, she always wanted this child to bless her. When someone of her household was ill, nani would let you sit on a chair and made cutting movements in the air with a knife along the

body of the patient while she softly chanted a mantra during this so-called "*Nazar utare ritual*" (abandoning the evil eye ritual). She believed that the ill person was infected by the evil eye of somebody, and it was necessary to '*djhare*' (sweep/clean) the person. And it always seemed to have positive effects. The person was healed when nani had performed the ritual. We always felt safe when nani was around.

Helping Others

My nani and nana married their eldest daughter—my mother—with all the Hindu rites. They gave my father's family some cows, a lot of copper 'thali' and 'lotas' and a good amount of cash. My mother received a lot of gold jewels; these were seen as insurance for bad times. When my mother was pregnant, they insisted that their first grandchild should be born in their house. I was the fourth grandchild and the first female grandchild. My nana was so happy with my birth that he slaughtered a pig to celebrate my birth and gave a big feast. He shouted out that Lakshmi came to his house. Pigs were considered a big investment because pork meat was very expensive.

Whenever nani thought that one of her children needed more help than the other, she made sure that child was well looked after. She strived to make her daughters as independent as possible. Since my mother did not pursue higher education, in order to ensure an income for her, my nani and nana hired a house with a shop and filled it with groceries to sell. When my father bought his own house, in 1965, my nani and nana financed the seamstress training for my mother. They also bought a sewing machine for her, so she could earn her own money by making clothes for other people. And she need not have to work out of her house because then—in the 1960s—it was considered not *ijjatdar* (honourable) anymore for Hindostani women to work for others. If one of her children needed help, they willingly asked her, because they knew she was kind-hearted and would not refuse. Nani helped her family in Livorno with rice and money. After the harvest time, she took burlap sacks full of rice to her family in Livorno and gave them money as well. Her charity extended beyond her own family; she shared her households' food with others that could not afford food for their own families. The adopted family of my nana also received money and rice. Even the people who were considered as family but who were not blood relatives (jahaji family, boat family) were also supported with rice and money[7] (Choenni and Choenni 2012, 57).

Whenever there was a wedding party in the family, nani bought metres of cloth from the market, for the whole family: her brothers, sisters, parents, children and so on. There were always women in the family who could help to make the new outfits. She paid the labourers a fair wage. Some of her labourers stayed with the family and

[7]The affective relationships and the strengthening of the commitment towards each other helped to create a strong community. In the Hindostani community is was traditionally so that not only the blood relatives were important, but also other relationships. If you were considered family, you were treated like that.

were treated as a part of the family. When one of them got married, nani paid for the wedding party.

My father had his own business as a contractor but often helped out when there was harvest time. When the fruit season was over, the labourers were put to work in the rice fields. When the crops were harvested and sold, a lot of income was earned. Some of the money was spent on festivities to celebrate life; music played a major part in these celebrations. Nani sang in '*bhaitak* gana' groups and even went to compete in a contest at Demerara, a district in neighbouring British Guyana. Whenever there was a party, on the courtyard of nani's plot, a big tent was set up covered with tarpaulin canvas. '*Chatais*' (mats) were laid out to encircle the stage area for the music artists. Hindostani people of the village were invited and attended in great numbers. Women came to sing, and everyone received a good meal. A goat and some chickens were slaughtered for the feasts. The women of the village came to help in preparing the food which included 'roti', goat's meat, chicken meat, rice, dhal and '*aloo ke tarkari*' (potato curry) and '*kohara*' (pumpkin). There was also plenty of rum and '*stroop*'—lemonade for the children. These parties lasted all through the day and night. Sometimes, visitors from faraway places stayed over for the night.

Life in the Netherlands and Death

Nani visited The Netherlands with nana for the first time in 1970 for the wedding of her fourth daughter (see photo). They stayed for five weeks and divided their time between their four daughters who had settled in The Netherlands. In 1971, nana passed away at the age of sixty-five, and nani was left widowed at fifty-five. She dressed appropriately for a widow in white with some faint blue or black decoration and an '*orhni*' (white lace headscarf). Since then, I never saw her wear clothes with bright colours. By 1975, six of her nine children were living in The Netherlands. She decided to divide her time between Suriname in the winter and The Netherlands during the summer months. She alternately stayed at each of her six children's houses in The Netherlands, often travelling on her own by train and bus. Even without knowledge of the Dutch language, she managed to find her way. She had the relevant information written on a piece of paper and showed it to railway personnel if she did not know the platform from where her train would depart. Her children lived in cities all over, from the coastal city of The Hague to the south-east tip of The Netherlands—Maastricht and everywhere in between. She was not fazed by the complexity of getting around. She carried herself proudly, impeccably dressed in a long skirt and blouse or a demure frock and knew where to catch the bus and how to operate the public telephone booths. I was surprised to learn that she never carried a wallet. I remember that she always had money in the pocket of her skirt.

Once, she came to celebrate my birthday. She put her hand in her skirt and gave me a green note. I thought it was five guilders. When I looked again, I noticed one and three zeros. It was a thousand guilders note. I gave her that back and told her that she made a mistake and told her to be more careful with her money. She gave me

a puzzled gaze, accepted the money back and gave me a five guilder note in return. She did not carry a purse with her but put all her money in the pockets of her dress. In how far she intended to give thousand guilders, I do not know. But if that was her intention, I decided not to accept such a large amount of money.

Nani had a stroke when she was sixty-six years old. She became paralysed and was sent to a nursing home. My youngest aunt was not pleased with the quality of care she received at this nursing home. She boarded nani in her own house and took care of her till her death. Nani lived on for ten more years. Her final years were lived out peacefully and happily with her youngest daughter. At her cremation, all of her nine children and the most of her 38 grandchildren were there to pay their respects. At my wedding, nani Jagdei sang *a Capella* loudly, a welcome *bhajan* (Holy song) when the '*baraat*' (bridegroom procession) arrived and was very happy to meet my husband, the grandson of her acquaintance and Hindostani businesswoman like herself. The energetic and smart businesswoman, manager and matriarch Jagdei passed away at the age of seventy-six in The Netherlands. She was indeed a strong daughter of Kalkatiyans, who had a courageous journey from India to Suriname.

Conclusion

This article elaborates the fact that oral history and personal accounts based on memory are active depositories of facts and creation of meanings. Such histories have become part of research methods across academic disciplines. In the postcolonial history writings, personal accounts and memory have become an important instrument of subaltern voices, especially of women. It is a frequently used method to promote or celebrate a common identity and has become a source of cultural survival of the marginalized communities and important means of maintaining or re-establishing connections with the past. The story of Jagdei fulfils all these objectives.

Jagdei, was a matriarch, a successful business woman and in that sense was a path breaker. Yet, she was a religious minded culturally connected human being who in a sense was very traditional. Her story and the cultural set-up described by the author vividly represent the making and remaking of cultural identity and Indianness among the indentured settlers in Suriname.

Acknowledgement I thank my husband Chan Choenni and my daughter Roomyla for their guidance and advice.

References

Choenni, C. (2016a). Hindustanis in Suriname 1873–1920: Indenture, plantations and beyond. *Nidan: International Journal for Indian Studies, 1*(1), 48–84.

Choenni, C. E. S. (2016b). *Hindostaanse Contractarbeiders; van India naar de plantages in Suriname*. Volendam: LM Publishers.
Choenni, G. G., & Choenni, C. E. S. (2012). *Sarnami Hindostani 1920–1960 DEEL 1*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers.
De Klerk, C. J. M. (1953). *De immigratie der Hindostanen in Suriname*. Amsterdam: Urbi et Orbi.
Lamur, H. E. (1973). *The demographic evolution of Surinam 1920–1970*. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.

Chapter 15
Popular Culture and the Changing Gender Roles: A Study of Indian Diaspora in Caribbean

Kalyani

Abstract Sexuality has been a subject of hierarchically positioning one's identity by constructing a superior masculinity vis-à-vis a frail, docile and submissive feminine counterpart. Representation of sexuality and gender identity within Indian diaspora was no exception to it. The identity of 'Jahaji' women was more of a reworking within the Indian identity and Western Creole identity with which they constantly seem to struggle. However, the very fact that women within diasporic culture were wage earners and that they displayed a sense of solidarity or 'sisterhood' by virtue of their fewer number and historical location (since majority of them were deserted women, prostitutes or Brahmin widows), understanding gender within Indian diaspora stands far more complex than understanding it merely as a 'dialectics of sex'. Poetry sung by these women thus often became a tool to capture their solitude and their struggle to construct their own spaces in a far destined and alienated land. Being an indentured labourer was newer space and experience that they were thrown open to. They do not have any relationship baggage because of the fact that their social composition explained the periphery of society they belonged to. This brought about newer dimensions with which they would associate themselves like motherhood, reworking of myths and even education towards the latter half century as modes of their emancipation.

Keywords Gender · Jahaji-behen · Indian diaspora · Popular culture and sisterhood

Understanding Indo-Caribbean women and changing patterns of sexuality need a critical engagement with the writers who have imagined the cultural and the political possibilities of the diaspora, as it has flourished over time. Some of the major works done in understanding this tradition is by Joy Mahabir and Mariam Pirbhai, who have tried to unfold the female bonds of solidarity that were developed during indentureship. The term Jahaji-behen itself became the term to connote the female solidarity that was eventually developed under the plantation system. To understand the term

Kalyani (✉)
Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
e-mail: kalyani.official.5@gmail.com

A. Pande (ed.), *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-1177-6_15

and meanings that get associated with the term 'Jahaji-behen', one needs to revisit the historical juncture and conditions under which this term has emerged. Some of the reflections about historical narratives within which the term 'Jahaji-Behen' finds its reference has been reflected in literary works of poets and novelist like Janet Naidu, Peggy Mohan, Mahadai Das, Lakshmi Persaud et al. Literary writing about women's history tends to look at history of these women beyond just a statistical enquiry. This methodological shift has enriched understanding of gender dynamics by engaging with both public and private memory of women who had experienced these historical shifts due to colonial history and indentureship. Such writings have engaged with women in terms of their life stories and with their experiences as indentured labourers, servitude, colonialism and creolization.

The main objective of the paper will be to understand Indo-Caribbean sexuality by looking into the historical processes of making and re-making of gender identity and sisterhood. Further, it will look into the meanings and changing dynamics of Caribbean music by looking into genre like Soca-calypso and its role in reconstruction of gender identity. The paper will also investigate and understand the uniqueness of Caribbean feminism and the role of popular culture in constructing it. The aim of my paper would be to locate the gendered dimension within the Indian diaspora in a moment of history and also to understand its uniqueness in terms of how it has influenced the larger discourse of feminism.

A Historical Trajectory of Indo-Caribbean Women

The history of indentureship dates back to time when 'coolies' were deported to distinct land as plantation labourers. Some of these communities were Dhangars (hill tribe), Kurmis, Lohars, etc. (Tinker 1974, 54). The social and caste composition of these communities were reflected in some of the annual reports of British India which showed that majority of these communities belonged to agricultural caste and low-caste artisans (ibid, 55). The European sugar plantation owners needed cheap and industrious labour force that these sections of society provided for. However, later these communities settled and became part of what is called as Indo-Caribbean diaspora. From twentieth century till present, the Indo-Caribbean diaspora has faced both converging and diverging experiences of the African and Creole culture. The diverging relationship is particularly witnessed in Indo-Caribbean marriages that are still widely practiced with the traditional fervour. Arranged marriages imbibing Indian culture are still prevalent, and it is also expected among the educated urban middle class (Samuel and Wilson 2009, 97). However, Samuel and Wilson (2009) while giving an assessment of the Caribbean marriages (particularly Guyanese) have talked about ways in which 'Arranged marriages' that are practiced in these societies did have some digressions from the conventional Hindu marriage practice towards 1960s. For instance, the bridegrooms were permitted to see each other prior to the marriage, which the conventional Hindu marriage did not permit for. According to Mohammed (2012), Trinidad had 4.69 creoles per 100 unmixed Indians. Similarly,

Port of Spain Indian Creoles constituted merely 21.37. However, there was a rise in Inter-racial marriages from last 20 years and have become what can be referred as a 'fairly common' (ibid, 98) practice.

However, the cultural assimilation is also witnessed in forms of cultural fusion that has happened particularly among the popular forms of dance and music, about which paper will discuss extensively later. One can, thus, argue that the process of hybrid culture or salad culture, as one may call, is eventually developing with gradual changes in cultural patterns in Caribbean.

Cultural Representation and Identity

The cultural turn led towards 1960s opened up many newer dimensions to understand cultural dynamics. The question of representation and identity also underwent a change, as it had 'no unitary or continuous past' to draw from (Needham 1970, 36–37). Stuart Hall had tried to explain this cultural complexity through the ways in which identity and representation became meaningful through the process of consumption and production. When one looks into the Caribbean culture, the dimension of production and consumption looks well enmeshed within the popular cultural forms like calypso. Calypso or the Chutney-Soca tradition emerged not only as the cultural genre but its popularity became part of the economic consumption pattern. These popular songs often have their own record companies like Jamacian Me Crazy Records, Spice Island Records, Mohabir Records, etc.[1] Draupatee Ramgoonai's popular Chutney-Soca music 'Roll up the Tassa' alone gained much popularity through concerts and cassette culture. The contemporary popularity of Soca-calypso can very well be sensed through YouTube channels like Djeasy Promo TV, Michealmontano music, etc., which have more than 2.5 M views.

Besides the consumption and economic side to the Chutney-Soca tradition, the popular culture also played important role in reimagining the Caribbean women. Reyes (1986) argues that music became the language for women to speak out. For instance, in song 'Ah, Done Wit' Dat', the woman speaks aloud about her violent partner and that she could no longer tolerate him. Similarly, other songs like 'Run Away' openly express the discontent of women. Thus, the cultural identity, which earlier had fixity of meaning, turns topsy-turvy with the newer cultural dynamics that penetrates through popular music like Chutney-Soca.

[1] https://www.thebetterindia.com/60362/chutney-soca-indo-caribbean-music-fusion-bhojpuri/ accessed 21 June 2016.

The Style of Calypso and Emergence of Chutney-Soca

Hill (1967), while tracing the history of calypso, has argued about its first appearance in Trinidad carnival song in the newspaper Port of Spain Gazette on 20 January 1900. The newspaper had published the lyrics of the song in Creole and English. It is also referred to as 'Kaiso', 'Calyso', 'Cariso' or 'Ruso' in local variant. However, over a period of time, there have different changes and variants that have been seen in calypso music.

The Chutney-Soca saw its huge success in 1990s within Caribbean music and was associated with the seasonal appearance of carnival. The genre witnessed influence of Indian music in terms of instruments like use of Dholak, Sitar, etc. The music saw its close connection with sexuality as often the imagery of cooking, eating, etc., would be well inserted within music with pun intended in it. The element of sexuality within Soca/Calypso is also rooted in 'chutney' tradition that was explicit in its overtones about sexuality. Niranjana (2006, 122) argues the popularity of calypso music within Trinidadian space actually shows how Indians and Africans together have successfully dominated the post-colonial space of Trinidad.

When one looks into contribution of Indian diaspora within it, one also needs to look into the thematic changes which it has undergone into calypso genre and how East Indian polity and economy has played a role bringing about these changes (ibid, 131). The gradual re-forming of feminine identity through its interaction with other cultures was a product of the cultural assertion that the Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians have constantly engaged with. In this, assimilative process has emerged the creolization of Trinidadians and a cultural unity often reflected through music.

Soca-Chutney: History and Meanings

In this context, it is significant to reflect upon some of these changing patterns that have emerged within the popular culture. The emergence of Soca/Calypso music itself reflects upon the hybridity of cultural pattern, and also, the changes these popular forms are making in the marriage patterns. Mahabir (2006) has described carnival spirit in 'Jouvert' where different cultures mingle together, and new kinship patterns emerge in the process of intermixing of culture. These changing patterns open up newer ways in which sexuality is both contested as well as liberated. Through the character Annaise (in his work 'Jouvert'), Mahabir explains the open-endedness and freedom she enjoys in carnival space like Jouvert. Such freedom was otherwise not available to women earlier who were stuck within the Hindu laws and tradition. Thus, the process of assimilation in Indo-Caribbean diaspora has opened up dimensions were openness to sexuality and of making a 'choice'. It has thus somewhere widened the horizon of gender identity.

One can also understand the changing patterns of family and kinship structure by looking into the transition from traditional 'Matkhor' to the emerging popular genre like Chutney. 'Matkhor' is a ritual performed during the wedding ceremonies. Matkhor, as (Baksh-Soodeen 1999) points out, is the sexual expression of women, which women within Hinduism were not permitted to express publicly, hence cultural symbolism was used as a method to express it. The ceremony is associated with instruments like Dholak, tassa (large drums) and Dhantal (long stick used for beating drums) and is also accompanied by music. It is performed within the private spaces. The ritual, however, is not static, and differences in its performance have appeared over a period of time. For instance, Ramnarine (1998) points out that the ritual initially had involvement of men as well as women; however, over a period of time, it became an all-women activity performed within the private-sphere. The ritual involves digging up of earth, which represented fertility symbolism. The designation of private-sphere for ceremony symbolizing 'fertility' and sexuality shows the ways in which sexuality of women was considered as mysterious and denied a sense of 'publicness'. Thus, it is significant to understand the role of popular music in bringing about changes to the existing gender roles and stereotypes.

The Changing Dynamics of Soca-Chutney

Over the time, the dance forms and music have, however, got changed, and it has reflected more as the blend of Indian forms with the calypso music. Popularly known as Chutney, the dance form had come into vogue particularly from 1990s onwards. The term was articulated by Indo-Trinidadian community and has become part of Indo-Caribbean diaspora. The term Chutney-Soca was coined by Drupatee Ramgooni and is very much part of the popular music within Caribbean culture. This popular form roots its origin not only in traditions like Matkhor, but it is also borrowed from Calypso, Soca and Rap. The status of this genre (Chutney) is reflected in the economics which this form of music has tended to generate. This form is very popular during weddings. The cassette and recording of these songs increase manifold particularly during festivities like 'Divali', 'Phagwa' and Hosay? (Manuel 1998, 30). The Chutney form, as Barratt (2009) has argued, is a more enabling for women, in particular, as they are able to shed out their inhibitions about sexuality through the enactment of this form of dance and music. Further, the new fusion form of music has also developed a sense of solidarity between Indo-Caribbean and black women. Thus, the music genre has become not only a way to shed-off sexual inhibition but also to blur the racial boundaries that existed between different racial groups. This can be considered as turning point in understanding the flourishing of Caribbean feminism.

The dance of Chutney has a flamboyant style and involves sensuous pelvic rotation. Such bold form of popular style has changed the ways in which sexuality was traditionally asserted. From Matkhor to Chutney, there has been gradual evolution of women from private to public sphere. Besides developing a sense of solidarity among black and Indo-Caribbean women, such forms of dance have also redefined the ways in which women might choose to enjoy without being judged for obscenity/lewdness or sexual promiscuity. It is significant to mention here that in most of the patriarchal cultures, the social control whether it be in forms of socializing, drinking or dancing is mostly applicable for women while men are freely allowed to surpass these socially determined constraints. In this context, the emergence of popular forms of Chutney has certainly enabled women to have greater control over public sphere. It has also increased 'bargaining power' (Manuel 1998, 33) of women as the newer dance form has enabled them to express and exhibit their sexuality beyond a private sphere. It has not only loosened male control over women's sexuality, but women now are free to be assertive of their sexuality. Draupadi Ramgoonai, for instance, had released song like 'Pepper Pepper', 'Lick down mih Nani' which is full of sexual innuendoes.

In one of the interviews of Drupatee Ramgoonai,[2] she says that when she started into Soca-Chutney music, she did get criticism from people that 'Indian (women) cannot be on stage' and that it is too loud to do so, but eventually, she has become more comfortable with performance. She has gained appreciation from her audience and people love and cherish her now. She considers 'Roll up the Tassa' as one of her moving performance. Her other songs like Pepper Pepper (1988) had made it into Soca top charts list as well. The song lyrics 'Pepper Pepper' read as:

"Time to jump and call for soca
Bring it close and come closer
And add little curry and Jeera
And I know you will like me with the style
It can send you wild
Indian Soca
Sound and Sweeter
Hotter than a Chullah

Rhythm from Africa run India
Blend together is a perfect mixture
All we doing is add a new flavor
Let me get them to Indian Soca
….

We add some curry and chokha
Indian Soca, Something Sweeter
Hotter than a Chullah
….

Rhythm from Africa run India

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_EAMaxFEW0 accessed 27 February 2019.

We together are a perfect mixture
All we doin is add new flavor
Let me get them to Indian Soca
…

That is what we are like..
We are a mix up breed up

We are going because of fusion for the culture
Because of our identity for the future
And the only pace to start
Is when I play your part
Indian Soca
Sound and Sweeter
…

Rhythm from Africa run India
We together are a perfect mixture
All we are doing is add new flavor
Let me get them to Indian Soca
….

Indian Soca, Something Sweeter
Hotter than a Chullah."

The song though has fun and sexual innuendoes like 'Hotter than a chullah', but it is also about women from different diaspora regions come together, sing and celebrate. There is a constant repetition of phrase like 'Rhythm from Africa run India', 'blending together', 'fusion of culture', etc., which reflects on the sense of sisterhood between women in diaspora. It is also interesting to mention that metaphors of domestic space like kitchen and cooking are well played into the song. These domestic metaphors have been blend together and have been used to explain the newness that is emerging among the women of Indian and African diaspora. Similarly, in Ramgoonai's and Alison Hinds other popular songs like 'Roll up the Tassa', there is a flamboyant and bold performance, which was earlier not seen missing by the women of Indian diaspora in Caribbean.[3] Further, its lyrics read:

"Wee!
This is jam
This is ah soca tassa jam
Man play the ting na
…

Old man Bissessar
Take off he kapra
Pull out de tassa

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhYMFQeQT-c accessed 20 October 2018.

and start jammin de soca
Jammin de soca
Aha

When de music soundin sweet
And de crowd get in ah heat
If yuh hear how people bawl
Bissessar don't stop at all

Roll up de tassa
Roll up de tassa Bissessar
Oh Beta, roll up de tassa,
Roll up de tassa, Bissessar
Rip up de tassa, Bissessar
Ruff up de tassa, Bissessar
Oh Beta
…

Look at my nani
She real get on bad yuh no man

It was past de night
Everybody tight
Til no end in sight
But dey jammin de soca
Jammin de soca

Pandemonium rage
Some climb on de stage
De young and de aged
And dey jammin de soca, jammin de soca
Yes man, they doin de ting

Man de action out of hand
With dem rival tassa band
I could tell you without fear
I can't miss this fete next year
…

Whey
Heat in this place man
Heat in this place."

The song almost revokes a carnival spirit of coming together without any barriers for any gender. Also, there is a particular reference of the old and the new which is in a way also metaphorically referring the decay of an older order and coming up newer forms of gender identity which is more afresh, open and integrative.

Critics to Chutney form have argued that this form of music tradition is a way to renounce Indian culture and tradition. However, such arguments are oversimplified as sexual innuendoes where never isolated from the cultural practice. Matkhor and its symbolism of sex and fertility were always present within the Indian society. One can even talk about the 'joking relationship' that exists within culture and has a social sanctity. However, female sexuality has occupied the domain of private space and has been expressed only in a covert way. The opening up sexuality in the form of emergence of a popular genre has certainly opened up newer dimension understanding sexuality. It has allowed for transgression of expression of sexuality from a private domain to a public domain.

For Indo-Caribbean women, the experience of 'diasporic dislocation' created a 'double displacement' (Mehta 2004, 3), and it would be too simplistic to club their experience with the overall Indian diasporic experience at large. By 'double displacement', it means that the women like men who were transported to these lands were widows, low-caste women, destitute, etc. They belonged to the periphery of society. Secondly, their movement to far of lands not had only uprooted them from their native lands, but the very fact that crossing the 'kala-pani' as taboo within Hindu tradition had alienated them further from their cultural belongingness. The cultural and familial alienation was also faced due to the presence of dominant Afro-Caribbean culture. However, the women's experience of diaspora had been a dynamic process instead of being static. Rossane Kanhai through her reading of two novels 'Lucy' and 'Jasmine' has tried to capture the layers of multiple experience woman goes through as part of a diasporic community. 'Jasmine' has shown how women have changed and transgressed some of these boundaries and have assimilated themselves within the Creole culture.

Locating Indo-Caribbean Feminism

Within the post-colonial studies, Mohanty has criticized the monolith of 'Third world feminism' and has argued about the need to break-up this 'monolith' that the western feminists have constructed. This breakdown of 'third world feminism' is indeed apt even in the Caribbean context, where the history of indentureship and eventual assimilation of cultures has generated an experience for woman that is unique in itself. The ways in which Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean women have interacted in the period of history and changes in the interaction pattern that have happened over a period of history needs a deeper meditation. The sense of sisterhood that women of different ethnicity and race have developed, over a period of time, reflects upon the solidarity that they have developed to overcome an alienating environment.

The history of Indo-Caribbean women can be first traced from 30 May 1845, when ship Fatel Rozack carrying twenty-one females first landed on Trinidadian shore (Reddock 1998). These women called as 'Jahaji-bhain' accompanied each other singing songs and developing a sense of solidarity with each other. Mahabir (2006, 142) has argued that even if the blood relatives were not found 'they recreated

families with their Jahaji and estate relations allowing the deep roots of kinship to flourish'. The women taken through indentureship would often have spiritual cohesiveness and cultural continuity. The rituals like Matikor were the examples of the patterns of cultural continuity which they were often part of.

The impact of Caribbean feminism is also witnessed particularly within the Indo-Caribbean writings. Within the Indo-Caribbean writings, major shifts have been witnessed after the writings changed hands from male writers to female writers. While male writers (Sam Selvan, V. S. Naipaul, Shiva Naipaul et al.) wrote about women generally referring to mythologies, women writings have shown a reflection upon their own selves and involvement of their subjectivities. The coming up Indo-Caribbean women writers like Espinet, Lakshmi Persad et al. saw a major shift in the ways in which women were perceived within the literary discourse. Mahabir and Pirbahai (2013) have argued that literary practices of some of the writers Rossane Kanhai, Sheila Rampersad et al. have tried to unsettle the 'racial and cultural subversion' by bringing in the dimension of newer spaces created as a result of intermixing of cultures. For instance, Kanhai talks about the 'dougla' as a new form of poetics that have emerged, over a period of time, due to intermixing of Indo-Caribbean and African identity. It is significant to mention here that the word that once had a derogatory meaning and was used to refer to a 'bastard' had undergone change with an entire newer set of meanings representing hybridity of cultures.

Caribbean writing as Dash (1989) talks about is an engagement with 'terrain of unspeakable' (Dash 1989, 297). It engages with questioning of a controlled and totalizing structure and instead engages with the formlessness, plurality and latency (ibid, 297). This sense of plurality, in particular, has enabled the women writers to develop a sense of bondage with spaces that earlier were more restricted. Birbalsingh (2009) while exploring some of the works of Shani Mootoo has tried to highlight the sense of fluidity that has gone into works like 'Valmiki's Daughter'. The works reflect the dynamics of ways in which gendered identities are engaged in a constant negotiation with the newer identities. For instance, the novel highlights the cultural milieu of contemporary Trinidad where an upper-class Hindu family is depicted. However, the family has undergone changes in terms of values that they imbibed as 'Biharis'. The family undergoes churning of values as newer generation (the daughter of the family) is more inclined towards the Caribbean culture instead of the Indian culture. However, the generational gap is posed through the narrative of her mother who remains in the dilemma of accepting the changes. Thus, the gender relationship and sexuality have layers of complexity of acceptance as well as divergence which needs to be mediated upon. It has not been static rather acceptance of cultural plurality as well gender relations between different cultures have witnessed a series of changes.

Conclusion

Overall, the understanding of gender and sexuality within the Caribbean context needs to be understood through the gender dynamics that have historically witnessed within the Caribbean. In the transition from Jahaji-Bahen to women in contemporary Creole culture, gender has been a subject of constant contestation as well as negotiation. While some of these changing dynamics are visible in the changing cultural practices, like from Matikor to Chutney, others are witnessed through the changing dynamics of Marriage and Kinship structures. The methodological engagement to capture this dynamic through writings and through engagement with narratives of these women have helped one to understand the very subjectivity of women themselves in constructing these gender identities.

The paper has tried to locate and understand Indo-Caribbean feminism by relooking into the dynamics of popular culture like Chutney-Soca tradition. The sisterhood within Indo-Caribbean can be traced back to 'Jahaji-Bahen' when the women have come together in solidarity because of their aloofness in distinct spaces like Caribbean. It was through the songs that they sung on the ships during their long journey to distinct lands that led the development of a sense of association among them. The Caribbean culture as it stands today is, however, more than this. The coming together of Afro-Indian identity has unsettled the traditional gender identity, as it had existed in past. In this, reworking of identities also lies the language of reassertion of gender identity. Popular music like calypso has thus become important sociological tool through which changing patterns of Caribbean sexuality and gender dynamics can be understood.

Further, the paper has also discussed the intermixing of identities and their manifestation in popular culture like emergence of Chutney-Soca. It has opened up larger spaces within which gender identity can be discussed. It has allowed for the bondage of womanhood that was previously limited to private spaces. These newer spaces of popular culture have given a sense of liberation. It has allowed women from different diaspora histories like India, Africa, etc., to come together and talk more openly about themselves and their identities. These new forms of sisterhood have allowed for debunking their expression of sexuality from private spaces to a more celebrated 'publicness'. They now occupy a public platform with a greater sense of visibility and acceptance.

Image 1 (*Source* https://www.beatport.com/artist/drupatee-ramgoonai/550482 accessed 16 January 2018)

Image 2 (*Source* https://alchetron.com/Drupatee-Ramgoonai accessed 20 January 2018)

About image:
Drupatee Ramgoonai is popular Chutney-Soca musician. She is the pioneer to the term 'Chutney-soca' which has now become popular music genre in Caribbean culture. Some of her popular tracks are 'Pepper', 'Hotter Than a Chulha', 'Doh Beat Yuh Wife' etc.

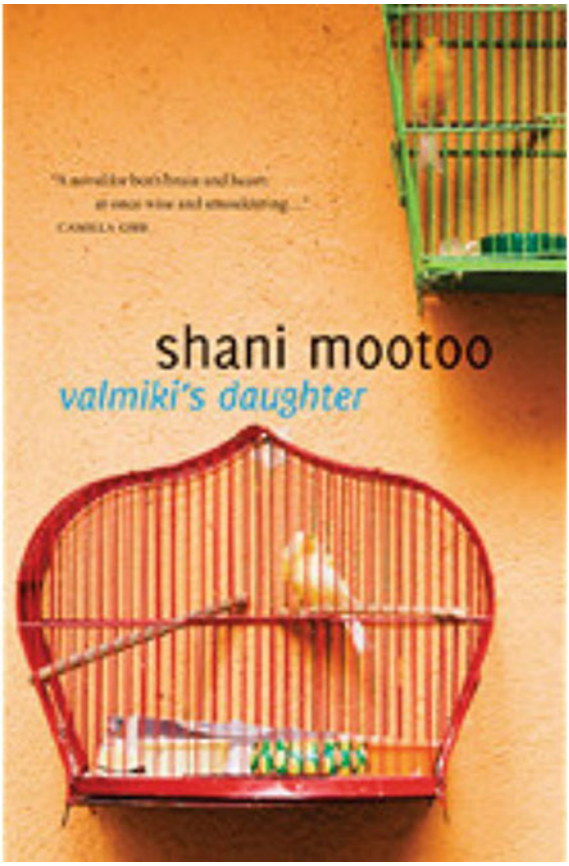


Image 3 (*Source* https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6044931-valmiki-s-daughter accessed 20 January 2018)

About the Image:
The popular work of Shani Mootoo's 'Valmiki's Daughter' is about the Trinidadian family and the changing gender roles and identity with time.

References

Baksh-Soodeen, R. (1998). Issues of difference in contemporary Caribbean feminism. *Rethinking Carib Difference. Feminist Review, 59,* 74–85.
Baksh-Soodeen, R. (1999). Power, gender and chutney. In R. Kanhai (Ed.), *Matikor: The politics and identity for Indo-Caribbean women*. St Augustine: School of Continuing Studies.
Barratt, K. A. (2009). "I Found My Indian Beauty…" Locating the Indo Trinidadian Woman in Trinidadian Soca Music. In K. Mahabir (Ed.), *Indian diaspora in the Caribbean*. New Delhi: Serials Publications.
Birbalsingh, F. (2009). Indo-Trindadian identities and sexuality: A survey of Shani Mootoo's fiction. In K. Mahabir (Eds.), *Indian diaspora in the Caribbean*. New Delhi: Serials Publications.
Dash, M. (1989). In search of the lost body: Redefining the subject in Cairbbean literature. In B. Ashhcroft (Ed.) *The post-colonial studies reader*. Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge.
Ellis, P. (Ed.). (1986). *Women of the caribbean*. U.K.: Zed Books.
Hall, S. (1995). Negotiating Caribbean identities. *New Left Review* (209), January–February, 3–14.
Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: cultural representation and signifying practices*. London: Sage Publication.
Hill, E. (1967). On the origin of the term calypso. *Ethnomusicology, 11*(3), 359–367.
Kanhai, R. (1996). Sensing designs in history's muddles: Global feminism and the postcolonial novel. *Modern Language Studies, 26*(4), 119–130.
Mahabir, J. (2006). *Jouvert*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.
Mahabir, J., & Pirbhai, Mariam. (2013). *Critical perspectives on Indo-Caribbean women's literature*. New York: Routledge.
Manuel, P. (1998). Chutney and Indo-Trinadadian cultural community. *Popular Music, 17*(1), 21–43.
Mehta, B. (2004). *Diasporic (dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean women writers negotiate the Kala Pani*. Jamica: The University of West Indies Press.
Mohammed, P. (2012). Changing symbols of Indo-Caribbean Femininity. *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, 6–16.
Needham, R. (1970). *The future of social anthropology: Disintegration or metamorphosis. Anniversary contributions to anthropology: Twelve essays* (pp. 36–37). Lieden: Brill.
Niranjana, T. (1997). Left to the imagination: Indian nationalism and female sexuality in Trinidad. *Small Axe, 2,* 1–11.
Niranjana, T. (2006). *Mobilizing India: Women music and migration between India and Trinidad*. U.S.: Duke University Press.
Ramnarine, T. K. (1998). Historical representations, performance spaces, and kinship themes in Indian-Caribbean popular song texts. *Asian Music, 30*(1), 1–33.
Reddock, R. (1998). The indentureship experience: Indian women in Trindad and Tabago 1845–1917. In S. Jain & R. Reddock (Eds.), *Women plantation workers: International experiences*. Berg: Oxford University Press.
Reyes, E. (1986). Women in Calypso. In P. Ellis (Ed.), *Women of the Caribbean*. U.K.: Zed Books.
Samuel, P. S., & Wilson, L. C. (2009). *Values and beliefs of Indo-Guyanese: An assessment of the assimilation hypothesis*. New Delhi: Serials Publications.
Tinker, H. (1974). *A new system of slavery: The export of Indian Labourers overseas (1830–1920)*. London: Oxford University Press.

Websites

https://www.thebetterindia.com/60362/chutney-soca-indo-caribbean-music-fusion-bhojpuri/, accessed 12 May 2018.

https://www.beatport.com/artist/drupatee-ramgoonai/550482, accessed 5 June 2018.
https://alchetron.com/Drupatee-Ramgoonai, accessed 5 June 2018.
https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6044931-valmiki-s-daughter, accessed 16 January 2018.
http://islandlyrics.com/lyrics-drupatee_ramgoonai-roll_up_the_tassa_1988.htm accessed 20 January 2019.