

# ACROSS THE KALA PANI: UNTOLD STORIES OF INDENTURED INDIAN WOMEN OF CHRISTIAN ORIGIN IN SOUTH AFRICA

Across the Kala Pani

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## ABSTRACT

The indenture experience is one that is entrenched in the very being of the Indian community in South Africa. Recent times have seen a good spread of documentation on such experiences, especially in light of the 150th anniversary of the arrivals in South Africa, celebrated in 2010. What does become clear in such accounts, however, is that the experiences of women are subsumed within such historical records, therefore giving little or no attention to their voices. Indian women were hugely impacted by the indenture experience; however, these accounts are few and far between. The history of Indian women in South Africa is undoubtedly largely shaped by their experiences of indenture. Such history is encompassed within their trajectories of poverty, culture, education and religion as they took the courageous decision to cross the Kala Pani.<sup>2</sup> In this short account, the indenture experience of the Indians in South Africa will be examined, giving specific attention to the aspect of poverty and the impact of mission on Indian Christian women. Various scholars briefly make mention of such experiences, however, it becomes important to apportion intentional spaces to those once muted, yet significant voices. Indentured Indian women of Christian origin have a story to tell – a story of their encounters across the Kala Pani. Such stories become important to the discourse of the history of the Indian community in South Africa.

**Keywords:** indenture, Kala Pani, Indian Christian women, patriarchy

## INTRODUCTION

At the outset, it must be noted that older historical records have been extremely limited in capturing the Indian story from the perspective of women – even more so from a Christian perspective. In many records, their voices are either hidden or expressed

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- 2 *Kala Pani* is an Indian term for the taboo of 'the crossing of the black waters' (see Ebr-Vally 2001: 20).

within the wrappings of 'his-story'. It is only recent historians and feminist scholars (for example, Nair 2010 and Nadar 2002) who have gone through the painstaking effort of restoring and unmuting the voices of Indian Christian women in various literatures. The fact that Indian women's voices in the indenture story were largely unheard or unspoken of is an argument in itself, reflecting the 'sub-human' state to which they had been confined. In any event, as I journey through the pages of history, I intentionally look and listen for the voices of Indian Christian women within the indenture story. However, in attempting to capture such stories, it must be noted that this is often in the wider discourse of the Indian indenture story, which does not place emphases on any particular religious group.

## THE INDENTURE EXPERIENCE

The Indian community first arrived in South Africa on 16 November 1860. There were 342 people aboard the S.S. Truro, mainly South Indian Hindus and a small number of Christians and Muslims (Arkin 1989). Later, on 26 November 1860, the S.S. Belvedere brought a further 351 immigrants. In total, there were 152 184 Indian immigrants that arrived in South Africa between the years 1860 and 1911 (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 2). The purpose of their coming to South Africa was mainly as 'indentured labourers', to work on the sugar cane plantations, particularly in Natal. 'After the abolition of slavery, subjugated India replaced Africa as the supplier of labour on colonial plantations and the Indians in their thousands, mainly from the south, were brought as indentured workers whose state of unfreedom was a little different from that of slaves' (Meer 1975: 2).

Desai (2010: 38) gives an account of a notice of immigration that was issued to all those earlier immigrants intending to immigrate to Natal. While the following quotation is rather lengthy, it helps to understand the promises that were made to Indians that caused many to take the decision to journey to foreign soil. The immigration notice stated, for example, the following:

Notice to Coolies intending to emigrate to Natal

You will be taken free of expense to Calcutta, and, while there, will be well fed and properly lodged until the ship sails; and should you be ill, the greatest care will be taken of you. When the ship is ready you will be supplied with good clothing; the finest ships are selected, and the voyage takes about five or six weeks. The food, medicines and other appliances on board are of good quality and your health, comfort and safety will be most carefully attended to ... (Desai 2010: 38).

On the contrary, South Africa became a land of broken promises where none of the spoken intentions were fulfilled. 'These poor Indians were made to believe that the Colony of Natal promised a good life. Plenty of food, trees which somehow produced gold coins and a host of hell ridden lies which easily convinced hungry, desperate

souls to make the journey to this land of false promises' (Naidoo 2001: 9). It was such promises that enticed many of the indentured Indians to make the brave and courageous journey to an unknown land.

With the hope of finding a better life based on those initial promises made to them, many of them boarded the S.S. *Truro*.

Caught up in this human web of misery, poverty and hopelessness, Indians began to immigrate with the hope of selling their labour and perhaps finding a new life in the colonies. Yes, slavery was abolished, however, another type of slavery venerated as "indentured" labour was now promoted by the British (Naidoo 2001: 8).

For a number of them, their hope of finding a better life was shattered by the reality that while they tried to escape one type of 'caste' system in India, they found themselves in yet another here in South Africa. Since the caste system was so entrenched in their being, the indentured Indians could not escape the experience of such a system, but this was also made more complex by the experience of yet more segregation and separation in South Africa based on racial divisions.

For those who had taken the decision to make the courageous journey, that initial journey, which was said to have taken about forty days in total, was not a pleasant one. Naidoo states:

Men, women and even children as young as a year old suffered much from the hardened blows of nature itself on the rough seas which made the journey a living nightmare. For more than forty days they endured this kind of hardship. They were cramped like unwanted human cargo journeying to a land of broken promises. They suffered physical discomfort and illness, some even died (Naidoo 2001: 9).

The women in particular endured unimaginable hardships, abuse and challenges on the journey. Naidoo (2001: 9) records an incident of a young girl who was put into chains for refusing to carry out a certain task requested of her by the ship officials. When she was released from the chains, she jumped overboard and committed suicide. Desai (2010: 20) concurs with such accounts, stating that many young women committed suicide, mostly by throwing themselves overboard, due to the inability to handle the inhumane treatment and torture on the ship. He asserts that the lives of these young women, who were in search of a better future, were brutally halted and what is even worse is that they disappeared from history books (Desai 2010: 21). One such woman was a young, single woman by the name of Muniyammah. 'To the men in charge, she was cargo being transferred from one port to another. After all, is this not one of the meanings of the word "indenture": official requisition for stores; orders for goods, especially from abroad?' (Desai 2010: 21). Hence, in the mind of the colonial officials, the indentured labourers and the women in particular, were merely cargo or goods, who were considered to be numbers and not human beings. Their vulnerability was severely abused and taken advantage of, and they often had no form of defence against such onslaughts.

Desai notes that many single women and widows had been among those indentured labourers, taking the risk of crossing over. In trying to understand why these women had immigrated to South Africa, he states, ‘Widows and adolescent girls who emigrated were usually socially “disinherited by the patriarchal infringements” that viewed them or their behavior as a violation against normative expectations of respectability’ (Desai 2010: 21). It becomes clear that there were a variety of reasons why women chose the path of indenture. For some, it was an attempt to seek redefinition, identity and subjective visibility as women. For others it was an attempt to escape from a ‘man’s world’ (Desai 2010: 434). There were also widows escaping *sati*<sup>3</sup> while others were escaping forced marriages and still others were escaping the hardship of patriarchy and a caste-ridden society.

Desai (2010: 22) observes that although these women were once ‘non-human’ by status, they managed to re-inscribe themselves into recorded history through documents of indenture that transformed their status from ‘non-human’ to that of ‘historical pioneers’ by emigration. Although this may be true, I argue that these historical records were largely written from a male perspective and the voices of women were often not heard in such historical reflections. Although many Indian women made such impacts and noteworthy contributions to the well-being of the Indian community, the names of many of these great women were, unfortunately, not known simply because the cultural practice was to address them by the names of their husbands. It is only in recent literature and feminist scholarship in particular that attempts have been made to find these lost voices and restore them into the annals of history.

In their attempts to escape cultural oppression, patriarchy and the hardships of the caste system, Indian women took the risk of indenture with the hope of a better life. These Indian women apparently ‘took advantage of the opportunity offered by indenture to transcend their marginality within the nuclear Hindu family by embracing a more Indian diasporic community, a community that was nevertheless created by violent disruptions and exile’ (Desai 2010: 22). However, as stated earlier, to their dismay, even before they set foot in the ‘land of promise’, Indian women continued to experience the oppression and inhumane treatment, they tried to escape, now under new and foreign circumstances (Ebr-Vally 2001: 21). The oppression and stigma had commenced the moment the decision to emigrate was taken, and even before they had made the journey. Ebr-Vally (2001: 21) uses an Indian metaphor, *kala pani*, which when translated means ‘the crossing of the black waters’. Desai concurs that in the mind of the Indian, the act of crossing the *kala pani* was considered contamination and defilement of the soul. He comments:

It was held to lead to the dispersal of tradition, family, class, and caste classification and to the general loss of a “purified” essence. *Kala pani* had a much deeper meaning for many Indian

3 *Sati* was a Hindu custom in which the widow was burnt to ashes on her dead husband’s pyre (see Desai 2010: 462).

villagers. Under British rule, those who committed serious crimes in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh had to cross water to serve their imprisonment on the islands of Andaman and Nicobar. *Kala pani* signified a life of internment with no return (Desai 2010: 56).

Hence in the eyes of those left behind in India, the many that had made the journey were considered defiled, unclean and contaminated. For the women in particular, who were often responsible for all the preparation of prayer utensils, meals and the cleaning up before and after religious practices, this would have meant that yet another stigma of contamination and defilement was attached to them, adding to the burden they were already carrying. Thus Indians had to reformulate their social structures as well as their identity in order to deal with these losses within their newfound home. Ebr-Vally (2001: 135) clarifies this by saying: ‘As a matter of fact, the Indian identity as inherited from India is structured by the group. The individual does not have any intrinsic value outside a group.’ Ebr-Vally believes that the caste system began its demise during the first decade of the Indian immigration to South Africa.

Despite various castes and religious ranks that indentured Indians had represented, to the colonialists all Indians were simply *coolies*<sup>4</sup> and no respect was paid to purity, rank or duty (Desai 2010: 177). All had to do the same work, and in fact the higher castes were frowned upon for being less productive since they had not developed the culture of hard work as the sub-caste might have out of desperation for survival.

It is evident that the disturbing experience of crossing the *kala pani* had long lasting impacts on the Indian community. Pillay comments that although some of the indentured labourers in the initial decades of their domicile maintained ties with India, these ties were soon broken. ‘Their children were now South African-born and with intermarriage among castes and the new commitments that ensued from setting up home in South Africa, reintegration into the society in India became impossible’ (Pillay 1989: 148). For many of them, as much as they longed for ‘home’, to make the journey back to their land of origin was unthinkable. For women in particular, if they had returned to India, the stigma, oppression and hardship would have been even more than they had experienced even before they had left. Historically, Indians were averse to crossing the *kala pani* since it was traditionally regarded as full of peril to the Indian soul. ‘In search for their fortune they had not only found themselves indentured but they had transgressed fundamental cultural and social codes. Shame, disappointment and dishonor weighed too heavily on the immigrants to allow them to keep in touch with their families, fraternities and villagers’ (Ebr-Vally 2001: 138). Having arrived in South Africa under such diverse and trying circumstances, the Indian community found themselves at a point of no return, hence were faced with the challenges of making a life

4 The term, ‘coolie’, was used by colonialists for indentured labourers. It was derived from the Tamil word, *kuli*, which referred to payment for menial work for persons without customary rights and were at the lowest level in the industrial market. In India it was regarded as a term of reproach. The term later transformed from *kuli* into coolie (Desai 2010: 78).

in a land of broken promises and reformulating an identity as a 'settler' in South Africa.

The initial years were those of physical torture, hardship and pain. 'Complaints of ill-treatment of the indentured immigrants were quite common' (Arkin 1989: 4). This inhumane treatment went on despite the commitment made by the immigration officials to the Indian government. Naidoo records various incidents of such cruel treatment and its tragic impact on various Indian families, for example, Mudlay (No. 116821)<sup>5</sup> and his wife Odda Nagi (No. 116838), were forced to peg their two and a half year old child in a hut as they worked from 4am to 9pm each day. The child eventually died of neglect (Naidoo 2001: 15). Many other accounts such as this have been lost with the voices of women who endured such intense hardship. These women had chosen the path of intense work on the sugar plantations as a means to supplement the meagre incomes that they were receiving. It was a decision taken for survival. The Indians were therefore enticed and 'seduced' to come to South Africa for the advantage, progress and well-being of the colonialists. Now, between a rock and a hard place, fearful to make the journey once more across the *kala pani*, most Indians had begun to settle in their new found 'home'.

## THE IMPACTS OF POVERTY

Since many of the Indians had come only with a small suitcase that contained their life's belongings, they experienced conditions of extreme poverty. This had impacted greatly on the women who constantly felt the pressure of having to feed their families, usually to the extent of denying themselves a meal (Naidoo 2001: 23). In the initial years of their arrival, the main work opportunities available to Indian women were on the sugar and tea estates where they served as cheap labour. Having worked just as hard for as many hours as men did, women received only half the pay that men did (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 14).

Most of the indentured labourers were Tamils and were mainly from the South Indian city of Madras now known as Chennai. They belonged largely to the labourer (*Shudra*) class (Diesel 2007: 3). It is recorded that of the total number of indentured labourers who arrived in the colony, thirteen percent were children accompanying their parents (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 4). Although technically children under ten were not allowed to work, they were in actual fact given light work to do, while those over ten helped with weeding in the fields, generally under the oversight of the women (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 4). Women laboured for long hours in the sugar cane fields or as domestic workers to the Europeans, and their working hours, which should have been nine hours per day, were extended to thirteen hours a day (Naidoo 2001: 16). Brain (1983: xvii) mentions that many Christian missionaries often condemned the long hours that the women had to work in the cane fields from daylight to dark, reminding the

5 Naidoo (2001:15) records that when the Indians arrived in South Africa they were referred to by number. Usually this would be preceded by *Coolie* followed by the number in order of their arrival.

employers that among the crowd of women were those who were probably in their early stages of pregnancy, some with suckling babies, and many who had left little children behind in their huts. Unfortunately, these concerns were expressed to no avail.

By 1903, the Kearsney Estate, which was a very successful tea estate in Natal, owned by Sir Liege Hulett and Sons, was said to have employed 4 500 indentured workers, many of whom were women (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 8). 'Women were preferred on the tea estates because of the skills involved in picking and also because they were cheaper to employ (they received half the wages men were given). During picking season, women could be in the field for as many as eleven to thirteen hours' (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 9).

Pregnant women continued to work for seven months, thereafter their rations were suspended until such time as they resumed work again. Many of these women neglected their roles as mothers because of their very long working hours and this in turn greatly impacted on the health and well-being of their children (Naidoo 2001: 19). The harsh socio-economic conditions experienced by indentured labourers in Natal affected women in particular. Desai (2010: 5) states: 'Life in Natal was difficult, even for those who managed to keep their families intact. Socio-economic conditions made family life precarious. Violence was endemic in the experience of indenture. Sometimes it turned inwards. Women were often on the receiving end.' They were constantly faced with the hardship of providing food for their children. Desai states:

Indentured women faced enormous challenges. They were paid lower wages and received less food rations than men. Pregnant women unable to work, or those who were ill, could also be denied rations. Women were sometimes forced to append themselves to men to gain access to food. Men labeled such women, who acted out of desperate need to survive, "rice-cookers" (Desai 2010: 6).

What impacted more on women was that initially employers denied women and children rations, stating that they did not see much productive value in them and therefore did not compel them to work. By 1866 the law was amended that entitled women and children under 10 to half rations (Desai 2010: 117). This had changed further around the 1880s when the law came to support the idea that women be compelled to work unless they had a medical certificate to attest otherwise. With the fear of the rations being cut off, women pushed on with work despite illness or even pregnancy. Desai (2010: 117) relates accounts of women losing their babies in childbirth due to medical and physical neglect resulting from these long hours that they had worked. What becomes clear from the literature is that although women worked just as hard, and in some cases, even harder than men, their work was often invisible or regarded as unimportant. The very fact that they received only half the wages that their male counterparts did, suggests that they were devalued and scorned, not because they produced less in terms of their work, but because they were women.

While women found opportunities to work on the sugar cane plantations, there were not as many opportunities as for their male counterparts outside the sugar cane

industry. For example, one such opportunity for Indian men was found in the food and hotel industry as waiters and it has remained a popular occupation ever since. Indentured waiters, classed as ‘special servants’, were in demand and generally worked under better conditions than the other indentured workers (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 10). Many were also employed as cooks and house servants as well as railway workers, where they played a significant role.

Unfortunately women were restricted in the opportunities offered to them, and they were mainly confined to the sugar estate because of their skill and ability in the plantations, or alternatively, they were employed as domestics. This often meant that the quality of food given to them was inferior compared to that of their male counterparts who found employment elsewhere, as well as receiving only half the wages for the same amount of work done by men (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 14). The traditional bondages and patriarchal attitudes in which many Indian women found themselves had kept them limited to the domestic sphere, with a number of them engaging in hawking and market gardening, selling predominantly fresh fruit, vegetables and flowers (Hiralal 2010: 155). Around the 1920s in Natal, a number of Indian women had also become involved in weaving baskets, which they sold either door to door or along the roadside. By then, all Indian females had gained the name ‘Coolie Mary’, which was used by whites, since they had difficulty pronouncing Indian names (Ebr-Vally 2001: 50). The poet, B.D. Lalla, wrote about the Indian female hawker, drawing attention to the disliked label, ‘Coolie Mary’. The poem reads:

To thy door each bitter morning  
Cold or hot or wind a-storming  
Comes she with her breath a-panting  
“Nice fruits, missus, and greens” a-chanting  
Is she not a blessed fairy?  
Dubbed as a Coolie Mary? (Ebr-Vally 2001: 51)

For Indian women of that period, market gardening and hawking became a small yet significant source of income. They were driven to these domestic means of income as a way to survive economically as many of them were living below the poverty line. Walker (1991: 71) highlights that between 1943 and 1944, a comparative assessment revealed that 70.6% of the Indians in Natal were living below the poverty line. These poverty stricken situations were confirmed by prominent political activist and medical practitioner, Dr. Goonam, who vividly describes the extent of poverty in the Indian community, particularly felt by the women, as leaving her feeling helpless against such poverty (Goonam 1991: 155). Hence it was such desperate situations that compelled Indian women to look for means of survival. Since formal work was not generally encouraged within the Indian community, and also because many Indian women were deprived of acquiring the necessary skills for formal employment, they had no option but to resort to domestic labour for income and survival.



The stigma endured by Indian women at that stage was not just segregation through 'race', but were also class and gender related. The dominant patriarchal family structure contributed to oppressive relationships that often led to considerable violence against Indian women. As the Indian community began to settle in Pietermaritzburg, there were increasing accounts of alcoholism, crime and violence against women, with divorce becoming more prevalent. Diesel (2007: 5) asserts that this is associated with stress caused by lack of recognition as a community and with the social change related to segregation and displacement of Indian families. One such experience that had elevated the stress levels and perpetuated poverty among Indian families was that of forced removals, which had a devastating impact on the lives of the Indian community (numerous others were affected as well, but for the purpose of this study, I make reference to its impact on the Indian community). Many Indian families during that period recollect these experiences that devalued the quality of life, particularly those of Indian women, who were burdened with maintaining the social stability of their families amid such turmoil (Meer 1975: 8).

In the Indian context, the possession of a title deed served as a constant symbol of security in a land of uncertainty and broken promises. This experience left many families with devastation unimaginable to those who have not been in a similar situation. The burdens attached to relocation were mainly carried by women who now found themselves with the dilemma of no longer being able to feed their families from their vegetable gardens since they were now in extremely confined and overcrowded spaces where it became impossible to keep gardens (Pillay 1977: 137). Adding to this problem was the fact that they were relocated to vicinities where markets and shopping facilities were not easily accessible; hence adding more to the existing burdens of women who needed to provide food for their families. In addition, due to the very small houses they were forced to move into, households were faced with the burden of having to dispose of many of their household appliances and furniture due to a lack of space (Pillay 1977: 137). Many households were forced to leave possessions such as chairs, table, stoves and other such items outside their homes, which soon became damaged and unusable with time and weather conditions. These are aspects that perpetuated poverty in the Indian community of which the women carried the heavier burden and felt the greater impacts in many households (Pillay 1977: 138). Yet again, it was the women who felt the worst effects of the new, communal facilities since they were the ones who would bathe the children, do the washing and other such tasks. Because of their poverty stricken situations, they had no other option but to comply, even to the extent of being stripped of their dignity (Pillay 1977: 138).

## INDIAN WOMEN AND CHRISTIANITY

The work of Brain was one of the earlier historical and statistical accounts of Christian Indians in Natal from the period 1860 to 1911. Brain (1983: 247) records that of the 152 184 Indian immigrants between 1860 and 1911, only 2 150 (i.e., 1.4 per cent)

were identified as Christian. The historical account of Brain asserts that the first ten to disembark from the Truro and set foot on Natal soil constituted two Christian families. The first family comprised a Roman Catholic male from Madras, Davarum, aged thirty years, his wife Nagium (18 years), and their two daughters, and the second family comprised Abraham (38 years), his wife Sarah (30 years) and their four children (Brain 1983: 12). Commenting on Nagium, Nair and Naidoo (2010: 183) state, 'With no written records available, one can only imagine the challenges, pain and disappointments this young mother suffered.' They further assert that it must have been extremely challenging for Nagium, who had to toil from dusk to dawn in the plantation and still care for her two young children.

Despite the small number of Indian Christians in Natal, the Christian mission played a conspicuous and evangelical role among Indian settlers.

By 1860 Christianity had already taken root in the Colony of Natal. Whilst the Dutch Reformed Church and the Presbyterian Church served mainly the white population, the Roman Catholic, the Methodist and the Anglican were the first three churches which were actively involved with mission work among the early Indian settlers (Nair and Naidoo 2010: 9).

The Lutheran church was the fourth denomination to make inroads into the Indian community and they were followed by the Baptists with Reverend John Rangiah in Natal on 27 December 1903. By 1925, the Indian community began to be greatly impacted by a Pentecostal movement, the Full Gospel Church, under the influence of John F. Rowlands. The Indian branch of this was called Bethesda, and the first church started at 519 Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg, on 26 July 1925, making huge impacts throughout the province and spreading throughout the country (Nair and Naidoo 2010: 107).

Nair asserts that Nagium, who was listed as *Coolie* number 2, being the very first indentured woman to set foot on South African soil, unfortunately had no written records about her experience, but he assumes that she must have gone through the extreme hardship that all other women went through. 'Her source of encouragement and hope in those early and dark days must have been her faith in God' (Nair and Naidoo 2010: 183). Then there was Kanakamma Rangiah, who was the wife of the first Indian missionary, John Rangiah, sent out to Natal on 13 June 1903 (Nair and Naidoo 2010: 183). At first Kanakamma was resistant to make the journey. At that time she was pregnant with her third child, but finally saw it as God's call over their lives. 'On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1903 Kanakamma gave birth to a son. No fussing midwives, no special food or Indian medicine. John helped deliver the baby. It then was taboo in Indian culture, but this was Africa!' (Nair and Naidoo 2010: 183). The story goes that Reverend John Rangiah died in 1915 after a brief illness. Kanakamma was now a widow with six children, and when given the opportunity to go back to India, she chose to stay in South Africa and continue the work that she and her husband had started among the indentured Indians. Many other such women had greatly impacted Christian ministry among indentured labourers

and among women in particular (Nair and Naidoo 201: 185).

Indian Christian women, because of the strong missionary influence, became very effective with regards to education among indentured Indians. The educational opportunities for indentured Indian children were attributed to mission schools. Desai comments, 'The mission schools were the embryo of Indian education, and Christians, with their knowledge of English, had a head start in economic mobility among Indians' (Desai 2010: 262). By 1885, the Anglicans were running nine of the 21 Indian schools in Natal. This had increased in 1886 to fifteen. By 1889, the Anglicans had opened the first girls' school, hence opening the way for girls to be educated contrary to cultural practices (Desai 2010: 262). Having been involved in initiatives of education, medical facilities, various welfare programmes, Desai (2010: 268) comments: 'The mission's greatest contribution, though, was in the field of education.' Many Indian women had been recipients of these educational initiatives.

It is against this historical backdrop that Indian women in South Africa attempt to locate themselves, calling for a more rigorous analysis, since they exist in a cross-national, cross-cultural setting with much diversity within the same culture, class and nation. Unfortunately, as we have noted, the history and experiences of Indian Christian women in South Africa have not been as widely documented as they should have been. Govinden (2002: 263) suggests that the reason for Indian women's histories being insufficiently documented is that much of the past research assumes that the term, 'Indian history', is inclusive of both male and female. She points out the necessity in the days of an emerging democracy, for critical scholarship on the lives, histories and experiences of Indian women who undoubtedly contributed to the development of society. In like manner, at the very outset of recollecting the journeys of faith by Indian Christian women, Nadar (2002: 139) concurs that women's experiences are often neglected within the annals of their respective church histories, since these records give attention to 'his' story.

It is scholars such as Nadar and Govinden, among a few others, who have in recent years, attempted to build on the historical background of Indian women in South Africa, giving attention to how these women contributed to the Christian faith. Govinden states:

Much of research in Indian history assumes that the term is inclusive of male and female, with little specific attention given to the particular experiences of Indian women. Given the male domination of society generally, it was inevitable that Indian men would have more opportunities to be chief players in this history. "History" itself is a male defined "master discourse". Further, because men have held the power traditionally in historical research, Indian women's histories have been insufficiently documented (Govinden 2012: 262).

The individual stories of Indian women have been subsumed within the larger narrative of oppression. It is for this purpose that Govinden intentionally traces the histories of these women who have left an imprint on the generations to follow. Indian Christian women are noted for their roles in leaving their mark on a history that was once shaped by patriarchy and androcentric mind-sets. The retelling of their dynamic stories is no

longer within the wrappings of ‘his-story’ because a number of them have found the courage to break the barrier of ‘unfreedom’.

It is only in the retelling of these stories that we are able to highlight the significant roles that Indian Christian women played in the advancement and growth of the Indian Christian community as a whole. It is also in the retelling of these stories that we are able to dispel the myth that ‘women were invisible’ or that they did not perform tasks that were important enough to be recognized in the life of the church.

From this background one understands that when Indian Christian women make strides and take the risk of breaking beyond the barriers of culture, this marks a victory. Indian Christian women were undoubtedly fearlessly venturing into terrain where they were once considered inferior. As we see the numbers increasing in terms of Indian women involved in various forms of church ministry, those who are ordained as full time priests, as well as those who are becoming more involved in theological studies, it serves as a reminder that those who have gone ahead have created space for those who follow.

## CONCLUSION

This short article has attempted to reflect on the historical accounts of Indian women of Christian origin, who crossed the *Kala Pani* to their ‘new found home’. The voices of such women have often been muted, yet are worth listening to. Historically, such narratives have been lost or subsumed within the greater indenture account. Indian women have made significant contributions to education, health, political and societal transformation as well as to religion. Crossing the *Kala Pani* was a courageous journey taken by our foremothers. Such stories have often been left untold and uncelebrated, yet it is such women that have contributed significantly to the spiritual formation of the Indian Christian Community in South Africa. Such stories are worth listening to, celebrating and handing down to future generations.

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