Amba Pande *Editor*

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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

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Editor and Contributors

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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

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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.

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