



Discourse Study of Indentured Women: A Historical Re-visit

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Abstract:

Migration, though considered as a source for the development of humans, can also be seen as turmoil. If the migration happens wilfully without any compulsion, it may lead to the progress of humans; but on the other hand, it may take the soul from the body leaving them alive without happiness. One such migration is diaspora which highlights suppression, pain and collective suffering experienced by the migrant community. Most of the olden diasporas occurred out of compulsion which left future generations of the diaspora to live still in the position of Trisanku. Presently through power, many aim to create discourses about diaspora in a romanticising way. The present paper aims to use testimonials and official documents related to the Indian Indentured Diaspora to highlight the subjugation of migrants with a special focus on the discrimination experienced by the Women indentured labours.

Key Words: Diaspora, Indenture, sugar colonies, Women indentured labourers

In 1834 the abolition of slavery paved the way for the existence of indentured diaspora. Since the law recommended the abolition of slavery, the Sugar colonies were in demand for labour. The colonisers were constantly in need of cheap labour as they used the colonies for cultivation under their control. There was a huge demand for the Indian labourers as the Africans were not willing to continue their services in the field. In India, various reasons like political change under the British rule, heavy taxes upon the poor farmers and failure in agriculture due to natural calamities led the peasants to work under the other landlords or to leave for a town in search of jobs. Subsequently, this was used by the Whites to transport millions of Indians as indentured labour to the colonies.

Indenture means a system of contracts with the Indian workers to work as migrants in the British colonies for some specified years. Initially, the appointment of indenture was done legally with proper labour contracts. But slowly practices of the old system of slavery were followed in the name of indenture. Hugh Tinker calls indenture as 'a new system of slavery' as the same rigid rules were followed. Moreover, as the planters were accustomed to the practice of strict inhuman treatment of the slaves, they preferred to follow the same with the indentured labourers too. Most of the ordinances for indentured labourers were similar to slave rules. Selection, process of transportation and life in the colonies showed different levels of discrimination and pain experienced by the indentured labourers.

Initially, the indenture tenure period was for two to three years and after that, they returned home as they worked in nearby places. When they started to migrate overseas, it was impossible for them to return soon and the plantation owners too wanted to extend the indentures' stay in the colonies. Hence the tenure period changed to a five-year contract and if the stay is for ten years (two times service) they would avail a free return trip. Though

indenture itself is a painful journey, the agonies experienced by women were unimaginable. Despite all the hardships, the indentured women were projected negatively by the power of the plantation owners and the patriarchal society. This paper aims to present the marginalised position of women in the sugar colonies and to highlight the discourses used by the colonisers to objectify women and to manipulate the issue of indentured labour problems by blaming the moral behaviours of women.

Women were exploited by power and for all the negativity caused by the indenture system indentured women were blamed as the reason for it. Even after the colonial period, descriptions of the turmoil of the colonial women are very less as most of the research focuses on men's writing and their experiences during indenture. The present researchers on indentured women's experiences find that very little work is done on this topic and even historical records on them are very minimal. Concerning this Margaret Mishra states that, "Indentured women featured in colonial exchanges, often in passing as a footnote or afterthought, and other times as objects of much deliberation, especially when they transgressed the neatly demarcated boundaries of femininity" (60).

Initially, most of the indentured labourers happened to be males who preferred to go alone by leaving their families back in India. Such labourers suffered from loneliness and after their bonded period of labour preferred to return home to be reunited with their family. Most women did not go as indentured initially as crossing the ocean was forbidden. Later to encourage migration and permanent settlement of the indentures in the colonies (to reduce the money spent for travel of the migrants), planters decided to invite more women indentures and families. Asthosh Kumar quotes G. A. Grierson's report of four categories of women, who migrated as indentures thus,

The first category was that of the wives of emigrants, the second category was widows without friends or kin, who were starving, the third category comprised married women who had been socially ostracised for absconding from their husband's house (with or without a lover) and had been shunned by him, and finally, women who were regarded as prostitutes and had no other means of support (41).

The government declared that 25% of women's migration was a compulsory norm, hence many women were manipulated or kidnapped. One incident of kidnapping women for indentured labour is quoted in Tinker's work. It was found out by the Revd. Thomas Evans, a Baptist missionary at Allahabad, later reported in the newspapers Pioneer (a newspaper from Allahabad) and Standard (a newspaper from London). Gunga who worked as a shoemaker for Evans said that his aunt was asked by a Chuprasee to grind some corn for money. When she accepted that offer, she was made to sit with other women and asked to wait for some more time. Meanwhile, they were offered food and forced to accept labour work abroad. Even when the women pleaded, they were forcefully taken to the depot and later released by Revd. Thomas Evans. Similar kinds of kidnaps happened regularly and in 1910 sixteen such cases were filled (126). There are several such kinds of narrations available about the reasons for migration which happened mostly due to compulsion.

One woman told me she had quarreled 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)

Most of the indentured women happened to be widows, abandoned wives or married women who travelled with family and some happened to be single women. Both in India and in the colonies recruited single women were seen with skepticism.

In the depots, some women were used cheaply to attract other women and men for migration. Once they boarded a ship for migration, they were expected to stay in the allotted place. Usually, single women were offered to occupy aft, in the rear section of the ship. Family members occupied amidships and sometimes married men were accommodated on one side and women and children on the other side. Women were mostly employed for cooking and cleaning in the ship and sometimes single women were sexually exploited by the crew members in the ship.

Gaiutra Bahadur in *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* describes the exploitations experienced by the women indentured during their journey to the colonies.

The first woman said: "The doctor came down one night between decks, took me by the arm and dragged me upstairs into his cabin. ... He is a great scamp. ... The doctor used to offer me biscuit and sugar, and did so as I was going to the [water] closet, taking that opportunity. ... I did complain to the commander but he is as bad as the doctor."

The second woman said: "On one occasion, the surgeon asked me to go into his cabin, but I refused. ... The surgeon was in the habit of pinching us and slapping us on the bottom; we did not like it."

The third woman said: "One night, the surgeon came down between decks, took me by the arm, and dragged me up into his cabin, and had connexion with me. ... He put his hand on my mouth when I was between decks. ... The surgeon was in the habit of taking liberties with the women. ... The surgeon used to ill-treat the immigrants by beating them with his hand and putting some of them in irons."

Then three weeks later, the same woman, in a group recalled from their sugar estates to be cross-examined by Holman, suddenly took ill with fever. Rojeah—that was her name—had to be hospitalized. On recovering, she found that her compatriots had all been cross-examined and sent back to their plantations. Facing Holman alone, in the colony's immigration office, she said: "The surgeon of the ship never seduced me, or did anything to me, nor did I ever go into his room, nor did he ever ill-treat or abuse me."

The fourth woman stood by her story. She said: "The surgeon frightened me.... I was afraid to refuse. ... He used to slap me hard on my bottom and hurt me. ... The surgeon came after me, and made me go by force. ... Inside his room, the surgeon had connexion with me near the door, on the floor; the door was shut. ... It is true that on three nights the surgeon took me into his room and had connexion with me. ... I was not a prostitute in India" (77).

Some of the single women to safeguard their lives, married strangers whom they met in the depot. Such marriages are called as 'depot marriages (sagay)'. This marriage is against their custom and religious belief, but once they reach the colony such marriage could be registered and legalised in the colony. The couple who registered as a family while signing for indenture did not face any problems. On the other hand, the migrants who married according to the custom of Hindu or Muslim religion were not legalised. Any time such marriages could be broken and the couples could be separated. Another issue with such marriage was some of the migrants sold their wives or children to other free migrants for money. "The practice amongst Sirdars and Overseers who return to the colony to bring with them two and sometimes three wives, with whom... they have contracted marriage; ... shortly after their arrival here these are sold or transferred to other men" (quoted by Tinker: 203). Hence women were perceived as objects either to get material benefits or physical benefits. Out of such marriages, men got more benefits than women.

The advantage to the men was obvious: they had someone to cook for him and attend to him in a society where females were very scarce. But there was also advantage to the women in securing a protector in a savage new environment, and in establishing some sort of recognized position in a social order which held no place for an adult single woman (Tinker: 140).

The differences in the advantages of marriage indicate the stringent norms of the patriarchal society. Women were exploited to work at home as well as in the field. In the field they were made to work for a longer period and at home they had to cook and serve their family. Regarding the worst condition of women, Sanadhaya states that,

First of all they have to get up at half past three in the morning and cook some roti. After that for ten hours they have to do hard labour in the fields, and then having gone back to the house, make more roti. When women return from work, there is corpse-like shading to their faces (69).

One of the important factors that affected marriage in the colony was the female-male ratio. Due to the unequal population of males and females in the colony, the practice of polyandry was followed. Tinker highlights that as

men need women for cooking and other requirements they accept and indulge in polyandry. Sometimes it may lead to violence. " It is the custom for four or five men to subsidise among themselves to maintain one woman who acts in the capacity of wife or mistress to each of them in turn, an arrangement which not infrequently leads to quarrels, violence, and sometimes bloodshed" (quoted by Tinker: 204).

The main reason for such murder and fighting is mostly misrepresented by imposing the blame on women. However, the basic reasons for such jealousy and murder on the plantation are the man-woman ratio, no secured law for other religious marriages than church marriages and the structure of houses. The houses offered to the indentured had a similar kind of structure in all the colonies and they remained unchanged throughout the period of indenture. A line of thirty to forty rooms in the measurement of twelve feet long and eight feet wide (for a family or three men or women) with another line behind. There were no proper roofs, verandas and most importantly no privacy for the married couple. Mostly the married couple share their rooms next to the bachelors and at times out of pity they invite them for a meal. Sometimes it may end in illegal relationships leading to tragedy.

Throughout the sugar colonies, disputes over women led to horrific and frequently fatal violence. In Suriname, man who chopped off his wife' arm accused her of adultery. Amazingly, she survived to tell her side of the story: her husband had sent her to live with the other man, in order to clear his debts. Natal, among other colonies passed special laws in an effort to curb wife murders. In Fiji, the killings were common enough to occasion an appeal to end the death penalty in all such cases (Bahadur: 141).

The indentured women were reluctant to give birth to children. They preferred to abort their children due to various reasons. Firstly, as most of the marriages were not legalised the children were considered as illegitimate and in most of the cases those girl children were sold by their fathers for money. Secondly, due to malnutrition and heavy work women died during delivery of the child. Thirdly the mother was expected to work in the field with the child on her back as no one was available to take care of the child. At times in the extreme cold and heat, many infants died. Fourthly the plantation authorities did not encourage employing young mothers as most of the time they feed their child.

Most women had to go right back to work after childbirth, since they weren't paid for time off to nurse babies. In many cases, they earned nothing for months and even years as they repaid planters for rations provided while they were pregnant. Many indentured women, probably finding those costs too high, used natural methods of contraception and herbal concoction to induce abortion (Bahadur: 113).

Another important issue experience by the indentured women was the sexual harassment by the overseers and sirdars. The women were forced to accept the desires of these men. If not accepted, they were given difficult tasks to perform until they accept. There was an incidence that brought out the sexual exploitation faced by indentured women. One is about a woman named Kunti from Fiji who tried to kill herself to escape from the sexual harassment of an overseer. One day in 1913 Kunti was sent alone to weed as a punishment for her troublesome nature. Later part of the day the overseer Cobcroft tried to misbehave with her. By struggling to free herself she ran and threw her into the river Wainibokasi. Fortunately, a boy working near the river saved her. This incident got wide attention not only in Fiji but also in India. People in India started to protest against the indenture system which failed to protect Indian women in the colonies. Unfortunately, this case was fabricated by the British as they did not want to encourage opposition against indenture. The report from the British office record runs thus,

I believe the whole statement to be a fabrication. It is absolutely untrue that female indentured immigrants are violated or receive hurts or cruel treatments at the hands of their overseer. If such were the case, it would be quite impossible to manage the labourers on a plantation. It is only by fair and just treatment that labourers, at any late in this colony, can be worked (quoted by Lal: 196).

Later modification was made in law and promises were made to punish the troublesome overseers. But it was not followed effectively. In remote plantations, women had to walk for several miles to complain about assaults to the resident Inspector of Immigration. Mostly they preferred to go by night to avoid the notice of the plantation members and sometimes it would be impossible for them to return on time. In most cases the complaints were found out by the plantation authorities and those women faced heavy work or more violence the next day. Such routine hardships discouraged indentured women from complaining. In some cases even if it had reached the court, the

judges dismissed the cases and let the white overseers free of charges. Sanadhya writes about the case of Narayani to project the corruption of law and courthouses in the colonies. This incident took place in Fiji. Narayani, an indentured woman, gave birth to a child who died immediately. The indenture law sanctioned three months of maternity leave to the women indentured. As the child died, Narayani was forced by the overseer to work in the field after three days of her delivery. When she refused to work, the White overseer beat her brutally and she was admitted to a hospital. The overseer was arrested and when the case was enquired in the Supreme Court, the overseer was released stating not guilty. These incidences prevented women from trusting the law of the plantation colonies (49).

The indentured women were misrepresented or represented stereotypically and branded as 'immoral or loose women' by the patriarchal society. It is unfortunate to note that even the broad thinkers had very cheap views about women. C.F Andrews, who supported the Indian National Movement, in his report about the indentures in Fiji, stated,

The Hindu woman in this country is like 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. She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so. (6)

Most of the single women and even the married women were cheated by men. In many cases of married women and young girls, husbands and fathers cheated them respectively and sold them for money. In such cases without their consent women were forced to enter into prostitution. Hugh Tinker describes the case of Surumi, a young girl who was married to four different men by her father to get money from them. These marriages were conducted by following the Hindu practices thus not approved by the law. Later she was married to Ram Sundar and again her father separated her and sold her to another man. Enraged by this incident Ram Sundar murdered Surumi, her husband and her child. Sometimes family situation and their economic condition leave them to enter into this position. Such a system of exploitation is explained in The Agent-General of Immigration thus,

A man and woman will agree to live together, the woman contributing to the man's means by ordinary labour, and, too often, by the prostitution of her person. Matters go on this way until, owing probably to her contracting some loathsome disease, the man finds her no longer a profitable investment. She is then invariably cast adrift, without a proper share of their joint earnings, and often penniless, sometimes with the additional burden of children (quoted by Lal: 206).

Despite living in wretched conditions, the indentured men preferred to feel superior by imposing the gender hierarchy. The position of women in the sugar colonies and the ill-treatment they received project the vulnerable position of women in a new land. The society of both the homeland and the settled land was in the view to condemn them for their choices and conditions rather than to protect them. Consequently many attempted to register women who crossed the 'kalapani' as immoral by recording such constructed information as facts through historical and literary texts by providing no space for illiterate women to record their sufferings. Presently many scholars through their researches try to create some space for women indentures and to give voice to those voiceless women. The paper concludes by stating that though these women faced many struggles and sufferings, that moulded them to be strong and most of the indentured women in the later part of their lives emerged to lead matriarchal families. The hardships and the challenges faced by the indentured women led the first and the second generation to be bold and successful.

Acknowledgement:

This research paper is a part of my Minor Research Project funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), India.

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