

Violence and Voices of Caribbean Female Indentured Women

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Abstract

Abolition of slavery caused distress to colonial masters and intensified the concern for labour. The fluctuation in the income flowing from the sugar industry demanded cheap labour, for which India and China became primary sources. To avoid unnecessary revolt colonial masters came up with 'contracts'. For contractual purposes, women were assessed as problems and liability; they were considered weak and physically unfit for plantation work, hence, were given low wages. Over time their sexuality became the centre of concern for plantation authorities. This paper attempts to investigate the bloodshed and crimes that took places against Indian indentured women and accounts their struggles and barbaric acts that took place during the first phase of Indian Diaspora.

Keywords: Diaspora, Indentured, Gender, Violence, Identity.

Introduction

Violence based on gender is a global problem; in 2020 the World Bank estimated that it affects every 1 in 3 women in their lifetime (World Bank, nd). But gender-based violence (GBV) is not a new phenomenon. This paper investigates GBV in Indian diaspora with a special reference to Gaurita Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. Diasporic literature has been sparse on heinous crimes that took place in the Caribbean during indenture and beyond. This paper examines three types of violent acts during indenture that has now been defined as an act of violence against women based on gender in U.N declaration (UN, 1993).

The first known GBV is conjugal rebuke generated violence; this includes physical punishments and torment by husbands to their wives for infidelity and adultery. The second category is rape and mutilations of the body by aphrodisiacal men other than intimate partners. The United Nation had defined Rape as 'invasion of body' (UN, 1993); a forceful infiltration of a victim's body, however slight, with a sexual organ during a forceful attack accompanied by danger, threat or maltreatment of intensity. Similarly, mutilation of body or disfigurement caused by any means which results in removing or damaging a part of the body is considered to be a criminal offence. The third type of violence is sexual abuse at workspace using authoritative power. With modern connectivity and mass media and policies, it is possible if not easier for a contemporary migrant to speak out against the wrongs and unjust happenings, but there are very few studies that mention or document violence that took place against women during indenture.

This paper discusses three main themes. The first establishes a fundamental understanding of indentured migration to different colonies of British Empire which demonstrate the relationship between migration and inclusion of women labourers. The second theme demonstrates how discrimination based on gender made the environment around 'coolie' women hostile and became one of the major causes for their sufferings. Furthermore, it describes how the concept of superior gender and race adapted itself and became a prime reason for the suffering of women on Caribbean plantations during the indenture period.

The research design in this study is exploratory and descriptive with a qualitative approach. The materials used for the current study are novels, newspapers, textbooks, songs, magazines, movies, research papers and articles. The basic data is obtained from Gaurita Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*.

Girmitiya Struggles: Gender Bias, Exploitation and Dogmatism

In 1838, slave abolition in the Caribbean came with a storm of distress, intensifying concern for sufficiency of labour by employers. Importation of labour from China and India became a major source of labour. A large portion of Girmitiya history revolves around those Indians who migrated from the northern region of India. 'Coolie' workforce was the prime agent used to stabilize the sugar industry and restore British hegemony. This restoration process involved a strict regulation, through an indentured contract and legal arrangements. In this innovative labour management, Indian women came as a predicament to the eyes of plantation owners, for them they were more of a liability rather than reliable workforce (Lal, 1992). Another thought followed was that women possess a substandard capacity for the work that was required of them on the plantations. This stereotypical mentality became the reason for women being awarded low wages. Women faced absolute tragedy in terms of earnings. They were structurally positioned as inferior. Moreover, they were always seen as an unsuitable labour force on the plantations and subsequently treated as subordinate to Indian men who worked side by side with them but received lower wages.

As the labourers started to settle down in these colonies, cultural dominance became apparent. There were confinement and limitations for women regarding a particular set of social relationships. These women were exclusively brought to the plantation to work, and, like the males, their mobility was restricted, for example, access to urban areas. They were expected not to be in any kind of sexual or social relationship with anyone other than their husbands.

Coolie Women and Indentured Life: Love, Crime and Debauchery

Undervalued work, low wages and more work made Indian women even more reliant on Indian men both in financial and social terms. If coolies were considered as a pariah, coolie women were considered underdogs. The question of respectability for women was outside of any relevant connection to the issue at hand during the indentured period. The time-period between 1865 to 1870 saw a wide number of spouse murders in the coolie community (Bates, 2000). Women were killed savagely and viciously by their own better half, lovers or men who had an uneven enthusiasm for any woman. Besides, women were being called out as prostitutes and ethically unfit. The colonial government acted calmly towards these unfortunate plantation circumstances, regardless of explanations for killing women. The colonial authorities saw social ills as the instance of 'unfaithful spouses' the individuals who had the right to be rebuffed from the husband.

A 3rd/4th generation Girmitiya currently living in the Caribbean, Nisha¹, (55 years in 2021), related to me the stories, as she recalled from narratives passed to her over the generations, the torment and struggles of her great grandparents and other shipmates who were taken Surinam. Such are the stories that kept the memories of migration alive and running that took place over a century ago; that kept the Indianism alive even when the current generation never visited their ancestral land. Nisha stated:

It wasn't just the plantation that snatched the innocence and modesty from Indian Coolies women, the seeds were planted on the ship deck in which they travelled to the Caribbean through Kala pani....

The sailors on the ship during 20 long weeks of the journey took advantages of many women on board, single ladies were treated with disrespect and as an object of pleasure. Brown skin attracts white men even the legends say that, just like we see in the movies, this ain't no different from any movies (personal interview).

Nisha stated further, that ship agents were responsible for the abuse; 'they covertly isolated wives from their husbands before the loading and were transferred to next ship'. No measures were taken by the British Indian government to stop such disgraceful act.

The ratio of the Indian laborers was 40 women: 100 men (Bahadur, 2013: 27). This gender disparity was the cause of competition, jealousy, treachery and often murders. The main aim behind selecting and recruiting coolie women to the plantation was to get short term stabilizing agent for Indian men on plantation and getting a long term of self-producing cheap and stable labour. Women were deceived and tricked to dreams of a faraway place where there was good weather, picturesque surroundings, simple work and plenty of food. The truth was remarkably the opposite; the 'wage-earners, mothers and wives, Indian women in Fiji were subjected to poor living conditions, physical and sexual violence, long hours of work on the plantations, and wage cuts for low attendance during sickness and pregnancy' (Mishra, 2012). Such conditions and misuses were living Narak or Hell on earth for them (Lal, 1992).

While the oppressive work conditions were suffered by indentured males as well, females suffered the added gender-related oppression. The expectation of virtue and righteous character in women came to extreme challenge. With the 40:100 ratio, women being 'unfaithful' to one partner is not inconceivable. Barbaric acts occurred during the excursion and on the plantation (Bahadur,

¹ Pseudo names are used for respondents in this article to protect the privacy of the respondents.

2013). The facts confirm that women had mysterious connections with men outside marriage, which was additionally a regular practice among men as well. Since the image of women has always been depicted as the ideal angel of the house, sometimes as a goddess along with the expectations of remaining chaste and pure until she is socially bound in a union with another man, which had its parameters to be satisfied, for instance, caste, religion, money, clan, etc. Hence, it was mostly them who got punished for the 'sin of adultery'. Women have been fed the stories of mythological past in which the female character either faced mutilation of a body part, banishment, public harassment, death and in some cases even suicide to prove her dignity, purity and chastity. The episode of Shurpnakhas's nose disfigurements from Ramayana, serves as a warning to those women with uncontrolled sexual desires; Sita's Agni Pariksha episode revealed even a goddess had to prove her purity.

Gautra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* cites several incidences where women were punished, disfigured and killed for gender-related activities. I have picked few of the incidences that have been mentioned in the book; some of them mentions the year, name of the victim and culprit as well but many remain in the unknown category as matters like these neither seemed important to the plantation officials nor the British Indian government. Prejudices against women also resulted in biases injustice as several times instead of investigation of the case the authorities labelled it as a matter of 'jealous husband and naughty wives' (Bahadur, 2013):

- 1896: 'unnamed Indian woman killed for being in a sexual relationship with a planter officer at the hands of her husband and other men' (60).
- Rashi 'an untouchable woman travelling with her husband, who was disfigured, her left nostril cut, culprit unknown' (60)
- A 'sailor who slipped down the hatch threatened to stab female guard with a knife when she tried to stop him from molesting the women' (60).
- 'One cut, 2.5 inches long, pierced her skull. Another, 1.5 inches long, bit into the bone on the left side of her face. The gash above her left elbow was so deep, there was no choice but to amputate. On that one arm alone, Laungee had been cut in eighteen places' (103).
- 'Lutchminia's head almost severed by two slashes to the neck, hung by a muscle.... Lutchminia was seven months pregnant, it's unclear if Ramautar was the father' (111).
- 'in 1897 an indentured man who failed to entice an Indian woman from her husband stabbed her....'

- In 1914 a leper chopped a woman who wouldn't leave her husband for him. (119)
- In 1917, a man wounded his shipmate with a cutlass because she refused him' (119).

Coolie Woman has several references where women were subjugated and were subjected as sex objects against their will, where they were viewed as inauspicious and shunned by the society because either their husbands died or they were looted of their modesty at the hands of a lustful or fierce lover. Bahadur's book focuses on those stories of indentured women that got lost within the history and struggles. The stories of *Luchmania*, and *Rashi* in themselves provide a background to a new genre of slave narratives. These not only go beyond the chosen and given facts about indentured workers and their life struggles but also allows a layman to do the excavation and unwrap the hidden facts and names which got lost in the history and documents.

Till now we were only acquainted with the pictures of coolie woman where they were depicted as beautiful and well ornamented, representing antique craftsmanship but never for once wondered what wounds they hid behind chunky jewelry and heavy clothes.² It was a coincidence and passion of a diasporic writer that sent Bahadur on the path to find more about her great grandmother *Sujaria* that made her witness the truths from the past.

Resisting Bigotry and Reclaiming Gender Identity

All through the miserable times of indentureship, the number of female migrants could never match the number of male migrants. Those limited number of females who set out to move, were either abandoned by their families or they deserted their spouses and/or families, or were just kidnapped and placed in situations from which signing up was the only option. Few moved with their husbands and/or families. The 'venturesome' ones were named ethically free or 'morally loose', as the majority of them were not joined by their men.

Be that as it may, women played an essential role during 19th-century migration that has changed Indian diaspora irretrievably (Lal, 1992). Numerous voices came up to obstruct sexual maltreatment of women migrants. It prompted building up a forum called 'Indian Women's Committee' around the late 1800s and 1900s, which represented women as well as tested different persecutions. A rush of fights occurred against the physical, sexual and financial abuse of contracted women workers in various provinces. Later on, this resistance

² See images, for example, at 'Indian-Girl-in-Trinidad-c.....'; cover photo in Bahadur (2013); Pinterest' (nd). <https://in.pinterest.com/alonzocarol33/guyanese-women/>.

movement expanded and came in the open circle. Jaikumari an Indian satyagraha extremist and ally of Gandhi, composed an appeal and sorted out gatherings and exhibitions alongside other women, that compromised the colonial male authorities (Mishra, 2012). It is critical that while these women did not carry out physical battles for their economic liberation, their sexual maltreatment made the whole movement of resistance extremely solid and noticeable according to individuals and in the pages of Newspapers like The Fiji Times and Herald (Mishra, 2012).

Not long after indentured abolishment, the rush of feminist activism hit the grounds of Caribbean quite strongly. The latter half of the 20th century saw an expansion in women sliding back inconspicuously from the political milieu. In 1961 after the new constitution of British Guyana (July 18, 1961), Christina Ramjattan became the first Indian woman to hold a congressperson post in British Guyana; later on, she rose as a main dissident and worked for the privileges of people (Fox, 2002; Mohammed, 2016).

Indo-Caribbean women not just opposed against sexism, bigotry, class hindrance, and minimization of gender roles within Indian religious association; they actually drew in themselves in the 'discovery of their identities'. A significant factor in these activist movements was the assertion of sexuality and gender identity. The latter two were the central ideas of resistance movements where women sought a 'woman-focused social space' where they could be able to discuss intimacy and stretch out sexual education through melodies and musical role-plays. These women were communicating their sexuality and erotic nature, testing man-centric inconveniences on female bodies as it was delineated as 'ungodly' or blasphemous. Existences of women among male social events were likewise one of the restrictions that Indo-Caribbean ladies stripped away by performing freely. Engagement with chutney music could be seen as one where some women attempted to recover their identity and celebrate their beauty and body. Dropatee Ramgoonai's name got formidable, as she was the first female artist who made legitimate music by breaking limits of the prearranged sexually-orientated role in music. In 1980s Ramgoonai with her performances affirmed the nearness of woman's social commitment and of expanding perceivability of an Indo-feminist presence among the tribrid (Indo-Afro-European) communities (Mohammed, 2016).

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