

Widows and the Pain of Indenture: Writings from Mauritius

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Abstract

With the rise of the sugar industry in British colonies and the abolition of slavery, lakhs of Indians worked under the contract of indenture, which eventually led to the formation of a substantial Indian *diaspora*. The demand for a community of indentured labourers forced the colonial administration to encourage the migration of women, a substantial number of them being widows. This paper looks at archival documents and fictional representations of Indian widows who migrated, raising a series of significant questions. Why did they migrate? Did the migration alter the state of widowhood and create opportunities for these women? Did Indian and Mauritian experiences of widowhood differ? How was the recasting of the selfhood of such women viewed within the discourses of nationalism? In framing these questions, I will be looking at historical records, fictional biographies and novels, including Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy and Abhimanyu Unnuth’s *Lal Pasina* (2010).

Keywords: Widowhood, Indenture, Migration, Community, Selfhood

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century witnessed a phenomenal growth in the demand for sugar. Between 1825 and 1835 alone the demand increased from 217,397 pounds to 648,548 pounds alone.¹ This saw a surge in sugar prices provoking the colonies to ramp up the production of sugar. The growth of heavy machinery in the cane fields meant that sugarcane had to be continually fed into the machines to make the venture profitable, and this required a supply of hard labour, with large estates flourishing. The harsh conditions led to high mutability rates as Vijaya Teelock points out:

¹ Teelock, Vijaya. *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in 19th Century Mauritius* (Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute, 1998), 71.

The extent to which sugar is cultivated in the different sugar colonies is generally speaking a more accurate index of the mortality among the slaves. In the colonies where the soil is more prolific and where sugar is grown more abundantly, it is proved by the returns of the slave population that the death far exceeds the births and the numbers of slaves are consequently in a course of rapid diminution".²

The abolition of slavery in 1834 led to the drying up of labour sources and thus, a new method of recruitment had to be located. The culture of indenture was thus initiated, with the labour signing a service contract with the employer for a specific time and at a specific wage rate. In most cases, the contract inserted harsh penal sanctions in case of any default. The labourer (*coolie*) was given a ticket in a tin roll to be carried at all times. This notion of the agreement led to the coinage of the Hindi term *girmityas* ('girmit' meaning agreement). While the wages were substantially higher than that in India, the high cost of living in Mauritius and the colonies virtually wiped away any economic gains. Harsh working conditions under brutal French cane farmers virtually transferred the entire experience into one of slavery. Indentured workers as Marina Carter points out thus "occupied a narrow space between the white plantation and black peasant societies belonging to neither but relational to both."³ Indenture was not slavery because the coolies could complain to the office of the Protector of Immigrants, and there were laws in place from 1843 onwards, thereby initiating state control in the process. However, this provision worked only in pen and paper. The labourers were mostly illiterate and poor, and the one holding the office of the Protector more frequently sympathized with their white brethren. The flow of the coolies started in 1834 with the arrival of only 36 coolies but the rise in numbers was staggering. Government statistics show that in Mauritius alone 4.5 lakh people were brought in; in British Guyana the figure was 2.39 lakhs while in Trinidad and Natal the numbers were 1.5 lakhs and 1.53 lakhs respectively. Less than a lakh indentured labourers travelled to the island of the French Caribbean, Fiji and Jamaica each.⁴

The breakup of the areas from which the workers travelled is interesting. Close to 40% of the total migration happened from Bihar, 31% of the workers travelled from the Madras Presidency while only 9% travelled from the Bombay Presidency. Almost 20% also travelled from Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Of the total migrants almost 25% were women. By the early 1920s after the great Morcellan movement these workers owned 40% of the total workable land in Mauritius.⁵ Two points need to be made here: firstly, in most cases the indentured labourers were people from lower castes facing poverty and social exclusion; secondly, they were often also illiterate, and very few records of their experience can be traced, except for archival records and their petitions at the office of the Protector.

² Teelock, Vijaya, 48.

³ Carter, Marina. *Lakshmi's Legacy: the Testimonies of Women in 19th Century Mauritius* (Mauritius: Editions De L'Océan Indien, 1994), 5.

⁴ *Indenture: from Prejudice to Pride. Souvenir Magazine. 180th Anniversary of the Arrival of Indentured Labourers in Mauritius* (Mauritius: Apravasi Gaht Trust Fund, 2014) 127.

⁵ *Indenture: from Prejudice to Pride*.

The reasons for such emigrations varied for men and women. The rise of the opium and indigo trade by the East India Company, the imposition of British land laws, and successive famines, had already initiated a sequence of internal migration within India, with Bihar and Uttar Pradesh being severely affected. The pressure on land made the widowed women vulnerable to the rapacity of their own brethren. The harsh social laws provoked them to escape from their own social conditions. In Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* the widowed Deeti resists the advances of her brother-in-law Chandan Singh, who wishes to merge their lands together with the idea: "*Jebar khet, tebar dhan*" ("he who owns the land, owns the wealth").⁶ This rapacity leads his clan to plan an elaborate ritual of Sati, from which she is rescued by the *chamar* Kalua; and Deeti accepts him as her husband. Deeti then takes on the name of Aditi, and Kalua that of Maddow Colver, to fit in their new identities in Mauritius. On the other hand, Parbotia Rai, a widow from Bihar, narrates her experience of running away with her cousin Biku Rai, after she had become a widow. Conscious of a life of suffering ahead, she had chosen her path, but her family "dismembered all connection with her."⁷ Along with widowhood, unhappy marriages and abandonment of wives was a rampant problem in India. Thus Heeru is taken to a pilgrimage and abandoned by her husband. She decides to join the boat carrying indentured labourers thinking to herself: "Had he perhaps intended to abandon her all along, seizing any opportunity that arose? Certainly he had berated and beaten her often enough in the past: what would he do if she returned to him now?"⁸

While some widows migrated voluntarily, middlemen known as *arkattis* tricked many of them into indenture. There are records of a group of widows who had travelled to Mathura, and were told that they would be taken to *Merich* or Ram Desh but were transported. In numerous cases relatives accompanied these widows to the immigration depot and abandoned them, forcing them to migrate. As Carter notes:

"A widow trying to find her way back to her parents' village after a quarrel with her mother-in-law met a recruiter on the road. All her jewellery was bundled in her scarf and she had a son with her. The recruiter stole the jewellery and put her on the coolie depot. Phuljharee a high caste widow lost her son. The recruiter promised to help but instead took her to the depot".⁹

In some cases widows also migrated voluntarily if they had relations already working in Mauritius. Others like Duffadari Banoo, returned to India and actively acted as *arkattis* to recruit more labour.¹⁰ In the Ibis trilogy Ghosh narrates the tale of two sisters:

⁶ Ghosh, Amitav. 2008. *The Sea of Poppies* (New Delhi: Penguin), 75.

⁷ Ghosh, Amitav, 240.

⁸ Ghosh, Amitav, 243.

⁹ Carter, Marina. *Lakshmi's Legacy: the Testimonies of Women in 19th Century Mauritius* (Mauritius: Editions De L'Océan Indien, 1994), 15.

¹⁰ Carter, Marina, 40.

“Ratna and Champa, sisters, married to a pair of brothers whose lands were contracted to the opium factory and could not support them; rather starve they had decided to indenture themselves- whatever happened in future, they would at least have the consolation of a shared fate. Doolharee was another married woman travelling with her husband: having long endured the oppressions of a violently abusive mother-in-law, she considered it fortunate that her husband had joined her in escape”.¹¹

For the colonial government the migration of women was critical as a ploy to tie down a restless population of plantation workers who were forever on the move. It was also imperative to form communities and replicate social structures of the homeland so that the Indians could settle in Mauritius. In 1842, women formed only 12% of the migrant population; in 1852, the government announced free passage and £1 bonus for every woman a migrant brought. As a result between 1855 and 1859 the percentage of women went up from 33% to 50%, of which 15% were widows.¹² One further aspect needs to be noted. The expectations of hard labour, and the need to be partners for eligible men, meant that widows of only a certain age group were preferred. There were only few elderly widows on board these ships; most of them were specifically travelling with their families. There was a substantial resistance against the migration of women from the side of the planters. Planters argued that married women would not migrate, and that single women could not add to labour, and that they caused trouble. The mortality rate among women and children was high, and the absence of long-term strategies of settlement made the planters prefer male groups. It was only due to government intervention that they were forced to accept female indenture workers.

Along with widows a substantial number of prostitutes also migrated. The passing of the Contagious Diseases Act had singled out the prostitutes for blame, and they were often branded and incarcerated as criminals. As a result they became the first targets of the recruiters. What this meant was a stigmatization of the single migrant woman as ‘fallen’ and disreputable, an idea that is substantiated by the Protector of the Madras Depot:

“As to the so called single woman, many of them are prostitutes, others are kept women, and the remainder after entering the depot in almost every case attach themselves to some man they meet there. No female of good character emigrates, except with her husband, father or some very near relation”.¹³

Given the harsh conditions the need for security was paramount for single women. Even on the ship they were vulnerable to rape by coolies themselves, and by the crew. When they landed at the depot they were inevitably assigned to men who had applied for wives. One such application provides interesting rationales:

“Being in want of a wife and having led to believe that there are many Indian women lately arrived without husbands, I beg that you will be good enough ... to facilitate me in

¹¹ Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*, 241.

¹² *Indenture: from Prejudice to Pride*. 129.

¹³ Carter, Marina. *Lakshmi's Legacy: the Testimonies of Women in 19th Century Mauritius*, 27.

getting one as I find the impossibility of getting any breakfast cooked in the morning ... and to take care of my orphan children.”¹⁴

Single women could also provoke law and order problems on the estates, and were vulnerable to *sirdars*, plantation owners and the like.

While the experience of leaving the shores, for the indentured worker, would have been traumatic in general, the experience of the widow would have been particularly traumatic. However this migration can also be seen in terms of a rebirth where identities were completely cast aside, caste hierarchies reversed, and new allegiances and associations formed by *jahaji bhais* and *jahaji behens*. Thus migrant widows would very often be forced to take partners at any of these three points - the immigration depots, the ship or the plantations. As Heeru points out to Deeti, approving Ecka Nack's acceptance of marriage on the Ibis in *The Sea of Poppies*: “Bhauji they say in Mareech, a woman on her own will be torn apart ... devoured ... so many men and so few women ... can you think Bhauji what it would be like, to be alone there [...] Yes I'm ready.”¹⁵ Deeti speculates on this alliance: “Had they been at home, the match would have been inconceivable - but over here, on the island what would it matter... Surely all the old ties were immaterial now that the sea had washed away their past.”¹⁶ Sarjee, a Maharashtrian woman chooses Rama Sutoona as her husband before embarking on the voyage. There are even instances of widows choosing ship surgeons to escape the pains of indenture.

This experience has provoked an intense debate as to whether this choice meant that widows had a degree of agency in the process of indenture. Peter Emmer for example feels that Indian widows “could emancipate themselves from illiberal, inhibiting and very hierarchical social system in India.”¹⁷ Similarly, Rhonda Reddock argues that migration offered a sexual agency to women: “women could now on their own accord leave one husband for another or have a parallel relationship with another man.”¹⁸

While it is true that migration did offer a medium of agency to the single woman in making her choice this was often illusory. Firstly, they were forced to make choices more out of a desire for protection than for any liberative end; secondly even under protection, the women were always subjected to violence and rape at any point during and after their migration. Even married women were not exempt from this fate. Once they had made their choice and declared a husband during their immigration, Indian domestic laws bound them, and the familiar structures of domestic oppression were replicated, as numerous records of domestic violence bears out. Jeremy Poynting however makes an interesting point when he suggests that Indian women could earn wages, farm vegetables and therefore claim a degree of independence in these

¹⁴ Carter, Marina. *Lakshmi's Legacy: the Testimonies of Women in 19th Century Mauritius*, 64.

¹⁵ Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies*, 440.

¹⁶ Ghosh, Amitav, 431.

¹⁷ Emmer, Paul. “The Importation of British Indians into Surinam 1873-1916”. *International Labour Migration: Historical Perspectives*. Edited by S. Marks and M. Richardson (London: South Temple, 1984), 195.

¹⁸ Reddock, Rhoda. *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago* (London: Zed Books, 1994), 83.

vocations.¹⁹ Additionally, the loose social structures and absence of familial pressures meant that the marriage bond could be broken, in case the woman so desired. Niranjana Tejaswini thus concludes that indentureship enabled a different “sort of accession to the modern for the subaltern diaspora than what was consolidated in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”²⁰

The experience of being an indentured worker in Mauritius, especially for the woman, was extremely harsh. While the men toiled in the field, women too had to work during the seasons for reduced wages. Additionally they had to look after the children and take care of rudimentary agricultural produce. However as the practice of indenture spread, and the Indian labourers got land, women played a greater role, often selling vegetables to nearby estates and even markets. Moreover, it was through the efforts of women that the rootedness in the original cultural milieu was preserved. The shrines of Shiva, Hanumanji and Kaji Mayi prove how deeply the notions of religion and domesticity were preserved, thereby retaining the hyphenated identity of the Indian diaspora.

While the identities of the Indian widows were transformed by working under the system of indenture, how was the experience of widowhood on the island itself? Amitav Ghosh's narration of Deeti's shrine in Mauritius suggests the emergence of a matriarchal society in Mauritius, with Deeti controlling the movements of the family. In fact Ghosh seems to elide over the hardships of labour on the estates, largely creating a romantic vision of escape and gradual consolidation. The real experience on the island could have been substantially different. In Abhimanyu Unmuth's novel *Lal Pasina*, a far more authentic account is provided. It is a tale of violent beatings, back breaking labour, disease and sickness, and frequent rape of women. Unmuth in fact falls back upon a Mauritian song which reads, “*Ramji ki tune chus li meethiyan/ Humre khatir chod gayi seethiyan ho Rama.*” (“You have sucked the sugarcane dry of its sweetness/ And left the dry waste for us”).²¹ Unmuth's text talks about the tribulations of three generations of coolies who gradually win over certain rights after repeated protests. While the details of this struggle might be the subject of another paper, what is interesting is that the society that emerges out of this novel is a patriarchal reflection of Indian society, with the women restricted mostly to household work. Unmuth seems also to be restricted to certain utopian parameters - there is no interaction of Indians with the Creole community, the traces of religion and caste are absent, and internal conflict within Indians are at a minimum, apart from the vitriolic criticism against the *sirdars*. There is a straightforward binary between the hardworking coolie workforce and the cruel

planters. The degree of violence in this society is appalling, with the rape of women by the planters a very common occurrence. What Unmuth also points out is the fact that widowhood on the island is a difficult state of existence; she is often dependent upon the community for

¹⁹ Poynting, Jeremy. “East Indian Women in the Caribbean: Experience, Image and Voice”. *Journal of South Asian Literature* 21. no. 1(1986). 133-180.

²⁰ Niranjana, Tejaswini. *Mobilizing India: Women, Music, and Migration between India and Trinidad* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 64.

²¹ Unmuth, Abhimanyu. *Lal Pasina* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Publishers, 2010), 85.

subsistence and for bringing up her children. Marina Carter's archival research suggests, that while younger widows could survive by choosing partners, older widows were always forced to beg or commit suicide. In fact destitute widows committed the highest numbers of suicides. Elderly widows were particularly susceptible - Pansah, a sixty year old woman threw herself in the Riviere Profonde. Tetaree, aged forty, drowned herself, unable to watch her sickly husband. Mariam Chikory drowned herself because she was crippled.²² The records at the Protector's office suggest that although the government attempted to grant them licenses for trade, and offered free passage to return, the survival rates were poor. In a society that replicated familiar Indian patriarchal structures, the experience of widowhood on the island were perhaps harsher, especially since structures of alternative social or religious support were yet to be formed. Another factor that needs to be considered is the frequency with which the Mauritian widows could be denied their rights. Because they were uneducated, they often had to depend on lawyers and interpreters, who used their gullibility to strike deals or outright rob them of their rights. Numerous accounts can be found where plantation owners, relatives and lawyers cheated them of their rights of inheritance, misusing official channels of complaint.

There were however incidents of widows thriving in Mauritius. The ship surgeon in *Nimrod* in fact noted the example of a widow who had moved on from man to man. She secured several advantageous marriages so that she could accumulate wealth and jewellery, and moved around the ship like the Queen of Sheba.²³ Sukoneea in fact rose to be the *sirdarin* of a plantation, though we have no records whether she was equally cruel, or merciful. The example of Doya Kishto, who built a temple after being widowed, points to the fact that after a few generations when they accumulated enough wealth and land, the lot of Indian widows on the island changed favourably. By the turn of the century, the efforts of the Arya Samaj and other welfare organizations meant that the destitute widow could then fall back on certain social structures for relief.

The issue of the single Indian woman, and her welfare, also became a rallying point in the nationalist struggle. Ironically, the nationalist outlook could move to great polarities. C. F. Andrews in his report on the indentured women in Fiji notes that “it has been proved that as far as Indian women are concerned, indenture is a form of legal prostitution”; he contented that Indian women are like “rudderless vessel moving from one man to the other” and that coolie barracks were often like ‘*kasbi ghars*’.²⁴ The case of Kunti, a widowed single woman, was a point of surge in the nationalist sentiment. On 19 August 1913, a European overseer accosted her in a deserted banana patch and she threw herself into a pond to avoid rape. The incident caused outrage among nationalists, and Gandhi's associate Totaram Sanadhya considered her to be a Sita. He commented that the “British people in their oppression ... surpassed even Ravan.”²⁵

²² Carter, Marina. *Lakshmi's Legacy: the Testimonies of Women in 19th Century Mauritius*, 156.

²³ Carter, Marina, 52.

²⁴ Andrews, C.F. and W.W. Pearson, *Indian Indentured Labour in Fiji* (Perth: Privately published, 1918). Quoted in Lal, Brij. V. “Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations”. *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 22, no. 1 (1985): 58.

²⁵ Lal, Brij. V. “Kunti's Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations”, 60.

The *Bharat Mitra* in 1914 held her up as an ideal of Indian womanhood arguing that “we cannot refrain from admiring the patience, bravery and strength shown by Kunti. In spite of being of the cobbler caste she has surpassed many well to do ladies by her courage.”²⁶ Sarojini Naidu led a delegation to Lord Chelmsford to impress upon him how as “women we have felt the misery and shame of our sisters of the colonies as if they were our own.”²⁷ The pressure paid off, and with effect from 1919, all coolie contracts were cancelled.

The experience of indenture was a traumatic one for thousands of Indians who forged a new identity under the shadow of trade and commerce and the rapacity of colonialism. Widows were an integral part of this migration. It is difficult to generalize their condition because each experience was different from the other but certain observations do surface. The harsh social and economic realities that were forced upon the widows contributed to the indenture system as they wrought new identities suitable for its use. The violence and rape unleashed upon these unfortunate women were severe. In the islands, the Indian patriarchal structures were replicated, and the unsupported and aged widows were forced into destitution and suicide. Yet migration did offer new lives, partnerships for the widows; and wages and freedom from caste or religious dogmas did offer them a new chance at life, however oppressive. It was largely due to their efforts that a community could acclimatize themselves in an alien land and preserve the codes of an originary culture. Because of their illiteracy and poverty their accounts have largely been lost, and thematic debates about their true agency keep on circulating. The Indian widows thus form a silent part of the history of Mauritius and India. One is reminded of David Dabydeen’s poem that eulogises these forgotten women

“There are no headstones, epitaphs, dates
... They lie like texts
Waiting to wither by children
For whom they hacked and ploughed and saved
To send to faraway schools”.²⁸

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²⁶ Lal, Brij., 65.

²⁷ Lal, Brij., 66.

²⁸ Dabydeen. “Coolie Odyssey”. *They Came in Ships: An Anthology of Indo-Guyanese Prose and Poetry* (London: Peepal Press, 1998), 35.