

Women Indentured Laborers: Historical Context, Objectification, and Resistance

Prinka Rajput, Banasthali Vidyapeeth, Rajasthan
prinkarajput05@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper explores the historical experiences of women indentured laborers, examining their motivations for migration, the conditions they faced, and the ways in which they were objectified within colonial systems. Predominantly recruited for labor on plantations, these women sought to escape violence, patriarchal oppression, and economic instability. Despite their aspirations for autonomy and empowerment, they encountered systemic exploitation, marked by significant wage disparities and a lack of agency. The paper highlights their marginalization across multiple axes, including gender, caste, and class, while also acknowledging their resilience in the face of adversity. Through a multidisciplinary lens, this study aims to amplify the voices of these women and integrate their narratives into broader discussions of labor, gender, and social justice.

Keywords:

1. Indentured labor
2. Women
3. Objectification
4. Migration
5. Colonialism
6. Gender inequality

1. Introduction

The indentured labor system, or *girmit*, refers to bonded contractual manual laborers who signed contracts to work for fixed periods under their masters. This system predominantly operated from 1834 to 1917. The conditions faced by women indentured laborers were deplorable; numerous studies and documentaries have documented their experiences of sexual assault, harassment, and exploitation (Bhuvanewari, 2015; Sharma, 2017). The journey across the Kaala Pani, leaving their native lands (*karmabhoomi*) to migrate as indentured laborers, presented significant challenges. Considered weak and docile, these women often felt alienated in the host lands. They were assigned specific numbers and referred to as such, rendering their identities irrelevant and treating them as mere objects (Mohan, 2016; Reddie, 2014).

Women were often lured into servitude under false promises and faced profound injustice and inequality, compounded by their gender. With family responsibilities overwhelming them and their limited wages, they were deprived of educational opportunities that could empower them to advocate for their rights. This marginalization extended across multiple axes, including caste, color, sex, and gender. They were portrayed as emotionally weak and playful, in stark contrast to the rational male laborers. Consequently, the conditions for women in the indentured labor system were both harsh and exploitative, leading to an ongoing cycle of dependency on men (Gairola, 2019).

The primary motivations for these women to migrate included the desire to escape violence, patriarchal oppression, and the rigid caste system, all in pursuit of economic empowerment (Bhuvanewari, 2015; Sharma, 2017). Predominantly recruited for labor on sugar and tea plantations, these women were also subjected to practices such as polyandry, leading to tragic outcomes, including suicide (Sinha, 2018; Gairola, 2019).

The portrayal of these women was characterized by coercion and exploitation. Migrating as *giritiyas*, women traveled to various locations including Fiji, Guyana, Natal, East Africa, Jamaica, and Trinidad (Tinker, 1990; Reddie, 2014). The gender discrimination they faced manifested as a binary opposition; women were often compensated with significantly lower wages than their male counterparts for equivalent work (Mohan, 2016; Nandan, 2020). This economic disparity reinforced their status as subalterns, as they were deemed inferior and treated as emotionless objects (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003).

These women were effectively rendered voiceless; although they had the ability to speak, societal structures silenced their voices. Their sense of impotence stemmed from a lack of rights and agency, further exacerbated by the necessity to maintain an unattractive appearance to avoid sexual exploitation (Mohan, 2016; Bhuvanewari, 2015). Philosopher Mary Astell's poignant query, "If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?" encapsulates the plight of these women, highlighting inherent inequalities within gender relations (Astell, 1705).

2. Reasons for Migration

Multiple factors contributed to the migration of women as indentured laborers. Many sought identity and autonomy, often defined in relation to the men in their lives. The migration presented an opportunity to escape gender-related issues, but the realities they encountered frequently undermined their aspirations (Nandan, 2020). The dynamics of marriage and labor roles meant that married women often needed to defer to their husbands, limiting their autonomy and perpetuating traditional gender norms (Sinha, 2018).

Environmental factors also played a critical role. The mid-eighteenth century was marked by widespread famine and economic instability in India, prompting many to seek opportunities abroad. Indentured laborers predominantly hailed from states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, becoming a source of cheap and mobile labor (Mohan, 2016; Sharma, 2017). However, the prevailing perception of women as gullible often undermined their agency and furthered their exploitation.

3. Recruitment Process

The recruitment of women was significantly lower than that of men. Plantation owners shaped recruitment policies to align with their interests, favoring young, healthy males due to perceptions of profitability. Female laborers were often regarded as less valuable, primarily associated with childbearing and rearing responsibilities (Sinha, 2018; Reddie, 2014). Recruitment for women was fraught with challenges, as there was a constant demand for "righteous" women who would be loyal and credulous.

4. Conditions on Plantation Sites

From the onset of the indentured labor system until its abolition, women indentured laborers and their families endured severe hardships. Economic destitution often compelled women into prostitution, as poverty drove them to accept exploitative conditions (Gairola, 2019). Despite raising their voices against injustices, their pleas often went unheard. The term "indenture" became synonymous with a "new system of slavery" in the nineteenth century, as women faced increasing pressure to engage in polyandry due to a gender imbalance in the workforce (Tinker, 1990; Mohanty, 2003).

The brutality of their conditions was exacerbated by the capitalist nature of the system, which prioritized profit over human dignity. Many women entered into contracts reluctantly, driven by dire economic circumstances. In some instances, they were recruited to fulfill the sexual desires of workers and masters, highlighting the exploitation inherent in the system. The physical and emotional toll on these women was profound, often leading to severe repercussions, including violence from husbands if they were perceived to be unfaithful (Bhuvanewari, 2015).

5. Conclusion

Women indentured laborers and those in their families suffered tremendously, both mentally and physically, as they were often depicted as sexualized objects. While the external scars of their exploitation were visible, the internal anguish they experienced frequently remained unacknowledged. Their resilience and capacity for resistance were stifled by systemic oppression, and their voices were largely silenced throughout history.

The intersectionality of caste, gender, and class further marginalized these women, rendering their struggles invisible in historical narratives. By examining their experiences through a multidisciplinary lens, we can begin to uncover the complexities of their lives and recognize the significance of their agency, even in the face of overwhelming adversity. Moving forward, it is crucial to amplify the voices of these women and integrate their narratives into broader

discussions of labor, gender, and social justice, thereby ensuring that their stories contribute to our understanding of both historical and contemporary issues of inequality.

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