

#### **14. Journey of the Women of Indian Diaspora : Carriers of culture, Preservers of identity**

March 29, 2015 (*External Affairs Minister laying wreath at Apravasi Ghat, Mauritius*) **Journey into the**

#### **Unknown**

The journey of indentured labour from India to Mauritius and to other destinations such as Suriname, Guyana, Reunion Island, Fiji, after the abolition of slavery in 1834 is one of history's untold sagas. The Indentured Route which brought the Indian Diaspora to these countries, has many similarities to the Slave Route but is less well known. It is a journey that is less well chronicled and sometimes conveniently forgotten. In many cases, the Diaspora and their journey led to the formation of modern democratic nation States. Their quest for political empowerment is one of the most interesting examples of the evolution of democracy, pluralism and multi-ethnicity in these regions. Their journey thus poignantly highlights the history of these countries during this period.



The journey of the women of Indian Diaspora as carriers of culture and preservers of identity was no easy one because of the circumstances in which they made the journey and the patriarchal nature of Indian society. The voice of the silent majority, i.e. woman, has been rarely heard in the historical documents which record the statements of the literate and thoughts of the influential. The part played by Indian women in the great 19th century Diasporas which have irretrievably transformed so many former colonies of the British and French Empires, has been especially undervalued. Indian indentured women have tended to be portrayed as dependents and spouses, reluctant to migrate, and of negligible labour value, or as lone females of dubious virtue. Such characterisations were the work of contemporaries – the European officials who authored so many of the documents we use today – but they have been echoed by many later historians.

#### **Historical origins: Journey into the past and preservation of links with Mother India**

The paucity of women initially, apart from being a serious social issue, necessitated marriages across social barriers and sometimes across religious boundaries. However, the indentured and particularly the women never lost their links with their past, with their culture, their language or their religion. They ensured the preservation of these links with Mother India, along with the celebration of traditional festivals, be it Holi for the Hindus or Muharram for the Muslims. It was often the woman in the family who played an important role in ensuring that Bhojpuri was spoken within the family. We must acknowledge that these indentured women who remained wedded to their oral traditions and language, played an essential role as a carrier of this culture.

*(Newly arrived Indian labourers in the Caribbean island of Trinidad)*  
**The Journey of the Indentured Indian women : Carriers of Culture and Preservers of Identity**



Through the letters, petitions and statements of the Indian indentured women, a cogent analysis can be made of their role in developing identity and maintaining cultural linkages with their past. Scholars

have noted that despite the efforts by the colonisers to impose a new form of slavery on the Indian indentured, the role that these women assumed was significantly different from that expected of their slave predecessors. This was possibly due to the fact that women were unequally integrated into capitalist production and into the plantation economy in particular. This was in contrast to the central participation of female slaves in plantation agriculture in the pre-abolishing period.

*(Indentured women; Photo Courtesy: The Alma Jordan Library, The University of the West Indies)*



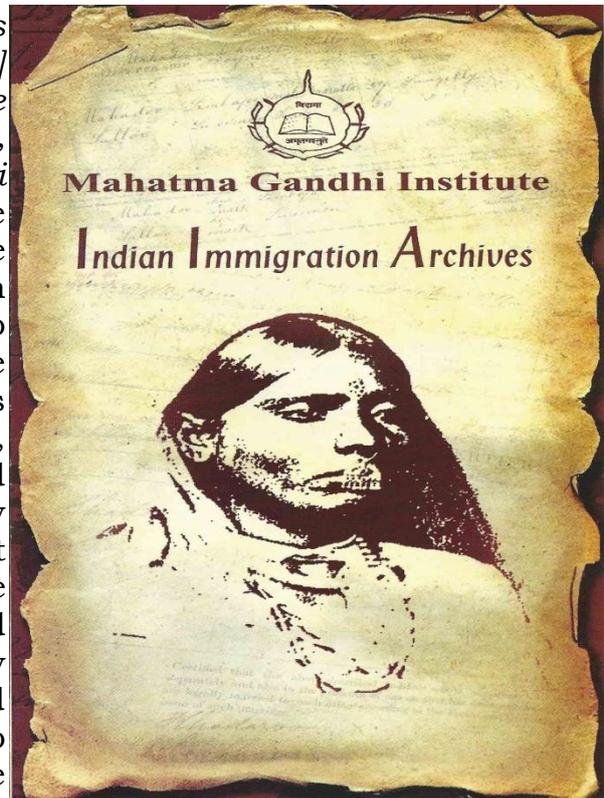
As a result, the position that women enjoyed in the indentured society has not been recorded in a sympathetic manner. They have either been referred to as a 'sorry sisterhood' of Indian women tricked into going abroad or from marginalised social classes or castes or again referred to as 'abandoned women', picking and choosing husbands for themselves.

There is no consensus in the available literature as to their actual position in the society at that time. Neither version is accurate and have been rejected by later historians, particularly feminist historians. The latter have also sought to exculpate women from charges of immorality as replicated in the traditional historiography of the period. The women at that time did seek to be treated as individuals, not as a commodity. They did strive to recreate stable partnership and happy family life in their new homes. Nevertheless, the skewed ratio between men and women indentured in the early years had an impact on the development of stable family life. It was only later that the colonial Government decided to sponsor family migration and women indentured labour. This approach differed according to the colony concerned. The increasing number of Indian women indentured immediately injected a new dynamism to the cultural creativity of the indentured population and the re-establishment of some of the norms of family.

The above is true for the women indentured across the Caribbean, Mauritius and Fiji. In the Caribbean and in Mauritius, the archives that

have been preserved and the oral records and letters of these women provide touching testimony to the manner in which they preserved their individual religion and their culture, especially the Bhojpuri culture. Some writers have noted that in the Caribbean as well as in Mauritius the humble indentured women came with two sarees, a lotta and a copy of the Tulidas Ramayana. It has been often noted "Indian culture was born and survived in the Caribbean out of this spiritual necessity of a community." We could add that this was largely due to the contribution of these indentured women.

*(The Indian Immigration Archives [National Archives of Mauritius.] contain records pertaining to the Immigration of Indentured Labouers , Photo Courtesy: Mahatma Gandhi Institute)*<sup>7</sup>. The struggle of these women demonstrated, above all, the capacity of these indentured women to initiate change, to react to injustice, to preserve their culture and to develop their identity. This was despite the oppressive State laws, Plantation codes of conduct and communal sanctions or family control, specifically designed to limit their mobility. The role of these women was therefore complex and diverse and they richly and fully contributed to the settlement and development of the communities to which they belonged and to the creation of the nation states that developed later, whether in the Caribbean or in Mauritius or Fiji.



8. The source material from which these conclusions have been drawn are mainly through the letters written by Indian women to their relatives abroad or by indentured women to their families in India. These provide an extraordinary and revealing glimpse into the life of these first generation women settlers. Supplementary information can be found from the petitions and statements of these women contained in the Immigration Offices of those days and now in national Archives, whether in Mauritius or in the Caribbean or Fiji.

### **Concluding Reflections**

9. This is a complex topic. It is unfortunate that scholarship in this field of inquiry is marked by the frequent failure of scholars and intellectuals to transcend the geographical, conceptual and chauvinistic parochialism that has become a hallmark of contemporary plantation studies in general and indentured labour studies in particular.

10. Equally unfortunate is the lack of interest internationally in the Indentured Labour Route, despite its acknowledged role in shaping the contours of socio-economic, cultural, and political life and contributing to vibrant democracy's such as in Mauritius, in the post-colonial era. There is a need to highlight the need for the constitution of an international network of scholars working on indentured labour for the purpose of fostering new perspectives on these systems and deepening our understanding of the indentured experience in all its complexity.

11. Let me conclude by an emotive poem by my friend and younger brother Rabin S Baldewsingh, leader of the Surinami Hindustani community in Netherlands and Deputy Mayor of The Hague, who became very close to me when I was Ambassador to Netherlands. Rabin often spoke of the folklore, legends, music and dance centered around the 'Lalla Rookh', the first jahaj to bring the jahajibhais and bahens to Suriname. In his book of poems, entitled 'Tamanna: Endless Longing' which I released at the Gandhi Centre at The Hague in June, 2013, his poem on 'Lalla Rookh' symbolises the triumph of human spirit of those who undertook this journey into hell. It states :

"I am not the only one  
in this narrowness of imprisonment  
where men  
play men  
where men  
surpass animals.  
This is surely no dream  
This weeping, this grief.  
No, this trek will not lead to liberation:  
it is the isolated destination in hell"

*(Ambassador Bhaswati Mukherjee)\**[The author, a former diplomat, was Permanent Representative of India to UNESCO (2004-2010). This article has been written exclusively for the 'In Focus' section of Ministry of External Affairs' website, [www.mea.gov.in](http://www.mea.gov.in)

