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**Indian Nationalists and the
End of Indentured Emigration**

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Indian Nationalists and the End of Indentured Emigration*

Ashutosh Kumar**

Introduction

Voices and Mobilization against the indenture system was begun as soon as it came into its own in the early 1830s. Humanitarians and others, who were associated with Anti-Slavery Society, tagged the indenture system as 'A New System of Slavery' and raised their voices against it. They ran their criticism till the 1870s but the system continued with various modifications. By the first decade of the 20th century Indian nationalists used the indenture system to criticize the colonial rule and organized protests for the abolition of the system. This paper seeks to 'find the gap and fill it up' in the portrayal of the Indian nationalist campaign against indentured emigration during the early 20th century. It looks into the nationalist discourse on indentured emigration and tries to figure out the way in which Indian nationalists moulded their criticism of the system. This paper interrogates the elitist and caste bias of Indian nationalists and argues that the question of indentured Indians was not the key issue of concern for them till the first decade of the 20th century; rather the issue generated a meaningful campaign only in the second decade of the 20th century. The paper also describes the nationalist campaign against indentured emigration as carried out in the public sphere in some detail and seeks to explore the centrality of women in the anti-indentured emigration campaign that made the overall exploitative nature of the system secondary.

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South Africa and the Issue of Political Rights

The pre-history of the Indian nationalist movement against indentured emigration was associated with South Africa. South Africa was one of the British colonies where not only a large number of indentured labourers emigrated but also a good many free Indians had gone as traders and merchants. These trading communities belonged to the south-west peninsula of India, i.e., Gujarat, Bombay and Madras. Most of them were shopkeepers and hawkers and some were prosperous merchants.¹ These free Indians did not try to establish any relationship with fellow Indian indentured labourers, were largely unconcerned about the condition of their indentured brethren, and always perceived themselves to be superior to the latter.

A political shock came in 1894 for free Indians of South Africa when the Natal Assembly passed a bill to disenfranchise Indians. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who was in South Africa at that time to help Gujrati businessmen in legal matters, resolved to fight against this Bill. Gandhi writes that he formed the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) to fight against such discrimination and sent a petition with 10,000 signatures to Lord Ripon, Secretary for the Colonies, London who finally cancelled the Natal Assembly Bill disenfranchising Indians.² But it is important to note that the NIC was primarily concerned with the interest of non-indentured Indian traders.³

In 1906 Gandhiji started his Satyagraha campaign in South Africa. Dominant historiography contends that the aim of Gandhi's movement was to abolish the abominable indenture system. Huge Tinker argued that Gandhi's movement in South Africa was to 'improve the condition of Indians' especially indentured and Gandhi was the man who called the whole indenture system into question. According to Tinker, 'Gandhi in South Africa succeeded in elevating the conditions of his fellow countrymen into the burning issue of the day for all politically-conscious Indians.'⁴ He went on to argue that Gandhi during his *satyagraha* campaign altered his style of dress to look like an indentured labourer.⁵ But a more careful study of Gandhi's *satyagraha* in South Africa makes us reach a different conclusion.



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During 1906–13 Gandhi concentrated his campaign on some specific issues, i.e., annual licence tax of three pounds for every free Indian, restrictive immigration bill which banned the entry of Indians, to settle or travel from one region to another and de-recognising the traditional Indian marriages. Though Gandhi's campaign against such acts of the South African Government was indirectly related to indenture as well but it was not till 1913 that he showed his concern toward indentured Indians. In a confidential letter written to Hermann Kallenbach in June 1913 Gandhi expressed that 'resolving in my own mind the idea of doing something for the indentured men'.⁶ Confidential letters written by Gandhi to Kallenbach and other friends show that the great strike of 1913 was not influenced by Gandhi, rather the participation of indentured workers in the great strike against the annual licence tax of three-pound was mostly spontaneous.⁷

*Even if we look into the final outcomes of his satyagraha campaign we find that Gandhi ended his satyagraha campaign with a compromise which did not achieve its 'actual' goal, the legal equality for which Gandhi began his struggle. Indians were still without political rights and had to obtain permits to travel from one South African province to another. The Indian Relief Act, which once Gandhi described as 'Black Act' did not relieve the situation of indentured labourers still under contract who had been the main body of strikers and marchers. So, as Joseph Lelyveld also said, the end of indenture system had not ever been one of the declared aims of Gandhi's satyagraha in South Africa.*⁸

Indian National Congress (INC) and the Issue of Indians in South Africa

Indian National Congress took the issue of discriminations against Indians in South Africa simultaneously with Gandhi's protest. As soon as the Natal Assembly Bill to disfranchise Indians was passed, the INC passed a resolution against such a Bill in 1895. Parmeswaram Pillai, the president of Poona Congress of 1895, spoke on the issue:

The Natal Government had not differentiated between different classes of Indians, referring to all as 'coolly

immigrants'.⁹ He further said, 'Many of our brethren being equally competent with white settlers in point of wealth and ability to exercise the right to vote, are disenfranchised and are further subjected to other disabilities, *for no other reason that some of the Indians have to work as coolies.*'¹⁰

So, here early nationalists found indentured workers who were working as coolies, the main source of the problem. For nationalists, due to these 'Indian coolies' the free Indian merchants and middle-class migrants were being treated with the same attitude in political arena as 'coolies' in South Africa. But at the same time the Act itself was seen as a racist attitude against [free] Indians.

Gandhi in the meantime had returned to India in 1896, and delivered a speech against such discrimination raising the issue at the INC held in Madras:

Every Indian, without exception, is a coolie in the estimation of the general body of the Europeans. Storekeepers are 'coolie storekeepers'. Indian clerks and schoolmasters are 'coolie clerks' and 'coolie schoolmasters'. Naturally, neither the traders nor the English-educated Indians are treated with any respect.¹¹

Every Indian without distinction is contemptuously called a 'coolie'.¹²

Gandhi and other Indian nationalists saw such discrimination as racism against Indians in South Africa. But in 1901 at the Calcutta Congress while raising the issue of racism being faced by Indians in South Africa, Gandhi himself came up with an upper caste elitist argument:

Gentlemen, throughout South Africa, our grievances are arises [sic!] from the reproduction of that anti-Indian feeling in anti-Indian attitude of the European Colonialist... I may tell you that all the Indians, no matter who they may be, are classes as a coolie. If our worthy president [D.E.Wacha] were to go to South Africa, I am afraid; he too will class as a 'coolie'.¹³



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So here while the Indian nationalists were considering the Act of the Natal Government against non-indentured Indian mercantile groups as racist at the same time they were discriminating between the indentured and non-indentured Indians where they saw the latter as superior to the former. Hence, even though at the Ahmedabad session of 1902 the issue of indentured Indians came up for discussion, and in 1904, indentured labourers other than those in South Africa came to figure in the proceedings of the Congress, yet as shown above, till the first decade of the 20th century the indenture system itself was not at the centre of criticism. Rather it was the discrimination faced by the free Indians that was the focal point of criticism by Gandhi and the nationalists. Indentured labourers or ‘coolies’ came into the picture only subsequently in contextualising the inferior status of free Indians in relation to others. It was then that Gandhi and Indian nationalists criticised the institutionalised tendency by the whites of South Africa to look at all Indians under one category.

When Gandhi and INC saw no hope from the government in securing equal treatment for free Indians in South Africa, they found a better way of bargaining. They thought that if they could cut off the supply of indentured labour from India, the prosperity of Natal would decline. Ultimately when they failed in this limited effort in 1905 then INC passed a resolution asking the Government of India and Her Majesty Government to prohibit the recruitment of indentured labourer for Natal. It was a frustrating moment for Indian nationalists, when the union of South Africa in 1909 initially passed the Bill, with no rights for British Indians.

Many newspapers at this time began covering the news of discrimination and racism faced by Indians in South Africa and of indentured emigrants also that were serving in the colonies. *Swarajya* (Allahabad), *Abhyudaya* (Allahabad), *The Indian People* (Allahabad), *The Advocate* (Lucknow) covered the stories of ill treatment of Indians in various colonies.

Nationalist Resolutions against the Indenture System

It was the build-up of such opinion in the Indian press that formed the backdrop to the efforts of the veteran nationalist Gopal Krishna

Gokhale to pressurise the Government of India to abolish the system. Gokhale suggested that Natal's labour recruitments could be used as a bargaining point to gain a better position for free Indians. He was still apparently more interested in the indentured labourers' potential political value than in whether they were victims of an unfair system. On 25th February 1910, Gokhale moved a resolution in the Legislative Council for the prohibition of the recruitment of indentured labour in British India for Natal and argued that the 'Indian problem in South Africa has arisen out of the supply of indentured labour to Natal'.¹⁴ For him the indenture system should be abolished because:

...continued influx of indentured labour into South Africa and the consequent inevitable annual additions to the ranks of the ex-indentured tends steadily to lower the whole position of the free Indian population. The feelings of contempt with which the indentured Indians is generally regarded comes to extend itself not only to the ex-indentured but even to traders and other Indians of independent means.¹⁵

So, for Gokhale, the indenture system was affecting the status of free Indians in South Africa, hence it should be abolished. Gokhale showed considerable anxiety on the issue of the political rights of free Indians in South Africa. He admitted that one of his motives was to retaliate against South Africa. He spoke:

I urge this resolution on the acceptance of the council because I believe it will prove of some use in remedying the evil from which we suffer. But I confess that even if there had been no chance of its proving in any degree effective, I should still have proposed it, because I think it is necessary for us now to mark in a formal and responsible manner our resentment at the treatment meted out to us by the south African colonies and not to take that resentment entirely lying down.

The most important Muslim politician on the council, Mohammed Ali Jinnah was even more outspoken. Jinnah spoke: 'I have no hesitation in stating frankly here, that the first, and the primary object of this resolution is retaliation, and the second or subsidiary object which is no doubt in the interests of the labour itself.'



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In a bargaining way Dadabhai Naoroji supported the resolution and suggested the Government of India to look economically and apply pressure on the South African Government to sort out the issues of free Indian settlers. He spoke:

Of the South African colonies Natal employs a large number of Indians under a system of indenture. So many as five to six thousand labourers emigrate to that colony every year from India. This is a lever in the hands of the government, which can be used to great advantage in any settlement of the Indian question throughout South Africa.¹⁶

It is important to note that while Gokhale moved a resolution for abolition of the indenture system, his central focus was the political rights of non-indentured Indians in South Africa and his argument to abolish the system came only as indentured Indians lowered the high status of non-indentured Indians.

In spite of the prohibition of indentured labour recruitment from India to Natal, free Indians could not get equal political rights in South Africa. This was a big challenge for the upper caste elites of India. It was now retaliation time against the British Government, as Indian Nationalists saw that it was the British Government that was conniving at the discrimination against diverse British subjects in the Empire. On 4th March 1912, Gopal Krishna Gokhale again moved a resolution in the Council of the Governor General of India for the abolition of indenture labour system altogether. This time Gokhale actually picked up the errors of the indenture system. For instance, he raised the issue of criminal penal laws, suicides and murders on the plantations, and mortality on ships. He paid attention to women recruited under indenture and argued that incorporation of women of 'loose character' to fulfil the quota of female workers on plantation, intended peasants to indulge in immorality under, which the immoral relations on the plantation existed not only between many of the indentured women and men but also between them and some of planters themselves and their overseers.¹⁷ He concluded that the system degraded the people of India from a national point of view. Due to this system, Indians were known as coolie, no matter what their position was. Unbearable burden of taxes drove men to crime and women to shame! Gokhale added that such a system had degraded the self-respect of Indians.¹⁸

Gokhale's criticism did not successfully affect the government's attitude towards indentured emigration. Over a period of time, the system had accommodated considerable improvements and had produced an economically enhanced new class in the colonies who were more concerned about their rising social status. For instance, in South Africa, two major organisations, the Natal Indian Patriotic Union (NIPU) and the Colonial Born Indian Association (CBIA) founded respectively in 1908 and 1911, whose members were the former indentured Indians and their offspring who emerged as a newly emergent elite, were centrally concerned about their rising social status rather than to abolish the system.¹⁹ Since the opposition of the system did not come from indentured labourers themselves, the government of India did give more importance on the Indian nationalists' criticism of the system.

This time 22 members supported Gokhale's resolution and 33 opposed it. So the resolution was rejected. This defeat of indentured resolution was frustrating for the nationalists. Gokhale promised to keep introducing such motions until one got passed. Now nationalists tried to consolidate themselves on the issue of treatment of Indians in the Empire and pressed full-steam for the abolition of indenture. On the eve of the First World War, Indian nationalists organised themselves on this issue and started a mass campaign against indenture.

So the origin of the Indian nationalists' opposition to indentured migration was associated with the Indian merchants and middle-class migrants' fears of being treated on the same footing in the civic and political arena as 'coolies' in South Africa.

Anti-Indentured Movement in Public Sphere

During the second decade of the 20th century the Arya Samaj and Marwari community of Calcutta got themselves involved in the anti-indenture movement.²⁰ They were very much active in Bengal, Bihar and U.P. They formed an association named the 'Indentured Cooly Protection Society or anti-Indentured emigration League' and opened an office in Calcutta.²¹ The formation of anti-Indentured emigration League made colonial officials anxious as the league was



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analogous of ‘anti-slavery society’ of Britain, which was responsible for the abolition of slavery from British Empire.²² A. Marsden, Government Emigration Agent of Benaras, anxiously wrote to the Colonial Office about the actions of the anti-indentured society and attached an anti-recruitment pamphlet that was being circulated by the members of the society in U.P. The pamphlet was as follows:

Save Yourself from Depot Wallas

Be Careful !!! Be Careful !!! Be Careful !!!

It is not service but pure deception.

Don’t get enmeshed in their meshes, you will repent.

They take you over seas !!!

To Jamaica, Fiji, Damra, Mauritius

British Guiana, Trinidad and Honduras.

They are not Colonies but jails.

Save, be careful from depot wallas,

They spoil your religion under the pretence of service.

Don’t hear sweet talks, they are your enemies.

Dear brothers,

You will find these ‘*arkatis*’ at the station, at the bazaar and enquire if you are in need of service. They have not got services to offer. They will take you to Calcutta and *sell you in other people’s hands* on agreement.

They got money for this, with including talks; by offering sweets they induce you. They say they will offer you service. They take you to *sahebs*.

Don’t entangle yourself with their cajoling.

Don’t hear what they say, don’t stand near them. They have sub-depots and agencies everywhere. Wherever you go be careful of these people, don’t forget. Circulate this news to all villages.



Satyadeva

Saty Granthamala, Johnstongunj, Allahabad.

Printed at Swadharma Pracharak Press, Delhi.²³

Marsden also reported that the anti-indentured organisation had established their regional offices in Allahabad and Delhi and were delivering lectures at the most recruiting places such as Muttura (Mathura), Allahabad, Benaras etc.²⁴ In Calcutta *Marwari Sahayak Samiti* workers raided the bogies of trains carrying indentured workers from the countryside to Calcutta. An anti-indentured organisation was also working in the various districts of Bihar such as Patna, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga under the leadership of Swami Satyadev.²⁵ He published and distributed pamphlets against the indenture system. Purushottam Das was another anti-indenture leader active in Muzaffarpur. He distributed thousands of pamphlets in Hindi. A translated version of the pamphlet is as follows:

ESCAPE FROM DECEIVERS.

ESCAPE FROM THE DEPOT PEOPLE

BEWARE ! BEWARE ! BEWARE !

It is not service. It is woe.

Don't fall in to their snare. They will ruin you.

You will weep your life along.

Instead of rupees, rubbish will fall (on you).

They are taking you across the sea!

To Mauritius, to Demerara, to Fiji, to Jamaica, to Trinidad,
to Honduras.

They are not islands; they are hell.

Do not go by mistake. By exciting your greed for money they will destroy your caste. There will you have to break stones. On board ship people only get one seer of water in twenty-four hours. At stations, on pilgrimages, in *dharmsalas*, in the bazaar they will ask you if you want employment. They have no employment to give. They will take you to Calcutta where by contact.



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They will sell you into the hands of sahibs.

These men are given money to deceive people. They delude them with sweet words and sweetmeat.

Fall not into their snare.

Do not listen to their words. These men are to be found everywhere. Proclaim this loudly in all villages.

The petitioner Purushottam Das, Vaishnav, Muzaffarpur [Let any one who wishes, ask for this notice free of charge.]

Every literate brother is prayed to read this to his illiterate brethren and sisters. It will be as meritorious as a *yajna*.

Narayan Press, Muzaffarpur, no. 68, 6-6-15, 20,000 copies printed.²⁶

Girmitiyas Writings and Nationalist Mobilisation: The Case of Kunti and Totaram

While Indian nationalists were protesting for the abolition of indenture system, returnees' writings about their experience on the plantation fuelled the anti-indentured movement. Kunti, an indentured Indian woman from Gorakhpur U.P., who had published her story of harassment by a white overseer and sardar, returned to Calcutta in July 1914 with her husband and two daughters.²⁷ The story of Kunti was already in public notice and became the subject of newspapers' editorials and writings of poets about the devotional characters of ideal womanhood.²⁸ Emigration officials in India were anxious to hear the news of Kunti's return to Calcutta. They were afraid of her joining with anti-indentured campaigners. Kunti registered her story of victimisation on the plantation of Fiji as well as the psychological and economic troubles faced by her during her return journey. Due to her husband's illness she did not manage to return to her village and came into contact with Dr. Rambihari Tandon, an anti-emigrationist. She stayed at 160 Harrison Road, which was the main office of 'Indentured Cooly Protection Society or anti-Indentured emigration League'.²⁹ She also joined the anti-indentured campaigners in Calcutta and delivered a public lecture.

Totaram Sanadhya was another Fijian *Girmitiya* who returned from Fiji in April 1914 after spending twenty-one years there. Totaram was already in contact with anti-indenture campaigners like Manilal, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Gandhi, C.F. Andrews and after his return, he stayed at Dharamtalla in Calcutta for a month and delivered 13 speeches and distributed some 15,000 pamphlets with the help of Marwaris, who were already campaigning against indenture and had formed an 'Indentured Cooly Protection Society or anti-Indentured emigration League'.³⁰

To expose the humiliation of the indenture system and to mobilise Indians against the Coolie System, Totaram with the help of Banarsidas published his own experiences in the form of an autobiography called '*Fiji Dwip Me Mere Ikkish Varsh*' in 1914. The book played a significant role in the nationalist mobilisation against the coolie system.

In his book he put, along with various errors of the system, special attention on the treatment of women labourers on the plantations. Totaram Sanadhya's writings are full of instances of how women were recruited through fraudulent means. Totaram has provided a glimpse of life of Indian migrants in Fiji:

*Bahut si striyon ne kaha hamare saas, sasur, pati etyadi mar gaye to nikat kutumbi logon ne kuchh madad nahi ki, isi liye ham tirth-bhraman ko chali gayi aur waha se hame arkati bahaka le aye. Kuchh istriyon ne yah bhi kaha ki pati ke marne ke bad jab ham vidhva hue to pariwar ke log hamse se ladne-jhagadne lage aur kasht dene lage. Inhi dukho se ham ghar se nikal gayi, bich me durbhagyavash arkatiyon ke fande me pad gayi aur ant me hame anannt kasht sahne ke liye yaha ana pada.*³¹

(Many women said, 'My father-in-law, mother-in-law, husband and so forth died, and the close kin did not help at all. For this reason I went on a pilgrimage tour, and from that the *arkati* fooled me and brought me.' Some women also said, 'When I became a widow on the death of my husband, the people of the house began to urge and fight with me, and to give me troubles. Because of these troubles I left home.



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On my way, unluckily I was caught up in the trap of the *arkaties* and in the end I was forced to come here to bear unending troubles'.³²

According to Totaram a woman had to face more difficulties than men in the plantations. First of all she had to wake up at 3:30 in the morning and prepare food, after that she had to work 10 hrs in the field and after returning home again she had to prepare food. Totaram is here at his caustic best:

*Jab striyan kam se ghar lautati hain tab unke muh par murdani si chha jati hai. Us samay unke much ki malinta ko dekh kar jo dukh hota hai wah varnanatit hai. Jo striyan bharatvarsh me kabhi apne gaon se bahar nahi gayin thin, jo striyan swabhavtah namr aur sukumar thin, jinhone ki ghar par kabhi kada kam nahi kiya tha, we hi striyan Aj hazaron kos dur Fiji, Jamaica, Cuba, Honduras, Guiana ityadi me ja kar das-das ghante kathin parishram karti hain.*³³

(When women return from work, there is corpse-like shading to their faces. One is so sad to see the dirtiness of their faces at that time that it is indescribable. These women who had never been out of their village in India, who didn't know that there was a country outside of their district, who are soft and tender by nature, who never did hard work at home, these women today, having gone thousands of miles away, in Fiji, Jamaica, Cuba, Honduras, Guyana and so forth have to do hard labour of ten hours a day.)³⁴

For Totaram, emigration of women under the indentured system created a bad image of India in Fiji. An indigenous Fijian commented to Totaram on the condition of women on plantation as follows:

*India bahut bura desh hai, jaha ki striyan mazduri karne ke liye pardesh me Fiji ko atin hai aur yaha akar anek atyachar sahti hain. Jaise atyachar tumhari Indian striyon par kiye jate hai waise yadi hamari striyon par kiye jaye to karne walon ko ham jad se mita den.*³⁵

(... 'India is a bad country, whose women come to a foreign

country, Fiji, to do the work of labourers. Coming here, they suffer many outrages. If the outrages which are done to your women were done to our women, then we would destroy to the roots the ones responsible.’)

What is implicit in Totaram’s story is that though he recognizes the work of women on plantations, and is sympathetic to their problems, yet for him women are not naturally built for hard work: they ‘are soft and tender by nature, who never did hard work at home’. Thus, Totaram confines women to a world of the home; they are not of the working world and in doing so he ignores the equal role of women in economic labour at ‘home’, i.e. India. The contradiction in his sympathy for women on the plantations is that it cannot logically be extended to women in the fields in India where in his understanding they ‘are’ at home, domesticity being the norm for ‘all’ women, irrespective of their class/caste. The grounds on which the issue of the exploitation of women on plantations is being fought is therefore fraught with problems. The campaign to save women from this double exploitation begins, not surprisingly, on the plantations abroad; ironically, there was no such recognition for similar exploitation in India. At this point in history, we were nowhere near recognizing the economic contribution of women whether at home or in the fields.

What became visible was women’s role in the nationalist discourse as carriers of culture. Therefore, every time an Indian woman was assaulted on the plantation, it took no time for it to be transformed into an attack on the very pride of the newly emerging nation.

Independent Enquiry by Andrew and Pearson

To look into the evils and sufferings of indentured labourers, it was in the context of such an anti-indenture build-up that Gandhi’s great friend Deshbandhu Charles Freer Andrews along with William Winstanley Pearson went to Fiji as joint honorary secretaries of the league for the abolition of indenture labour in 1915.³⁶ They published their independent enquiry report in February 1916.³⁷ Andrews reported many stories showing how recruiters deceived and brought men and women coolies to depots. For these purposes recruiters chose pilgrim places such as Mathura (especially for women), Allahabad, Benaras

etc. Andrews and Pearson were surprised to find a very large proportion of women recruited at pilgrim centres.³⁸ They reported that the system had produced abnormal number of murders and kindred crimes among Indians. For them the cause of such crimes was the disproportion between the number of male and females. They reported that:

The majority of those found guilty of such crimes are otherwise quite law abiding; and the murders, for which they are condemned to death, is not due to any murderous instinct in them, but really to sexual jealousy.³⁹

The colonial Government also contended that the murders in the plantation were due to sexual jealousy and so to solve the problem the Government passed a rule of 40:100 of the proportion of women and men in the recruitment for sugar plantations. An interesting petition filed by the Fiji Indians also contended that the murders in the plantation were due to disproportion of sexes in the colonies.

Explaining the causes of murders on plantation, Brij Lal has argued convincingly that the murders of women in the colonies were not due solely to sexual jealousy but due to the breakdown of the social system under the plantation regime. To quote him, 'sexual jealousy was a symptom rather than the cause of the problems that bedevilled indenture...it was the disturbance of the integrative institutions of society—family, marriage, caste, kinship and religion—that was the underlying cause of suicides and other ills afflicting the Indian indentured population in Fiji'.⁴⁰ In an interesting article, Prabhu Mohapatra argues that the murder of wives in the plantations was due to the discriminating nature of labour regime, which had effectively disarmed them from the heavy weapons such as cutlasses. According to him, 'the division of labour on plantations had ensured that the women were employed primarily in the lowest paying tasks, in the weeding gangs, while the heavier tasks requiring the use of cutlasses, hoes, and shovels were reserved for men'. Hence, women were unable to defend themselves against the attacks of men.⁴¹

What has been overlooked by these scholars was that there was a patriarchal mindset of Indian men behind the murders on the

plantations. Such kind of patriarchal frustration was due to the total freedom of women in the colonies free from any patriarchal restrictions. The plantation system had produced a free society devoid of any kind of patriarchal restriction. It had provided a level playing field in the context of gender and society. Hence, it provided a space for women to choose their own interest in every matter. Whenever women faced any problem with her legal husband or partner, they were quite free either to walk out of the marriage or to divorce him. The plantation system had also broken the restriction on cross caste/religion marriages. Most often, the choice of couples was the basis of marriages in plantations. The Indian nationalist saw such new developments as deeply disturbing. Andrews reported:

Divorces were equally common. Women left their husbands for the sake of jewellery and went to live with other men. They seemed to do just what they pleased, and to live just as they liked. Caste and religion were mixed together in common jumble. Hindu girls were sold in marriage to mahomdans and vice versa. Sweepers' children were sometimes married to Brahmans. ... immigration department marriages are called by the Indians '*marit*' and it was always necessary in Fiji to ask a man, or women, if they had a '*marit*' for nothing else was legal.⁴²

Andrew's Report highlighted many cases of 'honour killings' in which women were killed by men for saving the honour of their family and religion, and to preserve '*dharma*', for choosing a life partner by herself. For Andrews and Pearson, the moral ruin was the most pitiful. They reported that the Hindu women in the coolie lines, having no semblance even of a separate home of her own, which she can cherish, and, divorced from all her old home ties, has abandoned religion itself.

On the whole, Andrews and Pearson tried to show that the indentured system broke every Indian socio-cultural norm and led to the emergence of a different society, where caste and religion were no barriers in marriages. For them, it was degradation of Indian moral-cultural values. All such developments were seen as a danger to Hinduism and to the self-respect of India. To highlight the issue of the disproportion of the women, sexual jealousy among indentured and honour killings,



Andrews and Pearson put the women's sexuality in the centre where these women lost their morality. Rather, considering women on plantation as similar to men workers in their own wage work and right, Andrews and Pearson considered women as an issue of sexuality only.

Malaviya Resolution and the End of the Indenture

It was in such a charged atmosphere of considerable propaganda and mobilisation on the indenture issue that Madan Mohan Malaviya moved a resolution on the 20th March 1916 in Indian Legislative Council Assembly for the abolition of the system of Indian indentured labour. On this occasion he criticised the system and repeated the points raised by many nationalists in their earlier resolutions but the question of women's sexuality and national pride was central in his resolution.

The Government of India accepted Madan Mohan Malaviya's resolution pressing for abolition, on the condition that they will ensure that the emigration of Indian labour will continue in a different form. While the Government of India and colonial government were asking various authorities to suggest an alternative system, at the same time protests against the continuance of indentured emigration to colonies were on the rise all over India.⁴³ The nightingale of India, Sarojini Naidu, travelled far to address a mass meeting at Allahabad on 9th January and spoke:

I am a woman, and though you may not feel the dishonour that is offered to your mothers and sisters, I feel the dishonour offered to me in the honour of my sex... for women, for those women whose proudest memory is that Sita would not stand the challenge to her honour but called upon Mother Earth to avenge her and the earth opened up to avenge her... I came to speak on behalf of those women whose proudest memory lies in this, that Padmini of Chitor preferred the funeral pyre to dishonour. I come to speak on behalf of those women who like, Savitri, have fooled their men the gates of death and have won back, by their indemonstrable love, the dehumanised soul of their men in the colonies abroad.

...I ask you in the name of murdered sister, — that sister whom Mr. Andrews told us,⁴⁴ — that found in death only

deliverance from dishonour. I ask you in the names of those two brothers who preferred to save the honour of their family and religion in the blood of their sister rather than let her chastity be polluted.⁴⁵

What we would recognise as ‘honour killing’ now is here eulogised by a woman nationalist leader, Sarojini Naidu, who justifies this murder as martyrdom; so long as women remained an agent of Indian patriarchal norms.

While the termination of indenture system was under consideration of colonial government, nationalist poet Maithalisharan Gupta wrote a long poem titled ‘*Kisan*’ on the miserable conditions of peasants that forces them into migration to Fiji, and how *Arkaties* cheated and used fraud means to recruit illiterate peasants and in plantation how they suffered a lot. Under a sub-title ‘Fiji’ he writes:

<i>Adham arkati kahta tha-Fiji swarg hai bhu par,</i>	The evil <i>Arkati</i> had said—Fiji is heaven on the earth,
<i>Nabh ke niche rahkar bhi wah pahunch gaya hai upar!</i>	Even though under the sky, it soars above in the heaven!
<i>Mai kahta hu Fiji swarg hai to fir narak kahan hai?</i>	I say if Fiji is heaven, then where is hell?
<i>Narak kahi ho kintu narak se badhkar dasa yaha hai.⁴⁶</i>	Wherever hell may be but the conditions [in Fiji] are worse than hell could never be.

Influenced by the nationalist campaign many folk songs were also composed during the second decade of 20th century. A song can be seen which was composed on the theme of *Bidesiya*⁴⁷:

<i>Firangiya ke rajuwa me chhuta mora desuwa ho,</i>	In the regime of British, I was compelled to leave country,
<i>Gori sarkar chali chal re bidesiya...</i>	White government played a trick O migrant ...
<i>Bholi hame dekh arkati bharmaye ho,</i>	To see me innocent an arkati/ recruiter misled me,



<i>Kalkatta par jao panch sal re bidesiya.</i>	Go beyond Calcutta for five year O migrant.
<i>Dipuwa me laye pakarao kagaduwa ho,</i>	To bring into depot make over the [contract] paper,
<i>Anguthawa lagaye del har re bidesiya.</i>	Took fingerprint on it O migrant.
<i>Pal ke jahajuwa ma roy- dhoy baithi ho,</i>	In the sailing ship sit with lots of cry,
<i>Kiase hoi kalapani par re bidesiya...</i>	How would cross the black- water O migrant...
<i>Kali kothariya ma bite nahi ratiya ho,</i>	In the dark room the night was not passing,
<i>Kisase batae ham pir re bidesiya.</i> ⁴⁸	How do I express my pain O migrant?

Conclusion

To conclude, the movement against indenture was not started on the issue of sufferings of Indian indentured brethren and sisters under the plantation regime. Rather it was the desire for equal political and citizenship rights of the free Indians migrants in the colonies and especially in South Africa, which set the ball rolling in the early 20th century. Till the first decade of 20th century indentured Indians were not the key issue of concern for the Indian nationalist elites. Both, free Indians in South Africa and elite Indian nationalists differentiated themselves from the ‘coolie Indians’ overseas. But from the beginning of the second decade of 20th century, the issue of the indenture system became a meaningful nationalist campaign against the British imperial rule, when the question of exploitation of Indian women on the plantations came into the centre. But what was ironical that these working women were seen just as sexual objects whose morality became a contested terrain between the nationalist and imperial government.

Notes

¹ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography, or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Ahmedabad, Navjivan Trust, 1927, pp. 93–102.

² M.K. Gandhi, *Dakshin Africa me Satyagraha ka Itihas*, translated from original Gujrati, (1924), Sasta Sahitya Mandal Prakashan, Delhi, 2009, pp. 53–55.

³ Surendra Bhana, *Indentured Indian Emigrants to Natal, 1860–1902*, Romilla & Co, New Delhi, 1991, p. 116.

⁴ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920*, Oxford University Press [OUP], London, 1974, p. 288.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 303.

⁶ Joseph Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*, Harper Collins Publishers India, New Delhi, p. 108.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 110–12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1290–30.

⁹ Parmeswaram Pillai, Report of Eleven Congress, 1895, Poona, 1896, p. 106.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p.107. Emphasis added.

¹¹ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, [hereafter CWMG] Vol. 2, p. 409, speech at Bombay on 26.09.1896.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 428, speech at Madras on 26.10.1896.

¹³ CWMG, Vol. 11, 1897–1902, Speech at Calcutta Congress, p. 429. See also Report of the Seventeenth All India National Congress [hereafter INC], Calcutta, 1901.

¹⁴ Proceedings of Legislative Department, Delhi, 3rd March 1910, pp. 239–285.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Dada Bhai Naoroji, p. 251.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

¹⁹ Surendra Bhana, op. cit., p. 116.

²⁰ Marwaris, a Vaisya caste, originally belonged to Marwar of Rajasthan and spread all over India. In Calcutta after 1897 they emerged as the wealthiest and most successful business and industrialist communities widely known as a homogenous category 'Marwari'. The Mills of Calcutta was run by them and they were seeking cheap and plenty of labour for their industries. Emigration of labouring population of India under the indenture contract created problems for them in obtaining cheap and reliable labour force for their Mills. See Anne Hardgrove, *Community and Public Culture: The Marwaris in Calcutta*, OUP, New Delhi, 2004; Marwaris have been a moving business and industrial community from the 14th century. See Banarasi Das, *Ardh Kathanak*, Bombay, 1943.

²¹ See, Letter No. 322, dated Darjeeling, 14th October 1915, from James Donald, Secretary to the Government of Bengal (GoB) Financial Department to the Secretary to Government of India (GoI), Commerce & Industry, (C&I), Emigration.

²² IOR/P/9778, British Library (BL); Govt Emigration Agent, Benaras to Colonial Office, 23 July 1914, GoI C&I, Emigration, A Progs Nos. 43, December 1915, NAI.

²³ English translation, Emigration Agent Benaras, to Colonial Office [hereafter CO] 23 July 1914 in *Ibid.* This undated pamphlet is attached in the letter of Marsden.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, see letter of 7th June 1915, Ranchi, E.L.L. Hammod, Secretary GoB and Orissa, Municipal Department to Secretary GoI, C&I, Emigration.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, see letter dated Ranchi, 13th September 1915, from E.L.L. Hammond, Secretary, GoB and Orissa, Municipal to the Secretary GoI, C&I, Emigration; IOR/P/9778, BL.

²⁷ Colonial Secretary Office Minute Papers [hereafter CSOMP], 8779/13; 6609/14, National Archives of Fiji [hereafter NAF]. Government of Fiji set up an enquiry and it was found that the letter was written by Swami Manoharanand Saraswati on behalf of Kunti at the house of Totaram Sanadhya. Brij Lal discusses this episode in great detail. See Brij Lal, 'Kunti's Cry: Indenture women in Fiji plantation', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1985. See also John D. Kelly, *A Politics Venture: Hinduism, Sexuality and*

Countercolonial Discourse in Fiji, The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

²⁸ For detailed coverage of newspapers' editorials and poems composed by nationalist poets, see Ashutosh Kumar, 'Anti-Indentured Bhojpuri Folk Songs and Poems from North India', *Man in India*, December 2013, 93 (4): 509–519.

²⁹ CSOMP, 8865/15, NAF. Kunti recorded her statement in an affidavit and declared before Amylya Chandra Dutt, Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta on 14th August 1915.

³⁰ Totaram Sanadhya, *Fiji Dwip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh*, printed by Kunwar Hanumant Singh Raghubanshi at the Rajput Anglo-Oriental Press, Agra; published by Bharti Bhawan, Firozabad, U.P., 1914.

³¹ Totaram Sanadhya, *Fiji Dwip me Mere Ikkish Varsh*, Fourth Edition, Gyanpur, Benaras, 1973, pp. 30–31.

³² D. John Kelly's English translation of Totaram's *My Twenty One Years in Fiji Island*, Fiji Museum, 1991, pp. 60–61.

³³ Totaram Sanadhya, *Fiji Dwip me Mere Ikkish Varsh*, Fourth Edition, p. 31.

³⁴ D. John Kelly's English translation of Totaram's *My Twenty One Years in Fiji Island*, op.cit., p. 61.

³⁵ Totaram Sanadhya, *Fiji Dwip me Mere Ikkish Varsh*, Fourth Edition, p. 32.

³⁶ Charles Freer Andrews (1871–1940) born in England, became a priest in 1896, leaving the avocation in 1899 due to poor health, Charles Freer Andrews reached India in 1904 as a teacher at the Saint Stephen's College, Delhi; William Winstanley Pearson (1881–1923), a Christian Missionary and an active supporter of Indians; for some time a teacher at Santiniketan.

³⁷ C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson, *Report on Indentured Labour in Fiji: An Independent Enquiry*, Allahabad, 1916.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁰ Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji, Division of Pacific & Asian History*, Australian National University, 2000, p. 218.



⁴¹ P.P. Mohapatra, ““Restoring the Family””: Wife Murders and the Making of a Sexual Contract for Indian Immigrant Labour in the British Caribbean Colonies’, 1860–1920, *Studies in History*, August 1995, 11: 227–260.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴³ Resolution passed by the All-India Moslem League, Lucknow, on the 31st December 1916, the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee held on 31st December 1916, at Allahabad on the 19th January 1917, Aligarh on the 22nd January 1917, Cawnpore on the 23rd January 1917, Allahabad on the 28th January 1917, Tuticorin on the 30th January 1917, Madura on the 31st January 1917, United Provinces Congress Committee held on the 31st January 1917, Belgaum on the 3rd February, 1917, Punjab Provincial Muslim League held on 4th February 1917, Trinchinpoly on the 4th February 1917, by the Ladies’ branch of the Home Rule League, Kumbhakonam, on the 7th February 1917, at Cocanada on the 15th February 1917, Allahabad on the 16th February 1917 under the Auspices of the League for the Abolition of indentured Emigration.

⁴⁴ Andrews in his report mentioned a story told by a missionary: Two brothers of a respectable Hindu family were guardians of their younger sister. They caused her to be married by Hindu religious rites to a husband whom they regarded as suitable. The Hindu religious ceremony was fully and duly performed. Then another man intervened, and induced the sister to be married to him by means of a ‘*marit*’ at the immigration office. This ‘*marit*’ was legal. The Hindu marriage was illegal. There was no redress. When the brothers knew that there was no other remedy, they went and killed their sister, and gave themselves into custody. They declared at the trial that they had done it for the honour of their family and their religion. They had done it, they said, to preserve Dharma. They were condemned to be hanged. See Andrews and Pearson Report, p. 35.

⁴⁵ Sarojini Naidu’s speech is transcribed in the booklet of *Girmit Diwas: Commemorating 125 Years of the Arrival of Girmityas in Fiji*, organized by National Farmers Union, Fiji, p. 62.

⁴⁶ Maithilisharan Gupta, *Kisan*, Sahitya Sadan, Chirgaon, Jhansi, 1916, subtitle *Deshtyag*, p. 36. For more see, Ashutosh Kumar, ‘Anti-Indentured Bhojpuri Folk Songs and Poems from North India’, op.cit, pp. 513–514.

⁴⁷ During the second decade of 20th century Bhikhari Thakur composed a play *Bidesiya* that became very popular in northern India. The theme

of the play was on migration and separation of family/ newly married wife. See *Bhikhari Thakur Rachanawali*, ed., Nagendra Prasad Singh, Bihar Rashtra Bhasha Parishad, Patna, 2005.

⁴⁸ Vishwamitra Upadhyay, *Lokgiron me Krantikari Chetna*, Prakashan Vibhag, Suchana aur Prasaran Mantralay, Bharat Sarkar, 1997, pp. 42–43.

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