



## Migration and Marginality: Exploring the Economic Motivations and Social Realities of Female Indentured Workers

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### ABSTRACT

The historical experiences of female indentured workers are examined in this research study, along with the reasons behind their migration, the hardships they encountered, and the ways in which colonial regimes objectified them. These women were mostly enlisted to work on plantations in an effort to flee economic instability, patriarchal tyranny, and brutality. They faced institutional exploitation, characterized by large income gaps and a lack of agency, in spite of their desires for independence and empowerment. The study acknowledges their tenacity in the face of hardship while highlighting their marginalization along several axes, such as gender, caste, and class. This project intends to elevate these women's voices and include their stories into more general conversations about gender, work, and social justice by using a multidisciplinary perspective.

**Keywords:** Indentured Workers, Migration, Exploitation, Gender Inequality, Colonial Regimes, Economic Empowerment, Marginalization, Agency.

### INTRODUCTION

Girmit, also known as the indentured labor system, is the term used to describe bound contractual manual laborers who agreed to serve for their masters for certain amounts of time. The main operating years of this system were 1834–1917. Women who worked as indentured servants endured appalling conditions; their stories of sexual assault, harassment, and exploitation have been chronicled in a number of studies and documentaries (Bhuvanewari, 2015; Sharma, 2017). Significant obstacles had to be overcome in order to move as enslaved servants over the Kaala Pani from their original regions (karmabhoomi). In the host countries, these women were viewed as submissive and weak, and they frequently felt excluded. They were treated like inanimate things and were allocated numbers, making their identities meaningless (Mohan, 2016; Reddie, 2014).

Due to their gender, women experienced severe injustice and inequality and were frequently enticed into slavery with false promises. Due to the heavy demands of their families and their meager income, they were denied access to education that would have enabled them to fight for their rights. Several axes of marginalization were included, such as caste, race, sex, and gender. They were shown as frivolous and emotionally fragile, in sharp contrast to the logical masculine workers. As a result, women faced severe and exploitative conditions under the system of bonded servitude, which resulted in a continuous cycle of reliance on males (Gairola, 2019).

These women's main reasons for migrating were to seek economic empowerment and to flee patriarchal tyranny, the strict caste system, and violence (Bhuvanewari, 2015; Sharma, 2017). These women, who were mostly hired to work on sugar and tea plantations, were also exposed to behaviors like polyandry, which had devastating consequences, including suicide (Sinha, 2018; Gairola, 2019).

These ladies were portrayed as being exploited and subjected to coercion. Women who were girmityas migrated to a number of places, such as Trinidad, Jamaica, East Africa, Fiji, Guyana, and Natal (Tinker, 1990; Reddie, 2014). The gender inequality they experienced took the form of a binary opposition; women were frequently paid far less for doing the same work as men (Mohan, 2016; Nandan, 2020). Due to their perceived inferiority and treatment as emotionless objects, this economic gap strengthened their position as subalterns (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003).

Despite having the capacity to speak, these women's voices were successfully stifled by social structures. Their lack of agency and rights contributed to their sense of helplessness, which was made worse by the need to keep up an ugly appearance in order to prevent sexual exploitation (Mohan, 2016; Bhuvanewari, 2015). The predicament of these women is encapsulated in philosopher Mary Astell's moving question, "If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?" which draws attention to fundamental disparities in gender relations (Astell, 1705).

### MIGRATION-RELATED FACTORS

Women's migration as indentured workers was influenced by a number of reasons. Many were looking for autonomy and identity, which were frequently defined in connection with the men in their lives. Although the relocation offered a chance to avoid gender-related problems, their hopes

were usually dashed by the realities they faced (Nandan, 2020). Married women frequently had to submit to their husbands due to the dynamics of marriage and labour duties, which limited their independence and upheld traditional gender standards (Sinha, 2018).

Environmental influences were also quite important. India experienced widespread famine and economic instability in the middle of the eighteenth century, which led many people to look for work overseas. Mostly from areas like West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, indentured workers were a cheap and transportable supply of labor (Mohan, 2016; Sharma, 2017). But the widespread belief that women are naive frequently weakened their autonomy and increased their exploitation.

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## THE HIRING PROCEDURE

Compared to men, women were recruited at a much lower rate. Due to views of profitability, plantation owners influenced recruitment practices to suit their needs, giving preference to young, healthy guys. Because they were largely responsible for birthing and raising children, female workers were sometimes seen as less important (Sinha, 2018; Reddie, 2014). There was a persistent need for "righteous" women who would be obedient and gullible, which made recruiting women difficult.

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## PLANTATION SITE CONDITIONS

Women who worked as indentured servants and their families faced tremendous adversity from the beginning of the system until it was abolished. Because poverty forced them to accept exploitative conditions, economic deprivation frequently forced women into prostitution (Gairola, 2019). Even though they spoke out against injustices, their requests were frequently ignored. Due to a gender imbalance in the workforce, women were under increasing pressure to engage in polyandry, which led to the term "indenture" becoming synonymous with a "new system of slavery" in the nineteenth century (Tinker, 1990; Mohanty, 2003).

The system's capitalist nature, which put profit ahead of human dignity, made their harsh living conditions even worse. Due to the harsh economic conditions, many women reluctantly signed contracts. They were occasionally hired to satisfy the sexual needs of masters and employees, underscoring the system's underlying exploitation. These women suffered greatly on a physical and mental level, which frequently resulted in dire consequences, such as abuse from spouses if they were seen to be disloyal (Bhuvanewari, 2015).

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## CONCLUSION

Because they were frequently portrayed as sexualized objects, women enslaved labourers and those in their families endured severe physical and mental suffering. Although their exploitation left obvious scars on the outside, the internal suffering they endured was often ignored. Throughout history, structural oppression has mostly muted their voices and undermined their resilience and capacity for resistance.

These women were further marginalized by the intersections of caste, gender, and class, which made their battles unnoticeable in historical accounts. We can start to understand the intricacies of their lives and appreciate the importance of their agency, despite enormous circumstances, by looking at their experiences through a multidisciplinary lens. In order to ensure that these women's stories advance our comprehension of historical and current challenges of injustice, it will be imperative to elevate their voices going forward and incorporate their stories into larger conversations about labor, gender, and social justice.

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