

South African Indian women

Journey from 1860

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the arrival of Indian indentured labour in South Africa. **Mariam Seedat-Khan** traces the journey and changing identities of Indian women in South Africa. She finds many independent women in the first wave of arrivals who later reverted to the conservative role of maintaining the traditional Indian family. All these roles live on in South African Indian women today.

Subramuthy (not her real name) is a fourth-generation Indian woman and her family can be traced back to the 1860 arrival of Indians in South Africa. She carries her families' collective journey and their experiences that have been passed down to her from the generations that came before.

Her great, great, great grandmother was one of many women that left India to escape an arranged marriage to a man that she did not love and who was 15 years her senior. Her grandmother, Kavathy's (not real name) heart belonged to a man that was not suitable; he was of a different caste, class and religion. His name was Mohamed (not real name), he was a Muslim and came from a family of traders so their relationship was forbidden.

Kavathy and Mohamed were devastated and they both failed in an attempt to kill themselves in an act of love. They made a bold decision. They boarded a ship and signed a contract to be indentured in Natal for a period of five years.

Her journey was filled with challenges and difficulties from the

first day. Kavathy and Mohamed were unmarried and she was a beautiful woman. On this ship she was a victim of rape and sexual violations by the ships' doctor and other male passengers. Mohamed was infuriated by these violent sexual acts against the love of his life. He attacked the ships' doctor and a violent fight ensued where Mohamed was killed and his body thrown overboard. Dead bodies were not kept on board the ship, for fear of disease.

Kavathy was devastated, alone on a ship on route to a foreign land with no family of her own. She was afraid of the life she had to face; the idea of returning to India was not an option as her life would be at stake. The honour of her family was compromised in her decision to run away with Mohamed.

Vulnerable, she became open to further sexual abuse for the remainder of her journey. She was not alone in her challenges. The Captain's log of the *Umvoti* that left Madras on 25 August 1888, 28 years after her own journey tells a story of doctors with low moral values. This Indian woman too was

the object of sexual gratification and was forced to take on multiple sexual partners on her journey to the Port of Natal.

Women who challenged the sexual violation were punished and often jumped ship to escape the suffering. The captain reports that the women were anything but compliant and submissive.

FORGING NEW IDENTITY

Indian women also left India to escape a very poor nation. Some accompanied their husbands on the journey to escape this poverty. But the law also stipulated that each group of male workers leaving India should be accompanied by a minimum proportion of women. So some women left India to seek a better life in Natal as part of meeting these gender quotas.

These women who were employed on the sugar cane estates in Natal earned half the rations of their male counterparts. Women lived under the rule of the estate owners and were not allowed to leave the estate without their children. They also became the objects of sexual gratification for



An Indian indentured woman from the mid 1880s bound for the sugar plantations.

multiple men on the estates. The children that were born out of these sexual encounters were the responsibility of these indentured women.

These work conditions made their insecurity even greater and they developed a particular new South African Indian identity which included an identity as workers. Bill Freund remarks that, 'Labour is not conventionally part of the familiar definition of the lives of Indian women. Popular representations in South Africa of the Indian women projected by Indians themselves generally emphasized delicacy and dependency. Prestige resides in an idealised household where the woman's role is domestic and secluded.'

Between 1860 and 1911, 152 184 indentured workers were imported into Natal. They were recruited from across India. One third of immigrants were female. The Indian state had insisted that a minimum quota of 40% of indentured workers were women. This group consisted of wives and also independently indentured women.

According to G Vahed, of both

the women and men labourers, 'Approximately 60 percent of indentured workers were allocated to sugarcane estates; the rest were employed by the municipalities of Durban and Pietermaritzburg, the Natal Government Railways and as "special servants" such as cooks, waiters, policemen, clerks and interpreters.' They toiled under impoverished working conditions, were overworked and lived in poor conditions. They were also not allowed to refuse any work, demand higher wages or leave the employer. All acts of desertion and other offences were viewed as criminal acts.

This advert by the British painted a romantic version of what life would be like in Natal. It read like a tropical holiday, 'You will find a house rent free... care is taken not to separate friends and relatives... there is an abundance of good water and vegetables... varieties of work are available for women and children... you will receive generous food rations... women are paid half wages...'

In addition, women had an added burden unlike men indentured labourers. The notion of a single woman being employed on a sugarcane farm in Natal did not appeal to the colonial farm owners. An indentured woman labourer of the time said, 'I came from India with a man and we were indentured to Umzinto. He is dead. He committed suicide by hanging himself. I don't know why he did it. He was not my husband. I was only living with him. Six months after that man hanged himself I left. My master said that I was a single woman he did not want to keep me unless I got a husband and I said I did not want a husband and my master became disagreeable.'

This extract tells a story of an Indian indentured woman that defied the traditional norms. Abandoning family, friends and everything familiar is not an act that any man or woman embarks

on without good reason. The indentured Indian women, single or married, made choices and these choices led them to a new life upon arrival at the Port of Natal. Fatima Meer comments that, 'The abnormal structure of the Indian family in South Africa, created by the low proportion of women and the restrictions of indenture' meant that in this early period of arrival in South Africa women often broke with the conventional roles they had formerly played.

Other women arrived with their merchant husbands. This group paid their own passage and set up businesses with their husbands. These women were confined to the home, closeted and fearful of going out on to the streets. Those families that lived in rural areas had greater liberties and worked with their husbands taking care of businesses.

CREATING HOME ENVIRONMENT

The difficulties faced by the Indian indentured labourers could be the reason that they sought to re-establish their culture and religion in Durban. They shared experiences of being indentured and this brought them together in the spirit of community, family, religion and culture.

Indian women were instrumental in making South Africa their permanent home, despite the hardships they faced. They created a familiar environment through religion, culture and diet and they reproduced the Indian way of life in Natal. The indentured contract was five years and once the period ended Indians were free to reindenture, return home on a free passage, or seek work elsewhere in Natal.

Long before the institutionalisation of apartheid and gender-biased laws in South Africa race, class and gender discrimination were a part of Indian and South African society. Such discriminatory practices based on inequalities were instrumental in

the subjugation of women.

South African Indian women entered wage employment after the First World War. They focused on cultural and charitable work. In the 1930s their status was reflected in their isolation, poor education and dependence on their families for social and economic support.

The Second World War however had specific consequences for Indian women in Durban in the late 1930s and 1940s. Women engaged in wage labour and self-employed women worked as hawkers, domestic workers, cooks and market gardeners. They occupied low-paying jobs and were on the bottom rung of the economic ladder and were restricted to specific trading areas.

Indian families were forced to draw on child labour to supplement the family income. At the time 70.6% of Indians in Durban were living below the poverty datum line and 40.5% were destitute. The 1930s and 1940s were characterised by rising costs of living, periodic food shortages and general economic insecurity among Indians. Women were poor but their resourcefulness and familial responsibility strengthened their resolve to find solutions to these persistent problems.

SA INDIAN WOMEN TODAY

Meer notes the early low numbers of Indian women in South Africa 'was rectified in the second decade of the twentieth century when Indian family life in South Africa settled into traditional conservatism, and women assumed full responsibility for maintaining that conservatism. The home was the bastion of Indian life struggling against a foreign environment; surrounded by the strong forces... it depended upon its trustees, the women...'

Women themselves are responsible for the past and the present in their role of reproducing the Indian family and the Indian

women's current position. The role that Indian women played in reproducing the Indian way of life after the 1860s remains an important part of the role of Indian women in South Africa today. Some of this conservatism still remains under the guardianship of Indian women 150 years later.

The 'Indian' woman's isolation and oppression by women and men was deeply rooted in all spheres of society. Indian women placed themselves on the backburner while supporting their husbands, families, community, religious organisations and the South African liberation movement. Indian women in South Africa were nurtured in an even more oppressed atmosphere than their sisters in India.

The social pressures on Indian women defined by culture, religion, class, race and caste were instrumental in confining them in a variety of ways to a subordinate position within the family. Meer comments that, 'Not only had they, as Indian women, been cultivated to venerate, obey, and follow but they had been so protected from

outside influences that they alone could be expected to nurture and protect the conservatism of Indian culture and retain its purity.'

Meer also observes that, 'The good woman is the virtuous woman, patient, suffering, venerating the tradition of the past and sacrificing her entire being to her husband, her children and her family.' This notion of delicacy and dependency is one type of Indian women that is still visible in South Africa today. But Indian women themselves have been responsible for socially constructing new and independent roles and identities. They have begun to pave the road for other Indian women who will follow in their paths.

All this has led to Indian women in South Africa today being a multi-tiered construct integral to a membership in a variety of settings, such as the family, the home, the community, the political and economic arenas and the workplace. ■

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Natal sugar cane fields where the indentured women laboured.