

## Lives across the *kala pani*: the experiences of indentured women in the British Empire

In the wake of slavery's abolition, the British Empire turned to a new system of unfree labour to maintain the productivity of its colonies. Between 1834 and 1917, more than two million Indians were transported to British plantations across the Empire under indenture contracts. Among them were hundreds of thousands of women, many of whose stories remain marginalised or entirely untold. These women crossed the *kala pani* – the 'black water' – to places like Mauritius, British Guiana, Fiji and Trinidad. Their experiences of migration, labour, violence, adaptation and defiance reveal how gender shaped the realities of empire.

Women often joined the indenture system under complex and often coercive circumstances. Some were fleeing dire poverty, social stigma or domestic violence. Widows and deserted wives were especially vulnerable. Others were deceived by recruiters, known as *arkatis*, who promised jobs as nurses or cooks but delivered them to sugar plantations. One such woman was Sujaria, a young pregnant woman from Bihar, who left India in 1903 believing that she would work as a nanny in British Guiana. Her story, later reconstructed by her great-granddaughter Gaiutra Bahadur, reveals the vulnerability of women who boarded ships without fully understanding the realities of indenture. As Sujaria's pregnancy advanced, she endured the long sea voyage and the looming discovery that she would be cutting cane in gruelling heat instead of working in domestic service.

The journey itself was hazardous and marked by isolation. Travelling on crowded ships for weeks, women often found themselves outnumbered by men, typically in a ratio of four to one. On board, they were vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation. Upon arrival, women were assigned to estates and placed under the control of White overseers and Indian sirdars. The conditions that they faced were punishing: long hours of field labour, intense heat, meagre food rations and cramped barracks. Gender violence was commonplace. Some women faced coercion to enter sexual relationships in exchange for protection or better treatment. These conditions reflected both colonial disregard and patriarchal exploitation, reinforced by a labour system that viewed women primarily as economic assets.

Despite these hardships, many women found ways in which to endure. Some formed new relationships or families, not necessarily out of romantic desire but as a strategy for physical survival. Others took on roles beyond the plantation fields, becoming midwives, cooks or community caretakers. These positions allowed them to carve out small spaces of stability. In the colonies, women helped to preserve Indian cultural life. In Trinidad and Fiji, for example, indentured women led *pujas* (prayer gatherings), taught children folk songs and Hindi, and passed on oral traditions. Though not overtly political, these acts of cultural continuity helped entire communities to adapt to life in exile.

There were also striking acts of resistance. Some women simply refused to comply. In British Guiana, a woman named Kunti challenged her overseer's authority when she was assaulted. Her protest inspired others to stop working, triggering an official inquiry. While the rebellion was ultimately suppressed, it demonstrated the moral courage of women who risked punishment to resist abuse. Others ran away from the plantations altogether, forming hidden communities of escaped labourers. A small number took legal action. One of the most compelling examples is Bibee Zuhoorun, who arrived in Mauritius in the 1830s. She endured intense suffering and isolation, and eventually began petitioning colonial officials for her right to return to India. In letters preserved by the British Library, Bibee described the cruelty of her

treatment and her desire to go home. Her voice, though rare in the historical record, stands as a powerful testament to women's agency under empire.

Even when resistance was not overt, many women rejected the idea that they were passive victims. By negotiating their roles on the plantations and seeking ways in which to protect their families and cultural identities, they displayed forms of what historians call *everyday resistance*. In these acts – asserting their rights, preserving rituals, refusing work or simply surviving – women navigated the brutal systems of indenture with dignity and determination.

After the completion of their contracts, some women returned to India, but many stayed in the colonies. Sujaria, for instance, remained in British Guiana and eventually remarried. She raised children, worked as a petty trader and left behind a legacy of survival. Her story was passed down through generations, a fragment of oral history that challenged the silence around indentured women's lives. Others, like Bibee Zuhoorun, never saw home again but still asserted their right to be heard.

The experiences of indentured women were not monolithic. Some were victims of terrible violence; others found ways in which to make new lives in unfamiliar lands. Their stories show how imperial systems intersected with local gender norms to create particular forms of vulnerability, and also how those same systems could be subverted, negotiated or challenged. Whether through protest, adaptation or memory, these women shaped their own histories as much as they were shaped by the empire that moved them.

## **Bibliography**

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