

THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN UNDER THE INDENTURE SYSTEM: A STUDY OF THE ASIAN WOMEN & FERTILITY

Aakash Dev

Doctorate Research Fellow, Dept. of Economics,
Shiv Nadar University, Greater Noida, India

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the plight of the Asian women migrants, largely migrating from the regions of China and India during the period of Indentured labour system (1830's – 1920's) to the plantations spread all across the world. The major plantation crops included tobacco, tea, sugar, cotton, coffee etc. At all these plantation sites, the management required huge masses of cheap labour force to extract maximum profit out of the business. A portion of the labour force comprised of migrant women workers working actively at the sites/fields and earning their livelihood. Women in all these regions braved really harsh conditions due to the penal contract and other terms of working rules that they were subjected to. The instances of gender discrimination were quite prevalent. The recruitment policy was such that planters mainly preferred an able bodied male worker. Women were merely 25% of the labour force recruited. The working conditions were harsh and discriminatory against women. There was a huge wage differential in male and female payments. There was widespread violence against women due to their shortage on the plantations. Male workers often indulged in fights related to women. Marriage as an institution was weak and not adhered to as women preferred to leave one partner for another. Education was not considered as beneficial for women as was evident from the widespread reluctance of indentured parents to send their daughters to schools. The lack of education among women prevented them from taking up professional employment opportunities. There were many instances of revolts among women too against the stringent conditions of the penal contract although women were not that open about them as their male counterparts were.

Authors Silvia Pedraza, University of Michigan and Jon Pederson, University of Pittsburgh in their respective case studies on the living conditions of the indentured female labour class have revealed that traditionally social class relationships and the capitalist mode of production have been most frequently mentioned as the main source of oppression and victimization of women on the plantations while both gender and race were viewed as additional aspects which merely intensified the degree of atrocities being faced by them. Oppression is being described as a limitation of freedom by the use of coercive power by those sitting on a more superior platform. Author Lucie Cheng Herata, has also explored the dimensions of prostitution and sex

trafficking that was prevalent during the same period. Prostitution performed double economic function for the management. It helped to maintain the labour force of single young men, which was actually in the interest of the management which otherwise would have to pay higher wages to labourers with families to support. In addition, prostitution also enabled the entrepreneurs to extract large profits from the work of women under them and thus helped to accumulate considerable profits for their investment. Further, in multiracial areas, prostitution of minorities or colonized groups also provided cheap labour for the plantation themselves.

Keywords: women migrants, cheap labour, plantation

Cite this Article: Aakash Dev, The Plight of Women Under the Indenture System: A Study of the Asian Women & Fertility, International Journal of Social Sciences Research and Development (IJSSRD), 2(1), 2020, pp. 1-10.

<http://www.iaeme.com/IJSS/issues.asp?JType=IJSS&VType=2&IType=1>

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the overwhelming presence of women in migration flows, until recently the role of women in migration had majorly been overlooked. Under the dominance of the pervasive assumption that the international migrant represented a young, economically motivated male, the reality of women migrants stands overshadowed. Criminal sanctions were used to enforce this civil contract which restricted wage rates, limited the mobility of the workers, and in general guaranteed control by the management over the labour force. The goal of indentured labour was to increase the labour supply, depress wages, and make sure that the workers would be available when the planters needed them. Too often, scholars have referred to contract labourers, meaning men only. But there was a large scale migration by women too as indentured labourers which had widespread implications in the formation of social ties. It is argued that the experience of Indian women during indenture was marginally different from slavery. This argument is premised on the background of the immigrants before leaving India and their exposure to the crass plantation system. Their gender disparity, caste, religious backgrounds, and low social status before arrival stymied efforts towards cohesion and mobilization. Within and beyond their plantation world, women had little choice but to carry the double burden of balancing low-wage labour work with household duties and expectations. Whenever they failed to meet expectations, they were abused and even murdered. Women were often caught between the European and Asian patriarchy and were very much sexually abused or made susceptible to monetary advances from their immediate European and Asian supervisors. Indian women were paid lower wages than men. The death rates of Asian women were much higher than those of men. Deaths were caused by murder and childbirth. In summary, it was difficult for indentured women to find and experience freedom on and beyond the authoritarian plantation complex.

The underlying assumption in studies of migration had been the male pauper – a single male who looks forward to amassing capital with which to return to his native country. In the traditional approach to migration as developed by Lee, the theory of migrant's decision to migrate had largely been focussed on the 'push' and 'pull' factors that 'hold and attract or repel people'. Thus, the corollary assumption has been the migrating authority lying solely in the hands of males. The women workers migrated either under the force of family pull or were forcibly made to migrate. On the contrary, it has sometimes also been argued that indentured women used the labour system efficiently and effectively to emancipate themselves from patriarchal and plantation structures, which eventually put them in a better position in the destination country than in India and China.** For example, on the Caribbean sugar plantation or Sumatra's tobacco plantations, Indian women were not subjugated to

India's stern caste system and were able to earn their own wages. Moreover, the shortage of women on the plantations in the Caribbean islands even allowed them the freedom to reverse the bride price required of them in India. Dutch historian Pieter Emmer has proposed that most East Indian women left India willingly, and the indenture system gave them the choice between fieldwork and staying home. The female Chinese indentured servants also used the contract system more than men to increase their social status and to emancipate themselves from the hierarchical social system prevalent back home. The frequent occurrence of famines and plague also provided the acceleration towards such movements.

'Within India itself one of the apparent effects of this combination of destructive colonial policy with natural hazards was the migration of those affected to the towns from surrounding areas. For these landless unemployed, facing the increasing competition for survival in the towns, emigration to the British colonies was one alternative.' (Reddock, 86)

2. INDENTURED CHINESE PROSTITUTES

With the dominance of males in both Indian and Chinese migrating lots, it led to a very few number of women and families in the emigrant communities. Traditional Chinese beliefs and cultural attitudes acted against the reputation of the "respectable women and wives". This combined with the ban on women migration by the Chinese government (as late as up to the 1910's), perpetuated the highly unequal sex ratio in almost all the plantations belt throughout the world where the Asian migrants migrated. Hence, bringing in prostitutes for work became a profitable enterprise. Along with rapid surge in the scale of long distance migrations, the market for prostitution and sex trafficking of Chinese women gained momentum. Colonial authorities were also very ashamedly and surprisingly tolerant on this matter, probably considering it as a necessary evil. The major market for the business and services of prostitutes flourished in the mid 19th century America. After the formal abolishment of black slavery, the capitalistic mode of production predominated America. Gradually the Chinese prostitution system developed as an Economic institution where the prostitutes became a specific class of labour selling their sexuality in return of a marginal payment. Back home, these women were victimized by population pressure, landlord oppression, and foreign imperialism. Females with a lower wage rate than their male counterpart and their labour being less valuable were often the main victims of extreme poverty. Married and settled women were often left helpless by the movement of their spouses and male counterparts in the search for work and large scale undergoing plantation recruitments (both for the domestic as well as international markets) which specifically required single men migrating without their families. One solution for relieving the family of its female members was prostitution. The family did not have to provide for the girl's upkeep and her sale or a part of it could help to support the family. Thus it was the family itself and not the girl herself that organised the sale. Gender imbalance which was a common feature across all the plantations throughout the world often provided the impetus for the growing market of prostitution as an economic activity. Girls often accepted their sale out of filial loyalty and most of them were not in a position to oppose the families' decision. Other than these behavioural aspects, little else is known about the women themselves and the conditions under which they worked. There were three main categories of the Chinese prostitutes: "sold" prostitutes were the females who had been sold by their parents or relatives in a transaction akin to slavery; "pawned" prostitutes referred to those who were working to pay off debts incurred by their parents – they were theoretically free on full repayment of debt but this seldom occurred; "voluntary" prostitutes who operated independently. Thus the engagement in prostitution by the Indian and Chinese migrants was the result of the complex linkages between systems of temporary labour migration, colonial administrative policies, profit seeking, and other cultural and social factors.

3. RECRUITMENT

The recruitment policy varied over time, it depended on the basic ideology and motive of the plantation owners and was also contingent on the colonial authorities. The major recruiting terrain for various different plantations were the crowded bazaars and markets, temples, and railway stations, where recruiters looked for forlorn people and attracted them by various promises of work and new lifestyle away from their homeland. For the recruitment of women there wasn't any zeal or enthusiasm to recruit more women as according to Silvia Pedraza, female labour force was considered to be less valuable and not suitable for most of the outside field works at the sites. Women as a source of labour were seen as financial liabilities due to the financial risks of child-bearing and child rearing. Women were considered naturally weak, moreover recruiters didn't want to go that extra mile incurring that extra financial burden in search of women suitable for specific plantations. There was always a skewed sex ratio on the plantations. The recruitment conditions show that women were discriminated against on the plantations. In many instances the recruiters often indulged in violence and force at the time of hiring. These agents were thus feared by the masses, especially by the women. Many studies have also looked upon the angle of the recruiters as the person with dubious identity and the ability to influence the local crowds to sign the contracts.

For the Indian coolie class, the traditional system of *arkatti* recruitment was highly prevalent. The recruiters charged a heavy brokerage for being the agent for the planters. In China, luring and kidnapping were the most frequent methods of procurement. Most Chinese women, who could not read or write, could easily be duped into affixing their thumbprint to any document by the agent or party who was the beneficiary of the terms of contract (Hirata).

Failure of the management and planters in arranging cheap local workforce caused an acute shortage of labour at the plantation sites. They thus organised the system of an organised recruitment process from the rural/ low caste areas of India, China and other cheap sources tribal and poor workers. These recruits belonged to the diverse peasant, labouring, artisan and service groups. Along with men, women and even children were recruited through a system based on coercion. Instead of market mechanism, forceful recruitment became of crucial importance in mobilising labour. In most of the practices of recruiting, the recruiters/ contractors being concerned solely with rounding up as many people as possible, they resorted to all forms of deceit and trickery, violence and even abduction of married women, to secure labour. Once recruited, men and women were kept in transit depots and later despatched to plantation sites under the strictest controls. Initially, under the shadow of male dominance and cultural beliefs, legal and social barriers against female labour force, especially in China, it was not in the interest of the planters to look for women workers. This also helped them in saving the cost associated with the maintenance of families once male female ratio stands equalised. Later on the migration of females gained momentum under the various needs that evolved at the locations in due course of time.

4. CONDITIONS OF WOMEN ON THE PLANTATIONS

The reason why women immigrants suffered the most at the plantations was due to informal polyandry due to shortage of women which often led to numerous suicides and other crimes for passion. This phenomenon was observed in all plantation colonies. It was generally believed that women lacked the will power to resist the advances of other men. This mistrust was based on traditional morals that gave men control over and exclusive access to their partners' sexual services and the fear of losing their women or rather losing control of their women often led to various crimes which were brutal in nature. Moreover some of the heinous crimes were even considered as the right of men. As evident from the plantation of

Seychelles (Jon Pedersen) 'Wife-chopping' was regarded by contemporaries as the one proof of the low morality and barbarous and bloodthirsty nature of Chinese-Indian men and women

Discrimination among women was based on their family back ground whether they were single women, married women of an unskilled male counter-part or married women of a skilled male counterpart. A number of women even entered the plantations just to supply the sexual needs of the single workers. The existing contractual arrangements for the class of prostitutes were similar to the Chinese contractual coolie system. The contract involved full body service for a specified time, and if the prostitute succeeded in fulfilling the terms of service, she could theoretically, get out of the business. The importers received the women from the recruiting agents, arranged for their passage, and handed them over to the brothel owners upon arrival at the location. 'Sexual division of labour' was also visible based on the intensity of task whether heavy or light. Women were often granted lower wages and this was justified by the recruiters based on the task intensity. Women were often granted unattractive jobs and corresponding payments were made. The planters created a sexual division of labour forcing women to do the most menial and lowest-paying jobs, which were typified as 'feminine' because of the alleged nimble fingers of women. Thus, ideological reasons were given to reserve unattractive work for women. As a result the wages of women were always lower than the remunerations which their male colleagues received. The employers justified these wage differentials by assuming that a woman was dependent on her husband, who was considered the main breadwinner. Female labourers earned about half to two-thirds of what their male colleagues received. (Hirata) Of all the aspects of sickness and morality on the plantation, the most sombre was that of suicide. It was common for the emigrants to throw themselves overboard on the voyage to their destinations. Suicides among women were also a feature of bad estates, or periods in different territories when the conditions were especially stringent. Despite the severity of the crisis, the management was very ashamedly silent on the mass phenomenon of suicide. In fact attempts were made to emphasis upon suicides as a characteristic feature of the poor Asian class being trapped under various social and cultural webs as well as the nets of poverty.

The greatest obscurity regarding relations between planters and the Asian coolies surrounded the question of their taking over the women for sexual purposes. Very often the management and the European coolies formed physical connections with the Coolie women. Women performed double time both on field as well as on ground. Upon return from work they had to be housewives and mothers. Upon their shoulders rested the responsibility for cooking, cleaning, sewing, tending fires and childcare. These household tasks had to be done before dawn or at night, after the regular workday. What made it worst was that they were forced to work even during their pregnancy and soon after birth they were expected to return to the field and no leaves were granted rest though it was proposed by the colonial government that they should be granted on leave fees and rest after pregnancy but this was never been implemented. For example, it is often quoted that in the case of Assam tea plantations women were required to return to work within six days of delivery. The natural laziness was considered as a crime and penal sanctions were imposed and women were often jailed for the same. Those women who weren't married and received low wages could only improve their earnings via prostitution and ended up selling their bodies of which the planters had no objections as long as the immigrant men continued to serve them. Thus we see that women were subject to all sorts of crimes on the plantations. Men had a certain impression about women being of loose moral character. This was true of both the planters as well as Indian men. Wage differentials among women and men indicate the discriminatory practices by the planters against women. Women had to perform the dual role of labourers as well as housewives who took care of the household work and children. Despite this fact they were denied leaves during pregnancy and subjected to punishment if they resorted to laziness. They

were required to join work weeks within delivery. Thus this revealed that women had to face cohesion and discrimination on the plantations due to the assumed superiority of the planters and the patriarchal beliefs of the Indian men. Planters did indeed employ coercion and violence to keep labourers under control along with cutting the associated labour cost. Extra economic coercion also served to improve the planters bargaining position in the labour market.

The push for increasing the flow of migrants from India came initially from coffee and sugar (mid 19th century), then from rubber planters, especially during the 1900s when the rubber prices were enjoying a record high. Prior to 1860s, Chinese labour dominated the work force, most were engaged in spices, pepper and sugarcane cultivation. Some indentured Indian labour was also used on sugarcane and coffee plantations during 1830s. According to few accounts available, Indian women on estates worked as tappers (skilled labour), or more frequently, as ‘weeders’ (unskilled labour). They were housed on the plantations in “lines” or barrack like row housing provided by the plantation’s owners. Complete information on the marital status, age distribution and other characteristics of Indian and Chinese women across the plantations spread throughout the world do not exist.

In the case of plantations in Malaya, Chinese female immigrants’ participation in agricultural work differed from that of Indian females in significant ways. First, they came later into rubber cultivation, mainly as a result of the dramatic in Chinese immigrants. Secondly, unlike Indian labour force, Chinese women who worked on the rubber plantations were mainly drawn from the squatter populations that often ringed such estates. Thus Chinese women had a greater freedom and control over their work. Overwork and undernourishment remained the most common cause of death. Inadequate health care and extremely unhealthy plantations sites made life miserable for the Asian workforce. With women coolies having a much lower wage rate compared to the average wages of their male counterparts, their conditions stood even more pathetic. Birth rate was also at an extra-ordinary low level across all the plantations. Males competed for scarce female- yet lived under settled, semi-domestic conditions. As in slavery, marriage or companionship was an unstable state for many.

5. DECISION TO MIGRATE

Gender played a crucial role in the decision to migrate and composition of the migration flow. The experience of immigration also profoundly had an impact on the public and private lives of women – their labour force participation, their occupational concentration, their religiosity, their marital role and satisfaction, and their autonomy and self-esteem. For the women migrating along with their families and male counterparts, it was the male member of the family key decision taker. Women just had to follow them to the sites of plantations. Usually, the men took the leadership in finalising the contract. For the female workers migrating alone, it was either as a labour class or as a prostitute. In contrast to men, migration did not rupture the social sphere in which the women were actualised As a result struggle developed over finances and returns that revolved around the traditional definitions of gender roles. Most of the recruitment was forceful and carried out of cohesion. As argued in the case of Asian female immigrants, people were willing to disregard caste, religion and custom, and get married. One can suggest that among the poorer agricultural classes/castes from which the majority of the immigrants were drawn, restrictions on marriages were less strict. The life of single indentured women was unprotected or rather socially threatened and marriage was a basic tool used to get over such a situation. Man benefited as he had someone to cook, love or take care of home affairs while women benefitted as there was a protector in a savage new environment, and it helped establish some sort of recognized position in a social order.

Stability of marriages was always under threat whether it be stability of pre-married couple which arrived at the plantations or sustenance of marriages which took place after recruitment at the depot or at the plantation site. Indian women apparently preferred to leave their 'depot husbands' for men who had lived longer on the colony and could offer them a better standard of living. For a specific example of plantations in Trinidad, by 1882 the immigration authorities were considering the possibility of 'registering these marriages 12 months after the immigrant's arrival in the country'. Several unsuccessful attempts were made in establishing caste endogamy. Another basic problem at the Trinidad plantation was that Indian couples which arrived didn't see it necessary to register their marriages at government's registration office.

The prevalence of low women to men sex ratio gave rise to immense competition among men for marriage. Men would often get involved in fighting over a woman. This was almost the case common across all the plantations. Many couples which arrived at the plantations were not legally married. In majority of cases both Chinese and Indian indentured parents often preferred arranged marriages and there were many instances where the marriages were broken on account of proposal by a more financially stable man. This situation added value to having a girl child as there was a bride-price which parents would gain in return which is an unexpected scenario all due to rising competition among the indentured men. The marital status of women also affected them in their work affairs as evident from the plantation at Guiana that the preponderance of non-marital and non-residential relationships were decried as incapable of sustaining a stable family life and liable to produce criminal elements in society, especially black women who were considered lacking in sexual mores and were held liable for moral degradation for working-class life. (Hirata)

Thus in general indentured women at the plantations suffered and paid the price of lower sex ratio for which the colonial government and the recruiters were responsible. The legality and stability of marriages was always under scrutiny and was never resolved. Women also lacked legal rights because marriages were not recognised initially on the plantations. However, as is evident from the scarcity of women on the plantations, some women often used this in their favour by getting involved with partners who were more financially stable. Also a bride price started to be demanded for marrying women which was in the favour of women. In this sense, women seem to be using their scarcity in their favour and as a way to exercise freedom over their sexual lives and could choose their partners independently. This freedom would be lacking for them if they had resorted to staying in India as they would be subject to the stern caste system and had no sexual freedom.

6. INDENTURED LABOUR WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP ROLES

In this section we see whether there was hardly any major report of outburst among women particularly against the stringent conditions of the penal contract for indentured labourers or against the stern caste system and patriarchal norms. In his paper, Jon Pederson has examined the leadership roles among indentured Chinese women in Malaya. The leadership roles among indentured women were not as broad as those among the indentured men. The main reasons were that Asian women were recruited from the lower ranks of the society, which stymied leadership roles, and the authoritarian structure of the plantation system, which supported patriarchal trends. Moreover, the colonial records do not reveal leadership roles among Indian women because the records are based on imperial domination and exploitation, reflecting anecdotal rather than analytical evidence. However despite of restrictions, some cases of indentured Indian women engaging in leadership roles on the plantations had been reported but were not as open about these roles as their male counterparts were. The drive for intensification of the labour process, and the constant supervision to prevent coolies from

running away, reinforced the strong element of violence and overstep the limits of legality atmosphere of the penal sanctions. Very often the men and women protested by deserting the plantation sites or by merely refusing to work. Disobedience many a times meant a transfer of labour power from a particularly unhealthy, low wage, or highly under-manned field to a more favourable one. In case of Sumatra's tobacco plantations, with growing voices, violent clashes between planters and coolies became a frequent happening. Only in a very few of these instances women leadership was directly seen as active. This could be possibly due to two reasons: first, the repressive nature of the plantation confined the women largely within the boundaries of work and life. The roles of women were perceived to be secondary to those of men and were treated as a burden to the plantation system. Their domestic duties such as taking care of the household and raising children prevented them from being as productive as men on the plantations. Secondly, the Indentured Asian women were not involved in the writing of their own history, mainly because many were not schooled in academic institutions. Also, they spoke a language that was foreign and incomprehensible to the recorders of indenture. For the most part, indentured Indian women were illiterate who were incapable of interpreting the written procedures and policies of their indenture contracts. The archival records are found to be inconsistent with the reality of Indian women's experience in relation to their leadership roles during indenture. The planter class was not shy about expressing how they felt about indentured Indian women. They viewed them with much distaste and often described them as being deficient in cleanliness and neatness. This might have been an accurate view of Indian and Chinese women since they were poor low caste peasants who were busy working in the fields and home, which left little time for them to take care of themselves. However, historians and thinkers have also explored the dimension of voluntary choice behind such dirty and unimpressive looks to avoid sexual abuses. The plantation environment was a very fertile ground for sexual abuse. Women worked in the fields, sometimes alone, and without any protection. Even their homes were not well secured and they were generally powerless in the male-dominated indenture system. Given these situations, some women might have kept themselves in a poor state to appear unattractive to male predators, and consequently, might have prevented sexual advances and safeguarded themselves against any form of sexploitation. Leadership of protest in this regard was administered on an individual rather than on a collective basis and might not have been available to the recorders of indenture. However, to indentured women, it was a form of leadership in which they took control of their own lives, leading them to engage in innovative ways to protect themselves from the vile and virulent side of indenture.

Some archival records do show that Indian women were involved in a series of revolts and instances of resistance. However, this dimension has not been well explored. Critical and economic viewpoint explained that some level of leadership flexibility had to be allowed and administered to ensure a well-functioning of the plantation system that embraced a top-down system of management, the managerial staff allowed some members of the labouring force to be strategically placed in leadership positions to serve as intermediaries between the planters and indentured peasants. But how much was this system and practise successfully implemented and how long did it continue had not been explored quite well. **Subsequently, some coolies became intermediaries (Chief Sirdars) in between the European and the field labourers. Women were not totally excluded from these intermediary positions of leadership, even though their supervisors were men. For example, Indian women were made 'sadarines' or headwomen on the plantations. These women became *sadarines* not because of high caste status but because of their experience and skills relating to plantation labour. They were most likely to have finished at least five years of indentured servitude and had learned the fundamentals of indenture. These female leaders certainly knew how to read and write since these were prerequisites for intermediary positions of leadership. They used these skills to

communicate and interact with their European supervisors and other indentured women under their command. Some of their most demanding responsibilities were to have the female workers complete their assigned tasks in a timely manner, to ensure limited disruptions and stoppage of work, and to command respect and trust from both their supervisors and the workers under their control at crucial times. Their experienced positions made them natural spokespersons for other indentured women on issues relating to better wages and unfavourable working conditions. In return, the *sadarines* received higher wages and enjoyed other intangible benefits, such as power on and beyond the plantations that were denied to other indentured women.** These attributes, however, were not always earned amicably but from authoritative behaviour, learned perhaps from their supervisors. The mere shortage of women certainly weakened Indian patriarchal norms and strengthened women's positions in the plantation societies. While women were exposed to and suffered from abuse and were sometimes even murdered, some did experience upward social mobility.

7. CONCLUSION

Scholars have suggested two polarized arguments. This paper has attempted to summarize both the viewpoints in detail. One says that indentured women were discriminated against on the grounds of gender, race and it was difficult for them to find and experience freedom on and beyond the authoritarian plantation complex. The second argument stresses that indentured women used the labour system efficiently and effectively to emancipate themselves from the patriarchal plantation structure, which eventually put them in a better position in the plantation societies across various plantation locations throughout the world as compared to their home countries.

While looking at the plight of the indentured women, we see that although it was a conscious decision on the part of women to migrate due to the deteriorating conditions in India and other source countries as China, it was not particularly the case that they enjoyed a better life than they would have lived at home. A look at the recruitment policy, working conditions, marital ties and education for women suggests an inherent degree of discrimination against women. Women were subject to patriarchy both from the planters and their male counterparts. The cause of oppression was not solely the capitalist mode of production or class but there was an interaction between gender, race and class. Women were paid lower wages and were subject to sexual crimes due to their scarcity.

On the other hand, the independence of women is reflected by their conscious decision to migrate, their decision to change partners very often and the various leadership roles played by women on the plantations. The indenture system gave the women a new found freedom to fight the stern caste system back home. The scarce women were so sought after, that men had to pay a bride price to get married to women of their choice. This provided a deep anchor for unfortunate indentured women, enabling them to rely on themselves to take care of their own immediate needs and to break out of the low-wage regime of the plantation system. Thus the arguments presented by scholars are polarized in nature. A deep look at most of the plantation sites shows that women were subject to patriarchy and failed to achieve freedom in some areas but in other areas there is clear evidence of a new found level of freedom among indentured women. Thus, it can be said that elements of both 'freedom' and 'unfreedom' can be found for women. Women fared well in some areas and were successful in emancipating themselves from the authoritarian nature of the indenture system but in other areas, may be due to the deep roots of superiority and patriarchy inherent in the indenture system they failed to achieve that freedom and became victims of exploitation and sexploitation.

In conclusion, an extreme form of capitalist exploitation such as indentured immigration was not the only or most important reason for the oppression of female contract labourers.

The plantation system intermeshed with a racist ideology was a cause. Moreover, male domination from Whites (planters) as well as fellow Asian coolies produced the particular form of oppression experienced by indentured British Indian and Chinese, Javanese women. However, this subordination does not imply that they meekly accepted their oppression.

REFERENCE

- [1] Plantation Women and children : Wage labor, Adoption, and Fertility in the Seychelles
Author(s) : Jon Pedersen Source: Ethnology, Vol. 26, No, 1 (Jan., 1987), pg- 51-61,
University of Pittsburgh – Of the Commonwealth System of Higher Education
- [2] Women and migration : The social consequences of Gender Author(s) : Silvia Pedraza
Source: Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 17(1991), pg – 303-325 Published by:
Annual Reviews
- [3] Free, Indentured, Enslaved : Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America
Author(s): Lucie Cheng Hirata Source: Signs, Vol. 5, No. 1, Women in Latin America
(Autumn, 1979), pg – 3-29 Published by : The University of Chicago Press