

## Glimpses of Re-subjugation of Coolie-Women

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the socio-economic reasons that instigated a large section of Indian women to go colonial plantation countries as plantation workers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The paper also discusses the incidences and treatment what they bear with during their journey and after arrival in plantation industries by their male associates and colonial bureaucracy.

**Keywords:** Collie-Women; Plantation; Colonies; Subjugation.

### Introduction

Nineteenth century has been a crucial era for the history of colonizer countries as emerging most powerful capitalist country across the globe; more specifically it was the transformation from mercantile phase to industrial phase. It was the period when India's large region was annexed and captured by the Britishers and came into direct control of Crown and British parliament. Transformation at several walks of life, in India, was taking place by this colonial intervention. Labor class as indigo-workers, mine-workers, plantation-workers, and other allied workers such as rails, ports, docks and jute and cotton, sugarcane workers were the major emerging social classes during the period. It was actually also a transformation of Indian traditional labor into an industrial-labor, and notably to assert that the industrial revolution

of Europe became a curse for the colonized world. Despite other kinds of exploitation, "it was the extreme deprivation of Indian workers" (Punekar & Varikayil, 1989). India, particularly rural India was uprooted during the period due to colonial policies. With sharp intensity, it was losing its economic and social structure. Imperial capitalism destroyed traditional livelihood sources on which they had been living for long. Unfortunately, "The makers of silk and cotton soon turned themselves into manufactures of death and misery" (Ibid)

Hereby, imperialistic-capitalism severely influenced the life of women similar to their male associates. They also started working in colonial industries. One major change occurred when they began to migrate as a coolie in other countries such as Guyana, Trinidad, Mauritius, Fiji, Jamaica, and Surinam. In these countries, Britishers needed collie for the sake of his plantation industry, since

laws against slavery were working as a barrier in colonial market in order to get laborers; hence they developed a new trend of recruitment of cheap laborer. Here, notable to say that this plantation industry was nothing but was sugarcane plantation which was yielding at large scale.

The term coolie is originated from the Tamil word *kuli*, which means wages or hire; firstly, this term was practiced by Portuguese in 16<sup>th</sup> century when they touched the coastal India. Due to the impact of colonial view the term was defined as “an unskilled laborer employed cheapely, especially one brought from Asia” (Bahadur, 2015). Latter this term turned little bit with wide meaning as a menial work for which one is paid. Colonial officials imposed the term to the wide section of native peoples, while the people were involved in different occupation and belonged from several caste and class groups. It is said that Britishers did not recruited coolie, but they made collie. It astonishes, from many parts of India such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal cutting across the caste, class and religion, women went to these countries as coolie in a bid to get freedom from social and cultural shackles, but unfortunately they again trapped by colonial agenda. For instances Sujaria from a *Brahmin* family of Bihar, Phuljhari belonged from a high class *Brahmin* family and her father was a priest, Janky, around 20 years old widow who had some knowledge of English, belonged from a landowning *thakur* caste, migrated. According to evidences, in 1898, among total upper caste who landed to Guiana, more than two thirds were women. It was like a journey from one cage to another one. They faced a new ways of suffering that started from their sailing and would have been continued until the destination. These coolie women bear the curse of the colonial past (Ibid)

### Women: Towards the Field of Sugarcane

As above mentioned that almost from all social groups women migrated as a coolie in sugarcane plantation. They abandoned their past to a dark future. There are basically two narratives in this context. First is of the *principle of escape* and another one is *Principle of kidnap* (Ibid)

To understand the principle first, their social and cultural background provides us a strong view. Women across the country seem to be a symbol of ultimate exploitation. Few scholars concluded that female emigrant consisted of four groups.

*Whose husband was already there:* in this category

women went to fetch or associate their husband who was already working there for long (Ibid)

*Widows:* social and customary practices confine the life of women and it multiplies if the women unfortunately fell into the well of widowhood. One can easily imagine the tragedy of widowhood of two to three hundred years ago comparing them to modern prevalent widowhood, which is still obnoxious. At that time widowhood was a killing of sentiments and emotions and ending of desire to get a common and happy life. It used to put them aside from the main society, while most of them would have been child widow; according to the census of the United Provinces in 1891 reported that “90% of girls between ten and fourteen were already married”, and around 3.6 million were widows at the time. The plight inspired them to escape. Many Britishers advocated the emigration of widow as this way would have been saved themselves from barbarous social practices such as ‘sati’ and strictly prohibited re-marriage and so on. For instance, Maharani got married when she was just five years old and widowed when only twelve. The torture whatever she got from her in-laws triggered her journey to Trinidad (Ibid)

*Prostitutes:* here first question is who became prostitute? A Bengali newspaper interviewed twenty seven prostitutes in 1851. Sixteen, across all castes, were those who rejected the accepting widowhood rituals and then would have been mistreated by the family members and in two cases “being lured by paramours”. Two became sex worker in response to atrocities of their husband and two came in it since their husband cheated them. Seven unmarried girl entered in it, since they rejected to accept Polygamy and *kulinism* (a Brahmnical orthodoxy) types customs. There is a reason *Randi* (in Bhojpuri) and *Ranri* (in Bengali) became a word to pronounce both young widow and prostitute. Colonialism created new kinds of clients such as soldiers, sailors and alike. Hereby, sex market were too controlled and operated by British regulations. The Cantonment Act, 1864 and Contagious Diseases Act were one of them which dismantled the structured sex-work profession and then they moved in search of alternatives. Few colonial agents and officials provided the proposal of indenture labor. “sailers, who were such reliable clients and who worked as crew coolie ships, might have made sex workers aware of the option of indenture”(Ibid).

*Married absconded women:* several were married women who absconded since they were not happy

with their marital life. Marriage would have been imposed by their family member without seeing their interest. Marriage was like a prison for them. They would have been confined by patriarchy. Several times, married women were forsaken on account of their bad conduct and infidelity. These out-casted women lived in a vulnerable condition. One emigration register revealed *"the enquiry now ended, resulting in the fact that she has been forsaken by her husband on account of her unchastity, now allowed to go"* (Ibid). Despite these there were other several reasons which instigated women to escape.

Second *principle of kidnap* also provides several stories when socially and culturally depressed woman found herself in an emigrant depot. Actually, a large part of the recruitment lied on misinformation and exaggeration of job. Phuljhari was such types of widow woman to whom recruiter promised her to help in locating relatives, but they sent her Kolkata to deport. Many recruiters used to do false promises and misinformed women about the nature and terms and condition of the job. Even, to recruit them female recruiter were deployed. The cry of one song says the shrewd ways of kidnapping-

*Oh recruiter, your heart is deceitful*

*Your speech is full of lies*

*Tender may be your voice, articulate and seemingly*

*Logical*

*But it is used to defame and destroy*

*The god names of people<sup>1</sup>*

### Freedom as Re-caging

Women migrated in search of freedom from age-old discrimination and atrocities; hoped they will find a little space to live with dignity, but they could not know the deep rooted 'imperialist-patriarchy' will not let it be possible. Their rapes and molestation began just from their journey. Women were used as a common property. Doctors, sailors and several officials and other co-male-worker humiliated them. They suffered from mental trauma and many of them attempted to commit suicide. Ships were fraught with agony and suffocation. Malnutrition caused child and infant's death. During journey the death among indentured were as a natural phenomena. A woman Phooljhari was declared mad by the doctors and as ship reached British

Guinea, she was sent to lunatic asylum despite of a work-place with handsome salary what she had expected. From the beginning they dreamt of returning, but they didn't know that recruiters and planters have never been serious for their dreams and desires (Ibid). *"The plantation system and its farming techniques were based on slave labor. For indentured Indians, cultivation remained the same"* (Punekar, 1989). It was just a new kind of slavery. For the officials and planters young girls were like a thing to present on the bed. *"...pretty girls was almost a recognized form of hospitality on a plantation when the visitors were young men. The traditions of the time of slavery were retained"* (Ibid).

Women suffered from rigorous work and less income. They had double responsibility compared to male, from early morning to late evening in the sugarcane field after that they were engaged in domestic duties. Endless work was not only their major problem, due to gender gap women were forcibly served as concubine and kept-women. This was depicted by a Governor Arthur Gordon in 1870 when he took office in Mauritius (Ibid). Although there is contradictory evidence, however one person, who were on the ship in 1906 said that during the journey everyone's wife slept with everyone and the effort to keep them aside usually failed. It would have been really horrible. There were various ways to exploit the women. Their pain of uprooting from native lands went through entire their life.

### Conclusion

Can we consider women's migration to overseas as a revolutionary step? It was the period when going overseas was a sin and for that one had to lose their social identity. It was perceived totally as anti-religion and community. Notably to say even male were not exempted from it. *"No good Indian girl in 1903 would have done that, much less a good Brahmin girl"* (Bahadur, 2015), but as have been seen slow but consistent revolt occurred against obnoxious social and religious practices from every social group. Their efforts of searching a better justifiable life provoked to break the socio-religious practices and they entered into the ocean of hope, but unfortunately they again closed in the prison of colonial-capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> This sad poetic creation was usually song during the same period by the indentured.

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