

Indentured Women in South Africa¹
Labour, Survival, Resistance and Abolition
1860-1918

Kalpana Hiralal
Department of History
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Hiralalk@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the migrations (both indentured and free) of peoples from India to South Africa, Canada, Fiji, Mauritius, Caribbean and the Americas led to the establishment of Indian and Chinese diasporic communities abroad. Indian women were a key component of both indentured and free Indian labour. Both indentured men and women were subject to poor working conditions and hostile employers. In 1911 the Indian government frustrated by the anti-Indian sentiment that prevailed in South Africa and the poor treatment of indentured workers terminated indenture. This paper provides an overview of the trials and tribulations of indentured Indian women in Natal, South Africa between 1860 and 1918. It locates the discussion in the context of labour, resistance and agency both during and in the aftermath of indenture. This paper based on archival sources will add to current historiography in the context of gender and migration in the Indian diaspora and ways in which women were resilient and adaptable in the face of multiple challenges.

Women and Indenture on Natal

Between 1860 and 1911, 152,184 indentured Indian immigrants were shipped to Natal, of which 104,619 were men and boys and 48,022 were women and girls.² Women constituted only 25% of that total, as opposed to 62% men and 13% children.³ Indentured women originated mainly from the Northern and Southern India with the main port of embarkation being Madras and Calcutta. The majority of the immigrants were Hindus, followed by Muslims and Christians. Overall, indentured immigrants composed of 12% Muslims, 5% Christians and 83% Hindus.⁴ On arrival women were assigned to various spheres of Natal's economy. They were employed on the tea and sugar estates as domestic servants and field hands collecting cane and weeding, coal mines, railways and even engaged in fishing.

Resistance on the plantations

Women laboured under difficult conditions and resistance was common in the workplace. A careful analysis of the Return of Criminal Cases in the various magisterial districts in Natal between 1888 and 1895, such as Lower Tugela, Upper Tugela, Lions River, Inanda and Umlazi provide interesting insights to the defiance of labour laws by indentured women. Women were convicted of several offences such as, absenteeism, being insolent, leaving

¹Certain parts of this paper were extracted from, E Reddy and K Hiralal, *Pioneers of Satyagraha Indian South African Defy Racist Laws 1907-1914* (Navajivan 2017).

² J. Beall, "Women Under Indentured Labour in Colonial Natal, 1860–1911." In *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, edited by C. Walker, 146–167. Cape Town: David Phillip, 1990, p. 147.

³ A. Arkin, A. J. 1981. "The Contribution of the Indians to the Economic Development of South Africa, 1860–1970 – An Historical Income Approach". Ph. D. thesis, Unpublished. Durban: University of Durban-Westville, 1981, pp. 50–51, Natal Archives (NA), Durban Archives (DAR), Indian Immigration Papers (II), Caldwell to Protector, 1/7, 1272/1880.

⁴ Beall, "Women under Indenture", p.148.

work without permission, theft, assault, wilful disobedience of orders and damages to property. The two most common forms of labour violations were insolence and desertion, approximately 70% of the convictions. This behaviour was often punishable by a payment of fines or imprisonment. Women on the plantation were often described as a “source of trouble”. For example, in May 1895, the Protector of Indian Immigrants reported that at Fish Hoek estate, “The women here continue to be ...trouble”.⁵ Domestic servants who constituted an important segment of the labouring force in Natal were a “constant source of trouble” for many employers.⁶ Depositions submitted by many employers to the Protector of Indian Immigrants often complained that their servants were negligent and disobedient, at times “useless” and of “no further use to my wife”. Like many agricultural workers they often deserted their employers.⁷ Female domestic servants did not hesitate to challenge their employers by laying claims to their labour rights or rebelling against a system that procured their services under ‘false pretences’. For example, a woman named Sonarie on Deepdale Farm in Impendhle, raised ‘objections’ with regards to her work as a domestic servant. She stated, “I complain, I was indentured in India to work as a general labour, not as a domestic servant. I have objections to work in my employer’s house. He cannot compel me to do domestic work against my will”.⁸ Thus indentured Indian women were not afraid to violate the labour laws or challenge the system that restricted their mobility. The circumstances under which women found themselves compelled them to make decisions to protect them as both labourers and as women.

The £3 tax

As the number of Indians grew in Natal, with many of the ex-indentured Indians (known as ‘free Indians’) settled in the province. Some Europeans started agitation against the influx of Indians. To satisfy European public opinion, the authorities decided to tax the Indians who remained in the Colony after indenture. Indentured workers were originally offered land and security after the end of the indenture, but only a few received plots of land. The provision of land was abolished in 1891. Ex-indentured workers were, however, able to lease land from Europeans and many became market gardeners. In 1895, Natal sent a delegation to India to propose a levy of £25 on Indians who did not return to India or re-indenture. The Indian Government agreed to a levy of £3 on the understanding that the non-payment of the levy would not be regarded as a criminal offence. The tax, called a licence, was enacted in 1896 and came into operation in 1901.⁹ The tax was oppressive as the indentured labourers earned only six pounds a year. They were required to pay £3, in addition to the £1 poll tax that all males had to pay.

⁵ Natal Archives, PMB (NA), Minute Papers (MP) 1/78, 793/95.

⁶ P. Badassy, “(A)nd my blood became hot!’ Crimes of Passion, Crimes of Reason: An Analysis of Crimes Against Masters and Mistresses by their Domestic Servants, Natal, 1880–1920.” MA thesis, University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2005, pp.54-55.

⁷ MP, 1/145, 2154/1906.

⁸ MP 1/162, 2154/1908

⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 11 November 1911 and 24 September 1913; PS Joshi, *The Tyranny of Colour – A Study of the Indian problem in South Africa*. Durban: EP & Commercial Printing Company Ltd, 1942, pp. 55-56. The tax was similar to the poll tax imposed on Africans to force them to work in the white-owned mines or farms, but the amount of tax levied on ex-indentured Indians was far higher. African women in the Cape Province were faced with similar forms of taxation and demanded the reduction of the hut tax. *Indian Opinion*, 3 October 1908.

The Natal Indian Congress protested against the tax but to no avail. The tax was extended to wives of the labourers, as well as male children over 16 and female children over 13. The tax became prohibitive. Many ex-indentured labourers stayed on in Natal but were not paying the tax as they could not afford it.¹⁰ To collect the tax, the government passed a law in 1905 prohibiting employers from employing Indians who did not produce the receipt for the tax. The employers were required to deduct the tax from the wages. The Government tried to recover the tax by civil process, by auctioning the meagre possessions of the labourers, but could not imprison them. It soon devised a way around this. The magistrates would order the families to pay the tax and if they did not pay, they would be charged with contempt of court and sent to prison.

The tax weighed heavily on women. It forced some women into prostitution and subjected them to constant harassment by the police. An Indian wrote in September 1908,

I know of a poor Indian woman, who was employed in Berea as a nurse; and as her earnings did not meet the demands made upon her she had to give herself to a man... The constables were constantly after her. This poor woman was arrested by the Sydenham Police very often in 1906, sometimes two or three times in a month... she had to go and sleep a night in the cell and return in the morning...¹¹

Many young men, especially those born in South Africa (known as 'colonial-born Indians'), took up the issue from 1906. They sent petitions and held meetings denouncing the tax.¹²

Indian Opinion, the local Indian newspaper wrote on 29 August 1908,

To put an annual tax of £3 on a boy of 16 or a girl of 13 is iniquitous, but when we know what the effects of this tax are, we are led to marvel that the Government of this Colony can still call itself Christian. In the existing economic circumstances of the Colony, it is a known fact that the imposition of the tax compels the younger generation of Indian immigrants to live a life of servitude from the very first days of arrival at an age of discretion... In the case of the girls and women, the outlook is horrible, for the temptation to forego their womanhood must necessarily be tremendous... The Protector of Indian Immigrants himself admits the utter impossibility of an indentured Indian being able to save sufficient to enable him to return to India and live there upon the savings of five years of unexpectedly hard toil. In his last Report, he shows how the average savings of the Indian returning time expired man scarcely exceeded £8.....

In 1912 a bill was moved in the Natal Legislative Assembly to abolish the £3 tax on women.¹³ It was recommended by the Indian Immigration Commission and proposed by the Natal Government. It was supported by Sir Liege Hulett, a leading planter. But the Assembly adopted an amendment to give discretion to magistrates to relieve poor Indian women from the payment of the tax.¹⁴ Many Europeans in Natal recognised the futility and the injustice of the tax. The colonial newspaper, *Natal Mercury* said in an editorial on 17 November 1911

¹⁰ According to the report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants, between October 1901 and the end of 1906, 21,943 men and women completed their first term of indenture and became liable to the tax if they remained in Natal, but 8,131 were unaccounted for. Report in *Natal Mercury* reproduced in *Indian Opinion*, 16 November 1907. Some of these had probably moved to the Transvaal.

¹¹ *Indian Opinion*, 5 September 1908.

¹² *Indian Opinion*, 16 November 1907 and 29 August 1908

¹³ Indian Immigration (Licences) Act Amendment Bill

¹⁴ Immigration of Indians had practically stopped by then and the number of Indian traders had declined from 4,000 in 1895 to 1,040 by 1908. Statement by P.S. Aiyar, reported in *Indian Opinion*, 12 September 1908.

that the tax ‘is a disgrace to any civilised country, and a foul blot on the name of British administration’,

It is a tax that every right-minded man and woman in South Africa must condemn as immoral and flagrantly unjust.¹⁵

Collective Organisation

Women, too, both indentured, ex-indentured and “passenger” Indian, protested the £3 tax. This took several forms via meetings, petitions, letters to the media and most notably the political resistance in the satyagraha campaign between 1913 and 1914. Collective organisation by women in the form of associations and clubs became an important vehicle for resistance against discriminatory legislation.

One of the earliest Indian women’s organisations was the Durban Indian Women’s Association (DIWA), founded in 1907. The DIWA was primarily a welfare organization seeking to bring about social change and its work largely revolved around ‘moral and intellectual education’. It campaigned to establish a girls’ school as there was none for Indian girls in Natal.¹⁶ It was not politically inclined, but did not hesitate to protest against discrimination and exploitation. The Association was particularly sensitive to the issues of the £3 tax and how it affected ex-indentured women. The impact of the £3 tax, particularly on women mobilized the DIWA to protest this measure. In 1908, a petition was sent to the Parliament of Natal in 1908, voicing their condemnation of the £3 tax, stating,

Your Petitioners regard with great shame and sorrow that women who are in default of payment are sentenced to imprisonment, and the very dread of being marched up to the Court and gaol is enough to numb their intellect and cause terror, to escape from which the aforesaid Act fosters in them a temptation to barter their female modesty and virtue. The aforesaid Act has been a source of breaking up many a home, alienating the affection of husband and wife, besides separating child from mother. There is no precedent in the legislation of any other country under the British flag where women are taxed for the privilege of living with their husbands or under the protection of their natural guardians.¹⁷

The Association also sent a petition to the Natal Government but received no reply.

a. Resistance during the First Satyagraha Campaign 1907-1911

Whist women were active on the plantations and in the workplaces, the early nineteenth century provided women with an opportunity to engage in the public sphere. In the early twentieth century, Indians in the Transvaal were subject to a series of discriminatory legislation, immigration laws which inhibited the free entry of domiciled Indians to the Transvaal. Frustrated by the Transvaal government’s attempt to restrict their mobility, the Indian community embarked on the first passive resistance between 1907-1911. The movement, however, attracted primarily the trading and “passenger” Indians – not the indentured labourers- who were affected by the immigration legislation. Moreover, the movement was particularly male dominated. Women were not part of this struggle. Their

¹⁵ *Natal Mercury*, 17 November 1911

¹⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 6 November 1909

¹⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 3 October 1908

non-participation was not due to their lack of enthusiasm, but rather due to the patriarchal attitudes that governed women's behaviour within the public sphere. Traditional Indian society relegated women to the domestic sphere, whilst men were perceived as head of the household. Politics was the domain of men and not women.

The masculine nature of the struggle, can be further discerned in the way Gandhi and the Indian community perceived the role of men and women in the struggle. Gandhi and the Indian community rationalized or justified women's exclusion from the movement based on notions of Indian masculinity and the fact that the immigration laws did not apply to women. Gandhi, in *Satyagraha in South Africa*, not only acknowledges the women's willingness to participate in the satyagraha campaign between 1907- and 1911 but also how Indian male attitudes defined women's political activism.

Some brave women had already offered to participate, and when Satyagrahis went to jail for hawking without a licence, their wives had expressed a desire to follow suit. But we did not think it proper to send women to jail in a foreign land. There seemed to be no adequate reason for sending them into the firing line, and I for my part could not summon courage enough to take them to the front. Another argument was, that it would be derogatory to our manhood if we sacrificed our women in resisting a law, which was directed only against men.¹⁸

Indian women, however were not deterred by these chauvinistic attitudes regarding their political or social activism. On the contrary, they became very involved in the struggle in various ways. Their husbands, sons and brothers were all imprisoned and they had to find ways to negotiate and re-negotiate their lives as wives, mothers and sisters. They supported their spouses, maintained their homes, engaged in protests through petitions and active collective organization. The local community newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, primarily a mouthpiece of the Indian community in South Africa stated,

The imprisonment of a large proportion of the Tamil community had imposed great hardships on many families. In some cases, the sufferings outside the prison gates have equalled the sufferings within... They have seen their husbands and sons imprisoned, they have taken up the duties of life which do not usually fall to a women's lot and have borne the heaviest burdens to make it possible for those they love to be true to conscience. They have felt the grip of hunger, and yet through all they have never wavered. All honour to them! They are worthy helpmeets of a band of stalwarts! Just now some twenty-three families are destitute. Their bread winners are among the hundred odd Tamils now in prison, and the stress of endurance falls with peculiar weight on these women and children.¹⁹

The satyagraha struggle between 1907 and 1911 galvanized women into collective action. Several women's organizations were formed. These organizations became platforms for denouncing the Government's racial policies and for mobilising support amongst women for the struggle. They encouraged the resisters and collected funds to help families in need. *Indian Opinion*, in an article on 8 February 1908, cited two cases of women pressing their recalcitrant husbands to fulfil the pledge taken on 11 September 1906:

¹⁸MK Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1961), pp. 275. While women were exempted from the requirement in the Asiatic Registration Act, they were subject to the Immigration Restriction Act. There were perhaps other reasons to limit the resistance to men only. The Muslim women at the time could not participate in public activity because of the social norms. And there were doubts whether women could take the rigours of prison life

¹⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 28 September 1909

One of the men arrested at Pietersburg was in Pretoria when the Pretoria men were sentenced so barbarously. Terrified at the thought of heavy penalties, including hard labour, he hastily proceeded to Natal where his wife lay upon a bed of sickness whence she might never again arise. Upon his arrival in Durban, however, she demanded of him the cause of his departure from the Transvaal, and when she heard the cause peremptorily ordered him to return by the next train and submit to his punishment. He returned, surrendered to the police in Pietersburg, and was sentenced to three months' imprisonment with hard labour. Another man, in Pretoria, who had disobeyed the magisterial order to leave the Colony, was to appear before the Court to receive sentence. His courage began to leave him, but his wife informed him that if he were a coward, she would don his clothes and herself receive punishment on his behalf. He went to gaol. The Madras women of Pretoria informed their husbands, sons and brothers, who had undertaken picket duty, that they need not be alarmed for them. If the men were arrested and sent to gaol, they themselves would at once take their places in the pickets' ranks and warn the people of the perils awaiting them... In the light, then, of these incidents, who shall say that the Transvaal Indian community was without its heroines?²⁰

In the Transvaal, collective organization was largely spearheaded by the wives of prominent satyagrahis. For example, approximately 50 women of diverse faiths met on 11 March 1909 at the Hamidia Islamic Hall in Johannesburg. The meeting was spearheaded by women whose spouses were all actively involved in the satyagraha campaign in the Transvaal. Amongst them were, Mrs. K. Murugasa Pillay and Mrs. Packirisamy and Mrs Hazurasingh. At the meeting, Pillay and Packirisamy Naidoo spoke eloquently about the hardships women endured during the campaign. She stated, 'homes had been rendered desolate, their husbands and sons had been torn from them and in some cases, they had not even enough to eat'.²¹ Nevertheless, she encouraged women to 'support their husbands and if necessary spur them on'. She added, 'There cannot be any possibility of happiness or comfort or security for us, unless this cause wins, and so we must help to fight in the only way we can, by uncomplainingly enduring and encouraging our sons and husbands to continue till the end'.²²

Mrs. Hazurasingh of Germiston at the meeting urged women to be bold in their actions and stated that if the Government imprisoned their husbands, it should imprison the women too. This women's group was also supported by Kasturba Gandhi who admired the defiant stance taken by the organization. The Chairwoman read a letter from Kasturba then residing in Phoenix, who stated that, 'had she wings', she would have flown to the meeting to support the women. The association through a letter which was to be published in a local Transvaal paper, condemned the discriminatory laws against Indians and unanimously supported the families of satyagrahis. The tone and nature of the letter is clearly indicative of how women were responding as wives, mothers and sisters, and that whilst they were not directly affected by the measure they were indirectly affected by the consequences of satyagraha resistance. The letter read as follow,

Sir, A meeting of Indian women recently held in Johannesburg has desired us, on their behalf, as well as on our own, to write to the Transvaal papers. This meeting consisted of women of all ages, classes and religions, many of whom are now without their husbands and sons, who are serving terms of imprisonment for the right to live and be free. Women everywhere and always have had to suffer in this way, that their children may live upright, honest and free lives; and we will suffer and endure for our

²⁰ *Indian Opinion*, 8 February 1908

²¹ *Indian Opinion*, 20 March 1909

²² *Indian Opinion*, 20 March 1909

children in like manner. There cannot be any possibility of happiness or comfort or security for us, unless this cause wins, and so we must help to fight in the only way we can, by uncomplainingly enduring and encouraging our sons and husbands to continue till the end. Nearly all of us wish most devoutly that we could be with our husbands in gaol—we have no joy outside. And for those of us who have not enough to eat for ourselves and children, can we not look to British women for a little sympathy? Women in England are suffering imprisonment for the right to vote; we are enduring much greater sorrow for the simplest of all rights, the right to live as we believe our religion teaches us to do.

We are, etc. Sd.) Mrs. Imam A.K. Bawazeer Mrs. M.K. Gandhi Mrs. D.N. Cama Mrs. D. Ernest Johannesburg Mrs T. Naidoo²³

Letters of protests or petitions were not only confined to South Africa. On the contrary, petitions were also sent to Head of State in the British Empire. In July 1909, the women signed a petition to the Queen which read,

That your Petitioners are the wives, mothers or daughters of British Indians' who have suffered or still are suffering imprisonment in the Transvaal in connection with the Asiatic struggle that has been unfortunately going on in the Transvaal. Your Petitioners believe the struggle on the part of the British Indians' to be righteous and for the honour of their race. Your Petitioners are further aware that those Indians' who have been continually courting imprisonment are bound by a solemn oath not to submit to the Asiatic Act of the Transvaal Parliament until the grievances which have dictated the oath are redressed. Your Petitioners have felt bound to encourage their sons, husbands or fathers, as the case may be, in observing their obligation. Owing to the above, your Petitioners have in many cases been obliged to suffer not only the pangs of separation but privation. Many Indian families have been reduced to poverty during the struggle. Your petitioners are aware that under the British Constitution Your Majesty cannot directly intervene on behalf of the sufferers. But your Petitioners respectfully lay their case before Your Gracious Majesty in the hope that it may be possible for Your Majesty to use your influence unofficially as mother or wife feeling for mothers or wives and help to end a situation that has become most acute. The points required by the sufferers are the repeal of a law which is no longer required by the Government and the removal of a racial bar in the immigration law of the Colony, so that it may be possible for the most highly educated Indians' to enter the Colony on the same terms as any other immigrants. Your Petitioners respectfully hope that their humble prayer will be taken into consideration by your Gracious Majesty. And for this act of justice and mercy your petitioners shall for ever pray, etc.²⁴

These meetings led to the formation of the Transvaal Indian Women's Association on 25 March 1909 at Hamidia Hall. This Association, like its sister organization was largely a welfare organisation and apolitical. The TIWA was assisted by Sonja Schlesin, (who assisted Gandhi as a clerical servant) served as Gandhi's secretary), was elected Honorary Secretary. The Association's first chairperson was Mrs. V. Rama.²⁵

Whilst the TIWA like its sister organization the DIWA was not political, it was certainly vociferous when the need arose. In 1909, at the height of the first satyagraha campaign in Transvaal, the TIWA became involved in the immigration case of Mrs Rambhabai Sodha. Mrs. Sodha arrived in Natal in 1905 with her husband, Ratanshi Mulji. Ratanshi, had participated in the satyagraha campaign and was imprisoned several times in the Transvaal.

²³ It was decided at a previous meeting to send a letter and a committee of six was set up to draft the letter. The text of the letter was published in *Indian Opinion* on 20 March 1909.

²⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 3 July 1909

²⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 10 April 1909

He was reduced to poverty and lost his home in Tongaat on the north coast of Natal. He decided to send his wife and three children — two sons aged 12 and 3, and a daughter of eighteen months — to Tolstoy Farm. Gandhi telegraphed the Immigration Officer at Pretoria informing him that he would be accompanied by Mrs. Sodha and her three children. The Immigration Officer refused Mrs. Sodha entry to the Transvaal because her husband was not a registered Indian immigrant. When Mrs. Sodha tried to enter the Transvaal she was stopped, taken to the police station and asked to appear in Court. She was released on £10 bail. Gandhi again wrote to the Immigration Officer indicating to him that Mrs. Sodha did not seek permanent domicile in the Transvaal, that her stay at Tolstoy Farm was temporary and that at the termination of the passive resistance she would be returning to Natal. The Immigration Officer replied to Gandhi in a telegram: ‘Mrs. Sodha cannot be allowed proceed Transvaal. She will be treated as prohibited immigrant unless she returns Natal immediately’.²⁶ Fifty members of the Women’s Association met at the offices of the British Indian Association under the presidency of Mrs. Rama Moodaly to discuss the case. The following resolution was unanimously passed,

This meeting of Transvaal Indian women hereby offers its indignant protest the prosecution of Mrs. R.M. Sodha, to whom it tenders its sincere sympathy, and earnestly appeals to the Union Government to withdraw the proceedings instituted against her. The meeting adopted another resolution moved from the Chair: In the event of their appeal to the Union Government being rejected, those present pledge themselves to seek every opportunity of being imprisoned and thus sharing the sufferings of Mrs. Sodha.²⁷

These two resolutions were telegraphed to the Prime Minister.²⁸ *Indian Opinion* commented,

Nothing less was to be expected of the Transvaal Indian women than that they should follow the example of their brave husbands or other relatives and offer to court imprisonment with their sister, Rambhabai Sodha, should she be, as there is very little doubt she will be, imprisoned owing to the prosecution that is pending against her. It is perhaps as well that, in the semi-religious struggle that is going on in the Transvaal, the women of the community should have the privilege of taking their full and direct share in it. We congratulate Mrs. Rama Moodaly and her brave companions on the firm stand they have taken in this matter.²⁹

Mrs. Sodha was sentenced to one month in prison.³⁰

Women’s commitment to the satyagraha struggle in 1910 can be clearly discerned by their spirited actions. *Indian Opinion* on 12 February 1910 stated,

...in Mr. Gandhi’s office, Mrs. Amacanoo and Mrs. Packirsamy removed all the ornaments from their persons and vowed not to wear them again till the fight was over. They took off everything, their ear-rings, nose-rings, necklaces, bangles and rings. They took off even their wedding necklaces. This was

²⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 12 November 1910. Mrs. Sodha did not know a European language.

²⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 26 November 1910

²⁸ The meeting also passed a resolution, acknowledging the support given by the women’s meeting in Bombay on 26 August 1910. The resolution read as follows: ‘This meeting of Transvaal Indian women hereby tenders its warm and grateful thanks to the women of Bombay for their generous support and sisterly sympathy given to the families of the Transvaal Indian passive resisters in their time of trial’. *Indian Opinion*, 26 November 1910.

²⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 26 November 1910

³⁰ After the provisional agreement of May 1911, she was allowed to stay in the Transvaal.

no ordinary thing to have done. Mrs. Packirsamy removed her ornaments, saying that it was impossible for her to wear them when Packirsamy's eldest son was about to go to gaol and Mr. Packirsamy himself was likely to be arrested soon.

The TIWA appears to have spurred other women to organise. Less than a month after its formation, on 3 April 1909, Indian women in Germiston met at Location Hall and resolved to form an organisation like the TIWA. They agreed to meet fortnightly to discuss matters relating to the struggle. A few months later a group of women from families involved in the satyagraha met in Pretoria at the home of Mrs. V.S. Pillay to discuss the impact of the satyagraha on their families. Mrs. Tomy chaired the meeting. Among those present was Miss Schlesin, Secretary of the TIWA. Women had 'sad tales to tell of the emaciated condition in which they found their husbands or sons on visiting day...'³¹ They resolved to form an association and to meet fortnightly.³²

In 1912, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a highly respected Indian leader who later became a member of the Viceroy's Legislative Council visited South Africa at the invitation of Gandhi. During his stay in South Africa, Gokhale witnessed the efforts by Indian women to sustain the satyagraha campaign through fundraising and collective organisation. In 1912 the TIWA held a reception in honour of at the Independent School, Main Street, Johannesburg. They presented Gokhale with a casket of teak containing a silver writing set, a tablecloth which had the names of two Indians' who died during the satyagraha struggle in the Transvaal and a picture entitled 'Thoughts of Home' by M Appavu. One of the members of the TIWA, Miss Bhaikum Morgan read the following address at the meeting,

Dear Sir, We, on behalf of the Indian Women of the Transvaal, desire to pay our respectful tribute to you. When hours were darkest with us and our homes were desolate, it was a comfort to think that you, so far away, were watching over us, befriending our husbands, sons and brothers, many of whom were strangers in a strange land. We know, too, of your work in connection with the abolition of the indentured labour system with its incidents which so nearly touches the honour of our woman-hood. And we know what you are doing in the cause of woman's education. For all this and many other noble acts too numerous to record we are deeply grateful to you; and we pray Heaven's blessing on your work.⁴⁸⁵ In response to their address, Gokhale said he knew what they had to go through during the dark days of the struggle.³³

According to *Indian Opinion*, he continued,

As he was speaking he could almost see before his eyes a great meeting that was held in the Town Hall of Bombay, at which their delegate, Mr. Henry Polak, described to the people of India the suffering and disgrace to which they had been reduced in the struggle. At that meeting hardly an eye was dry or a heart untouched by their sacrifice and suffering... The Indian women of the Transvaal had come forward courageously to take part in the struggle, to cheer their menfolk and send them forth, and it had been an object lesson to their sisters in India... He felt in every fibre of his being that a great destiny awaited their land (India); in that destiny, the women of India would play a great part, and the women of the Transvaal had set an example for them.³⁴

³¹ *Indian Opinion*, 7 August 1909

³² The following women were elected to office at the meeting: President: Mrs. V.S. Pillay; Vice-Presidents: Mrs. Tomy and Mrs. Anthony; Secretary: Mrs. Supoo Naidoo. *Indian Opinion*, 7 August 1909.

³³ *Indian Opinion*, 9 November 1912

³⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 9 November 1912

On his visit to Durban he was warmly received by women's groups. The Indian Women of Durban gave the following address,

It is perhaps the women who, even more than the men of the community, can appreciate the enormous value to the Motherland, to South Africa, and to humanity at large, of your successful labours to put an end to the system of indentured recruitment in India so far as this Province is concerned. The Indian women have marked with intensest interest your efforts to uplift the people of India of all ranks and both sexes, by means of well-applied education, without which they feel it would be impossible for any Indian nation to be effectively built up. On behalf of the Indian women we fervently pray that the mighty may restore you to complete health, and that in His mercy He may give you length of years to continue your patriotic and self-sacrificing work for the Motherland and to see your efforts crowned with success.....³⁵

The satyagraha campaign 1913-194

In 1913, both indentured and Free ("passenger"), Indian women mobilised against discriminatory legislation that was an affront to their womanhood. Firstly in 1913, a judgment of Justice Malcolm Searle of the Cape Supreme Court on 14 March 1913 denying legitimacy to marriages under religions which allow polygamy — this seriously had an impact on Hindus and Muslim marriages of "passenger" Indian origin. This judgment had broad implications. It degraded the legal status of Indian women within Hindu, Muslim and Parsee marriages, by branding the wives as concubines. Second, it sought to illegitimate the children of such marriages and deprived the rights of a wife and her children regarding ownership and inheritance on the death of her spouse. Third, it practically prohibited the immigration of Indian wives to South Africa. The judgment was a special affront to women as it affected women more than men.³⁶ The Transvaal Indian Women's Association boldly protested the judgment. Sonja Schlesin sent a telegram, on behalf of the Association, to the Minister of Interior, General Smuts, calling for a legislative remedy to restore the situation before the Searle judgment, failing which they would embark on passive resistance. Both indentured and ex-indentured supported the bold stance by the TIWA.

The marriage issue and the £3 tax were serious grievances affecting Indian women and they could no longer be prevented from participating in the satyagraha struggle. Women from diverse backgrounds supported the struggle. Caste, language, religion, and labour status were blurred and women united and showed political solidarity. Women were active in Johannesburg defying municipal laws such as hawking and transgressing provincial immigration laws. For example, in Germiston, a town in the Transvaal, six women joined ten men in trying to court arrest. The women were: Mrs. Bandu; Mrs. Behari; Mrs. Doowat; Mrs. Gaysidin Maharaj; Mrs. Mandar; and Mrs. T. Somar. They first hawked fresh fruit and vegetables on the main street but were not arrested. They proceeded to the platform of the Central Railway Station and began hawking. They were then arrested. A Transvaal Leader correspondent described the scene at the railway station at Germiston: Excitement reigned for a while at Germiston railway station this morning. From 50 to 60 Indians, male and female, took possession of the central section of the spacious new platform. About 20 of them carried

³⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 16 November 1912

³⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 10 May, 1 October and 8 October 1913

hawkers' baskets, containing a few bunches of bananas, a pineapple or two, or a few handfuls of monkey nuts, which they offered for sale to the white people assembled. As hawking on railway premises is prohibited the police intervened. It then transpired that the affair was a passive resistance demonstration.³⁷ To their disappointment they were soon released. Three Germiston women — Mrs. Nanden, Mrs. Bandu and Mrs. Thai — arrived in Charleston in Natal to seek arrest by re-crossing the border, when the provisional settlement made that unnecessary.³⁸ Meanwhile, the arrest of Kasturba and other women in the pioneer party encouraged other women to court arrest. Bai Fatima Sheik Mehtab decided to court arrest in solidarity with the women resisters. She was the first Muslim woman to become a passive resister at a time when Muslim women were secluded and did not engage in political activities. She left Durban on 8 October for Volksrust, accompanied by her mother, Hanifa Bibi, and her seven-year-old son, as well as Akoon, a servant and family friend. The adults were arrested at Volksrust and sentenced to three months with hard labour.³⁹ *Indian Opinion* (22 October 1913) carried a letter by Mrs. Mehtab to 'Indian Brothers and Sisters' giving three reasons for her going to prison: the marriage issue; the Government's breach of the promise to Gokhale to abolish the £3 tax; and the need for Indians' to defend their institutions. She said that, because of the crisis, she was breaking the purdah which she had long observed.⁴⁰

In Durban, the pioneer party consisting of 16 individuals, which included four women, Kasturba Gandhi; Mrs. Kashi Chhaganlal Gandhi and Mrs. Santok Maganlal Gandhi, wives of two nephews of Gandhi; and Mrs. Jayakunwar Manilal Doctor, daughter of Pranjivan Mehta, a friend of Gandhi from his student days in London. They were sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labour. The harsh sentence on women engaged in peaceful protest stirred India. Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, the prominent leader of Bombay who was known as 'the lion of Bombay' and who had not supported the satyagraha until then, roared in a speech at Bombay Town Hall that 'his blood boiled at the thought of these women lying in jail herded with ordinary criminals, and India could not sleep over the matter any longer.'⁴¹

In the Natal Midlands women mobilised support on the coal mines. They addressed political platformed and urged the miners and their families to strike until the Government assured them that the tax would be abolished.⁴² Thambi Naidoo described the determination of the women: The poor ladies tried their utmost to get arrested but they could not succeed. They forced their way into the barracks and called upon all women and men to come out, thinking, if they did so, they also would be arrested, and they told the sergeant who came to arrest us that they were also advising these people. But the sergeant took no notice of them...⁴³

At the Ballengeich mines, Indian women jeered and taunted Indian miners to defy being incarcerated on mine premises. According to Puckrie Pillay, a time keeper at the mine, two

³⁷ *Indian Opinion*, 29 October 1913

³⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 25 February 1914

³⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 26 November 1913

⁴⁰ *Indian Opinion*, 22 October 1913

⁴¹ Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 283

⁴² *Indian Opinion*, 8 October 1913

⁴³ Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 288

Indian women “started to abuse the men saying they were not men and why did they not march on to Newcastle”.⁴⁴ According to the medical practitioner JA Nolan of Newcastle, ‘one woman was evidently urging the Indians on’.⁴⁵

Cessation of Indentured Labour to Natal in 1911

In Natal, South Africa the first ship of indentured Indian immigrants arrive on the 17th November 1860. Six years later, that migration ceased on the 14 July 1866, a total number of 6, 445 Indians arrived during this period of six years. Immigration resumed on the 25 June 1874 and then ceased on the 31st July 1911. During this period of over 37 years a total of 152134 Indian immigrants were introduced. The immigrants were brought in 91 sailing vessels and 279 steamers in all, 370 voyages were made. The clear majority of whom worked on the coastal plantations in the tea and sugar estates, coal mines, up-country farms and many women in domestic work. Many lived and worked under deplorable conditions. The treatment of indentured Indians was also subject to various commissions between 1860 and 1911. By 1914 the number of indentured Indians labouring on sugar estates and farms declined as many left to work in the city, wattle plantations and on the coal mines, where wages were much higher.

The Indian Government was perturbed by the treatment of indentured immigrants in Natal. The Honourable Gokhale moved a resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council of India to empower the Governor-General in Council to cease all recruitment of indentured labour from British India to Natal. This was subsequently legislated in 1911. According to a government report the cessation of Indian immigrants to Natal was “not stopped of any ill-treatment of the Indian labourer”.⁴⁶ In a debate in the House of Commons in London, Lord Montagu stated,

The treatment of indentured Coolies has received the careful attention of the authorities in South Africa and India. It has already been decided that indentured emigration from India to natal shall cease with effect from the 1st of July next (1911) on the ground, not that there has been any general ill-treatment of the Coolies in Natal, but that the unsatisfactory position cannot be perpetuated which was created by the colonialist’s standpoints, and the absence of any guarantee that the Indians will be accepted as permanent citizens of the South African Union after expiry of their indentures”.

In a debate on behalf of the Government in the Indian Legislative Council, on the Bill to authorise the Viceroy of India to stop Indian Immigration to any Colony the following statement was made by Lord Maxwell,

Indian carefully review the reports of the Protector of Immigrants on the condition of indentured labourers in the Colony, but they found no occasion to act regarding the ill-treatment of this class of emigrants; on the other hand, no difficulty is experienced in obtaining recruits for Natal. These

⁴⁴ NAD, PMB, Alleged Floggings of Indians at Ballengeich Colliery Compound (special gaol) and allegation that Magistrate, Newcastle, authorized floggings, AG 764/1913.

⁴⁵ NAD, PMB, Alleged Floggings of Indians at Ballengeich Colliery Compound (special gaol) and allegation that Magistrate, Newcastle, authorized floggings, AG 764/1913.

⁴⁶ *Indian Opinion* 6 July 1915

circumstances do not indicate that the condition of indentured labourers in Natal is unsatisfactory and that a special enquiry by the Government is required.⁴⁷

In the post 1911 period coal mines were still a key employer of Indian labour although the number began to steadily decrease. In 1911 11 collieries employed indentured Indians. By 31 December 1911, there were 4304 men employed on the mines as opposed to 4939 in 1910. Many women did re-indenture after 1911. But on many estates, women did not re-indenture with the intention of working and they worked when it suited them. The women who did re-indenture with their husbands did so on the condition they were not forced to work. Those who did were usually paid £9d. per day.

A perusal of the Protector of Indian Immigrants reports between 1911 and 1922 reveals that whilst the recruitment of indentured labour officially ceased in 1911, many Indians continued to re-indenture in Natal. Moreover, the living and working conditions generally improved for indentured labourers. For example, in 1911, a total of 7800 men and women completed their five-year term of indenture, of which 4022 re-indentured, 2874 men and 1148 women. The reasons for re-indenture was due to several reasons. For many Indians, it offered a sustainable employment, higher wages, free accommodation and medical aid. The minimum wages paid to plantation labourers was 30 shillings per month, however, on some estates wages ranged from 35-37 shillings. Moreover, improved rations were another incentive. The official scale of rations was 6lbs, rice and 7lbs of maize meal with dhol and ghee. However, some employers gave rations above the official scale, 10lbs rice, 11lbs maize meal per week, with increases in the monthly allowance of dhol, oil and salt. On some plantations and estates, this was a considerable inducement when an Indian had a large family to maintain. In some places, there was a system of money bonuses, extra rations and more leave to deserving men.

On some estates Indians had plots of land and cultivated vegetables such as brinjals, nuts, mealies, potatoes, chillies, beans and tomatoes. Many also reared pigs, goats and fowls. Some Indians had cattle and horses too. Accommodation quarters on the estates, farms, coal mines and railways barracks also improved. In Pietermaritzburg, railways authorities, built brick quarters with bathrooms. Barracks and compounds on the Edendale Roas were all well-kept and flowers planted in “pots”. On the mines, the sanitary conditions of the different barracks were generally good and in some instances, there were “sweepers” whose sole duty was the daily cleaning of the barrack surrounding. On the Burnside colliery, a school was opened and was well attended. In addition, a wood and iron building, 100 x 20 feet was erected, above the barrack quarters which was used for recreational purposes.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Indentured men and women forged new lives and identities when they travelled on an unknown journey to Natal in 1860. Women, defying traditions of patriarchy and purdah, crossed the “kala pani” to seek new opportunities. Indenture whilst exploitative in many instances, did to some extent, reverse gendered notions of power, femininity and

⁴⁷ *Indian Opinion* 14 July 1915

⁴⁸ Reports of the Protector of Indian Immigrants for the years ending 1911-1922.

womanhood. With the cessation of indenture in 1911, women constituted less of the labouring force on the farms, estates, mines and railways. By the late 1920s and 1930s many began to move to the towns seeking work in factories and became actively involved in trade union movement. More significantly, for many in Natal, South Africa was their new-found home. India, became a distant memory.