

INDENTURED MASCULINITY: A STUDY OF INDIAN EXPERIENCE IN COLONIAL NATAL

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ABSTRACT

The indentured servitude was commonly prevalent in the 18th century. This master slave authority and subversiveness was mainly for debt repayment, or as a judicial punishment. But it became a way of life for approximately a hundred thousands Indians when they were transported to the South African lands for labour purposes on agricultural lands and plantations, domestic servanthip. It was rarely for any apprenticeship for a skill or job. Most of the Indian Indentured labourers were taken as part of the contract. They were introduced to a new way of living in the foreign land with minimum facilities and a socially hostile environment. This paper attempts to study the life of these indentured labourers and the kind of Indian indentured masculinity that was augmented in the alien land and culture. This paper further dives into the violent nature of the indentured labourers, its causes and effects on the mental faculties of the men. This paper also explores the lifestyle and adjustment of the indentured males outside of the traditional Indian social setup.

Keywords- indentured labourers, masculinity, native, violence, Indian Indenture, white masculinity, hegemonic model of masculinity.

The British Colony of Natal was on the east coast of Southern Africa. Around a hundred thousand men were brought as labourers by the British, to this colony of South Africa for cheap labour who would also be reliable in the sense of discipline. The colony was formed on May 8, 1843, after annexing the Boer, Republic of Natalia in 1839. India was still in the rule of the British, so transporting the labour from one of their colonies to the other was minimally difficult. Initially, the Indian men were brought for a limited period of time in view of cheap labour, but they were allowed prolonged stay and then later permanent stay as the regulations changed. A few women also accompanied these men for the same purpose of labour. The indentured population was largely imbalanced, giving an improper platform for gender relations and politics. fewer women and alien land arose a slight competitive feeling among men for the domination over these women, (physically, mentally. sexually, socially). The most impacted platform was of culture denomination. The Indian men came from different cultural backgrounds, and hence divided by language and ethnicity. The two broad divisions were of Madras and Hindi. Migrants from Madras spoke Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil, whereas Migrants from Calcutta spoke dialects of Hindi- Kanauji, Bundeli, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Braj. (Mesthrie, 1991). Putting it geographically, the two categories were- ‘ *Madrassi and Calcuttia*’. The oblique gender balance and slanting differentiations in the indentured population had direct consequence on the defining and framing of the indentured masculinity and femininity on the lands of colonial Natal. These Indian men were nicknamed or popularly called ‘ *Coolie*’. This word was used by the British men in disregard for the Indian men. The word carries a wholesome cultural connotation with it and was later used as a recognition factor in the system of indentured labourers. The word was firstly used by the European traders who moved across Asia for their trade,

later the British administration started using it to address the poor Indian men who were taken as bonded labourers to distant lands. Its meaning eventually altered to 'a day labourer'.

The white hegemony that was long established was in full progress until the indentured labourers from India arrived and they formed a mixed racial or a class which was neither White or Black. The brown people of India were excluded from either of these categories, but they were still a crucial part of the hegemonic construction of masculinity that was prevalent. The hierarchies and the model of local masculine features were shared by the black and brown community. Their ruling model of masculinity was the white masculinity, which oppressed men of both the communities. This oppression led to the blending of the brown and black community which eventually shaped an experience of marginalised masculinity for the Indian Indentured Labourers. Masculinity is always constructed in interaction (Connell, 1995). The interactions of the Indian men with local African men was a huge factor in redirecting the masculinities of both kinds of men.

African men were taller, darker and had more physical strength than the Indian Men. The Indian men were short, stout and had much less physical strength. The working conditions deteriorated the health of Indentured men. The extreme heat, poor unsanitary conditions and the harsh beating if the worker were to be absent or lazy. "Overwork, malnourishment, and squad living conditions formed the pattern of daily life for most agricultural works". (Swan, 1985). Physical and emotional violence was part of the daily routine of the indentured labourers. The white rulers, officers, the African and Indian overseers and Indian Sirdars tormented the labourers which became a permanent part of the Indentured experience of the indentured labourers. The management of the indenture labour was classified into three strata, the white superiors, the middlemen or extension of the white superiors which were Indian Sirdars or overseers and the mass of indentured labourers which comprised Indian and African men as labourers. The Sirdars were usually uptight and used a caste system of Indian society as a tool to police or keep the Indian labourers in check. (Carter, 1996). They are concrete examples of hegemonic masculinity model, wherein the lowest strata is overpowered, bullied and mistreated by the highest strata. (Morell, 1998). The middle strata (Sirdars) were usually least affected because they were ruled by the highest strata and they ruled over the lowest strata thus being the intermediaries with a profit and minimal loss in terms of respect and finances. They were provided with a whip to use on the labourers. acts of violence and scars of fear were prime markers of masculinity for white employers. The use of whip to commit violence on the African and the Indian labourers derogated the Indian Indentured Masculinity. Failure of any kind of opposition or retaliation led to more atrocities and diminished the African and Indian labourers' stance in the hegemonic model (Vaheed, 1995). African men's robustness was compared with Indian men and it was found that Indian men were less productive and more cowardly. They were then considered as 'unmanly'. Their appearance, strength, mannerisms and fierceness was compared to the black and white men, which resulted in Indian men being declared as incoherent males who could be easily subjugated as women. They soon reached the bottom of the hegemonic model due to the contrasting personalities of manhood. The sudden increase in discrimination between the Indian and African indentured labourers ended a 'white gaze'. This gaze diffused the caste, language, ethnicity and racial boundaries between Indian men and united them against the oppressive nature of the white employers (Vaheed, 1995). The Dislocating Masculinity theory explains the shift in the psyche of the Indian men and the reason behind their collective attitude even after having different cultural backgrounds. "The weak restore their own sense of worth and maximise their advantage within the system which disempowers them". (Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1993). The Indian men were racially discriminated against and their only manliness, which was respected in India, was now mocked in a foreign land. Calling it a

silent aggression or retaliation, the Indian labourers started missing on their shifts from the plantation fields. They ran away from the fields, faked illness, got involved in theft, damaged the employer's property and absconded. This grave neglect in the duties and misbehaviour was not to revolt but to undermine the authority as often as they can. (Mohapatra, 1997).

Desertion was a prominent feature of Indentured Masculinity.(Vahed, 1995). Most of the labourers would run away only to come back when the next rations were issued. Some lived in the fields and returned to work in the evening at pay time or dinner. Many of them would defiantly miss their duties, and then would land up in jail. They wanted to prove their manliness , in some little way that they could, in this case it was absence of fear. Acts of violence became synonymous with the Indian rebellion and they preferred jail to work. The unrestrained use of violence by the oppressor and the oppressed reflects on the misuse of physical power and insensitivity of men for each other, resorting to violence to prove the manliness and male ego of each side of the community resulted in bloodshed and inhumane conditions which at long last, adversely affected the Indian labourers.

Leisure activities were a proper part of the schedule of the indentured labourers. After the duties, where every labour was equal, the recreational space was the time when individuality was in focus and the men could be themselves without judgement, bias or fear. The crucial feature of the unity of these labourers was the celebration of the Muharram. Although being an Islamic festival, it became more of a collective practice with active participation from all religious groups of the labourers. The festival was observed for three days and became an outlet of vexations. The labourers were given a three day leave, and on the tenth day, *tazias* and wooden mausoleums with colourful paper decorations were made. The labourers used these processions as a blood thwarting competition between each other and against the white employers. A lot of labourers smoked and used tobacco and opium. Gambling was another interesting act for the labourers. The huge debts insinuated more violence within the community and in turn by the white employers with the community. These activities which bonded the clan of Indian and African men promoted brotherhood and a unified front against the white employers, but at the cost of physical abuse, mental exertion and constant violence.

This transoceanic journey of the indentured labourers from Indian subcontinent to African land ruptured the string of familial ties and relationships. In an Indian sphere of culture and society, the basis of a man's existence comes from his family and surroundings. A man's physical and societal superiority over women is boldly evident in the Indian context of familyhood. The profound sense of manliness comes to a man when he has his own family which he provides for and takes care of. In return for this providings and care, women and children almost worship the man by constantly being around him as domestic help. The wife cooks, cleans, washes, serves and provides sexual pleasure to the man. The children see their father as an embodiment of sole manhood and rough masculinity, almost like a protector. A man's sense of masculinity is fulfilled by the feminine and childish energies around him. But in the surroundings, like that of the indentured labourers, men are each other's greatest competition and greatest reward. His masculinity is continuously challenged and he never gets to rest mentally. The men needed women around them to survive and make this journey on another land a little comfortable and homely. However , the women's population that accompanied the men was so disparagingly less that it created a social commotion amongst the men. The competition to secure a female counterpart was intense. The patriarchal notions of Indian society collided with the loneliness of the Indian men, unlike the African men who had their families next to them. The Indian indentured labourers were missing out on the companionship and familial bliss. Most of them had their families back in the Indian Subcontinent and

means of such long travel and transportation was next to impossible. It was costly to import women from the native lands to the Natal, and the few women that did accompany the men did not suffice. However, the milieu of the indentured men took a steep turn when they learnt the domestic chores for a better survival in an alien land. Indian men learnt the basics of cooking, cleaning and surviving by themselves in the company of each other. However, these were not the reasons behind importing women to Natal land. The women were brought in as a rescue operation for the crucial problem of interracial and homosexual relationships of men (Kale, 1996). The Indian family system was insubstantial, charged with the dowry system and caste politics. Marriage of two persons who came from two different classes or caste was a serious issue. But in contrast to the Natal land, the indentured Indian men gave money to marry a woman from their native country. The women were highly priced and processed and had more freedom to choose the partner they wanted. This social freedom of a woman challenged an Indian patriarchal system and Indian masculine norms, depreciating the respect a male carries in the traditional set up of marriage. Female adultery, infidelity, divorces, separation and second marriages were getting common. 'When patriarchy loosens its grip in one area it only tightens it in other arenas' (Walby, 1990). When Indian men started to lose out on their native women, they started hate crimes against the women of their own country. They started beating, murdering and assaulting the females because they could not possess them (Vahed, 2005). It was a detonation of the Indian men's pride and honour which always came from ruling over their own women. In the colonial land of Natal, they were ranked lowest amongst the white and black men, and now they were being out-riden by the lowest member in the hierarchy of men - the women. This led to serious crimes against women and inter racial relations which was deforming the symmetry of the colonial societal discipline. The concerned authorities then made laws for the institution of marriage. Law 12 of 1872 required Indians to register their marriage with the Protector. (Vahed, 2005). Laws were also made for adultery and separation. These laws ensured the foundation of a stable family system within the indentured labourers community. But the position of Indian men was also defended within the circle of Universal masculinity as the women were paid as of the men. They were restricted to very few occupations such as hawkers and domestic help at White people's homes and married women had the choice not to work. However, complaints regarding violence against women increased manifold.

At the Coolie huts in the vicinity of Botanical Gardens an Indian entered his hut shortly before 9 pm and deliberately killed his wife by hacking her head well nigh into pieces with a spade. He used such force that the edge of the spade turned and had particles of flesh and hair on it. (Natal Advertiser March 2, 1878).

The Indian women's position did not rise much in the social strata but it was duly noticed. Since European and African women were not to be pursued or even looked at by the Indian men, the circle of available women was very small. A woman's prominence was largely based on the sexual gratification and domestic help that she would provide in the upper class British homes. Many times, women were kept as mistresses for the white men and administrators which fueled the anger of the Indian men and directly insinuated their feelings of jealousy.

Violence still remained as a prime feature of the Indian Indentured men, the downfall of this social peace and stability can be attributed to the masculine notions about family and jealousy and their urge to be the authority for women. Several such cases made it to the news of Natal which informed the masses about the horrific crimes and daylight murders that were taking place. Violence became inherent with indentured males. The white administrators condoned these incidents to the patriarchal and shallow mindsets of Indian men who

could not control their women and that it was a cultural setback. These incidents made the familial life even more burdensome and demanding. The long hours of separation, lack of a full fledged family including the relatives and a paternal authoritative figure who also served as the moral compass for the family, and scarcity of women made a man unguarded from the mental and social implications of loneliness. Violence against women may be directly associated with a man's worth for himself. Such faltered psychological issues stemmed from the need to effectuate one's masculinity.

Violence and patriarchy remained the central tenet of the indentured masculinity. Denial of human rights was a significant factor in promoting the violent tendencies of the Indian men. Constant comparisons with African and white counterparts, continuous physical labour, improper food availability and unsatisfied sexual appetite led to mental instability and intemperate nature of indentured men. The white colonial supremacy and the fellow African labourers subverted the meaning of men and masculinity for the Indian men. The gendered conception of work was shattered down as the Indian men had to live by themselves under tyranny and abuse. They practically lived the lives of the Indian women in a foreign land. The abuse and torture by the white supremacy also convinced them to be less fragile and dramatically strong in their emotional capacities. The intellectual perimeter of the men was not built much as even in hours of recreation, the men did not get a chance to read books or newsletters or engage in some educational/ informative activities. Their leisure activities included gambling and fighting, hence their intellect and spiritual construct was not strong enough. Since, Indian masculinity took a hit in the foreign nation, it took years to refurbish the proper definition of Indian masculinity in the minds of the men and map of the world. In one part of the world, they were the oppressors, in another part of the world, they were being oppressed. This dichotomy in the states of Indian men contorted the actual definition of Indian masculinity. Some men worked hard enough to build a home in the Natal land and other colonised areas of South Africa, while some came back to their motherland, scarred for the lifetime with the experiences of indentured labour and maltreatment. The most profited among these were the middlemen or the Sirdars/overseers. They earned a decent amount of money by supervising their countrymen on the agricultural fields and inflicting wounds on them whenever necessary. These people eventually when returned to India, brought immense amounts of wealth. These Sirdars were not exactly in the indentured masculinity model, but they did affect the way Indian Masculinity was perceived. A section of these Sirdars acted greedy and manipulative who implemented their shrewd kind of masculinity over the week. This kind of masculinity stemmed from the upper class masculinity of white men who dictated everyone, and became a fragile masculinity which could easily fluctuate and was in a debilitated state. Sirdars/overseers did not have any connection with their own countrymen. This created a negative implication of Indian Males as they were saleable and had no nationalism and concern for their countrymen. The Britishers used Either way, it taught them lessons of humanity and the resilience which fueled the desire to get freedom from British rule. This colonial time period fragmented their ideas of earning money and working under a white superior for the betterment of living standards. The setback in culture, nationalism, and historic phase of young men diluted the advancement they wanted to achieve by moving far away from their motherland. They were now questioned about their own adulthood and hardships in the Natal land. The British rule challenged the Indian Masculinity in their home land and in the foreign land as well. The Indian definition of Masculinity took twists and turns and was reformulated according to the place, culture, origin, land, dialect, ethnicity and language. The constant formation and reformation of the Indian Masculinity in the context of indentured labourers fixated them on one single characteristic -of violence. The dynamics of the men to men and men to women relationships upheld in

the Indian land was starkly different from the Natal land. The interracial tensions of black community against the brown community made it a constant struggle for the Indian men to make a place of their own in the plantations and indentured labourers society.

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