

# Voices of Protest: Abolition of the Indenture Labor System

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The Indian National Movement was one of the multi-dimensional nationalist movements. It attempted to address almost all the major challenges that were affecting Indians. The indentured labour system was one such aspect that was finally abolished due to the efforts of our leaders. In this paper, primary sources from archives, speeches, and secondary sources have been used. This paper aims to understand the abolition of the indentured system from a gendered perspective. As Indian independence was not the effort of a single individual, the abolition of the Indenture was also a collective effort at multiple levels and platforms like newspapers, pamphlets, legislation, and active resistance to the system. The abolition of the Indentured system was achieved in a non-violent way. The campaign against the Indenture system was intensified by the letters, poems, pamphlets, and Reports mentioning the atrocities against Indians in these colonies. Individual experiences of Indentured Indians also gave a push to this anti-colonial campaign. The second part looks at how nationalist leaders like Gandhiji, Malviya, Gokhale, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and other women leaders approached the issue. The abolition of the system was, apart from other unjust aspects, over the issue of women's honour and sense of humiliation and derogation aspect over the term *coolie* for Indians in foreign countries.

**Keywords-** Indentured labour, women, Mahatma Gandhi, abolition movement.

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The indenture system was a form of labour under which Indians were sent to work in the European colonies. This contract was generally for five years. It was full of exploitation, deceit, coercion from the recruitment at the village, to the sub-depot, to Calcutta, till the port of arrival. Once, arrived in the host colony, life was not easy either. The hard days of plantation life were very difficult for survival. The exploitation and injustice from the beginning till the very end of the system forced Indians to resort to resistance to the system with the means available to them. The system involved three countries, one Britain as a colonial power, the other two were India and the host countries, as crown colonies.

The accommodative culture of Indians was one of the reasons for the assimilation and accommodation of Indians in host colonies. Plantations, despite being a place of exploitation, were also a place of resistance for Indians. It gave Indians an agency to resist themselves to an unjust system as pointed out by Radica Mahase in *Why Should We Be Called "Coolies"?* (Mahase, 2020) But despite such an accommodating nature of Indians, they were seen as competitors by native populations. Indians resisted to injustices of both host societies and the brutalities of plantation life when it became

intolerable. There was no “uncontested acceptance” of Indians. (Mahase, 2020). There were different ways adopted by Indentured Indians to resist the system. There were deliberate and conscious attempts by them to resist it. They adopted the means available to them to express their discontent with the system. They even condemned them.

In Indian public discourse, British colonies were mentioned as jails. In a pamphlet written by Satya Dev, printed by SwadharmaPracharak Press, Delhi, circulated in Allahabad and Delhi, these lines were mentioned. (UPSA)

“They are not colonies but jails.”

“They spoil your religion.”

“Circulate this news to all villages.”

As indentured labourer, Indians were supposed to get their fixed wages. But there was an element of violation of the contract by the planters in the form of low wages, lack of facilities promised, and the penalties which were imposed even for the very slightest crimes. It is mentioned that emigrants were not aware of the liabilities for the offences committed by the emigrants at the time of recruitment.

Despite several reports like McNeil and Lal, the Andrews Report found that there were abuses in the system, the British Government made efforts to reform it. However, the nationalist demand for the abolition of the coolie system was in place from the late 1890s when Gandhiji spoke about this unjust system in South Africa. The rallying point in collective nationalist consciousness became Kunti’s cry (Lal, 2012) in Fiji. In the nationalist uproar against the indenture system, women’s *izzat* (honour) became a rallying point to stand with their Indian sisters in the faraway colonies of the British Raj.

After the Andrew’s Report, conditions of Indians in Fiji and colonies became a significant aspect of the National narrative against colonialism. The accounts of Totaram Sandhya in haunted lines were published as *Fiji Mein Mere Ikkish Varsh*. This book was published in Kanpur in 1919. This book was translated into several languages to reach a wider audience and create an impact in voice against the indenture system. The living conditions in haunted lines were miserable and inhumane. (Shineberg, 1991) From the given lines below, we can get a glimpse of the harsh and pleading conditions of the survival of Indian indentured labourers in Fiji.

“You are our benefactor. It would be better if you end our lives. Despite working so hard, we are not able to earn enough to feed ourselves. Alas, we will not be able to survive.” (Shineberg, 1991, p. 109)

The other example of the strident conditions of Indian colonies is mentioned in the poem “Kisan” under the title “Fiji.” Maithili Sharan Gupt mentioned the miserable conditions of the indentured Indians in Fiji (Gupt, p. 49)

*Adham aarkatikehtatha- Fiji swarghaibhoo par,*

Cruel Arakatiya said the Indian indentured labourer that Fiji is heaven where  
Indians will be sent to work.

*Nabhkeneeche reh karbhiwaphunchgayahaiupar.*

While being on earth, he has taken the position of God, deciding the fate of Indian  
indentured Indians.

*Main kehtahun Fiji swarghaitohphirnarakkahanhai?*

Indentured Indians ask, If Fiji is heaven, then where is hell?

*Narak kahinbhihokintunarak se badhkardashayahanhai.*

We do not know about hell, but conditions in Fiji are worse than hell.

Combined with these vernaculars the letter of Kunti, a chamar woman from Gorakhpur escalated the voices against the injustice meted out to Indian specially indenture Indian women.

The demand for the abolition of indentured labour in India was the 'first great campaign' in which all factions of nationalism came together to save the honour of Indian women, as it was affecting the status of all Indian women. Such a collective nationalist consciousness about the honour of women converged all divergent nationalist opinions. The nationalist factions included Hindu, Muslim, moderate and extremist, and Mahatma Gandhi. (Ray, 2002)

Gandhiji was one of the leading voices for the abolition of this system of human transportation to distant colonies. He defined the word *girmit* in *Samalochak*, titled as *Indenture or Slavery*, in December 1915 as

'Girmit is a corrupt form of the English word agreement. The term cannot be dispensed with. What it suggests, "agreement" does not...the document under which thousands of labourers used to migrate and still emigrate to Natal and other countries on contract for five years is known by the labourers and employers as girmit. A labourer so emigrating under a girmit is a girmittio (indentured labour).' (Gandhi, 1999, p. 74)

However, in this article, Gandhi's criticism of the system targeted the issue of women who were migrating. He said-

'...some of these are women of ill fame. They do not, as a rule, enter into a marriage alliance...women who in India would never touch wine, are sometimes found lying dead-drunk on the roads" (Gandhi, 1999, p. 75)

Gandhiji criticised the system as the transplanting of Indian women to a foreign land for her economic advancement was at the cost of the social and moral degradation of the Indian family system in that foreign land. He further says even if it leads to her economic advancement, it is after selling our souls.

Mahatma Gandhi's, 'a transoceanic migrant'(Natarajan, 2009)<sup>12</sup>, attachment to the cause of indentured labour was from his experiences in South Africa. Gandhi created an imagined community of scattered Indians in South Africa and the Caribbean by mobilising them towards the cause of the discriminatory system against the Indians.(Natarajan, 2009) Gandhi's link with these communities prevented the Indians in these regions from siding with other ethnic and national divisions. The Indians' discontent against the coolie system first came in 1894, when free Indians were disenfranchised by a Bill passed in Natal National Assembly. This was due to the fear of the Asiatic menace(Swanson, 1983) in colonial Natal. Gandhi formed the Natal Indian Congress to fight this injustice towards Indians. (Kumar, 2017, p. 206) In South Africa, Gandhi started a newspaper *Indian Opinion*, to raise the issue of injustice towards Indians. The Indian National Congress also amplified the inhumane treatment of the Indians in British colonies. In the Banaras session of 1905, Congress

passed a resolution against the discrimination towards Indians by denying them citizenship in South Africa. In the initial days, Gandhiji was not much involved in the affairs of the indentured labourers. (Vahed, 2019)

There are several scholars like Swan, Kathryn Tidrick, and Joseph Lelyveld who criticise Gandhi for delaying in picking up the issue of indentured labour. Frene Ginwala, Ashwin Desai and Ghoolam Vahed also criticised Gandhi for his delay in taking up the issue of indentureds' plight in South Africa, although he took the issues of affecting Indians but not the coolies. In South Africa, Gandhi launched his great satyagraha campaign in 1913 (Lelyveld, 2011) against the injustices faced by Indentured Indians. Ashutosh Kumar criticises Gandhiji for the delay in taking the issue of indentured labour, and the failure of the 1913 campaign to achieve anything substantial for the indentured Indians. Joseph Levyveld also says that the emancipation of indentured Indians was never the goal of Gandhi in South Africa. However, this initial fight against the discrimination was not for the rights of the coolies but the treatment of free Indians as coolies.

However, there is constant mention of the indentured Indians in the speeches of Gandhi. He might have delayed publicly in picking up the issue of indenture till 1913, but Gandhi's fight for injustice and discrimination against Indians began a long time ago. He wrote in *Vichar Srishti* (Gujarati), titled as *Message of Gokhale's Life*, he acknowledged that he discussed the issue of indentured labour in Natal with the leaders in India. (Gandhi, 1999, pp. 140-146) He might have delayed the mass mobilisation of the indentured labour, but he was concerned about the conditions of Indians. Mass movements cannot be launched in a vacuum without understanding the issue comprehensively. Even if the movement of 1913 failed to meet the desired objectives, it was not a failure, as it created an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1999) of Indian coolies, a notion of identity and strength, for the Indians in South Africa. It was in South Africa that Gandhi met Andrews, who later became a leading voice of the anti-indenture campaign. Gandhi, in a letter to J. B. Petit on 16th June, 1915, said that-

'...system of indentured emigration is an evil which cannot be mended but can only be ended'. (Gandhi, 1999, p. 18)

Gandhi constantly attacked the Indenture system. In his Bombay 1915 speech, he called Andrews and Pearson true friends of India. He condemned the McNeil and Lal report and the protector of emigrants for their conflict of interest with the class of planters and the nexus between them in the exploitation of Indian indentured labourers, and having absolute power, as no one was to judge him, if any decision went wrong. (Gandhi, 1999, pp. 55-58) In his article, published in *The Leader* on 26th Feb, 1916, he quoted Sir William Wilson Hunter, who called it a state "perilously near to slavery". (Gandhi, 1999, pp. 188-191) In this article, he questioned the system for the two unethical and unequal treatments meted out to Indians-

First, he questioned Indian women's position in this whole system and criticised the system for the illegitimate and immoral marriages that exist in the colonies and the treatment of Indian women as concubines. He says the "marriages is a farce" (Gandhi, 1999, p. 190) as its validity depends only on the concurrence of the Protector of Immigrants. (1916, 1916) Such conditions on the plantations about the marriage system of India disrupted traditional Indian family systems, "marriages

and family structures were in a state of flux.”(Sangari, 2019) Regarding womanhood and marriages, Gandhi and Annie Besant shared the same ideology of *pativrata* women. Their ideals were Savitri, Sita, Damyanti, and Shakuntala. (Sangari, 2019, p. 1089). Another reason Gandhiji questioned the system was the unequal treatment between Indians and Englishmen.

Gandhi moved the Resolution for the abolition of the system at the Bombay Provincial Conference at Ahmedabad, demanding the immediate abolition of the system on 23rd October 1916. (Gandhi, 1999, p. 264) Gandhi also introduced Resolution number IX on indentured labour on 28th December 1916 at the Lucknow Session of the Indian National Congress for its abolition in the upcoming year. (Gandhi, 1999, pp. 282-283). In the year 1917, an Anti-Indentured meeting was held at Ahmedabad on 4th February, in which he talked about the contribution of Andrews and Polak in highlighting the plight of women indentured labourers. (Gandhi, 1999, p. 304)

There was another Anti-Indenture Meeting held at Bombay on February 9th, 1917, under the presidentship of Sir Jamsetji Jeejibhoy, where Sir N. G. Chandavarakar moved the Resolution for abolition of the indenture. (Gandhi, 1999, p. 308) There was an Anti-Indenture meeting at Karachi on 2nd March 1917, where he set the date of 31st May for the abolition of the indenture system. (Gandhi, 1999, p. 320) If this demand is not accepted, Gandhi asked members present to prevent Indians from leaving the country.<sup>2y</sup> Gandhi reiterated the date of 31st May in an Anti-Indenture meeting held at Calcutta, as reported in *Amrit-Bazar Patrika*. It was like a challenge Gandhi gave to the British prior Rowlett Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience movement.

C. F. Andrews was one of the prolific voices who questioned this system of indenture. He criticised the system for the prevalent abuses, from the recruitment to the arrival of Indians in the plantation, which led to moral degradation of the Indian family system. Andrews had been the associate of Gandhi and had worked with him even in South Africa. He was sent to Fiji along with William Pearson. He criticised the McNeil and Lal report for not getting to the root of the problem. (Tinker, 1974, p. 336) He compared the status of Indian indentured labourers with the “semi-servile” existence. (Andrews, 1930, p. 433) He tried to convince Hardinge about the injustices of the system and the gaps in McNeil and Lal’s Report.

Andrews’ report on the indenture system in Fiji and the condition of women was used by nationalists in the Anti-indenture Campaign. (Pearson, 1916, p. 5) The fraudulent methods for the recruitment of women were adopted, women gave up their lives by jumping off in Hugli River (Pearson, 1916, p. 19) little care was taken about the privacy of women. (Pearson, 1916, p. 25) The reports mentioned the ‘regulated prostitution’ on the plantations regulated by overseers. The report further mentioned trafficking in young girls and selling of daughters by fathers to many persons, cases of desertion, divorce crisis in the married life of Indians, and failure of family life on the plantations and amongst Indians, and (s)exploitation of women by overseers. (Pearson, 1916, p. 56) These were some of the brutal aspects of the lives of women in a distant foreign land. It was ‘freedom denied’ for her (Reddock, 1985) rather than her economic empowerment. There were even murders of women in the West Indies colonies. (Proceeding No. 1, Jan 1873) However, Andrews was also sharing the stereotypical attitude towards women, as was in earlier reports, he said-



‘The Hindu woman in this country is like a rudderless vessel with its mast broken, drifting upon the rocks; or like a canoe being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand. She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so.’ p (Lal, 2012, p. 198) (Kale, 1998, p. 166)

Such a stereotypical image of women by one of the critics of the system suggests how the notion of morality was used to define a woman, even by those leading the movement.

The abolition was further supported by the emerging capitalist community, like the business community of Marwaris after the First World War, who opposed this export of cheap Indian labour due to their orthodox belief of crossing the Kalapani. (Ray K. A., 1996) However, this reason for the interest of the Marwari Community is objected to by Radica Mahase as she says that cheap labour was not the intent, as there was no opposition to the internal movement within India. (Mahase, 2020, p. 157) The introduction of women was based on the fact that she was required to meet the sexual needs of the Indian men on the plantations and for the development of a family system on the plantations. Karen A. Ray has suggested that miscegenation and homosexual practices of North Indian men were other factors that necessitated the emigration of Indian women to the plantation. (Ray K. A., 1996, p. 129)

Although the voice against the indenture system rose in South Africa, not against the oppression of the indentured Indians but due to treatment of all Indians as *coolie*, which led Indians to unite against the British. (Kumar, 2017, p. 207) As Indian nationalists objected to the intrusion of the Raj in the ‘private sphere’. (Chatterjee, 1991) During the Indian Nationalist Movement, the issue of women’s honour became a national issue.

The local voices against the system were from the beginning, as Pitcher’s Report mentioned that “...it is a thing to be avoided...”. (No.9-15, Aug 1983). *Marwari Sahayak Samiti* propagated a narrative of Indian women in trouble in the clutches of the planters. This *Samiti* was formed in 1913 due to the politicisation of the Indentured labour issue. The Marwari community targeted the fraudulent means of the recruitment of indentured labor as a point of its opposition to the system. There were instances of illegal confinement of women at the depot. (Proceeding No. 11&12, Sep 1871,) There are instances of kidnapping by recruiters. (Proceeding No. 5 to 12, 26th August 1871) Marwari Sahayak Samiti was helping the escapee women by providing them return tickets, free legal aid etc, (Ray K. A., 1996), but in 1913 Samiti changed its stance on the indenture issue by actively opposing the system. The active support of the Marwari community for the cause is laudable. They had commercial contact with the Garden Reach Dock, and because of this, they were able to establish contact with the returned emigrants. They researched the problems faced by Indians abroad and interviewed them to know about the conditions of Indians overseas. They send ‘missionaries’ upcountry to propagate about the real conditions of Indians in colonies to discourage the emigration of Indians. The strategies adopted by them in this anti-indenture campaign were pamphlet distribution, where the depot-wala was compared with thugs. Anti-abolition campaign also included public meetings and lectures, an awareness programme in vernacular languages. (Mahase, 2020, p.

155) (File, 1914-1915)

They corroborated their arguments by showing the findings of the report of Andrews and Pearson about Fiji in 1915; the visit of this Committee was financed by the Marwari Community. This report exposed the horrors of plantation life, especially for women. The voices of Indian nationalists about the abolition of the system were further amplified by the print media, like Kunti's letter, and writings of Totaram Sanadhya's account, *Fiji mein mere ikkisvarsh* (My twenty-one years in Fiji) (Gupta, Jan 2014)(Gupta C., 2015)

During the sati abolition debate, women's bodies became a site of contestation between imperial morality and reformers.(Mani, 1987) In this public debate over *sati*, we find a complete absence of agency for women themselves. However, in the campaign against the indentured women, women's organisations were taking the lead for the abolition of the system, but they were circumscribing their arguments against this inhumane system. Rameshwari Nehru, wife of BrijLal Nehru of the Gandhi family, was one of the leading voices of anti-indenture campaigns by her periodical *stri-darpan*(Women's Mirror). (Gupta C., 2015)

There were Women's Anti-indenture groups all over India. The upper-middle class of women were also actively participating in the cause of their sisters in foreign colonies. Karen A. Ray talked about Ladies' meetings at places like Bombay, Cawnpore, and Ahmedabad. '*Ladies Meeting in Bombay*'(Ray K. A., 1996) over the issue. It was a meeting for women by women. The important women who participated in this meeting were Kasturbai, Lady Mehta (Widow of Sir Phiroz Shah Mehta) and Mrs. Ramabai Ranade, Lady Tata, Lady Chandawarkar, Lady Patit, Lady Currimbhoy, and Lady Fazulbhoy. This was the first time that these women came to the forefront on the issue of women indentured labourers. Protests were also held at Cawnpore, at the Widow's Home, where Indian women protested against this system, which was dishonouring Indian women. At Ahmedabad, the indentured women were led by Mrs. Ramanbhai M. Nilkanth. She even planned to meet Lady Chelmsford, Wife of the then Viceroy Lord Chelmsford; as a woman, she expected Lady Chelmsford to persuade the Viceroy to save Indian women from exploitation.

In a meeting held at Ahmedabad Anti-Indentured meeting on 4th Feb 1917, Gandhi, in his speech published in Gujarati in *Prajabandhu*, talked about a meeting of women at Mahadev Temple of *SathodaraNagars*, such a meeting of women started from Kanpur.(Gandhi, 1999, p. 304)The reason for a meeting of women, Gandhi cited, was that as women are the greatest sufferers of this inhumane system of indentured labour hence women should also join to strengthen the protest against this system.

Sarojini Naidu was also one of the leading women opponents of the indenture system. She advocated for the abolition of the system. Sarojini Naidu refused to accept the label of Western-defined feminism for the women's movement in India.(Sinha, 2000, p. 640)The relationship between feminism and nationalism in India is complex, as pointed out by Mrinalini Sinha, as nationalism in India was not a "derivative discourse"(Chatterjee, 1991) from the West. Indian feminism and nationalism should not be judged on the parameters of the Western notion of nationalism. For Indian nationalism nation nation-building was a cultural project. Hence, the projection of women as a symbol of "national honour". Naidu delivered a lecture at Allahabad on 'Indenture Labour' on 19th January, 1917, in which she used metaphors like Sita, Padmini of Chittor, and Savitri.(Natesan, 1917)

Annie Besant was another leading female figure of the Indian national movement who took up the cause of the Indentured women. In her Presidential address of the 32nd Indian National Congress Session in 1917, she talked about *'The Case for India'*, when she talked about the awakening of Indian womanhood. (Besant, 1917) She talked about the dishonour this system caused to Indian women. She called it a 'covert form of slavery'. (Mani M., January 1996, p. 707)

Apart from the efforts by the popular leaders in public meetings, there were efforts by the Legislators. The Abolition of the indenture system was not a sudden event. The murmuring of its fall was in the making, in the Legislative sphere since 1910, (G.A.Natesan) when Gopal Krishna Gokhale urged through a resolution for the prohibition of this inhumane recruitment of Indians for Natal. In 1912, again, Gokhale moved a Resolution in the Imperial Legislative Council for the prohibition of this system. In his speech, he raised five principal objections against this system. First, about the inequities in the system in which recruited Indians are unaware about the terms of the contract, penal provisions in the host colonies etc., the contract is written in a language which the indentured labourers did not understand, which he said is a breach of contract. Second, the safeguards given to Indians in host colonies like the Protector of Immigrants and Magistrates are illusory and ineffective, as they also belonged to the same class as the planters. He corroborates his argument from the Sanderson Committee report. Third, the difficulties faced by the Indians in the colonies led to high mortality and suicide. Fourth, he objected to the system over the issue of women and their exploitation by the planters. He quoted Edward Jenkins' account of the indenture system and raised the issue of women's honour and the treatment meted out to them in the colonies. The immorality is attached to their system due to the treatment it gives Indian women. He spoke about the immoral relations between many of these women and the Indian men, but he also talked about the immoral relation between Indian women and planters and overseers. It was a shocking affair altogether, a considerable part of the population in some of these colonies being practically illegitimate in its origin. Fifth, treatment of Indians as coolies wherever this system was introduced. His basis of this criticism was the treatment of free Indians as coolies in Natal. He demanded for the complete abolition of the system. Gandhi, in an article published in the *Leader*, 1916, called the Resolution by Gokhale a 'death knell' for the system. (Gandhi, 1999, p. 188)

Madan Mohan Malviya was the person who finally introduced a resolution which led to the dismantling of its edifice. He called it as "an unmitigated curse." (G.A.Natesan, p. 14) He introduced it on 20th March 1916. He questioned the wrongs of the system on the methods of recruitment, lack of understanding of the system by the intending migrants, as the real conditions and nature of the work were not told to them. He further questioned the system as it attacked the religious sensibilities of the Indians. He corroborated his arguments by citing the Report of Andrews and Pearson. Malviya objected that a Kabirpanthi who honours life above everything else, was forced to do work of cutting meat under compulsion to reflect the actual condition on the type of work assigned to Indians. (G.A.Natesan, p. 331) He also strongly objected to the system for the misery it was causing to the women. He also gave the cause for immorality on the plantations due to the character of women and paucity of women on the plantations (G.A.Natesan, p. 341). The non-recognition of Indian marriages in these colonies was another grievance. He criticised the system for imposing strict penalties and prosecution against immigrants in these colonies.



He ended by saying that-

‘My Lord no reform will prove sufficient; tinkering will not do; the system must be abolished root and branch.’  
(Tinker, 1974, p. 344)

Thus, an inhumane and unmitigated curse came to an end. The demise of the system, which was the first demand of the nationalist leaders accepted by the Raj. Although there might have been a delay by Gandhi in launching a campaign against the system but once the movement was launched, he was adamant to discontinue it. His writing and speeches against the system were no less vocal and categorical than the demand for the independence of India. He raised the issue of indentured women and the hardships they faced in a colony. It was the collective efforts on multiple fronts that led to its dismantlement. However, like Indian Independence, which was achieved by the peaceful methods of Indian nationalism and Gandhiji, the Anti-Indentureship movement was also successful in its aim. The abolition of the system was the collective efforts of the nationalists on many fronts, in which women leaders played an important role.

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