

# Women and Culture in the Hard Days of Indenture: The Case of Mauritius

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**Abstract** -This paper aims to highlight the pivotal role of women in the island of Mauritius during the hard days of indenture, where they landed as dependent beings yet they proved to be robust in supporting the male migrants both physically and emotionally. It [mainly] focuses on women being instrumental in establishing a stable family life and also lays emphasis on the presence of women that was crucial in building the Indo-Mauritian community, by sowing cultural and religious roots on a new land, which was to become their homeland. A qualitative research methodology, more precisely the document analysis method has been used to explore and evaluate the social facts during indenture, based on books, journals, newspaper articles, documentary films and previous studies, that provide historical insights. Marina Carter has been a major reference by virtue of her authoritative studies and publications on immigration in Mauritius. While scholars, as in ([7]-[13]), [23] and [28] have elaborated on the contribution of the first generation of Indian women in the socio-economic field of Mauritius, little has been mentioned about women and culture. In this endeavour, the biosocial theory as well as a reflexive approach has been preferred to understand the lifestyle and perseverance of women of Indian origin in the cultural domain.

**Keywords:** Indian women, indenture, culture, Mauritius.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Few themes pertaining to the system of indentured labour during British colonial rule resound with so much bitter connotation as that of women in indenture. Following the abolition of slavery in the early 1830s, the new scheme of recruiting workforce on contract agreement is perceived simply as another form of slavery by Tinker [32], an opinion which is emphasized by his interpretation of afflicted Indian women migrants, being the “*sorry sisterhood of single, broken creatures*”. A significant number of scholars, as in [18] and many more, seem to share this derisory opinion, as the majority of studies tend to emphasize the painful life experiences of Indian immigrants in their respective host countries. Carter [7] strongly opposes the opinions of such historians whom she condemns for having “[...] *done a disservice to women under indenture by reproducing stereotypes which portrayed female migrants as social outcasts in India who became the amoral profiteers of sexual scarcity in the colonial sugar plantations.*” As a retort, ‘Laxmi’s legacy’, focuses on the rich and important contribution of the first generation of Indian women in Mauritius. Authors in [9] opine that considering the Indian labourer as a servile victim is a myth, which the authors convincingly demolish by studying immigration in Mauritius,

through petitions and testimonies of immigrants which led to ‘forging the rainbow’, title of the first volume of their trilogy.

This paper aims to highlight that though women landed on the island of Mauritius as dependent beings, yet they proved to be robust in supporting the male migrants both physically and emotionally. It mainly focuses on the crucial and pivotal role of women during indenture, in establishing a stable family as well as the socio-cultural life in Mauritius. Their presence led to the creation of the marriage system, which opened the way to setting up of the family, sowing cultural and religious roots in a new land which was to become their homeland.

### A. *The Presence of Women in Mauritius*

Scholarly works ([1], [2], [4], [29], [34] and [37]) point out that during the slavery period, women were present in Mauritius as slaves and convicts, who had been brought from Africa and Asia by the Dutch and French colonizers. With the end of slavery and its replacement by free labour under the indenture system, male and female workers were recruited from the British colonial state of India. A closer look at the chart of annual immigration to Mauritius for the year 1834 as in [9] reveals that the first batch of immigrants consisted of 75 exclusively male workers. The number of males increased up to 1,182 in 1835 while there is also indication of a first batch of 72 Indian women landing on the island the same year as indicated in [7] and [23]. As per the immigration report of 1859 [23], the influx of women kept increasing gradually between 1834 and 1842, with a total of 1,014 women who arrived and 244 who departed, while 210 died in Mauritius. The large disparity between the number of men and women that started at the onset of the indenture system, continued till the end. Figures indicate that between 1834 and 1920, out of the 451,796 imported labourers, 105,760 were women [15]. It is worth highlighting that within a span of eight years between 1834 and 1842, 327 girls were born (categorized as Creole Indians by virtue of their birth on the island), representing the second generation of Indian immigrants in Mauritius.

Women migrated for different reasons compared to men: the latter came as ‘indentured’ labourers to work in the sugar plantations, while the migrant groups of Indian women opted to leave their homelands because of extreme poverty prevailing in the rural regions of India. For those who were widows, the fact of being rejected by the Indian society led many of them to adopt prostitution as a means of living. In such cases, migration presented itself as a solution to their

problems. According to [7], Indian women used the system of indentured labour to escape from hunger and misery and “[...] *to seek more personal freedom*” from an “[...] *illiberal, inhibiting and hierarchical social system of India*”.

In the first phase of immigration in the 1840s, the majority of the Indian female migrants were married, (approximately 60 to 80 %). They came to join their husbands and relatives [9]. As for the single women, they were dependent on males travelling in the same ship or waited at the immigration depot, to be chosen by a suitable match from the 60 to 80 % of unmarried men, working on the island. The post slavery period consisted at one end, of liberated women who were engaged through agreements, under the same conditions as Indian male immigrants and they reportedly worked as domestic servants and apprentices to milliners [9]. These former women slaves enjoyed a promoted status from slavery to apprenticeship and were also able to earn a wage. The other end consisted of Indian women who migrated to Mauritius during the system of indentured labour, but were ironically not bound by any contract [13]. Therefore, “[...] *the recourse to Mauritius was for many Indian women not a search for work at all but rather a marriage migration .....*” These historical facts led Carter (ibid) to describe the Indian women as “*slaves, servants and spouses*”.

#### B. Family Migration

In the early immigration period, it was noted that thousands of men opted to go back to their home country upon termination of their contracts. It has been stated in [23] that retaining existing male workers on the colony proved to be profitable for the sugar planters as there were no indigenous sources of plantation labour in Mauritius. Since most male workers had left their wives and children behind in India, the, “[...] *desertion of the family was one of the main obstacles to the resumption of emigration towards Mauritius.*” Also, the poor living conditions along with rigid work schedules and the meagre income of male immigrants were not conducive to “*the development of a settled domestic life*” [9]. Due to these factors, the Indian workers resided in Mauritius on short term agreement.

On the other hand, single male immigrants living on the island felt the need to create a family. Kurmally of Arrah, for example, confessed to the Protector that he wished to seek a wife who would be able to cook food for him and take care of his orphan children [9]. Along with it, thousands of freed indentured male workers, who went back home, expressed their keen interest in returning to Mauritius with their wives and children. Such petitions consolidated the conviction of authorities that the family nucleus was central to the Indian minds, thus there was a growing demand for family migration.

As a result of the recognition that women were crucial for the constitution of the family unit, various measures were undertaken to encourage women’s presence in Mauritius. Laws were enacted pertaining to increased recruitment of Indian women. Fixed ratios were established and by 1860s,

each batch of Indians landing in Mauritius, comprised 45% to 50% women migrants [9]. In order to encourage family migration, male migrants were rewarded with money for bringing along their wives [11]. The colonial authorities took initiatives to sponsor family migration, along with free passages for wives and children of male migrants. Also, a bounty system was introduced wherein a bonus was paid by the public treasury to every man bringing married couples or the wife of another immigrant to the colony. As a result of these incentives, a boom in women migration was noted as the number of arrival rocketed from 49 in 1842 to 4380 in 1843 [7]. It is observed in [23] that within a span of two years between 1843 and 1845, 200 ships were chartered that brought 4530 women and 1449 children, which Carter [7] qualifies as “*an unexpected innovation in a long confirmed national habitat*”.

Along the same line, as stated in [13], migrating Indian women in the 19th century were not required to sign indenture agreements because “[...] *they were primarily valued for their role in fostering the permanent settlement of the community in Mauritius, as reproducers of labour power force rather than as labourers per se.*” As the sugar-export business flourished, the British rulers faced rising demand for additional manpower in their agricultural lands. Instead of relying on temporary importation of workers, the authorities deemed it more advantageous to encourage the migrants to settle down on the island with their spouses and gradually increase the labour population by proliferating their offspring. Thus, “*long term labour force called for family immigration*” [9] and consequently, Governor Higginson proposed the “*creation of resident labour population*” which was seemingly “*indispensable to permanent security*” [15].

#### C. The Role of Women during Indenture

The above statements clearly demonstrate that the purpose of male immigration was to earn a living while Indian women arrived to add their contribution to the lives of their respective husbands as companions and carers. As mentioned in [23] from the standpoint of the colonizers, the recruitment of women was a social need, in order to stabilize the life and condition of the male workers and at the same time to obtain cheap labour. Furthermore, the author pertinently observes that the decision to stay on the estate after the expiry of contracts was geared by the women’s will. Thus “[...] *individuals who sought to entice gangs of labourers from one estate to another, succeeded best by enticing the wives of the leading men of the gang...*”

It is argued in [7] that “*women were primarily valued for their domestic roles as wives and mothers*”. Along the same line, it is indicated in [23] that by the end of 1842, only 931 women worked on the island compared to the 20,332 men. Also the chart portraying female Indian labour force on the estates from 1864 to 1871 [7] indicates that merely 6.9% of women were employed as indentured labourers presumably because of their apparent physical inferiority. At the onset of indenture, Indian

women were first and foremost, housewives [24]. As a child, the girl always depended on her father, and during her youth she relied on her husband. If she was a widow, she depended on her sons and in case she did not have any, she was taken care of by her dead husband's or father's relatives. She never was a self-governed woman. The ultimate responsibility of the woman was to take care of the family and to procreate.

Initially, women were associated with non-remunerative domestic chores such as fetching water from the common well or the tap in the camp. Their works also consisted of collecting firewood from faraway forest lands for cooking and fetching grass for feeding animals. The local Stipendiary Magistrate in 1846, as cited in [7], commented that women proved to be "extremely useful in the preparation of food and carrying it to the men when they work at a distance from the camp and many other ways to the comfort of the coolies." In line with other contemporaries, Carter [7] considers "that the presence of women served to soften the harsher aspects of estate life." In [23], the author notes that women played a major role in rearing cattle and poultry and she adds "in 19<sup>th</sup> century Mauritius, women's domain lay outside the cash crop economy, principally in food production and retail." While some women sold vegetables and dairy products, others tried their skill at such tasks as coaching, sewing and embroidering [28]. They would work till late night using candles or kerosene lamps in order to contribute to the family income and help relieve their husbands financially by their irregular earnings.

Moreover, if the tough part of harvesting and loading cane plants on lorries were reserved for men, sugar estates found specific jobs for women and children, such as weeding, digging holes, applying fertilizers and working as washerwomen. During harvest, most women were employed in the storage of sugar, e.g carrying and drying sugar and sewing vacoas bags for its storage. Some women joined their menfolk in cane cutting and earned four rupees at the end of the month. It is stated in [23], that some of them became supervisors of cane cutters and were known as "sardarines" (women overseers). There is also evidence that at a later stage in the history of the sugar industry, a few women moved up the ladder and improved their status from ordinary migrant to the rank of recruiters and labour mobilizers, whose job was to collect and accompany new recruits to the island.

#### D. Creation of the Marriage System

At the early stage of the peopling of Mauritius, though women's population was growing, it was largely outnumbered by men. A male slave labour was crucially needed for the development of the colony. As shown above, a similar situation arose after the abolition of slavery and the mass recruitment of predominantly male labour under the indenture system. The presence of women as a minority in the male populated country entailed issues such as polyandry, violence in marital relationships, murders, sexual abuse, prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases. After a close monitoring and analysis of the situation, the colonial

authorities decided to solve the problems through the institution of marriage, since marital relationship was equivalent to respectability [7]. Thus the Indian marriage ordinance was framed and marriage laws were regulated and enacted in late 1850s. Arriving couples, who were united by means of religious rites in India, required having a marriage certificate issued by the civil registration office in order to validate their union. As for the single women, by rule the first step to be taken after their disembarkation was to get married at the depot. It should be highlighted that both men and women had the freedom of choosing or rejecting their partners. The scholar in [7] observes, though the regularization of the marital relationships of migrants aimed to "create a settled Indian community in Mauritius", it was also the "effective re-institution of patriarchal authority" since "the state and employers were primarily concerned with securing men's right over the women they formed partnerships with." Carter [7] equally states that the marriage legislation impacted profoundly women migrants, since in many cases; husbands and other men within the estate took wrong advantage of their position of having upper hands on members of the opposite sex. It should, however, be noted that marriage laws were in force only for Indian born women and not for those born in Mauritius, defined as Creole Indians. Along with it, in order to solve the issue of prevalent child marriages, the marriageable age in the colony of Mauritius was fixed at 18 and 15 for men and women respectively [12].

The legitimization of civil marriages was soon followed by the official recognition of religious weddings in ordinance 3 of 1856 [23]. Indians held great significance to traditional marriage ceremonies. The American consul in Mauritius in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was impressed by the fact that even long settled South Indians who intermarried with Catholics, distinctively "retained non-European wedding traditions". As stated in [22], Pike devoted a chapter to 'the marriage ceremony of the Madras Malabar Indians' in his book on Mauritius. His narratives present the groom as a Catholic, the bride as a 'Malabar' and the wedding ceremonies as what appears to be a typically contemporary mixed marriage: Thomas, the groom "was a Catholic, and had a service in the church; but as his wife was a Malabar, he was obliged to go through all her ceremonies as well as his own". He was witness to a cultural event which covered three days of festivities, for which a special "house" was hired in Moka Street in the capital of Port-Louis. Pike's description of the wedding rituals consisted of the bride's mother accompanied by other women performing the ritual of anointing the groom, of tying the nuptial outfits of the bride and groom; the bride was wearing the yellow silk cord round her neck along with the toe-rings and oblation to the sacrificial fire. There is reason to believe that Pike's vivid representation stands out as the earliest evidence of a traditional wedding celebrated by Indian immigrants in Mauritius. According to the author in [15], "marriage ceremony provided perhaps the most spectacular occasion for the manifestation of the traditional customs, beliefs and observances of Hindu religious life." The religious

celebration of marriages gave rise to other ritualistic practices such as the betrothal of children of Indian immigrants performed in the traditional way that led Carter in [7] to qualify the “*legal recognition of customarily arranged marriage by the colonial state as a triumphal restoration of cultural rights for the Indian migrant population*”.

Gradually the legislations pertaining to a great number of women on the island and the enforcement of marriage laws contributed to the stabilization process of the Indian migrants in Mauritius. She opines that unlike previous practices by Indian men engaging into inter-caste marriages or tying the knot with Creole women, the presence of large numbers of Indian women provided choices for a better match while choosing partners. Thus, caste consciousness was strengthened and that “[...] *facilitated the transmission of the practice of folk religion and of tradition based sanctions.*”

In addition, the British authorities had rightly forecast that marriage laws and initiatives for family migration were long term investments for the colony. In [9], the authors argue that they were convinced that by living together with families, the Indian population would most likely be able to form villages. Lord Grey, as referred in [15] was the secretary of state of colonies in 1846 in Mauritius who requested the Governor to introduce appropriate legislation which would enable the Indian immigrant to be integrated into the community of the island inhabitants. He also recommended the establishment of the Indian village system, which would allot a portion of land to each immigrant. Thus, in order to promote the integration of Indian immigrants in host countries, full privileges of citizenship were given to them. Along with it, other impetus was provided such as establishment of school for children of immigrants (1859) and loan facilities being granted to enable freed labourers to acquire lands for farming under the scheme of ‘le grand morcellement’- the great land subdivision in the late 1870s. Subsequently, with these amendments in laws and other incentives, a new wave of motivation rippled among male migrants to settle down in Mauritius with their families. A few single immigrants arranged marriage alliances for themselves, and others for their children with their *jahaji bhai* or shipmates on their way to Mauritius. For single migrants who resided on the island, they looked for suitable matches amongst newly arrived workers and many more went back to their homelands to fetch their relatives, thus creating chain migration to the island.

An analysis of the life history of Indian migrants in Mauritius and the related enacted laws makes it clear that the presence of women was imperative for the development of a stable family life, which in turn contributed to the formation of villages and communities. It is affirmed in [7], that “[...] *over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the immigration of Indian women to Mauritius was transformed from a labour migration into a colonization programme.*” As the number of women increased, their spouses and male relatives felt more confident to lead their lives in villages, away from the estate camps. At the same time, it is also claimed in [13], that the ill-treatment

faced by indentured workers, was deflected by the presence of women, who created semi-autonomous religious and cultural life.

#### *E. The Re-Creation of Cultural Life*

The ‘Grand Morcellement’ of the 1870s mentioned earlier is assuredly a great turning point in the history of Mauritius. Following the introduction of labour laws in order to regulate the life of free Indians in 1867, the British Government continued ahead with the process of *morcellement* that involved selling small plots of agricultural lands to immigrants [37]. Availing of loan facilities against interest, being no longer committed to any sugar estates, many of the ex-indentured workers struggled amidst a “*mixture of oppression and opportunity*” to emerge from labourers to independent small planters and finally to land owners [14]. Despite their meagre savings, many of the Indian immigrants bought lands, built houses and re-created their homes away from the estate camps. As early as 1874, many families had already established themselves in Mauritius which became a pull factor for further settlement on the island [23].

Moving away from their initial dwellings in the sugar estate camps to their own homes was an act of liberation for the labourers. Their conglomeration transformed them into communities and ultimately a new homeland was reshaped. The setting up of Indian villages throughout Mauritius has been described in [35], as a space modelled on home in India. In his preface to *Sueurs de Sang*, the French translation of Abhimanyu Unnuth’s *Lal Pasina* [33], Jean-Marie Le Clézio, the Literature Nobel Prize Winner looks back on how memory and religion linked them to their ancestors and origin, and he celebrates the heroes and heroines of *Lal Pasina* “*who belong to this island as much as it belongs to them, because they came here, with their load of pain and suffering, to plant the arrow of Ram.*” Through his intimate knowledge and feeling for the men and women bonded together, Le Clézio can sense how their “*revolt against the sugar planters is a very long and difficult revolution across generations*”, and also how it relies “*on the anger of the men as much as on the strength and love of the women*”.

A more down to earth perspective in [23] pinpoints that besides being a source of comfort to the husbands, it was “*easier for the immigrants to save money when accompanied by their wives and to retain their customs, language and religion.*” Historical accounts confirm that having ascended the social ladder, from agricultural workers to land owners, some immigrants with the support of their wives, donated lands and money for erecting religious edifices. An example is Doya Kishto along with wife Songor in [29], both landowners and married in 1859, are remembered for building a Tamil temple on their land. Other examples are Gokoola, Dabeedin Reetoo, Dookhee Gungah and Ramtohol, who are equally credited for the charitable acts of donating money for constructing temples, cremation grounds and also for sponsoring publications in Hindi and administering a number

of Hindi schools in Mauritius. It is commented in [11] that these landowners used “[...] *their economic power to become cultural benefactors.*” That landmark ushered the development of socio-religious organisations among various communities in Mauritius.

The Bihari Hindus in particular, created village councils (comprising of relatively high profile persons), a replica of the *Panchayati* system in India that was meant to maintain discipline and justice in the newly emerging society. Along with it, *baithkas* or community centres were built that served as locations for cultural and religious activities such as the *hawan* (fire sacrifice) and singing of Ramayana verses and teaching of Hindi to village children. Abhimanyu Unnuth in his literary work ‘*Lal Pasina*’, attempts to re-imagine the life of the Indians during indenture and portrays a glimpse of the village life of that epoch. He revisits the construction of religious buildings (*Kalimay* and *Hanuman Chawutra*), singing of religious chants (verses of *Vedas*, *Ramayana* and *Hanuman Chaalisa*), of Bhojpuri folk genres (*birha*, verses of *Alha-Udal*, *kajari* and *jantsar*), celebrations of festivals such as *Holi*, representations of *Ram lila*, playing traditional games (*gouli-danda* and *kabaddi*), cooking traditional recipes (*paratha*, *litti*, *kheer* and *sattwa*). Along the same line, the scholar in [15] writes that each village had a Brahmin priest for officiating prayers and *naaw* or barber who had specific tasks assigned to him in Hindu rituals such as weddings, birth and death ceremonies. He also mentions the village priest called *Bhagat* who performed *baharia puja* (goat sacrifice). Hundreds of men and women converged to listen to the priest who delivered the *Bhagwat katha* (Hindu mythological stories) and Hindu women observed fasts for ‘*ekadassi*’ and ‘*Ram nawmi*’. The historian further reminds us that there were theatrical performances in the villages “*to add to the gaiety of life, the most notable of which were the Ramlilas and the Indra Sabha, and although they did not have much artistic finish, they satisfied the craving for the indigenous culture.*” These manifestations of cultural activities were described in [12] as forms of recreation of the society and culture which the Indians had left in their homeland and the reinstatement “*of customary marriage settlements and wedding ceremonies was one of the symbols of recreation of Bihari traditions in the new setting.*”

#### F. The Preservers of Bhojpuri Traditions

Bhojpuri culture and traditions travelled as the cultural luggage along with the indentured labourers from India to various countries of the world, during the British colonial period. Scholars in [3] perceive women “[...] *as the transmitters of cultural traditions, customs, songs, cuisine and (...) mother tongue.*” The author in [20] equally opines that as women shifted, they became the “*carriers of culture and preservers of identity*”. Holding similar views, “[...] *diasporic communities tend to view the family and especially women as a source of cultural influence (...)*” [3].

Along the same line, the well-known Mauritian writer Pahlad Ramsurrun, pays a special tribute to his mother, Sundari, in the preface of his book on Mauritian Bhojpuri folksongs in [26]. Born in 1919 towards the end of the indenture period, Sundari had never been to any formal school, and yet she learnt Hindi by attending the evening classes at her maternal uncle’s place. She became a living encyclopaedia of Bhojpuri songs, tales, and riddles/poems and was also very well versed in Hindu sacred scriptures. Sundari was always surrounded by women of the community and for many years she trained young girls of her neighbourhood in singing folk songs, sewing and embroidery. In 1967, she created the Sainte-Croix (suburb of the capital Port-Louis) women’s association, and in 1974, she invited the Prime Minister Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam to attend the ‘*vaarshikutsav*’ or annual function. Considered as a social leader, Sundari had the responsibility of making wedding arrangements within the village and in the neighbourhood, and the fact that she was a living library of ritual songs, her presence was considered as compulsory in wedding gatherings. Till her last days she remained the chief administrator of the women’s association that used to organize activities such as singing of *bhajan/kirtan* or devotional songs, *hawan* or fire sacrifice and celebration of various festivals.

Pahlad Ramsurrun still recalls how his popularity in the field of literature was due mostly to the exposure of folk literature through folk tales that he used to listen to, seated in the lap of his mother. The name of Sundari may not be remembered by history, yet within her capacity, she contributed to propagating her ancestral culture in her surroundings, by practising religious and folk rituals. At the same time, she represents so many other Indian women who resiliently adhered to and sustained the Bhojpuri tradition that they inherited from their mothers and grand-mothers of the preceding generations. Their profiles befit the description of women in [26], where it is pertinently noted that, “*women only gained prestige with age: first as mother of her children and later as mother-in-law...with time, she might become the well respected and venerated matriarch of her children, grand-children and all members of the community. With luck, she might then become part of an undeniable and permanent entity.*”

G. *Beyond Indenture: A Discussion on the Subordinate Position of Women V/S Their Role of “Forerunners in the Indo-Mauritian Population”.*

At the very onset of the discussion, it is important to realize that the system of indentureship transformed the fate of so many colonial countries. Despite the fact that Indian labourers undeniably faced numerous hardships in terms of living and working conditions, the reality of the other side of the coin shows, in the case of Mauritius, that only one third of the whole population of Indian Immigrants opted to return home upon termination of their contracts. The census data in [15] stands as evidence that the majority of the Indian workers, more precisely 215,595 males and 76,364 female immigrants preferred to stay back in the island. The initiatives of the colonizers need to be appraised for enforcing marriage laws,

providing facilities for acquisition of lands and possibilities of becoming entrepreneurs from labourers [9], and also for maintaining a conducive environment that allowed the Indian migrants to practise their religion. Thanks to these favourable factors, the indentured workers were motivated to settle down and felt inspired to build their own communities and to re-create their cultural life. Thus, aspects such as the underlying pull factors in host countries during indenture need to be explored in order to throw light on the brighter side of the system.

Regarding the Indian women, based on the facts mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, namely that women were not engaged in work agreements, yet they were not left on their own and were rather bound to get married immediately after disembarkation. The picture that emerges, depicts their states of being highly dependent on men, thus underpinning their lower status. The scholar's argument about Indian women's migration in [7], being an escape from the hierarchical social system of India, may be debatable, the more so as she herself draws attention to the enactment of marriage laws being an effective re-institution of patriarchal hierarchy: hence, hinting at the prevalence of men's authority. Also, the sexual division of labour within the sugar industry purports oppression and accentuates the subordinate position of women in the Mauritian society. Since women during indenture were considered as poor, uneducated, tradition bound, domestic or family oriented, their portrayal matches the "*average third world woman*" of western feminists' writings [30]. In parallel, however, despite the stereotype of women as the weaker sex, their presence was considered indispensable in order to retain the male workers in Mauritius. For this reason, colonizers provided all possible facilities to encourage the influx of women, whose quality of caring and being able to procreate incontestably became their strength in the colonies. Along with their main duties as wives and mothers, in due course, women also became wage earners, contributing to the family income. Based on historical evidence, it can be acclaimed that women were pivotal, firstly in the formation of settled families and at a later stage, in the development of a stable population in Mauritius. This same observation applies to former British colonies, leading social thinkers to describe women as the bearers of tradition.

Drawing on the works of anthropologists, [17] refers to the Mauritian society and highlights the "[...] *cultural aspects of Indian women's resilience, depicting it as basically a success story of resistance*". In such a context where the religious and family systems are constructed by men, the commendation of women for their ability to carry forward their cultural heritage sounds somewhat contrasting. There is need to reflect on the over-arching question of how women have been able to cling to culture and tradition in the patriarchal system. Should the cultural practices of women be associated with their 'natural attributes' or were they simply "*feudal residues*" of feminists' theories as argued by Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar (cited in [30])?

From an anti-racist feminist perspective, the present paper has attempted to understand the lifestyle of Indian women during indenture days and their perseverance in the cultural domain through the 'biosocial theory of sex differences' of Wood & Eagly in [36]. The integrative approach of the biosocial model blends the essentialist and social constructionist theories. Applied in the studies of such social-constructionist theorists as Mead, cited in [36]), advocates that "*sex differences in social behaviour arise from the distribution of men and women into social roles...*" Since the Stone Age era, hunting for food was associated with men, while women would gather seeds, nuts, wild plants and they would also cook, make clothes and take care of their children. The biosocial theory assumes that men and women have their own bodily specialization. During colonial era, men were assigned with the strenuous tasks in sugar cane fields due to their physique. Women were mostly associated with domestic activities, mainly because of their ability to give birth and take care of children at home, as depicted in [23]. Thus the formation of gender roles emerged from the productive work of the sexes [36], due to which men were portrayed as "provider" and women as "homemaker".

The biosocial theory also claims that "(...) these roles change in response to alterations of the domestic and non-domestic tasks typically undertaken by each sex. In line with this theory, Indian women in Mauritius were undoubtedly primarily viewed as housewives but there are evidences that they equally performed a significant amount of non-domestic tasks in their daily lives such as rearing cattle and poultry (refer to [23]). Though women were kept away from intensive tasks within sugar estates due to their 'physical inferiority' as compared to men, yet paradoxically they had to perform other demanding works such as fetching water and gathering fuel, that require substantial strength, as argued by Murdock and Provost (1973) (cited in [36]). Additionally, the literature of women in indenture reveals that their roles changed, as some of them became supervisors of cane cutters known as "sardarines" (refer to [23]); which indicates the dawning of the emancipation of women during indentureship.

Moreover, unlike the Marxist belief, the biosocial theory professes that "*patriarchy is not a universal feature of human societies*" [36] and it rather emerges under predictable circumstances. Historical evidences reveal that though the lives of women were controlled by their husbands, yet decision-making in the sugar estate camps was to some extent controlled by women (refer to [23]). The latter also had the freedom of choosing or rejecting their partners for wedding. Along with these, women also had the liberty to perform their religious/cultural rites as described in [15] and [22]. It confirms that though patriarchy was prevalent during indenture, it was not universal.

In addition, the pioneering studies conducted in the Bhojpuri regions in India (refer to [16]) and observations made through documentary films [see Ethnographic film (2014) '*Vivaah Samskara*'] have highlighted the role of women in the

performance of Hindu rituals and more importantly on such crucial occasions as birth and wedding during which “*the only music is the singing of women*”. In his book ‘Chant the Names of God’, the scholar [16], draws a parallel between the songs performed by women and the mantras chanted by the priest at each of the life cycles: “*just as the priest, accompanies each stage of his ritual with a mantra, the women accompany each of their rituals with a song*”. In the same vein, the author in [21] affirms that “[...] *most of the old songs are sung by women, for in Trinidad, as in so many parts of the world, custom dictates that men do not sing wedding songs or lullabies.*” In Mauritius, scholars and cultural leaders (e.g [5], [19], [24] and [25]) acknowledge that the wide spectrum of popular Bhojpuri genres namely *saadi ke geet* or wedding songs, *lalna/sohar* (birth songs), *harparawri* (invoking the God of rain), *janeo* (wearing of the sacred thread), *Gopal gaari* (teasing song) and *jantasar* (songs of the grinding stone), are the domain of women. By contrast, Servan-Schreiber notes that the few musical styles associated with men such as *birha*, *sabadh*, and *gamat* or ‘*l'accroche*’ (translated as ‘*sawaal-jawaab*’ in Hindi and ‘*encounter*’ in English), are on the wane. The fact that the most prevalent Bhojpuri musical forms in Mauritius are female genres, clearly shows that women have been able to preserve the Indian traditions and culture in a more authentic and sustainable manner than their male counterparts.

In the final analysis, it is not by sheer coincidence that in various Indian diaspora countries, mostly women have been identified as practitioners of folk music and culture. The biosocial theory claims that men and women behave differently, because “(...) *various phenotypic possibilities for behavioural tendencies are pre-formed in the genes...*” (cited by Caparael 2001 in [36]). Based on this assumption, one may tend to link women’s inclination towards cultural/musical practices to behaviour genetics. However, scholars as in [31] observe that “*elucidating the genetic basis of music ability may be challenging due to its multifaceted nature*” and though “(...) *music genetics research has yielded promising preliminary results*”, there is need for in-depth studies in the field.

## II. CONCLUSION

Women landed on the island of Mauritius in a context of indenture, as dependent beings yet they proved to be robust enough to be able to support the male migrants both physically and emotionally. To paraphrase Marina Carter’s titles, the women of Mauritius contributed not just to the forging but also to the colouring the rainbow nation of Mauritius. While the men toiled hard in the fields from dawn to dusk during indenture, women remained connected naturally and in a very unassuming manner to the Indian way of life through simple ways such as cooking recipes, wearing the traditional *saree*, singing *lori* (lullabies) for babies or *jantasar* while working. In other words, unlike the male migrants, the domestic lifestyle of the vast majority of women provided the means for them to be in touch with their respective traditions.

In [17], it is suggested that “*the contribution of women deserves to be highlighted in the immense work of cultural persistence and reproduction (...)*”. Having nurtured their traditions in a subconscious but consistent manner, women have contributed enormously in making Mauritius the “*chota Bharat*” or “*little India*” (Somduth Bhuckory (1967), ‘Mauritius ki Shristi’).

To sum up, it would not be an extrapolation to state that the multiple musical forms, songs and cultural expressions preserved, were the voice of the silent, subdued souls of indenture, which later in history became their identity markers. Gone are the bitter times of Tinker’s portrayal of women migrants as dependents and spouses of negligible labour value. Within less than two generations women moved on to play an increasingly major role in transforming the destiny of so many former colonies of the British and French Empires. Marina Carter’s reference in [7] to those Indian women who “[...] *made the journey across the kalapani to Mauritius, and became the forerunners of the present Indo-Mauritian population*” is a timely reminder of “[...] *their rich and important contribution to the island’s development*”. The world cultural heritage site of the Aapravasi Ghat in Mauritius stands out as a tribute not just to the *jahaji bhai* but also to the *jahaji bahen*.

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