

Chapter Three

"LEFT TO THE IMAGINATION":

INDIAN NATIONALISM AND FEMALE SEXUALITY

This business about the women is the weakest and the irredemiabale part of the evil... These women are not necessarily wives. Men and women are huddled together during the voyage. The marriage is a farce. A mere declaration by man or woman made upon landing before the Protector of Immigrants that they are husband and wife constitutes a valid marriage. Naturally enough, divorce is common. The rest must be left to the imagination of the reader.

(M.K.Gandhi, *Speech on Indentured Labour*, 1916)

The aim of this chapter and the next one is to investigate a conjuncture of modernity, "Indianness" and woman that is radically different from our own in India, in the hope that it will de-familiarize our formation as well as throw some new light on the elements that led to its consolidation. This chapter attempts to alter the lens through which we have been accustomed to viewing or framing the emergence of that discursive subject, the modern Indian woman. In analysing the formation of "woman" in India, we often use almost as though by default the implicit comparisons with western or metropolitan situations. I want to ask whether our frameworks might look different when the points of reference include other non-metropolitan contexts, in particular those that are historically imbricated with our own, even if in ways that are obscured by later developments.

My investigation proceeds through an analysis of the early 20th century campaign against indentureship in the tropical colonies by nationalists in India. I follow this, in Chapter Four ("Take a Little Chutney"), with the investigation of a contemporary controversy around East Indian women and popular music in Trinidad. I have chosen these moments for their foregrounding of the question of female sexuality, an issue which is increasingly being seen as

central to the formation of gendered citizenship and to dominant narratives of nationhood. Historically, the moments are also those of "Indian" political assertion as well as of the availability of new possibilities for "Indian" women. I use the quote marks for the term Indian to signal its double use: marking in my first "moment" a (future) nationality in South Asia, and in my second, an "ethnic" category in the Caribbean. Much of the writing in the media tends to blur the difference between the two usages, a blurring that could well serve to make Indo-Trinidadians invisible both in India as well as Trinidad, marking them simultaneously as "not Indian enough" in the first location and as "not Trinidadian enough" in the second.

The formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 signalled the beginning of a new phase of organisation in the movement against British rule in India. Accommodating a wide spectrum of ideological strands and reconciling a host of conflicting interests, the Congress was able—in the space of the next few decades—to provide focus and direction to the anti-colonial struggle, culminating in the final handover of political power in 1947. Among the many successful initiatives of the nationalists was the early twentieth century campaign against indentureship, one that contributed in significant measure to building up a moral case against colonialism. However, in the late nineteenth century, indenture did not yet figure as a significant anti-colonial issue. On the contrary, as B.R.Nanda points out, in 1893 the leading nationalist M.G. Ranade actually wrote an article on "Indian Foreign Emigration" in which he argued that emigration afforded some "relief" to the growing population of India, and that the expansion of the British Empire could be seen as a "direct gain" to the masses of this country.¹ Eventually, however, due in significant measure to the efforts of an Indian involved in agitations in South Africa, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a figure who was to rise to great prominence in the nationalist struggle, indentured emigration became an important issue for Indian nationalism.² Born in India and educated as a barrister in England, Gandhi had gone to South Africa in 1893 to

¹ Published in the *Sarvajanic Sabha Quarterly Journal*, Oct 1893, edited by Gokhale. See B.R.Nanda, *Gokhale* (Delhi, 1977), Bk.IV, Chapter 37.

² At the Calcutta meeting of the Congress, Gandhi had Gokhale's assurance that a resolution on South Africa would be passed, and when his name was called, Gandhi read the resolution. As Gandhi wrote about that moment: "Someone had printed and distributed amongst the delegates copies of a poem he had written in praise of foreign emigration. I read the poem and referred to the grievances of the settlers in South Africa". Since all resolutions passed unanimously, Gandhi's too was passed, and it did not mean that delegates and read and understood it. "And yet the very fact that it was passed by the Congress was enough to delight my heart. The knowledge that the *imprimatur* of the Congress meant that of the whole country was enough to delight anyone." From M.K.Gandhi, *My Experiments with Truth: An Autobiography*, vol. 1 (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Pub House, 1968), p.341.

work as a lawyer for a prominent Indian business family and ended up staying there for nearly twenty-one years.³ Although the early agitations initiated by Gandhi did not involve indentured workers in Natal, many of them came to participate in Gandhi's passive resistance (*satyagraha*) campaign against the various legal disabilities imposed on Indians in South Africa. Closer interaction with the indentured increased Gandhi's awareness of their specific problems, which he tried to bring to the attention of nationalists in India.

The *satyagraha*, stretching from 1906 to 1914, was for Gandhi a direct ancestor of the anti-indenture agitation. When Gandhi began the *satyagraha* campaign in South Africa, in Bombay the Imperial Indian Citizenship Association - a group who expressed explicit concern for Indian immigrants - was founded.

From the 1890s on, Gandhi had attempted to enlist the help of the Congress leaders, and Gokhale in particular was supportive of his endeavours. In 1894, Gandhi had drafted the first petition protesting against the indenture system. After constitutional reforms in 1909, a Legislative Council with Indian members was formed, and was dominated by the Congress. As a member of the Legislative Council, Gokhale in 1910 moved a successful resolution to stop the recruitment of indentured labour for Natal. In spite of his failing health, Gokhale not only visited South Africa on Gandhi's invitation but "attended to the South African business night and day" (p.354). "Eventually all India was deeply stirred, and the South African question became the burning topic of the day".⁴ The focus of Gandhi and his European Indophile colleagues (C.F.Andrews, Pearson, Polak) was indentured hardship in Fiji and South Africa, and while Indian indentureship in the West Indies seldom got special mention in this narrative, it was often subsumed within it.

Indentured Women in the West Indies

The nationalist description of the situation of indentured women drew from missionary accounts, Government of India and colonial administrators' reports, and first-hand accounts of sympathetic Europeans such as C.F.Andrews who wrote about Fiji. The central concern of all these writers seemed to be the "immorality" caused by the disparate sex ratio of the immigrant labourers. There

³ Some of the famous biographies of Gandhi include Romain Rolland, *Mahatma Gandhi* (Zurich, 1925), Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London, 1951), and Erik Eriksen, *Gandhi's Truth* (London, 1970).

⁴ M.K.Gandhi, *Selected Works*, Vol 3, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Press, 1969), p.428.

was also more than a suggestion that the inconstancy of Indian women could be traced to the social composition of the female migrants.

Women evangelicals of the Canadian Presbyterian Church which began proselytizing amongst the Indians in Trinidad in 1868 interacted closely with the indentured women and recorded their impressions of what they saw as barbaric "Indian customs" and the reprehensible behaviour of the women in particular:

There are no zenanas in Trinidad. Our women immigrants are not recruited from the class that in India are shut up in zenanas. In Trinidad they find themselves of added importance through the small proportion of their sex. They have great freedom of intercourse and much evil example around them. Sad to say they often shew themselves to be as degraded as they are ignorant. On the other hand many are beautiful and lovable, faithful to their husbands and devoted to their children. This, however, is by no means the rule.⁵

While the planters did not want a permanent community of labourers at first, preferring young male workers who would return to India at the end of their indenture period and make way for a new batch, colonial officials recommended that a certain proportion of women to men be maintained in order to avoid what they saw as social complications. For a variety of reasons, however, recruiters were often unable to obtain a sufficient number of women.

Trinidadian feminist historian Rhoda Reddock addresses the implications of this problem in her important early work on women under indentureship. She is of the opinion that modern historians do not pay sufficient attention to the disparate sex ratio, although it was a crucial point of contention during the entire period of indenture. In 1884, Act XXI of the Government of India authorised the resumption of emigration to the West Indies after a long break, laying down as one of its conditions that at least 12% of the emigrants should be female, a legal proportion that, says Reddock, was rarely enforced. She points to how in a period of twenty-plus years, between 1857 and 1879, the recommended ratio of women to men changed about six times, "ranging from one woman to every three men in 1857 to one to two in 1868 and one to four in 1878-79". Reddock is of the view that these changes in the proportion of men to women were a reflection of the

⁵ John Morton of Trinidad, *Pioneer Missionary of the Presbyterian Church in Canada to the East Indians in the British West Indies. Journals, Letters and Papers* edited by Sarah E. Morton. Westminster Company, Toronto, 1916. Extract from "Work among Women", p.185.

contradictions in recruiting 'the right kind of women'.⁶ She concurs with other historians that as early as 1851 there was a recognition of the need for women as a "stabilizing factor" on the male labourers, and that by the late 19th century planters were convinced that they needed a stable workforce which would not return to India, and were therefore willing to create the conditions for the reproduction of Indian families in Trinidad. This need for domestic units coincided, as we shall see, with the Presbyterian initiatives regarding education for Indian women and the range of housewifely skills they were expected to acquire. Among the efforts to increase the number of women emigrants was the 1890s reduction of the indenture period for women, from five years to three, and the promise to recruiting agents of an increased commission for women, sometimes 40% higher than that for men. Emigrants were also encouraged to take female children, preferably between the ages of ten and fourteen (Reddock, p.29).

As historian K.O.Laurence suggests, one of the reasons for the lack of women was that few wives emigrated, since their husbands would prefer to leave them behind in the protection of their joint family rather than take them to a strange country, especially since the indenture period was presumed to be a short one.⁷ The Government of India tried to set the proportion of women to men at 50:100, but there was opposition to that on various counts, including the argument that this would, according to a former Emigration Commissioner, result in recruiting "bad women" who would "do more harm than good" (Laurence, p.123). The concern about immorality arising because of the small number of women seemed to go hand in hand with the idea that these women were in any case innately depraved to begin with, and that the real solution was to obtain enough numbers of virtuous wives to offset the other kinds of women who seemed most likely to want to emigrate.

If we look at the number of married women among the female emigrants, it becomes obvious that they were often in a minority. Here are some random figures for Indian female immigrants registered as married upon arrival in Trinidad, 1882-1900, taken from G.I.M.Tikasingh's compilation put together from the General Registers of Immigrants and Register of Indian Marriage. In 1882, for example, the number of total female immigrants was 662, among whom 133, or about 20%, were married. In 1890, out of a total of 713, 291 or 40.8% were married; in 1891, out of 1,091, 470 or 43% (the highest figure in the period under

⁶ Rhoda Reddock, *Women, Labour and Politics in Trinidad and Tobago* (London: Zed Books, 1994), pp.27-29.

⁷ K.O.Laurence, *A Question of Labour, Indentured Immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana, 1875-1917* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1994), p.119.

consideration) were married women, and in 1898, out of a total of 371, 59 or 15.9% (the lowest figure) came out to Trinidad already married.⁸ In 1900, at the beginning of the new century, out of a total of 188 female emigrants, 46 or 24.4% were married. The rest of the women, from 57% (1891) to as much as nearly 84% (1898) were single, being unmarried, widowed or deserted. Even as late as 1915, two years before the abolition of indenture, when emigration of families was being encouraged, Commissioners McNeill and Chimman Lal found that a third of the women came out to Trinidad as wives, the remainder being mostly widows and runaway wives, and a small percentage of prostitutes. There were also among them women deserted by their husbands, and some unmarried pregnant women. (Reddock, p.30)

The planters' demand was not just for more females but for the 'right kind of women', who would not only be productive labourers on the estates but also faithful wives to the male workers. In response to these demands, the recruiters pointed out that a better class of women could not be induced to emigrate and that in any case they would be no good as field labourers. As an Emigration Agent in Calcutta put it in 1915: "In considering this matter it must be borne in mind that genuine field labourers such as the planters require can be obtained only from among the lowest castes, i.e. from among the non-moral class of the population. A more moral type is found higher in the social scale, but such women would be useless in the fields". (CO 571/5, 27680, 1917, cited in Reddock, p.30). Recruiters also warned that if more women were demanded they would be sending "non-effective" ones or "objectionable characters". (Laurence, p.124) As Basdeo Mangru points out in the case of British Guiana, Trinidad's neighbour, "Criticisms regarding the type of women imported had not been wanting. Immigration officials and others often referred to their 'loose and depraved character' and condemned the Emigration Agents for shipping 'the sweepings of the Bazaars' of Calcutta and other large Indian cities". [CO 384/106. Longden to Carnarvon, no. 218, 20 Oct 1875]⁹

Evidence from another destination of indentured emigrants, the Dutch colony of Surinam, suggests the diversity of occupations of the women who decided to migrate. An emigration agent for Surinam wrote in 1877-78 about the recruits gathered in the depot prior to departure: "Their number was considerably augmented by a batch of dancing girls and women of similar

⁸ G.I.M. Tikasingh, 'The establishment of the Indians in Trinidad, 1870-1900', Ph.D. thesis, UWI St. Augustine, 1975, p.262.

⁹ Basdeo Mangru, "The Sex-Ratio Disparity and its Consequences under the Indenture in British Guiana", in David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (eds), *India in the Caribbean* (London: Hansib/University of

description with their male attendants. These people laughed at the idea of labouring as agriculturalists".¹⁰ Other descriptions of female migrants to the same colony indicate close similarities with the British West Indies. The Protector of Emigrants, writing in 1880, is of the opinion that "...[T]he class of women willing to emigrate consists principally of young widows and married or single women who have already gone astray and are therefore not only most anxious to avoid their homes and to conceal their antecedents, but are also at the same time unlikely to be received back into their families" (Emmer, p.194).

Oral histories of early twentieth-century Trinidad provide the story of Maharani, a young Brahmin widow who ran away to Trinidad, fearing ill-treatment in her in-laws' house:

Maharani

I married

me husband dead

...

milk boiling

dem go want de milk to eat

an ah cat coming to drink

an ah hit im an de milk fall down

I say dem go beat me

because I getting too much lix [beatings]

I say dem go beat me

well I run

I no tell nobody I leaving

only me modder-in-law.¹¹

Given the disparity between wages for male and female labourers, young women like Maharani often found it difficult to manage on the small amounts that they earned. To avoid indebtedness to grocers and traders, in 1879 the Agent-General ordered that rations be given to all first year

Warwick, 1987), pp.223-24.

¹⁰ P.C.Emmer, 'The meek Hindu: The recruitment of Indian indentured labourers for service overseas, 1870-1916', in Emmer (ed.), *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), p.192.

¹¹ *The Still Cry, Personal Accounts of East Indians in Trinidad and Tobago during Indentureship (1845-1917)*, compiled and edited by Noor Kumar Mahabir (Ithaca, NY, and Tacarigua, Trinidad: Calaloux Publications, 1985), p.79.

immigrants, to be deducted from their wages (in some estates the rations were given free of charge). However, as Judith Weller points out, "The immigrants, especially women, frequently embarked on the second year of their apprenticeship saddled with a considerable debt for the first year's rations. The newly-arrived immigrant was the "fag" and given the hardest work to perform".¹² There were skilled 'male' tasks (millwork, forking, truck-loading) and less-skilled 'female' tasks (such as weeding, manuring, supplying and cane-cutting, also the lowest-paid). Even when women did heavy male tasks like truck-loading, they were paid the same as other women. In 1870 and 1875, a fixed minimum wage was set for men at 25 cents; for women it was always less. An investigator in 1891 wrote about one estate where women earned from 10 cents to 25 cents, and men earned 25 cents to 40 cents; on another estate, males earned between 50 and 70 cents per day, and all women earned 25 cents. In 1913 when the two last Commissioners McNeill and Lal visited Trinidad, and women were indentured for three years technically, they earned half to 2/3 of the male wage, that is, half a crown to 3 shillings weekly. (Reddock, pp.36-38) Low wages drove women to increased dependency on male partners, although as we see in the following section of this chapter they were able to negotiate sometimes the terms of such dependency.

Maharani the Brahmin widow, for example, did not particularly want a partner but was pressurised to acquire one:

an e carry me go

e carry me he room

I no want nobody

I say

I stop alone

but she fadder say

I like you

but I say

me nuh like you

[but he takes her all the same] (*The Still Cry*, pp. 84-85)

Missionary Travails

The Canadian Presbyterian missionaries who came to Trinidad to work with the indentured

¹² Judith Ann Weller, *The East Indian Indenture in Trinidad* (Rio Piedras: Institute of Caribbean Studies, Univ. of Puerto Rico, 1968), p. 63.

Indian labourers were the first to build schools for them. Access to Western-style education was accompanied by exposure to Christianity, to which the missionaries often found the Indians quite resistant. A Girls' Training Home was established in 1890, "for the protection and training of Indian girls". Christian girls 12 years old and upwards were admitted here to be instructed so that they would become good wives for "our helpers" (Christian teachers). At the Home, apart from Hindi, English, arithmetic and Bible classes, the girls were taught "washing, ironing, starching, scrubbing, gardening, sewing, and all the housewifely arts"(pp.348-49). While some of them turned out to be apt pupils, other Indian women presented a puzzle to the Canadians, as the following extracts from the Mortons' writings show:

The women, as a rule, are quite as wicked as the men and more ignorant and prejudiced; thus their influence for good or evil is very great. (p.186--quotation from Morton's Report, 1879)

[Soobhie knocked at Juraman's door and was taken in--both had become Christians--subsequently --March 1878--she wanted to leave him and live with another man on the estate--despite the interventions of the Mortons and others Soobhie finally went to live with this man.] She must be crazy as well as wicked. Some of these Indian women are hard to understand and I fear are not much good when you do understand them. But then it is the result of long ages of ignorance, mistrust, and degradation. And we cannot hope to raise them in a day... July 1878--Soobhie wishes now to come back to Juraman, but he will have nothing to say to her. [She never returned to her husband.] (p.188)

Illustrations to indicate the difficulties they had to deal with-- (possibly 1893)

S.E.M.--The loose notions and prevailing practices in respect of marriage here are quite shocking to a new-comer. I said to an East Indian woman whom I knew to be the widow of a Brahman, "You have no relations in Trinidad, I believe." "No, Madame," she replied, "only myself and two children; when the last [Immigrant] ship came in I took a papa. I will keep him as long as he treats me well. If he does not treat me well I shall send him off at once; that's the right way. is it not?" This will be to some a new view of women's rights. (p.342)

S.E.M.--...A group of women newly returned from field work salute me thus: "Your disciple is going to church now." There is a spice of malice in this, for the woman indicated [as a disciple was not baptized with us and] has left her married husband for another. I answered, "That will

do her no good unless she change her living." "What can she do?" says one. "This husband takes better care of her than the other one did."

S.E.M.--A few weeks ago a poor little girl was deliberately stabbed through the heart by her would-be husband; he said he had paid \$200 to get her, and since she would not live with him no one else should have her. [These are extreme cases, but it will be understood that there was great need for improvement in the conditions of home life among the people.] A woman who had left her husband because he had taken another wife, said to me in the calmest possible way, "You know, it would not be pleasant for two of us in one house." "And where are you now?"

Unhesitatingly she mentioned the name of her newly-adopted husband. "And where is your boy?" (Quite cheerfully) "With his father." But enough; or you will be thinking Trinidad the hell the East Indians sometimes call it. (p. 342)

(Main text) It should be added that in some Indian nationalities women are treated with much greater consideration than by others, and that in more than one Sanskrit drama, read and sung every day by the priests among the people, and revered by all Hindoos, beautiful and touching love stories are related with pictures of unspotted purity and supreme devotion in married life. (p. 347)

(From a report of 1891) S.E.M.--In connection with our Bible class I have read and explained each day to the girls, in Hindi, a lesson from the Zenana Reader, used by lady missionaries in India, each chapter containing a separate lesson on some subject suitable for wives and house-keepers... Nothing but the power of the Word could ever have subdued the evil passions that made the experience of the first few months the most soul-trying we have ever gone through. (p. 350)

[A new girl, about 17, who had studied in a mission school in Calcutta and could read Hindi and Pharsi, came to the Home--she was married off (to a teacher?) and taught sewing in the school in Arouca--she once took a broomstick to her husband in a rage]

... that broom-stick, however, was a grave source of dissatisfaction around; it was feared that other wives might hear of it and do the same.

(main text) Sad to say Rachel left her husband permanently; he was proved to have been unkind to her. We last heard of her in Venezuela. (p. 351)

It must... be remembered that, with few exceptions, Indian girls are married at a very early

age... and also that moral conditions in Trinidad render it altogether inadvisable, if not unsafe, for young women to visit from house to house, nor are the husbands willing. [about the difficulty of training bible-women] (p.359)

[About a pupil teacher who was Christian but without benefit of clergy "took unto himself a wife and a heathen to boot"] With a sad heart I had to dismiss him. In three months' time she had become another man's wife. After due repentance and full confession of his wrong-doing he was taken back into the school. (p.442)

Marriage and Morals

The rapidity with which Indian women formed new relationships in Trinidad was a matter for comment by contemporary writers as well as latter-day historians. Early twentieth century visitors to the West Indies like British novelist Charles Kingsley tended to see women's behaviour as stemming from a practice like child-marriage, which Kingsley called "a very serious evil" but attributed to customs brought from India:

The girls are practically sold by their fathers while yet children, often to wealthy men much older than they. Love is out of the question. But what if the poor child, as she grows up, sees some one, among that overplus of men, to whom she, for the first time in her life, takes a fancy? Then comes a scandal; and one which is often ended swiftly enough by the cutlass.¹³

Kingsley talked of child-brides, although many of the examples in the missionary writings are those of older women, who seemed to have constructed for themselves spaces of negotiation to offset their lack of privilege in the wage system of the plantation.

As Tikasingh remarks, the most common type of union was the "keeper union", "whose stability depended primarily upon the satisfaction of the female partner". He cites the case of a woman named Mungaree, who had an arrangement with one Namoomarlala on Orange Field Estate. He had given her \$150 in clothes and silver, and she had lived with him for eight years. She then went to live with another man, Nageeroo, "with the understanding that she could return to her former keeper at any time"; subsequently, at the time of the court case mentioned here, she was living with yet another man, a shopkeeper. "As soon as females were ill-treated by their

¹³ Charles Kingsley, *At Last, A Christmas in the West Indies* (London:Macmillan, 1910), p.192.

'papa', ... they were quite ready to break the existing union and form another".¹⁴

Speaking about British Guiana, Basdeo Mangru points out that the "paucity of women made polyandry almost an acknowledged system. Very often an Indian woman was found to have two husbands and to be unfaithful to both". [Daily Argosy, 23 March and 24 April 1913] (Mangru, p.227) That these kinds of relationships were also common in Trinidad is borne out by the experiences of Sarah Morton and other missionaries. Mangru cites official correspondence that expressed concern about the "loose domestic relations" among the indentured labourers: 'It is not uncommon for a woman of this class to leave the man with whom she has cohabited for another, and then for a third, perhaps for a fourth, and sometimes to return to one of those she had previously deserted; and this she does in most cases with impunity'. [CO 111/376, Scott to Kimberley, no.100, 15 Aug 1870] (Mangru, p.227) As K.O.Laurence puts it, "Women sought to maximize their bargaining power and shifted their allegiance to the male who presented the best offer with great facility". He quotes the research of B.L.Moore on British Guiana, giving the 1887 example of a woman at Bush Lot who was "married with Hindu rites to three different men in a single year". (Laurence, p.239) He also points out that "In Guiana polyandry with two or three, sometimes even four men became fairly common. Similar situations were also known in Trinidad, though probably not widespread. Keeper unions however were very common there".¹⁵

The Anti-Slavery Society proposed banning the recruitment of single women to avoid what they saw as inevitable immorality, but it was pointed out that to circumvent this rule recruits would pretend to be married to each other at the time of emigration. In any case, some opponents of indentureship believed, as Gandhi did, that marriages between recruits were often fictitious. The point is not whether the marriages were false or real, or whether single women were entirely responsible for "immoral relations", but why critics and commentators chose to ascribe to the above a situation clearly related to the displacement of men and women into a diasporic condition where new opportunities presented themselves to people married as well as unmarried. Colonial officials, however, persisted in seeing the "notoriously lax morals" of the indentured as due to the significant proportion of "sexually permissive women" on the estates, where they claimed the general "level of sexual morality" was lower than in a typical Indian village. (Laurence, p.126)

¹⁴ Tikasingh, op.cit., p.270. CCCB (1878-79), pp.158-59; Mungaree vs. Nageeroo, 13 July 1878.

¹⁵ K.O.Laurence, *A Question of Labour*, p.236.

Wife Murders

The prevalence of "wife-murders" by indentured Indians in Trinidad and British Guiana in the 19th century was represented as due to the inconstancy of the women. David V. Trotman presents the following factual information: Between 1872 and 1880, 27% of all murders in Trinidad were committed by East Indian immigrants; subsequently, between 1881 and 1889 East Indians accounted for 60% of the murders, and 70% between 1890 and 1898. Tikasingh gives figures between 1872 and 1900, of 87 murders of Indian women, of which 65 (74.7%) were murders of wives [CP 76/1898: PIR for 1897, p.5, (Tikasingh, p.272)]. The majority of the murderers were men, and those killed were women who were either wives, concubines or fiancées. Although there are quite a few court cases involving men who had killed their child-brides whose fathers had promised them to several men for a hefty bride-price each time, many of the cases were those against men who had murdered their wives for having taken up with another man. It was also not uncommon for Indian women to form relationships with overseers and white estate managers, as depicted for example in A.R.F. Webber's 1917 novel *Those that Be in Bondage*.¹⁶ Trotman contends that the women received very little sympathy, in spite of their difficulty in resisting the advances of their employers, most officials choosing to blame "the very loose character of the majority of coolie women, and the temptations to which men in the positions of managers and overseers are subjected". [cited from Longden to Kimberley, No.161, 21st August, 1873, CO 295/269.] (Trotman, p.253)

"Wife murders," D.W.D. Comins wrote in 1891, "form the foulest blot on our whole immigration system..."¹⁷ A variety of explanations were offered for this phenomenon, ranging from the cultural (wife murder as proof of the moral depravity of heathens, as resulting from "Asiatic idiosyncrasies", or from the "constitutional jealousy of Orientals"), to the materialistic (Indian men outraged at having the woman they had paid for become the wife of another man), the psychological (envy, jealousy, rage and revenge) and the demographic (the disparity between the numbers of men and women). Whatever they saw as the causes of wife-murder, the only possible remedy for the problem, according to some colonial officials, was the introduction of larger numbers of females. (Tikasingh, p.272)

Other colonial officials, however, refused to accept the idea that the shortage of women recruits was at the root of the trouble, "suggesting that it was a question of quality rather than

¹⁶ A.R.F. Webber, *Those that be in Bondage, a Tale of Indian Indentures and Sunlit Western Waters* (Georgetown: Daily Chronicle Printing Press, 1917).

numbers: that the women were of such 'low class' that the men regarded them as chattels and treated them as such. Much was ascribed to "Asiatic ideas" of the low value of female life". (Laurence, p.239) Prison authorities in Trinidad were of the view that "So long as there shall be in the Colony a large body of Asiatics who live as a race distinct from the rest of the labouring classes, keeping their own style of dress and observing their own peculiar traditions, it is useless to expect that the mere risk of death upon the scaffold will prevent their holding in Trinidad the same views with regard to their womankind that exist in the country from which they come". [TRG, LV, No.23 (June 9, 1886), CP 47, Prison Report for 1885, p.618]. (Cited in Weller, p.66)

Charles Kingsley seems to concur: "Wife-murder is but too common among these Hindoos, and they cannot be made to see that it is wrong. 'I kill my own wife. Why not? I kill no other man's wife', was said by as pretty, gentle, graceful a lad of two-and-twenty as one need see... There is murder of wives, or quasi-wives now and then, among the baser sort of Coolies—murder because a poor girl will not give her ill-earned gains to the ruffian who considers her his property. (Kingsley, p.192) There is an additional hint here, perhaps, that the woman's "ill-earned gains" may be money obtained from another man than her husband.

Oral histories confirm the prevalence of wife-murder, as in Fazal's testimony in *The Still Cry*:

if e run way nex man daughter
 e go beat e arse too
 if you have to run way wid man wife
 leave one time
 dat man go kill e wife
 kill two a dem

(p.56)

Much of the information about the nature of the relationships which led to wife-murder comes from anecdotal sources. It was not easy to obtain statistical data about wife-murder, since, as Judith Weller suggests, most of the time the crime was recorded as murder only when a conviction was obtained, and very often there was not enough evidence to convict the murderer. (Weller, p.66) It is perfectly possible to imagine, then, that the incidence of wife-murder was even higher than the records indicate. Early punishments for those caught enticing women away from their husbands included flogging, shaving, transfer of guilty parties to other estates, fines

¹⁷ Comins, "Note", p.31; Minutes of the Legislative Council, 21 Oct 1890, cited in Tikasingh, p.272.

and imprisonment, but these did not bring down the number of wife-murders.

The eventual solution to the problem was sought in legislation about marriage, not just in punishment upon the scaffold. There seemed to be agreement on this score between the colonial authorities and the immigrant men. Witness this petition from Indian immigrants, signed by 274 Indians and witnessed by Canadian missionaries, Reverends Morton, Grant and Christie, and seeking enactment of an ordinance for registration of Indian marriages. The purpose of the registration was to enable "any person...[to] prosecute an unfaithful spouse and their partner in guilt either in the Magistrates' Court, the Complaint Court or the Supreme Court, according as damages are laid at L10, at L25 or upwards, with provision for imprisonment if the damages be not paid, for the imprisonment of the wife if she refused to return to her husband, and also for the continued prosecution of the parties if the offence be persisted in". (TRG, L, No.6 (Feb 2, 1881) Minutes of the Legislative Council Meeting of Jan 28, 1881, p.74). Interestingly, the petitioners did not demand divorce but "the preservation of their households". Ordinance No.6 of 1881 was passed to make the necessary provisions for the marriage and divorce of Indian immigrants. This applied only to Hindus and Muslims among the immigrants, since Christians were already covered by the existing laws of the colony. (Weller, p.69) Tikasingh, however, speaks of the problems connected with registration under the Immigrants' Marriage and Divorce Ordinances, 6/1881 and 23/1891, suggesting that part of the difficulty lay in the framing of the ordinances. "For example, the marriage ordinance of 1881 was really concerned mainly with the prevention of wife-murders rather than with the recognition of Indian marriages". He goes on to say that "...the act of registration itself was subject to numerous difficulties such as the age of the bride, *the lack of accurate information concerning the former marital status of either party*, and the refusal or neglect of either party to apply for registration of the marriage". [emphasis mine]

Other kinds of solutions were sought too. In 1879, for instance, Acting Governor of Trinidad William Young demanded measures to improve the "moral status of the Coolie woman". Only by recognizing their traits of character, among which he included thrift and industry, and initiating measures to develop them, Young contended, could "civilization and morality", be substantially improved among the Indian population. He maintained that Indian women were not strong enough for strenuous plantation labour but could exert a "civilizing and humanizing influence" if she devoted herself to domestic duties. This impulse coincided with that of the Canadian missionaries who started the first schools for Indians in 1869, where there were distinctly different curricula for boys and girls, with the ones for the latter primarily focussed on

the production of housewives.¹⁸ Just a couple of years before Young's statement, the planters had passed a resolution asking for the indenture-free importation of Indian widows and "betrothed women" who had lost their intended husbands. This proposal had been suggested by the Emigration Agent at Calcutta, who commended the "pure and blameless lives" of these women; other colonial officials agreed that bringing in a higher class of female would ameliorate the cause of the problem of wife-murder: the immorality of immigrant women. This new scheme of emigration did not find support among recruiters in India, and eventually had to be dropped. (Mangru, pp.224-25)

The shameless Indian woman was being increasingly represented as a matter of grave concern not just to colonial officials but also to Indian men, as we see from a letter written by Mohammed Orfy, who wrote numerous letters to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Indian Government and other authorities "on behalf of destitute Indian men of Trinidad": "Another most disgraceful concern, which is most prevalent, and a perforating plague, is the high percentage of immoral lives led by the female section of our community. They are enticed, seduced and frightened into becoming concubines, and paramours to satisfy the greed and lust of the male section of quite a different race to theirs". Having mentioned the susceptibility of the women to seduction, Orfy goes on to say that "...They have absolutely no knowledge whatever of the value of being in virginhood and become most shameless and a perfect menace to the Indian gentry". [CO 571/4 W.I.22518 (1916)] (cited in Reddock, p.44)

Between Sarah Morton's comment about the Brahmin widow who took a new 'papa' and the reasoning of educated East Indian men as exemplified by Mohammed Orfy, the difference might not be that the first stresses the wilfulness of the Indian woman and that the second is inclined to emphasize her susceptibility to "enticement", as did the colonial authorities who framed the marriage laws. Both Orfy and the colonial authorities were in agreement on the lax morals of the Indian woman immigrant. We could see the two - an emerging East Indian middle class in Trinidad and the colonial rulers - as complicit in the reconstitution of patriarchal

¹⁸ According to Reddock, in 1891, only 6.2% of the female population of Indians were officially 'housewives' (not estate workers). The later years of indenture saw women's withdrawal into the domestic economy. Depressed wages for Indian labourers were accompanied by permission to produce cane and food crops on a piece of land which would be looked after by the wife and children. Women who worked for the family thus received no wages although they were involved in "cane farming, market gardening, rice production and animal husbandry" (Reddock, pp.36-39).

structures which becomes visible by the early twentieth century. However, it might not be accurate to assert, as Reddock appears to do, that "Indian tradition" simply comes to the fore once indentureship ends.

We could briefly examine two kinds of approaches to the culture of Indians in Trinidad. The pioneering work of Morton Klass, already discussed in Chapter 2, typifies one kind, in which classical anthropological paradigms prevail, and indenture is seen as a temporary disruption in well-established patterns of living; the stress here is on cultural persistence and survival, since culture is framed as that which continues through time, and includes characteristics of people, as for example the supposed docility and submissiveness of Indian women (a prevalent stereotype even today among Afro-Trinidadians and other Creoles). The work of Rhoda Reddock typifies another approach, which employs a consciously historical paradigm, and in Reddock's case provides us with a nuanced understanding of women's lives under indenture. The emphasis, however, is on the 20th century reconstitution of the Hindu and "Indian" family, with all its patriarchal features, including prescriptions for women. The suggestion here is that "tradition" won out in the end, and was able to subjugate women, so that their options today are not much different from those of women in India who have not shared their history. The stories about immoral Indian women result, in Reddock's analysis, in the construction of a new patriarchy, and to the closure of the question of women's agency, or "freedom denied". The implicit argument here concerns East Indian women in the present, and Reddock's perception that - like women in India - they do not live lives that are "free".

It is interesting to note how historians and anthropologists are able to document changes in areas such as caste, religion and customs, but seem to insist that with regard to women there were no changes at all or that if they did occur, they were eventually reversed. Commonly, they make a series of culturalist assumptions, where "Indians" no matter where they are continue to manifest certain behaviour patterns. Against both these approaches, I would want to argue that the displacement caused by indenture made for irreversible transformations, and the discursive deployment of the East Indian woman in the realm of popular music discussed by me in Chapter Five, for example, is an indicator of some of these changes.

Abolishing Indenture

In 1896, Gandhi, who was still living in South Africa at the time, had a meeting with nationalist leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale to try and interest him in the cause of overseas Indians. In 1901,

again Gandhi spent some time with Gokhale, who was to become one of his earliest admirers and supporters in India. On Gandhi's urging, in February 1910 Gokhale piloted a resolution through the Imperial Legislative Council of which he was a member, calling for a complete ban on the recruitment of indentured labour. In 1911, a ban was imposed on recruitment for Natal, and finally in 1917 it was extended to all overseas colonies, but not before a large-scale campaign had been mounted against indenture by Gandhi and a host of other nationalists.

As historian Hugh Tinker points out, the campaign was, in fact, Gandhi's first big political intervention in India. He gave anti-indenture speeches all over the country, wrote about the topic at length in newspapers, and was able to have an Anti-Indenture Resolution passed at the Lucknow Congress in December 1916. By 1915, "the indenture issue became the central question of Indian politics". Even as emigration itself declined for a variety of reasons, there was widespread nationalist protest, with meetings organised in Hyderabad Sind and Karachi (then in north-western India), Allahabad (in the central region), Madras (in the south), and in parts of Bengal (eastern India).¹⁹ The agitators called for an end to a system which they said was a "moral stigma" for the country. As Rhoda Reddock reiterates, issues of low wages or poor working conditions were of far lesser importance than "women's moral condition" in the campaign to abolish indentureship. (Reddock, p.45)

The historical significance of the anti-indenture campaign, suggests Tinker, lies in the fact that "this was the first major Indo-British political and social issue to be decided in dependent India, and not in metropolitan Britain". (Tinker, p.288)

An examination of the nationalist discourse on indenture would reveal the crucial place occupied in it by the question of women's sexuality, helping us understand why it was believed to be something unspeakable, and why - paradoxically - it needed to be spoken about so interminably. Given this campaign's centrality to nationalist thought, it would be interesting to see how women were represented in the criticism of indentureship. I will take as my point of departure some aspects of Partha Chatterjee's well-known argument about the nationalist resolution of the women's question. Chatterjee has tried to account for the relative insignificance of the "women's question" in the late 19th century by suggesting that nationalism was able to "resolve" the question by this time in accordance with its attempt to make "modernity consistent

¹⁹ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, (London: Hansib, 1993), pp.334-47.

with the nationalist project".²⁰

In constructing a new woman, the middle-class upper caste *bhadramahila* (Bengali for bourgeois lady), nationalism in India was able to produce and enforce distinctions between the material might of the colonizer and the spiritual superiority of the colonized. Chatterjee suggests that the distinctions were embodied in new oppositions between public and private, the "world" (*bhaire*) and the "home" (*ghare*); in the former realm the Indian man acquired English education and took on the manners and dress of the British, while in the latter realm the Indian woman took on new markers of ethnicity and new responsibilities for maintaining the sanctity of the home, which was now additionally seen as a refuge from the world where the colonizer held sway, a point also made by Sumanta Banerjee in his study of 19th century popular culture and the emergence of the *bhadralok* (the respectable classes).²¹ Although both Chatterjee and Banerjee write about the Bengal case, there are enough parallels in relation to women and nationalism in other areas of India directly ruled by the British. The new woman envisaged by nationalism was "modern", but not heedlessly westernized. Neither was she like the uneducated, vulgar and coarse lower-caste/class working woman (Chatterjee, p.127). The lower caste woman would be a central figure in the labour migrations of the nineteenth century.

The processes of differentiation of the upper-caste woman from the lower-caste woman unfolded in a variety of spheres and were often part of seemingly naturalised qualities. A comment in a 19th century Brahmo Samaj newspaper opposed a proposal to educate respectable Bengali women so they would become self-reliant, saying "they did not have to be self-reliant since they were being looked after by their menfolk, and then added: 'Only among the women of the lower classes in this country, we come across some sort of self-reliance'".²² Banerjee's argument is that throughout the 18th century lower caste groups in Bengal climbed up in the social hierarchy, in the process distancing themselves from their poor and/or rural kinfolk and becoming a new middle class through its access to English education. "The stratification was ideologically buttressed by the *bhadralok* concept of *itarjan* and *chhotolok*--the pejorative terms used to describe the lower orders and evoke the picture of a lifestyle that was to be scrupulously avoided by the educated and privileged Bengalis". (Banerjee, pp.71-72)

²⁰ Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), p.121.

²¹ Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets, Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989), p.76.

²² *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, 1880 (cited in Banerjee, p.56).

Among the features of a lifestyle to be avoided by the educated *bhadralok* was the close interaction between middle-class women and the wandering female artistes from the lower castes who were a source of entertainment and education for those confined to the inner space of the courtyard. There was a concerted attempt by the *bhadralok* in the late 19th century, for example, to eliminate from the *andarmahal* or women's quarters the *panchalis* or folk songs described as "filthy" and "polluting" by missionaries. This description was echoed by Indians too, like Shib Chunder Bose in a book titled *The Hindoos as They Are*: "The Panchali (with female actresses only) which is given for the amusement of the females...is sometimes much too obscene and immoral to be tolerated in a zenana having any pretension to gentility...Much is yet to be done to develop among the females a taste for purer amusements, better adapted to a healthy state of society'. (Banerjee, p.172). By the end of the 19th century, *panchali* performance had disappeared. We may speculate whether the deskilling of large numbers of performers resulted in some of them joining the indentured migration to the Caribbean and elsewhere, as shown by the report on the dancing girls and their troupe waiting to embark for Surinam.

That the making of the *bhadramahila* involved a new domestication is evident from the effort to dissuade women from attending public recitals of epics or *kathakata*. It was feared that descriptions of the erotic affairs of the gods, as in the Krishna-leela for example, would be a bad influence on respectable women. According to a commentator in the Bengali journal *Somprakash* in 1863:

...[S]ince it [kathakata] has become a source of so much evil, it is not advisable for bhadraloks to encourage it. Those who allow their ladies to go to kathakata performances should be careful...' 'If, during kathakata performances, women stay home and are provided with opportunities to listen to good instructions, discussions on good books and to train themselves in artistic occupations, their religious sense will improve and their souls will become pure and they will be suited to domestic work... (cited in Banerjee, p.171).

The genealogy of the domestic woman has been traced in contexts other than Bengal, as the nationalists attempted to fashion a purified civilizational essence in the face of missionary and colonialist criticism. As Susie Tharu and K.Lalita argue:

In India...the middle-class woman's propriety was also to be vindicated under the glare of the harsh spotlight focused right through the nineteenth century on what was described as

the moral degeneration of the Indians. Bureaucrats, missionaries, journalists and western commentators of various kinds filed sensational reports about Indian culture and made authoritative analyses of Indian character, which was invariably represented as irrational, deceitful and sexually perverse. The ultimate thrust of these descriptions...the situation in India was so appalling that it called out for intervention by rational and ethical rulers [such as the British].²³

Tharu and Lalita write this in the context of the controversy about reprinting *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radhika) by 18th century Telugu poet Muddupalani, a *ganika* (courtesan) at the royal court of Thanjavur. In 1911, another learned woman in the tradition of Muddupalani, Bangalore Nagaratnamma, reprinted her predecessor's poem, only to be charged with obscenity. The poem which Nagaratnamma appreciated so much described the relationship of Radha and Krishna and the nature of their intimacy, and was considered a fine literary work in its time. Copies of the book were seized and their sale forbidden. An earlier edition of the poem by Venkatanarasu, linguist and associate of lexicographer C.P. Brown, published in 1887, had removed the verses they thought sexually explicit and obscene. Nationalist upper-caste led initiatives such as the construction of the good Indian woman sometimes found unlikely allies, such as the non-Brahmin Self-Respect movement which in the 1920s provided support to the anti-nautch campaign, also setting up as normative "the virtuous domestic woman".²⁴ The anti-nautch campaign which reached its peak in 1911 was initiated by western-educated reformers in the early 1890s who wrote about the degradation of women and the "threat posed by devadasis (temple and court artists)-often derogatorily referred to as "nautch girls"--to the purity of family life. The bill prohibiting dedication of women in temples was finally passed in 1947. (Tharu and Lalita, pp. 12-13)

Another figure evolved to complete the picture of virtuous womanhood was that of the upper-caste widow. Historian Tanika Sarkar contends that the Hindu widow emerges as a significant figure in 19th century Bengal because her "purity", chosen consciously by her, "becomes at once a sign of difference and of superiority, a Hindu claim to power". Women's monogamy then makes possible the existence of the Hindu nation. As a contemporary writer, Srinibas Basu, put it: "...[T]his so-called subjection of our woman produces this sacred jewel of chastity which still glows radiantly throughout the civilised world despite centuries of political

²³ "Empire, Nation and the Literary Text", in *Interrogating Modernity*, eds. Niranjana, Sudhir and Dhareshwar (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993), p.208.

²⁴ Eds. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India, 600 BC to the Present, Vol 2, The 20th Century* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993), p.13.

subjection". [*Hindur Achar Vyavahar*, p.60, cited in Sarkar, p.42] Sarkar argues that the ascetic widow was seen as gaining moral and spiritual energy through her "voluntary abdication of all earthly pleasures", thus ensuring "a reservoir of spirituality in each home and for the Hindu order as a whole".²⁵

Although in the 19th century and later, various forms of widow remarriage and cohabitation were prevalent, ascetic widowhood and sometimes *sati* [immolation with the husband's corpse] came to be seen as the norm in nationalist discourse. This would serve to illuminate Sarah Morton's annoyance and bewilderment at the behaviour of her prospective Indian converts in late 19th century Trinidad.

The period when indentured emigration to the other colonies began, the 1830s, is also the period of the initial formation, via the social reform movements, of nationalist discourse in India. Since for the nationalists official modernity came to be produced through the project of the future nation, there was no room for formations of modernity other than those which involved as its subjects middle class, upper caste Indians. The problem with indentured labourers, both men and women, was that their geographical displacement and the new context they came to inhabit was enabling them also to become "modern". The transformations caused in the lives of the indentured by displacement, the plantation system, the disparate sex ratio, racial politics, etc. had to be made invisible by nationalist discourse in order that the indentured be claimed as authentically Indian. This was accomplished, I suggest, by erasing the difference between the agricultural labourer in Bihar and the one in Trinidad ("Chinitat", as the indentured called it) or in other parts of the subaltern diaspora, and imaging these latter in particular as victimized, pathetic, lost and helpless. Even when the changes in the emigrant were acknowledged, they were criticized as "artificial" and "superficial", loss rather than gain. Gandhi writes that the labourer came back to India "a broken vessel", robbed of "national self-respect".²⁶ Any "economic gain" he might have obtained could not be set off "against the moral degradation it involves". (*Collected Works* Vol.XIII, p.249)

²⁵ Tanika Sarkar, "Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation", in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), p.42.

²⁶ Speech on Indentured Indian Labour, Bombay, District Congress Committee, in *Collected Works, Vol.XIII*, p.133.

The indentured woman in particular could not be accommodated in the nationalist discourse, again except as a victim of colonialism. By 1910 or so when the campaign against indenture was gathering momentum, nationalism had already produced the models of domesticity, motherhood and companionate marriage which would make the Indian woman a citizen of the new India. The question of what constituted the modernity of the Indian woman had been put forward as an *Indian* question, to be resolved *in India*. What, then, of the Indian women who were "becoming modern", but elsewhere? For nationalism, theirs would have to be considered an illegitimate modernity because it had not passed through, been formed by, the story of the nation-in-the-making. By the late 19th century, the route to modernity - and emancipation - for the Indian woman in India was a well-established one: education, cultivation of household arts, refinement of skills, regulation of one's emotions. The class-caste provenance of this project, and of the new woman, needs no further reiteration here.

What sort of ideological project, then, did nationalism envisage for the indentured woman labourer who was shaping her own relationship with the "west" in a distant land? Reform was not practicable. Disavowal of this figure would not have been possible while the system of indenture still existed. The only solution, therefore, was to strive for the abolition of indenture. The manifest immorality and depravity of the indentured woman would not only bring down the system but also serve to reveal more clearly the contrasting image of the virtuous and chaste Indian woman at home. As Gandhi asserted, "Women, who in India would never touch wine, are sometimes found lying dead-drunk on the roads".²⁷ The point is not that women never drank in India and started doing so in Trinidad or British Guiana, but that for Gandhi and others this functioned as a mark of degraded westernization and "artificial modernity". The nationalist reconstitution of Indian tradition, I suggest, was a project that was still incomplete when the new phase of the nationalist struggle, marked by the anti-indenture campaign, was inaugurated.

Although according to Chatterjee the nationalists had "resolved" the women's question without making it a matter for political agitation, with the anti-indenture campaign there seems to have been a re-focussing on women. At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century a

²⁷ Gandhi, "Indenture or Slavery?" in Gujarati, published in *Samalochak* December 1915. Reprinted in English translation in *Collected Works Vol. XIII* (Delhi, 1964), p.1467.

political campaign was undertaken - mobilizing "a wider public than any previous protest"²⁸ against the colonial rulers - to dismantle a system that was said to be turning Indian women into prostitutes.²⁹ As Gandhi wrote, "The system brings India's womanhood to utter ruin, destroys all sense of modesty. That in defence of which millions in this country have laid down their lives in the past is lost under it".³⁰ The nationalist discourse on indentured female sexuality, however, veered time and again from denouncing the women as reprobate and immoral to seeing them as having been brought to this state by colonialism.³¹ The Indian nationalists were joined by the European critics of indenture, led by C.F. Andrews, Gandhi's associate, who had worked with him in South Africa and had been mobilized by him to prepare a report on Indians in Fiji. As anthropologist John Kelly puts it, Andrews and others "portrayed indenture...as a degenerating force and blamed it for the moral condition of the 'helots of Empire'. But they accepted the claim that the 'coolies' were degraded, and they agreed especially about what we might call the 'harlots of Empire'".³² Gandhi's focus on the alleged sexual availability of women can also be read as a strategic move to counter the colonial administrative reports which defined, as Susan Bayly puts it, "the dependent status of unclean menial groups...in terms of the sexual availability of their womenfolk".³³ In this case, by ending indenture and thus providing the conditions for chastity for women they would cease to be available, for instance, to their white employers in the colonies; thus nationalism could refuse menial status for Indians versus the coloniser.

The nationalist campaign to end indenture was supported by a series of developments in Trinidad. By 1870, voices were being raised in the Creole press against importing Indian labourers. There was public criticism of the size of the subsidy for immigration, especially by cocoa interests (who used free labour as against sugarcane planters who used indentured) and the

²⁸ John D. Kelly, *A Politics of Virtue: Hinduism, Sexuality, and Countercolonial Discourse in Fiji* (Chicago: Chicago UP), 1991, p.48.

²⁹ Note that after the end of indenture, the women's question in India becomes a social issue, to be resolved through legislation, not political mobilization.

³⁰ Gandhi, *Collected Works, Vol. XXII*, p.349.

³¹ Kelly, for instance, points out that in the case of Fiji the critics of indenture stressed the sexual abuse of Indian women (*A Politics of Virtue*, p.30).

³² C.F. Andrews, Gandhi's emissary on the indenture issue, wrote in 1915: "Vice has become so ingrained that they have not been able to recover their self-respect.... The women of India are very chaste; but these women, well, you know how they are, and how it can be different, situated as they are, living the lives they do, brought up in this atmosphere of vice and degradation?" (cited in Kelly, p. 33-4).

³³ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the 18th Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), p.196.

professional coloured and black middle class. The Creole middle class also sought to diminish the influence of the planters during the campaign for constitutional reform in the mid 1880s. Creoles who feared the influx of Indians into the political system they hoped to capture found new reasons to attack the system of immigration. (Laurence, pp.432-34) After the Hosay riots of 1884, when Moharram processionists in Trinidad were killed by the colonial police, the interest of the Indian press in the conditions of indenture began to grow. The Anti-Slavery Society in England which had long criticised indenture renewed its attacks after the 1884 riots. (Laurence, pp.448-54)

After immigration to Natal and some other countries were prohibited, Gokhale on March 4, 1912 moved in the Legislative Council that indentured emigration be wholly prohibited. He spoke eloquently of the misery of the immigrants and of the "immorality" resulting from the disparate sex ratio, and of the blow to national self-respect. The agitation to end indenture was fuelled by the publication of reports from Fiji. An Anti-Indentured Emigration League was formed in 1914. "Centred in Calcutta, it organized public lectures and the distribution of pamphlet against emigration and tried to discourage recruits on their way to Calcutta from continuing their journey. Soon it also began to operate in the United Provinces." Leaflets were distributed in towns and villages, recruiters were molested, and relatives brought to Calcutta to secure the release of recruits from the depot. (Laurence, p.465)

In 1915 Gokhale died, but Gandhi had returned from South Africa by then to provide leadership to the agitation. On March 20, 1916, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya's motion was discussed in the Legislative Council. He listed all the evils of the immigration system, drawing extensively on the situation in Fiji, and spoke of indenture as "a horrifying record of shame and crime", demanding that "the system...be abolished root and branch". In February 1917, Malaviya sought permission to introduce a bill for immediate abolition, which was disallowed. Not being able to obtain a clear assurance from the Government about ending indenture, Gandhi toured the country and addressed public meetings, demanding that the abolition be announced before the end of July.³⁴ Large demonstrations were held in Madras and Bombay. The Viceroy was "pelted with telegrams" and his wife received many "asking her whether she approves of Indian women being converted into harlots and imploring her to help". Attempts were made to mobilise the opinion of Indian women. An appeal by Andrews to Indian women was printed in several languages and widely distributed in the United Provinces. (Laurence, pp.477-78).

³⁴ Gandhi, *My Experiments with Truth*. Vol 2. chapter XI. "Abolition of Indentured Emigration".

As the final phase of the campaign against indenture gained momentum, among the delegations which met Viceroy Hardinge to press for action were several organized by Indian women's associations. At the meeting between Colonial Office and India Office representatives on May 9, 1917, James Meston, representing India in the war cabinet, spoke of how "the women of India" felt "deeply on the question [of indenture]". Satyendra Sinha, the other India representative, declared that "there was an intensely strong feeling of concern...[which included] ladies who lived in purdah, but read the news".³⁵ In spite of Englishmen such as Alfred Lyall, Governor of the North Western Provinces, and G.A. Grierson, who reported on emigration from Bengal and recommended it for its benefits to women, giving a chance for a new life to "abandoned and unfaithful wives", (Tinker, pp.267-68) Viceroy Hardinge was not willing to continue supporting a system when "Its discussion arouses more bitterness than any other outstanding question". Hardinge was convinced that Indian politicians firmly believed that it "brands their whole race...with the stigma of helotry", and condemns Indian women to prostitution. (Tinker, pp.340-41)

By mid-1917, the end of indenture was certain. Historians tend to see it as an issue that brought a new focus to nationalist politics in India and gave it a wider base. I would argue that it was not simply that. We need to re-frame the indenture question so that it can be seen as marking for us the consolidation of the early national-modern, a setting in place of new (nationalist) moralities, new ways of relating between women and men, appropriate "Indian" modes of socio-sexual behaviour, the parameters for the State's regulation of reproduction as well as sexuality, as well as the delineation of the virtues which would ensure for Indian women citizenship in the future nation. It should be obvious that the historical formation of these virtues, for example, and the contemporaneity of their description, was obscured by the nationalist presentation of them as the essential, and "traditional", qualities of Indian women.

While it is evident that the immigrant female was an important figure invoked by Indian nationalism in India, the centrality of this figure to "East Indian nationalism" in Trinidad has not

³⁵ Tinker, *New System of Slavery*, pp.350-52.

yet been systematically elaborated.³⁶

With regard to the indentured woman too, the immediate contrasting image for the colonialist was the African woman, the ex-slave, the urban *jamette* of Carnival whose sexuality was othered, and sought to be regulated, by the European ruling class.³⁷ The *jamette* was seen as vulgar, promiscuous, loud and disruptive, and the removal of this figure from Carnival and related activities became part of the project of creating a new urban middle class in Trinidad in the early twentieth century. Charles Kingsley, visiting Trinidad in 1909, sketches his impressions of African and Indian women: "[The] average negro women of Port of Spain, especially the younger...[t]heir masculine figures, their ungainly gestures, their loud and sudden laughter, even when walking alone, and their general coarseness, shocks, and must shock." In contrast to the "the superabundant animal vigour and the perfect independence of the younger [African] women" is the picture of a young Indian woman "hung all over with bangles, in a white muslin petticoat...and green gauze veil; a clever, smiling, delicate little woman, who is quite aware of the brightness of her own eyes". (Kingsley, p.72)

Much of the elite's anxiety around the *jamette*, or even the rural Creole woman, seemed to hinge on the fact of her being seen as independent, in both sexual and economic terms. The East Indian woman in post-slavery society, then, brought in to compensate colonial planters for the loss of captive labour, had to be imaged as completely different from the African woman. For this, "Indian tradition" was invoked by different groups, and the lack of conformity of indentured women to the virtuous ideal of Indian culture deplored. In post-indenture society the need to differentiate between the African and the Indian woman would take on a new kind of urgency, both for the emerging Indo-Trinidadian middle class and for the dominant Creole imaginary. I examine some of these notions of the Indian woman in Chapter Five, which deals with the representation of Indians in calypso. One important mode of differentiation would have to do with denying the obvious similarities between women of all races in Trinidad, and emphasizing instead the similarities between indentured women and women in India. However, as I have tried to argue, the indentured woman was a figure that the nationalist construction of Indian womanhood had to disavow in order precisely to ensure its own coherence. If one set of reasons

³⁶ Recent unpublished work by Rhoda Reddock and Patricia Mohammed makes interesting beginnings in this direction.

³⁷ Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* (Port-of-Spain: Rohlehr, 1990), especially Chapter One

for the disavowal arose from the non-upper-caste provenance of the indentured woman, another set had to do with her incorporation into Creole modernity. But clearly it was not one set of reasons *rather* than another but the combination of both that placed indentured Indians outside the normative frameworks which were being assembled in India.

Thinking about Trinidad might be interesting to those of us investigating the processes by which contemporary feminism in India comes to rest on the historical disavowal of lower caste-class women even as it claims to speak for them. The Trinidad example shows that for Indians in India this also involves a disavowal of other forms of modernity that have not passed through the anti-colonial struggle or participated in its inevitable outcome. As Mrinalini Sinha contends, "the nationalist construct of the modern Indian woman also created the climate both for women's reforms and for women's entry, under male patronage, to the male-dominated public sphere".³⁸ Sinha describes the early initiatives of Indian feminists as being linked to the "unprecedented mobilization of middle-class women" in the nationalist movement, manifested for example in the all-India women's organizations of the early twentieth century (Sinha, p.483), many of which would have petitioned the Viceroy in support of the campaign to abolish indenture. While nationalism provided the language and the spaces in which the middle-class woman could become modern, it also made her a representative, one who spoke for all other Indian women, who became, as Sinha puts it, "the transmitter of the fruits of modernization". (Sinha, p. 494) The indentured woman in the subaltern diaspora could never be seen in India as this kind of figure, given her caste-class characteristics and the tangentiality of her modernity to the project of the future nation. It is not just the notion of the female in India today, therefore, which rests on a disavowal of the indentured woman, but also the notion of the feminist, who has crucially been implicated in the project of nationalism even as she tried to formulate a critique of it.

And what of Trinidad? A popular calypso (some called it a soca because of its lilting rhythms, others called it a chutney because of its extensive use of Hindi) sung during Carnival 1996 - the first Carnival after the political victory of the East Indian-dominated United National Congress (UNC) over the African-led People's National Movement party in late 1995 - was *Jahaji Bhai* by Brother Marvin, an Afro-Trinidadian who also claimed some Indian ancestry. The music for the song, drawing heavily on East Indian rhythms and instruments, was arranged by two other "Africans", Carlyle 'Juice Man' Roberts and C.B.Henderson. The song dramatised the

³⁸ Mrinalini Sinha, "Gender in the Critiques of Colonialism and Nationalism: Locating the 'Indian Woman'", in Joan Wallach Scott (ed.), *Feminism and History* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), pp.477-504.

notion of fictive kin or "brotherhood of the boat" (in Hindi, "jahaji bhai" means "ship brother") invented by the indentured labourers who formed communities of friendship on the long journey from India across what they called *kala pani* or the black waters. The burden of Marvin's song was to demonstrate that Indians and Africans shared, in a metaphorical sense, the same ancestry, that "Ramlogan, Basdeo, Prakash [East Indian male names] and I/Jahaji bhai". Although the calypsonian came under sharp criticism from many Africans and Indians, as I discuss in Chapter Five, the song was also appreciated by many, across political boundaries. But some people, even while applauding Marvin's attempt to envisage a common past and future for the two major racial groups in Trinidad, asked the question: "Where are the women in Brother Marvin's story? Were there no *jahaji behen* (ship sisters)?"