

## **INVISIBLE INDENTURED HISTORY OF WOMEN MIGRANTS DURING SOCIAL REFORM IN INDIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Paper is an attempt to explore the invisibility of women migrants in the history of social reform movement. According to migrants' literature there was a huge migration from Bengal, Kerala, Pondicherry and other parts of India during the period of social reform movement. As we know that social reform movement was known as one of the women's centric movement in India. After that why they have not addressed the question of Indian women in indenture history? There is no historical literature, which talks about women's migration to plantation economy. This historical gap rises many questions on the politics of social reform movement. Why women indenture migrants were not a part of the social reform movement? Where there any social and political pressure on the entire movement? Why the social reformist leaders were silent on this issue? This paper will attempt to make a critical review of social reform movements in India based on literature review and critical analysis.

**Keywords:** Women, Migration, Invisibility, Indentured, Social reform, Movement.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The core idea of this study is the Invisibility of women indenture migrants during the social reform movements in colonial India. When one attempts to understand the Indian society through historical perspectives, it can be claimed that there are multiple frames of references which lead to the Indian history, its people and society. Which makes it more unauthentic.

The perspectives of women have been ignored in the mainstream historical discourses, R. L. Shukl argues, "Indian history had always been written through the prism of power and state and women had remained very far from it in the Indian society. Through these power structures male counterparts had falsely popularized their power and intellect and continuously kept power in their hands. The written Indian history has ignored more than half of the population (Shukl, 1987). As we know very well, Indian history is very much associated with power politics, and historians

glorified 'power' in history which always written under the supervision of powerful state, caste, class and gender. Friedrich Engels in his 1884 book '*Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the state* (Engels, 1884)' says that the woman should not be seen only from a biological prospective, but also we need to look at their subjugation in history. Feminist theory contest with patriarchy and this contestation intents to achieve women's rights and in this way it supports the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.

In India, history has a very deep relation with power is always in the hands of men. If we looked at the documents of the initial period we will find that the history of only powerful (those who belonged to the ruling class men) is only recorded. From the colonial period till now the history of women is missing or invisible. This paper has attempted to explore the colonial Indian history through the Indian indenture migrants' point of view during the social reform movement. Before going to the debate, it will be good to understand about Indian indenture migration.

Migration is a natural phenomenon. Human beings migrate for various reasons like food, living place and for other important resources. Indians migrated from their country to different parts of the world for different reasons since the ancient time. Their presence in almost all the countries in every corner of the world is an illustration of their migratory nature. There have been different phases of migration starting from ancient to colonial, post-colonial, etc.

Indians migrated during the ancient period for trade purposes like trade from the Silk Route to different Central Asian countries and for dissemination of religious values, proliferation of Indian civilization in different regions etc. an example can be this- during the period of Ashoka, king Ashoka, his son and his daughter travelled to different countries for dissemination of religious values. After this ancient phase of migration has started with the onset of the seventeenth century when the British came to India for the purpose of trade and to colonize India. The British Empire was not only limited to India but spread across different parts of the world. To serve the interests of the British industries and plantations in various countries, the practice of slavery was institutionalized. However, the practice of slavery was technically abolished in the 19th century. Which eventually lead to the shortage of labourers in the industries and a plantations. In order to resolve this labourer issues, the British started importing people from its various colonies like India. A large number of Indians tired of poverty and various other social discriminations decided migrate to the British industries and plantations for a better life.

In this migration a huge number of women also were involved and the migration continued till the social reform movement. According to the norms of indenture migration, a fixed percentage of women were supposed to migrate in every ship, even though a large scale of women have migrated during this period but they didn't get enough space in the history. Some feminists have

made an argument on the women and men hierarchy. According to feminist argument, 'Women are capable to think they can theorize anything like man' (Arya, 2001). This idea becomes problematic here when the women were never even marked in the history. So one can thoroughly argue that this invisibility of women in the history of indentured migration is a visible result of patriarchy.

So women have right to perform on every ground and acquire every right. This discourse has a major problem which is that there is no women in the history of migration or history of indenture system. Therefore, behind this invisible history of women, there is the patriarchal approach in history through the historians.

The question is not about history, but of course about historiography. Historiography has always been human made and social endeavor rather than a mechanical record of the facts observed objectively. It was based on the individual author and the power. Therefore, when we accept it as an individual effort so it is necessary to know the influence of power and social environment on author's writings. Thus, we can say that Indian history shows history as a symbol of Indian society which was established by patriarchy. The male authors who were connected with the history of 1830-1914 kept women invisible.

The history of migration is an important incident in the history of colonial rule in India. As Giriraj Kishor has marked, "after the establishment of British Raj in India, British, French and Portuguese imported the poor Indian labourers (contract Labourers) for industrial expansion in America, South America and South-East Asian colonial states. Here, the contract exactly referred to the condition of work for huge number of Indian labourers who had been hired by British, Dutch, Portuguese, and French companies. Indian businessmen were also involved in all these. There was a deal between them, and they used to sell labourers like animals. Unaware and innocent labourers were sent overseas. Those labourers were known by the names of Girmitya, Kalkatiya, coolie and jahaji (Kishore 2011).

After the liberation from colonial rule, the history of this period has been evaluated from different approaches. These documents were analyzed with keen observation and after that it has become possible to assess the entire situation where cultural and economic causes were the main focus. According to Jagdish Prasad, "a large number of women were also included in migration during this period (Prasad 1985). A fixed percentage of women were necessary for each migratory ship. It was made compulsory that at least 25% women must be in British immigration. It was increased to 40 percent in 1858 but achieving these goals were too difficult (Carter 2012). Therefore, to meet with legal requirements, a few abducted women were inserted in each bunch of coolies. "Among Indians the ratio of women's population grew in Mauritius which became 80.7

percent in 1901(Carter 2012). It cannot be denied that the migration occurred without exploitation. It was done by the colonial government which said, "Indian people are such uncivilized persons who commit too many atrocities on their women (Chakravarti 1998).

In the conversation between social reformers and the government, it is not very much clearly mentioned that this social reform movement is against colonial rules or is it their pressure from within. Perhaps, if we look at the background of these social reform movements it shows opposition and agreement with colonialism simultaneously. Some documents which point out that these migrations which began in 1760 and continued later. The history of this period stated that so many incidents took place and the leadership emerged on several different issues. Community rights, freedom of expression, question of Dalit's and women emancipation and religious reform movements were included in them. These facts and expressions of these movements are recorded in the history and other documents. In this period, the migration of Indian labours started and large scale migration in different forms also took place. Obviously, the labours were mostly from lower caste and class. There were only a few records showing the reasons behind their migration as well as exploring their social identity.

When, we observe the migration on the basis of women's identity, a question arises that who were these women? Were they migrated as a part of family or were they different from it? When we observe the atrocities on women, again a question comes that what role was the "social reform movement" playing for women? What was the actual impact of social reform movement on women? Social reform movements were started by raising a voice against women violence. At the same time, it is interesting to notice that the colonial rulers and Indian society always kept silence regarding women migration and their violence.

Furthermore while trying to find the roots of social reform movement in India, it has been seen far and wide in the pages of history. It started with the establishment of the British rule. It was a time when the British were reconstructing Indian history in order to further cement their rule. In their writings, they were very much critical of the Indian culture, traditions, history as well as the question of gender, especially the dilemma and status of women in Indian society. They had chosen women centric issues like 'Sati', child marriage and other orthodox rituals. Many Indian nationalist thinkers, countered these arguments saying that ancient India does have a good and strong culture of gender equality by quoting examples of eminent women's like Maitrayi, Gopa Gargi etc. Another group of thinkers showed their concern over the social reforms than social reconstruction. They argued that only a reform can eliminate the social evils which are inherent in Indian society. According to Radha Kumar, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian social reform movement was a result of this same conflict.

In addition to social reform movements in Indian history, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century were marked for the society and educational development. This period was mainly known as period of Indian modernity. The philosophers were thinking about the rationality and humanity. Movements of this period were trying to reform the society which was based on so many rigid conservative assumptions. Many thinkers as well as organizations were working and writing in favor of rationality and humanity. Many movements and organizations were raising question regarding the humans and the reform of society, religion, etc. Even after this huge social experiments, there were nobody was really concern about question of women's migration! This dark corner of the history critically questioned the existed reforming movements.

Raja Ram Mohan Ray was known as the father of 'Social Reform Movement' and he established Brahma Samaj in 1828. In this period many organizational social movements have started regarding women rights, women empowerment, abolition of Sati, Widow Remarriage, and child marriage etc. According to the modern historians, social organizations like Tattvabodhini Sabha, Keshav Chandr Sen and Sangat Sabha, Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, Young Bengal Movement, Prarthana Samaj 1867, Jyotiba phule and Satya Shodhak Samaj, Dayananda Saraswati and Arya Samaj 1875, Vivekananda and Ramkrishna Mission, Theosophical Society Movement 1875, etc. were working on the above mentioned issues (Sarkar 1914).

The various social practices which existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in India prepared a ground for later developments in other fields. The status of women started improving since they joined the social movements and political struggles against the British rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The continuity of these movements contributed for the larger national struggle against colonialism in the succeeding century. With the reform movement, Indian freedom movement also came in focus, with raising demand for Indian Independence. Especially, during the Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagrah and Swadeshi movements, for the first time women come out of their homes for participating in the freedom struggle. Most of the women who engaged in Satyagrah belonged to the Indian middle class. As a result of which, the 'ideal' women of Indian society and the concept of 'Bharat Mata' entered in to the pre independence social discourse. On one hand our Nation was being given the status of a mother at the same time on the other hand the women of our country were becoming victims of so many social issues. They were the voiceless who suffered beyond limits. Their sufferings and pain led to their migration from India to abroad.

The mission of reform was firstly started in Bengal. That time Bengali 'Bhadralok' was transformed into Bourgeois. At the same time Calcutta (now Kolkata) emerged as a Centre of intellectual excellence. Most of the initial campaigns of reforms were run by intellectuals based in Calcutta and these movements were quickly spread in different parts of India like Maharashtra, Punjab, Kerala, Orissa, etc. Many organizations were established from the social reform

perspective which has been mentioned above.

Here, we are pointing out the women's movement which occurred through the Indian social reform movements. In the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century the condition of women was miserable. They were not treated equally. There were many problems such as female infanticide, Illiteracy, child marriages, widow system, dowry system, and *Sati* torture. The social movements for reforms regarding women addressed these issues. Several progressive thinkers of the nineteenth century struggled to make a difference for all these problems faced by widows. They fought for the dignity and status to women, but within the framework of Hindu revivalism.

The social and religious reform movements in the 19th century were highly affected by western education, and the reform approaches were largely influenced by it. Social reform movement in its initial stage had solid ties with religious thoughts. It was directed at evacuating the social problems faced by society, especially the women community. The Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Theosophical Society, etc. were all spoke about the need of women's participation in societal affairs. A number of programs were taken and formed up for the Miserable Class Society of India. "Lady Harding Medical College at Delhi was established. The Hindu Girl's School at Calcutta came up in 1849. Facilities for the training of nurses and mid-wives were also provided. 'Slavery' was abolished in India in 1811, when the import of slaves was declared illegal (Jones 1989). The social evils mentioned earlier were needed to be abolished. While taking their action regarding this, the social reformists deliberately kept quiet about women's terrible issues over migration. The social reformers were actually in a way joining hands with the western project of "civilizing the Un civilized" that time. So one can assume that this deliberate exclusion of women issues mentioned above was to show their sympathetic attitude towards the British crisis for labourers in Plantations.

Due to the efforts of Ram Mohan Roy, the British Government passed a law in 1829 abolishing the custom of *sati*. But there were many other customs that were unjust to women. For example, the higher caste widows were not permitted to marry again, while widowers could re- marry. A widow had to wear white clothes, cut her hair and could not be invited to attend auspicious functions. Like Ram Mohan Roy, many other social reformers raised their voices for the welfare of widows. They demanded that widows should be allowed to marry again and that a law should be passed to this effect.

After successful prohibition the practice of *sati* (widow-burning), the British Government in India had given an alert of the dilemma of higher-caste widows, prohibited to remarry, believed unlucky by their families, often unwell treated, and from time to time enforced into beggary and prostitution (Pieper 3 April 2015). Many women had been married at a very young age to elderly



men who became widows in a very short period of time. They were literally small children, whose conditions were worse than anything else. "The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act XV of 1856 enabled the widows to marry again. This gave a severe shock to the conservative Hindu society. Later, in 1872, the Special Marriage Act III of 1872 was passed which enabled one to marry out of her own caste (Gaur 1989).

Reformers had opposed child marriage as well. Consequently as a result, Native Marriage Act of 1872 was passed, in which the girl child marriage under the age of 14 was prohibited and polygamy was declared illegal by law. But this Act could not be much effective. At last, due to the efforts of V. M. Malabari (Persian reformer); An Age of consent Act was passed in 1891. By this Act, many revolutionary changes came in the Indian societies. According to this Act "girl marriage under the age of 12 was prohibited (Ganachari 2005). The author here not denying the role of social reform movements in Indian society, instead acknowledges its significance in empowering women and children. Along with understanding their contributions in the history, here it is intending to raise a very crucial question that "Why they selectively ignored certain remarkable issues."

This subject requires a lot of research to find the answers for these questions. There was a lot of documentation about social reform movements which was done during the British period, but any documentation related to migration was not done particularly except some travel records at the point of departure and destination. Moreover, even they have been missed or ignored by the sight of historians. Social reform movement talks about betterment of the situation of women in India but they have not given space for Indian women migrants and their sufferings. The reformers remained silent or chose to ignore the fact of atrocities against indentured women migrants. The places like, Mauritius, Suriname etc. in the history is called as the "mini India". It was not a visible partition of India but the formation of this "mini India" became possible by such larger migrations. Even after having huge importance, the whole indenture migrants' narratives being neglected in the Indian history.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the concluding section of this paper, an analysis has been done on the whole migrant history to find out the identity of migrant women by looking upon their Invisibility throughout migrant's history as well as in social reform movement. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, two events were occurring at the same canvas- the indenture migration and social reform movement. The researcher here enquires the reasons that were led to the invisibility of women from the history. As per the research findings, the idea of social reform movement was given by the British to the social reformers. On one hand they were supporting and promoting social reforms, but on the

other hand they were allowing, encouraging and also forcing the “modern age slave migration” because it was beneficial to them as they wanted labourers in their plantations. The indenture migration has led to a different and new level of suppression of women.

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