

Coolinama: Lost voices of Indentured Women

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"Peasants and labourers do not write; they are written about." This statement underscores the fact that the history of working-class individuals has primarily been documented by historians through official reports or the observations of others. In the case of girmitya labourers, their narrative is similarly conveyed to researchers and scholars via these official documents and accounts. In both instances, those who transcribe testimonies or interpret responses are often removed from the actual circumstances faced by the migrants. However, when recruits are permitted to articulate the challenges and issues of the indenture process in their own language, the outcomes are profoundly insightful, revealing the breadth and intricacies of their experiences. In this presentation, I delve into the overlooked narratives of Indentured women, particularly on the colonial plantations of Fiji and Natal, to gain insight into the intricacies of life within a vastly different societal and production framework, as revealed through their letters and petitions. Unlike the sources typically employed by scholars to document the experiences of women under indenture, such as colonial records, official reports, and journalist writings—which often fall short in providing an objective representation—this paper utilizes the petitions, depositions, and letters predominantly composed in Indian languages, whether by women or men, either individually or collectively, addressed to various authorities. This type of source has been infrequently utilized in the past to understand the plantation system concerning gender violence, sexuality, and patriarchy. By closely analyzing these letters and petitions, this paper investigates the circumstances faced by Indian indentured women laborers on the colonial plantations of Fiji and Natal.