

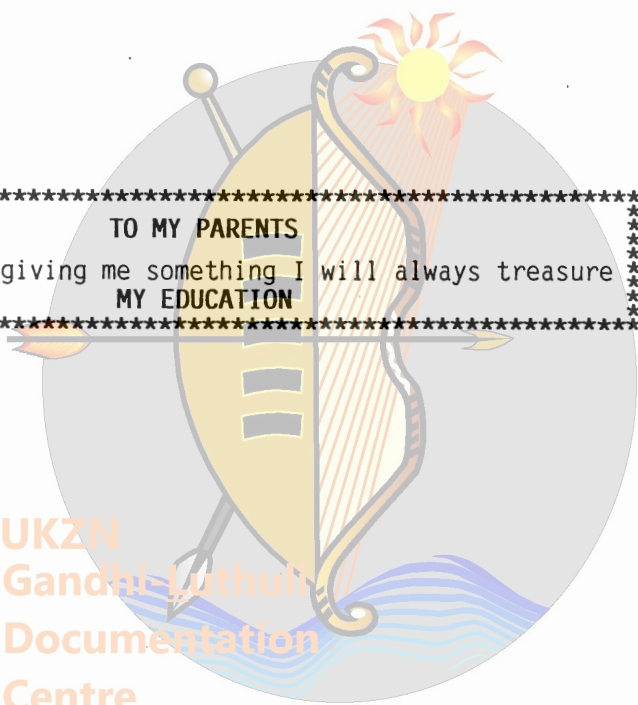
THE CHANGING ROLE OF INDIAN WOMEN
IN SOUTH AFRICA

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I wish to thank most sincerely Mr K Chetty of the documentation centre for his invaluable assistance in obtaining material for my project and Mr Jay Singh, the Editor of Fiat Lux for so obligingly giving me many copies of Fiat Lux.



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*
* **TO MY PARENTS** *
* Thank you for giving me something I will always treasure *
* **MY EDUCATION** *

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"The Twentieth Century will be called many things by future historians: The Age of Global War, the Age of Mans Society, the Age of Youth Revolution, to name but a few. One name that historians will not fail to give our century is the March of Women towards Equality"(1) The emergence of Women's liberation Movements in the 1960's has had a profound effect on men, and has resulted in women playing more dominant roles in their homes. This role has since become more and more evident in South Africa, especially in the Indian home where the man was ultimately the boss. Mrs Fatima Meer, a lecturer in Sociology at the University of Natal, and a symbol of the Indian Women's liberation in South Africa says, "Indian women have assumed a position of responsibility all along the way, but now they are taking over new positions. It is their projection of themselves and the fact that they are coming to the fore which is recent local Indian women, in their serene and subtle fashion, are now beginning to make a considerable impact in the Community Although the old orthodox era has not entirely disappeared - strictness and limitation of movement still prevail in some homes - this attitude is dying out; and an ever-increasing number of women are free to mould their destinies as they please."(2)

- (1) JITHOO, S : THE CHANGING STATUS OF INDIAN WOMEN IN S.A, FIAT LUX, NOVEMBER 1975, VOL. 10 No. 9, Pg. 22
 (2) TRAIL BLAZERS IN AN INDIAN WOMEN'S WORLD, FIAT LUX, FEBRUARY 1974, VOL. 9 No. 1, Pg 16

THE POSITION OF INDIAN WOMEN AT THE TIME OF THEIR ARRIVAL IN SOUTH AFRICA

Indian women first came to South Africa in 1860, together with Indian men, who were recruited as labourers to serve a period of indenture in Natal. When this period of indenture ended they were promised a free piece of land if they decided to remain in Natal, or alternatively, a free passage home if they did not. Although the requirements of the Natal Government specifically stipulated labour, indenturing of Indian workers came under the control of the "Colonial land and Emigration Commission" in Britain. This meant that the Indians were regarded as immigrants and it was anticipated that they would assist in the Colonisation of Natal. Therefore it was stipulated that each group of immigrants from India to Natal should include at least thirty-five percent of women. This was not an easy task to fulfil.

Indian women did not share equal status with men, and their social position in those days was the cause of much unhappiness and despondency. It was not so much the long hours of work and the small hours of sleep which created disappointment and bitterness in their hearts and minds, but the overbearing attitudes of husbands, mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. Women were treated as minors in all respects and the planning and living of their lives were subjected to the domination of the various members of their families, especially the male members.

Thus it was not possible for recruiting agents to approach women directly and get them to enlist. Ships often waited for long periods of time before leaving without the required number of

were wives
women immigrants. Among those who did come with their husbands and children, widows and daughters-in-law - women who found the social conditions unbearable and saw escape as the only way out. Also aboard the ships to South Africa were women who were kidnapped or lured or tricked into enlisting by unscrupulous agents.

The conditions under which these women came to South Africa can be best described by the term, "from the frying pan into the fire". If they did not work on the fields, and were wives of the labourers, they found that more often than not they and their children starved, because they were refused rations by their employers, and the pay of their husbands - 2/6 per week was insufficient to buy food and clothing for the family. They suffered when their menfolk were flogged and beaten and fined for minor incidents of insubordination, like coming late to work. Neither their husbands, nor their children belonged to them. When working in the fields, it was not uncommon for them to be whipped by their overseers for daring to lag behind or gossip with their co-workers. At times they would be ill and quite incapable of work, yet they would be pushed into the fields or fined for "truanting", as the day's work was interrupted. Complaints sometimes came to light in the Press and some brutal cases were publicised. Harsh conditions of labour imposed tremendous hardships on these early Indians, producing a suicide rate among them, which was fourteen times higher than that of the whole of India during the period 1903 to 1907.

Indian women in South Africa do not owe their origin in this country merely to indenture. There were women who came as wives of Indians of the Passenger class - Kasturbai Gandhi was one of them. Women continued to enter South Africa as wives of men domiciled in South Africa until 1952, when a new law was passed ending all immigration of Indians into the country. While the early indentured women worked as hard as the indentured men in developing the country's agricultural resources and enriching the country, the women of the passenger group were equal pioneers with their menfolk in developing Commerce and Trade in South Africa. They joined their husband's in shops set up in the rural areas, or ran businesses themselves while their husbands travelled as "hawkers". The women saved and stinted, worked hard, employed no assistants and tried, if they could, to build a little capital of security on which their children and grandchildren could progress.

A people in the process of severing old links and establishing new ones are faced with insurmountable difficulties in formulating a pattern of life which would bind and maintain them. For the Indians the task was made more formidable by the fact that they settled in this country not as free men but as virtual slaves, who had no choice of employers, or fellow-workers, or place of work and who could be prosecuted for leaving their compounds without a pass. Yet, after more than one hundred years, the Indians are a highly integrated people and the tribute for this phenomenal success in building a solid and lasting human relation-

ship must go to the women. It was the women who undertook successfully the responsibility of caring for the children while the men were preoccupied with economic interests; It was the women who treasured the religious beliefs, nurturing and developing them so that they may serve as a source of support and social upliftment in the new life they adapted. Thus despite all their early difficulties and lack of status they rekindled and Indian pattern of life which is old, group-consolidating and high in value; based on a strong background of eastern culture, social norms and tradition. The family and the home occupied a pivotal position in this ethos. The role of the Indian girl was confined to being a good wife and a good mother.

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THE EARLY RESPONSE TO EDUCATION FOR INDIAN GIRLS AND THE
LATER ADOPTION OF EDUCATION AS THE MEANS OF PROGRESS BY
INDIAN WOMEN

In the socio-cultural context of the Indian Community, the role of the Indian girl, that of being a good wife and a good mother, was an important and full role which the Indian girl played with contentment, gratification and considerable authority and influence. As any Indian husband would confirm, some of the most important decisions concerning the home, family affairs, and marriage were taken by the wife. So it is something of a facile assumption to say that because the domain of the woman was confined to the home this implied subservience or inferiority. The influence of western civilization and pattern of living has of course necessitated a reassessment and modification of the role of the Indian woman.

In the set up of the Indian Community in the early days a formal education for the Indian girl was not considered a necessity. Even the education of the Indian boy received lukewarm attention. Although some attempts were made by the missionaries to provide elementary education for the Indian children, it was only after 1877 that an organised effort was made by the authorities. But the Colonial Government had neither the funds nor qualified teachers to provide the basic education for more than a fraction of Indian children of school-going age. The reluctance of the Indian parents to send their daughters to a mixed school was therefore a blessing in disguise for the authorities. Indian parents were, confirmed in their belief that a simple, home-spun education was sufficient to equip the Indian girl for her role as wife and mother. In 1872, out of a total of 930 children of school-going age only 73 boys and 15 girls were receiving elementary instruction.

While efforts to provide more schools were stepped up by the authorities, the progress of education for the Indian girls was still painfully slow. In 1886, Mr F Colpepper, an Inspector of Schools, strongly recommended education for Indian girls as a pre-requisite for the graces of motherhood. As a further encouragement to parents to send their daughters to school the authorities provided separate girl's schools. Although this helped to a certain extent, by 1909 there were only 324 girls at school out of a total enrolment of 3284. As more girl's schools were built parental objection lessened and by 1928 there were 2794 Indian girls at school, but this represented less than thirty percent of girls of school-going age in the Indian Community. The Indian parent still regarded formal education as a time-filler until the girl reached marriagable age. Bare literacy was apparently sufficient for the Indian girl as far as the parent was concerned, and the thinking still largely prevailed that if a girl was allowed to go to school after reaching puberty she would be "spoilt". Concentrated efforts were subsequently made to encourage Indian parents to send their daughters to high school. After much cajoling and convincing, the female high school population was brought to about 100 in the early 1930's. The next two decades were marked by equal slow progress and in 1954 there were only 817 girls in secondary school. Most of them were destined for the kitchen after reaching, at best, J.C. Level.

The Indian parent still did not entertain the idea of a career for his daughter. Although a few girls entered the teaching profession and the odd one went to University, these were clearly the exceptions. Preparation for marriage was indeed still the upper-

most thought in the minds of most parents. It was perhaps this that prompted them to keep their daughters at school for as long as possible. For as the level of education of the Indian boy was rising, the Indian parent felt that if his daughter was "educated" she would stand a better chance in the marriage stakes.

With the onset of the 1950's the impact of the western way of life was being felt with greater force by the Indian Community. The need for a marked change in the manner of thinking and living was clear. The Indians as a minority eastern group in a fast changing western milieu, perceived adaption to a new order, with emphasis on competition, individual achievement and economic advancement as a means of enjoying the fruits of a higher standard of living. Education therefore came to be regarded as the road to salvation in a new society. Reverence for learning had always been a central feature of Indian culture but it had never got off the ground as far as the Indian girl was concerned because of her limited domestic role in the social set up. But the need for change and adaption gave the necessary impetus to this concept and from the 1950's onwards, the snail-pace development of education for Indian girls gave way to galloping progress.

Some of the elements of this impetus were that the new generation of women had themselves received some formal education and could see the benefits for their daughters of higher education. Indian parents realized that the Indian Community was now inextricably bound to the bustling, industrialized society and that each member of the family had to be educated in order to cope with its

complexities.

Economic necessity put a speedy end to prejudice against the working girl, only better education would bring better jobs, better income and therefore a higher standard of living; Modern technology has enabled the housewife to cope more easily with domestic chores, and still have free time to enjoy the pleasures of radio, cinema, books, etc, which would be better appreciated with a certain degree of education.

The past three decades have seen dramatic developments in the education of the Indian girl. Today it is expected that every Indian girl will go to school and remain there, provided that she satisfies academic requirements, until she reaches matriculation level. Improvement can be seen not only in the numbers of Indian girls attending school, but also in the type of education the Indian girl receives at high school. Since the introduction of the differentiated system of education in 1972 the Indian girl has the choice of a diversified and more meaningful curriculum which is intended to equip her for higher study, career-training and to fulfil her role as wife and mother.

In the days of the gradual progress of education among Indian women, Indian girls became teachers, nurses, a few became doctors, a number of lowly-qualified women worked in clothing factories or as domestic servants. This was virtually the sum total of their employment opportunities. Today, by taking advantage of

the facilities available for higher education at Technikons, Universities, Training Colleges and Business Colleges, the Indian girl can find gainful employment in a variety of fields, thereby increasing the wealth of the Community. Indian girls today work as teachers, lawyers, accountants, bank-tellers, doctors, beauty consultants, physiotherapists, social-workers, lecturers, hairdressers, receptionists, secretaries and driving instructors.

An interesting feature is the large number of women attending part-time classes. Many are married women whose formal education stopped years ago. They are educating themselves not only in order to improve employment prospects, but also to add grace, quality and sophistication to their domestic roles or perhaps to achieve some degree of intellectual compatibility with their husbands who are educationally advanced. The learning explosion has therefore made its impact on all strata of Indian women.

The Indian Community has geared itself to exploit the full potential of its human resources. With characteristic resilience and enterprise it has adapted its eastern culture, tradition and way of life to the needs of a western mode of living. And education has been the catalyst for this transformation. Educational advancement has given the Indian woman new power and worth, and enables her to play a fuller and more diversified role in the life of the Community.

D. THE EFFECTS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE ON INDIAN WOMEN

Many changes have taken place in the lives of Indian women in South African in a comparatively short period of time. In the past they lived a secure and trouble-free life, with ample protection by their menfolk from the harsh realities of life. Business and public affairs were handled exclusively by the males of the household. The ideal Indian woman was portrayed as a modest, retiring creature who ruled in her own domain, but took very little interest in anything outside it. She did not meddle in legal affairs or politics and never dreamt of claiming equality with men. Today, the idea that an Indian woman is naturally subservient to her menfolk is rapidly fading away. Many modern Indian women have been profoundly affected by the Women's Liberation Movement. Gone forever are the days when households needed constant attention in order to keep them running smoothly. Many Indian homes are now equipped with modern, time and energy saving equipment - with emphasis on labour saving, thus resulting in more leisure time as a result of having more time on her hands, the Indian woman thinks of taking up a career as well as running a home. In the earlier days there was the tendency for Indian women to give up their employment once they married because it was considered both unacceptable and difficult to synchronise the two roles of housewife and worker. But today women do not forego the pleasures of one sphere in order to enjoy the satisfaction of the other - the best of both worlds has come within their grasp. Women do not only go out to work in order to supplement the family income, as there are instances where the husband's social status and income are high and the wife's earnings are therefore not really necessary; but the more highly educated women are, the more strongly motivated they are to return to their careers after their marriage. This development is common among the intellectual elite of Indian South African women.

ADHERENCE TO OLD CUSTOMS

Age-old customs and traditions which were practised by their forebears are still observed by many Indian women - some Indian women still cling tenaciously to the Eastern way of life. Religious ceremonies connected with family events are still widely practised by some Indian women. Wedding ceremonies continue to be performed in the traditional manner but they are now considerably modified. In Hindu weddings the "Thali" is used in place of the Western wedding ring but it has now become fashionable for the contracting parties to exchange wedding rings. The cutting of the wedding cake by the bride and bridegroom has also gained popularity.

THE FADING AWAY OF THE SYSTEM OF ARRANGED MARRIAGES

The accepted system of arranged marriages among Indians has also undergone considerable change. Marriages have usually been arranged affairs where parents choose the respective partners, especially in the case of the Indian girl. The trend now is for love and courtship before marriage. Close contact between younger people of both sexes in either a social, educational or working atmosphere has resulted in young people knowing what they would like in their respective marriage partners, and therefore preferring to choose their own partner in life - something which was unheard of in the past.

THE BREAKDOWN OF THE JOINT FAMILY SYSTEM

There appears to be a strong correlation between the issue of married

women going out to work and the subsequent breakdown of the Joint family system. A survey conducted by Dr Sabita Jithoo, Head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Durban-Westville on the Joint Family system, has revealed that women played an important part in the segmentation of the traditional family structure and branched off into nuclear families which consist of the husband, wife and children. The daughter-in-law in the early days conformed to the traditional way of life without questioning it. When the educated daughter-in-law went out to work, the tension and conflict which inevitably developed in the family eventually led to the couple setting up a nuclear family unit on their own. In cases where the wife was a professional person the segmentation of the joint household was expedited. Over the past forty years Indian women have developed a high level of career-mindedness. With higher education women are adapting a Western-orientated outlook to life which is in direct conflict with the traditional ideals that are upheld in a typical joint family. Dr Jithoo's survey further revealed that the conjugal bond was much stronger when marriages were based on personal choice, with the wife's problems and wishes attended to by her husband. Education and Westernisation have encouraged in women a desire for expression and the right to run their own homes. Even Moslem women who only a few years ago lived in strict purdah and were deemed all but the basic education have now fully emerged and occupy their rightful place in community activities.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE SEXES - A PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT

Contrary to the view that the change of sex roles must have some effect

within the home, on both the male and the female, Researchers have expressed the view that the changing role of the sexes in modern society was beneficial for all. Dr B A Balkissoon, Senior lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Durban-Westville says that society's expectations of the sexes have become more flexible with the resultant view that although certain masculine traits such as aggressiveness, are still expected from the male, and feminine qualities are still expected of women, they are no longer as rigid as they were in the past. Thus women are no longer expected to be dependant, submissive and non-competitive and men are no longer criticised for enjoying "feminine" pursuits like cooking and child-care. With regard to the discipline of the child at home, the role of disciplinarian was traditionally that of the father; if the mother took over one would ponder at her effectiveness in such a role. Research has however indicated that the intergration of masculine and feminine roles in the discipline of the child, is beneficial for the development of a well balanced personality in the child - he would adapt more easily to situations, would have a high self-esteem and greater maturity will result. Dr Balkissoon is also of the view that if more and more women were "wearing the pants" and men "donning the apron", it augered well for a more behaviourally adjusted married couple.

THE ISSUE OF DIVORCE

A matter of utmost concern is the increasing divorce rate among Indian women. Divorce was taboo in the past. The sanctity of the marriage vows was strictly observed even if the couple were totally unsuited to each other. However, some Indian women today are less willing to endure an unhappy marriage than formerly. Those who are able to support themselves do not hesitate to set up a new home and start

a new life.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE WEST ON INDIAN WOMEN

The Appearance and Etiquette of Modern Indian Women

The West has profoundly influenced many other aspects of the life and lifestyle of "newly-emerging" Indian women. The type of clothes worn by most Indian women is now typically western. But the traditional and glamorous "sari" has, however, not been forsaken completely, as many Indian women still wear them on auspicious occasions like religious ceremonies and weddings. Whereas western garments were previously worn for the sake of convenience, Indian women and more especially Indian girls, now show increasing preference for the ever-so appealing fashion of the West. In the past, Indian women preferred either to braid their hair or wear it in a "bun". But the modern Indian girl now prefers short, sleek hairstyles which are convenient and easy to manage. Several beauty and hairdressing salons have been established by Indian women and are well patronised by Indian girls and women. Indian women now attend functions with the latest creation in hairstyles.

Special attention is now also given to speech and elocution. Indian girls who have had the advantage of education now speak English with a trace of an Indian accent which is usually associated with their forebears. English is preferred as a medium of communication to their vernacular language.

THE INFLUENCE OF MISSIONARIES ON EARLY INDIAN WOMEN

At the turn of the century the wives of Christian Missionaries exerted considerable influence on the wives of Indian Christians. Indian women were taught knitting, embroidery and needlework. Some learnt how to play the piano and the organ. Many Indian women have since taken a keen interest in Western musical instruments and are now able to play a variety of them. Indian women were also taught the use of cutlery, crockery, laying the table with linen and western table manners.

FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT

The type of entertainment now enjoyed by Indian women is wide and varied - her horizons extend far beyond traditional concerts and films. Indian women attend cinemas which show a wide variety of English films. While the older generation prefers "Indian" films the younger generation is showing an increasing preference for English films. The viewing of video-recorded films have also become increasingly popular. The western form of dancing has also gained popularity, with more and more Indian women going out to discotheques and nightclubs. English "pop" music has also become decidedly more enjoyable among the younger generation of Indian women than traditional Indian music which has not been totally banished from most homes."

There is no doubt that the influence of the West on Indian women has been most marked in recent years. The Indian woman has now fitted into the South African pattern of life with a happy blending of the best from the East and West.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The trend today is towards a more inspiring and fulfilling state of women. Indian women now dress better, look smarter, and walk with an air of confidence, traits which are in themselves a clear indication of their ability and will to prove themselves effectively and equally as South Africans. The achievements of Indian women over the past forty to fifty years have indeed been great, and they are still forging ahead in their attempts to remove obstacles in their struggle not only for freedom from ancient taboos and tradition but also towards a much greater freedom - that of being recognised as co-workers together with their male counterparts for the upliftment of all aspects of society. The emancipation of Indian women has been an invaluable contribution to the vast improvement in the living standards of the Indian people. By adhering strictly to their faith Indian South African women have succeeded in maintaining their pre-dominantly Eastern character in many ways in spite of Western Cultural influences. The ideal Indian woman is the mother - the mother first and the mother last. Indian women must grow and develop in the foot-prints of Sita, who was faithful to her husband Rama, patient and uncomplaining even in times of injustice and adversity. "So Indian thought views woman exactly as it views man, as a person with destiny. In the pursuit of worldly excellence and spiritual realisation, which is the highest reach of life, women and men have to " walk in single file."(3) Radhamony Poonisamy, a former South African who became Mauritius's first Minister of Women's Affairs in 1976 and the first woman to enter politics in that country, who was on holiday in Durban recently, says, "Women - power in every field is here to stay

The power of our women today should not be underestimated. No longer can they be looked upon as the weaker sex. They are the hope of the future."(4)

THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADEL RULES THE WORLD.



(3) G. NAIDOO : THE INDIAN IDEAL OF WOMANHOOD, Pg. 25

(4) HERALD, JULY 21 1985, Pg 4

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