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Indian Women and the Changing Character of the Working Class Indian Household in Natal 1860-1990[1]

BILL FREUND
(University of Natal)

The conventional literature on Indian women's lives in South Africa as elsewhere tends to ignore or gloss over their economic activities. While the bourgeoisie prize female seclusion, the working-class household is itself a complex economic unit in which women play a highly significant part. Only looking at the participation of women in the wage economy obscures this part. It is possible to look at the Indian working-class household and the economic activities of women in it in a rough historical pattern. As Indian family life developed outside the indenture system, Indian social, cultural and familial life in South Africa was recreated along new creolised lines in rural areas and in the urban periphery. Industrialisation meant that increasing numbers of men obtained factory and other employment, but this represented part of a broad family accumulation strategy in which women's work was effectively exploited. The joint family was as much an effective economic unit as a product or generator of family ideology. Finally, after World War II but particularly from the 1960s, Indian women themselves entered the job market in large numbers. This helped to cause the growing nuclearisation of Indian families and their enmeshing in new levels of consumerism. To some extent, the experience of going out to work has opened the horizons of Indian working-class women, but wage labour is more significantly a strategy to maximise cash income in a male-dominated nuclear family.

Unpacking the Indian Family

In literature on women's work and notably in South Africa, there is a conventional division between domestic labour and wage labour. Thus with regard to 'settler society', Cherryl Walker refers to 'women's proper place centred on the domestic sphere of children and kitchen [which] was set apart from the world of money and

[1] I am grateful to Rob Morrell and Tim Quinlan for looking at drafts of this paper. Jo Beall provided me with a bibliography of the literature on India that has been enormously helpful.

power, the domain of men'.[2] This division disguises the complexity of an interrelationship. The relation of family to economy and the place of women in household as well as wage labour economies is a basic one but one that has experienced important historic change despite its normal presentation as part of an unchanging cultural reality. In this paper, the particular case investigated is restricted in terms of class (working class) and ethnicity (Indian). This particularity has been shaped by a particular historic experience which will broadly be characterised below.

Labour is not conventionally a part of the familiar definition of the lives of Indian women. Popular representations in South Africa of the Indian woman projected by Indians themselves generally emphasize delicacy and dependency. This kind of Indian model idealises and generalises from the bourgeoisie, which has existed since the earliest Indian settlement in Natal. Prestige resides in an idealised household where the woman's role is domestic and secluded.[3] In India, legitimate marriage was validated in terms of a dowry that gave a man exclusive rights to a woman's sexuality and offspring and assumed her subjection to the household for the purposes of domestic labour. Seclusion has been associated with men's jealous control over offspring: 'Women of the landholding classes are secluded and their sexuality guarded not only as a mechanism to recruit and control the reproductive tasks of the family, but especially to ensure the paternity of children'.[4]

In an ideal type model of Indian family development, women after marriage were incorporated into extended households in which they first occupied a position of great vulnerability to exploitation. This situation gradually improved as they bore children. The mature mother could hope to exert very substantial power, including control over labour, from the wives of her sons. As a household accumulated wealth, this kind of model became more and more relevant to a family that had begun poor. The one important modification has come from the growing acceptance of the legitimacy of professional work based on high educational qualifications to bourgeois Indian women. To the outside world, the household tried to present a common face but in fact it was and is likely to be the site of intense struggles and very substantial inequality in disposition over resources.

The bourgeois extended family is a veritable advertisement for prestige as well as a highly practical partnership of father and sons or of brothers. However, such a model is not very appropriate to the much larger Indian working class in South Africa, which has constructed a rather different kind of family history neglected in conventional cultural self-presentation. It is important in recovering that history to

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[2] C. Walker, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, 1990), Introduction, p. 11.

[3] Z. Mayat, *Indian Delights: A Book on Indian Cookery* (Durban, 1961); and *Nanima's Chest*, Durban, 1981), on clothing. The anthropological literature I have been using on India tends to generalise about Indian culture and Indian values while allowing for the existence of variation. The subjects of this essay are largely of south Indian origin and Hindu (although many have become Christians in the last two generations) and I have tried to give particular attention to comparative literature on Hindus in southern India.

[4] G. Sen, 'Subordination and Sexual Control: A Comparative View of the Control of Women', *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 16, 1, (1984), p. 134.

avoid two important traps that are there in the available literature. On the one hand, there is the emphasis across class lines that often exists on the joint household structure whose rationale is explained largely from the point of view of the associated males.[5] On the other is a debunking view, now highly developed in the new feminist literature on India, which insists that women's labour (today at least) can only be understood properly if 'the household ... be abandoned as the basic unit of analysis'[6] and women, or at least relevant groupings of women, be comprehended as virtually a distinct class.

Feminists have long since exposed the problems with the former, male-centred perspective on family life. To quote a student of the Tamil-speaking community in Sri Lanka, the family institution 'keeps women in a double-bind situation, because the family not only exploits and oppresses; it is also only through the family that women can expect support and protection'.[7] The latter tendency is more problematic. It highlights the extent to which capitalists, for instance in India, have been able to transform and proletarianise women's labour in a particular way distinctive from the labour of men. This may sometimes in fact be the basis of an industry that is of more importance in the cash economy of India than the labour that men are performing.[8]

In contemporary South Africa as well, it is important to look both at the conditions of those Indian women who have found themselves compelled to survive outside the conventional household economy and to see the logic of particular capitals in employing large numbers of Indian women as wage labour. Through the modern history of Natal, the exploitation of labour has clearly been constructed along lines of gender as well as race and skill level and cannot be explained purely in terms of individuals and market forces. Gender is not a sufficient class category definer, however. In one of the most influential Indian studies that pursue gender as virtually a class category, the reader finds on close inspection that some of the entrepreneurs are also women.[9] Moreover, even if one emphasizes the particular nature of the exploitation of the working woman, it is essential that an adequate analysis captures the intersection of that exploitation with the dynamics of the household economy. Simultaneously, that household economy has to be explored from the woman's perspective as a site of domination and struggle, however muted.

In working class Indian households in Natal, Indian women have always laboured in a way that defies the conventional categorisation of the household as separate from the cash economy. Thus it is not only a question of developing an economic model that will explain how wage labour intersects with a certain kind of

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[5] See for instance S. Jithoo, 'Complex Families and Joint Households Amongst Indians in Durban' in J. Argyle and E. Preston-Whyte (eds), *Social System and Tradition in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, 1978) or T. Scarlett Epstein, *South India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (New York, 1973).

[6] M. Mies, *The Lace Workers of Narsapur* (London, 1982), p. 179.

[7] E. Skjonsberg, *A Special Caste? Tamil Women of Sri Lanka* (London, 1982), p. 121.

[8] .M. Mies with Lalita K and K. Kumari, *Indian Women in Subsistence and Agricultural Labour, Women, Work and Development 12* (Geneva, 1986).

[9] Mies, *Lacemakers*, p. 66.

patriarchal authority at home but also that takes account of labour, defined as 'domestic' but actually part of a strategy of familial accumulation. Before Indian women went out to work for a wage, they were involved in a nexus of economic activities, some of them invisible to the census-taker, which belonged to a co-operative if internally unequal and arguably exploitative enterprise that fuelled the extended household and made economic sense of it for working class Natal Indians.

'Wealth', wrote the anthropologist Hilda Kuper, about South Africans of Indian origin, 'belongs to families rather than to individuals'.[10] The daughter and, more emphatically, the wife and daughter-in-law, were expected in working class families to contribute to the sustenance of the family by any legitimate productive activity that became available. Mies, studying Telugu speakers in India, writes that 'usually one form of subsistence production is not sufficient to guarantee survival but a combination of several is required'.[11] In general, the literature on Indian women emphasizes the importance of dowry given to the husband on marriage by his bride's family. However, amongst Tamil-speakers in Sri Lanka, brideprice is the norm outside the high castes because the wife is expected to contribute to the economic activities that will allow the family to survive.[12] I have also now found confirmation that in Natal, brideprice is indeed identified as customary amongst Tamils.[13] Similarly, lower-caste Bengali Hindus traditionally offered brideprice payments.[14] It may be useful to look at the prevalence of brideprice amongst Africans somewhat similarly. However, in southern African societies, the relative historic absence of petty crafts and a cash economy meant that the kind of claims that might be made on Indian women to participate in such activities, and customary assumptions concerning on what terms, were not logically a part of African 'traditional' marriage.[15]

Contemporary studies from southern India suggest that the roots of this familial complex, of the extended household as an economic unit, are historically deep. The proletarianised Telugu speaking lacemakers of Narsapur, of whom Maria Mies has written with such force, have replaced lacemakers who worked in the household in enterprises organised by the household head. Women are allowed and indeed encouraged to work in productive activity inside the home and out as a crucial element in the survival and accumulation strategies of the household. 'Women are not housewives (Mies' emphasis),dependent on the income of their husbands; they

[10] H. Kuper, *Indian People in Natal (*Pietermaritzburg, 1960), p. 64.

[11] Mies, *Lacemakers*, p. 3.

[12] See Skjonsberg, A *Special Caste?*

[13] Private information, Mrs. P., Tamil housewife. Probably the majority of the Indian working class in Natal is Tamil-speaking. Rather few Tamils could be described as middle class until the last couple of generations and very few came to South Africa as free 'passenger Indians'. Traditionally, Gujerati-speakers, Muslim and Hindu, formed the bulk of the so-called trading class in South Africa but religion, region of origin and indeed caste background today correlate less and less with class in South Africa.

[14] K. Bardhan (ed. and translator), *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants and Rebels* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 272.

[15] For the regional anthropological literature, see E. Krige and J. Camaroff (eds) *Essays on African Marriage in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, 1981); A. Kuper, *Wives for Cattle: Bridewealth and Marriage in Southern Africa* (London, 1981).

are in fact the last guarantors of the survival of the family through various types of work and services'.[16] Apart from lacemaking, Narsapur women continue to find many legitimate ways of earning money, all of which they are strictly obligated to contribute to the family till unlike men, who have more discretion over their own earnings.[17]

Everywhere in India, women, even in Islamic communities, work in the fields and constitute a major source of seasonal agricultural labour. This kind of activity damages family prestige in the Indian caste system where 'exclusion from the productive economy' is crucial for promoting the image of a caste,[18] but it is a norm in the lives of the poor. In some lines of economic activity, women's work is conventionally considered as too domestic, cheap and unskilled to be discussed but in fact it forms a crucial component in extended household cash production that usually is registered only in terms of the man's 'more productive' work. Correspondingly, it is more prestigious to define this component as familial or domestic despite its commercial utility.

For most of the history of the Natal Indian population, the contribution of women to the extended household economy through a wide range of productive activity has been essential. Only limited numbers of families have been in a position to seclude their younger women or to withdraw them from such activities. At the same time, opportunities for harnessing female labour aimed at extended family accumulation through economic activities based at home have existed, better in some historic phases than others admittedly. The direct exposure of women to wage labour therefore was undesirable and largely avoided. The patriarch sought to keep his family out of wage labour and within an economic extended household unit over which he had maximum control as much as possible, a pattern which can be traced in African society throughout the continent as well. Indeed the proportion of Indian women at work in the formal state definition for a long period of time actually fell. The number of 'economically active' Indian women over the age of 15 statistically tabulated by the South African state fell from 4,368 to 3,710 between 1921 and 1936, then slowly rose to 6,034 in 1946 and 6,599 in 1951.[19] Women were however intensely involved in market-related activity. This paper seeks to discuss the rise and fall of this type of economic involvement. There is at first the question of women's situation under indenture. How did the household reconstitute itself in South Africa? In the third section of this paper, the decline of household production and its replacement by wage labour is considered. From the 1950s, Indian working class women do go out to work in growing numbers. It will be argued that this is as much a cause as an effect of the forcible shift to living in

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16 Mies, *Lacemakers*, pp. 3-4.

17 Ibid., p. 133; Mies, with K and Kumari, *Indian Women in Subsistence*, p. 109.

18 J. Liddle and R. Joshi, *Daughters of Independence; Gender, Caste and Class in India* (New Brunswick & New Jersey, 1986), p. 59. Liddle & Joshi argue that in India, the rise in family fortunes tends to be accompanied by a withdrawal of women from wage work into theoretically unproductive family labour, pp. 90-91.

19 Bureau of Census and Statistics. *Union Statistics for Fifty Years* (Pretoria, 1960).

state-built townships and went together simultaneously with big social and cultural changes, for better and for worse.

Women and the Construction of Indian Family Life in Natal

The origins of the Indian working class in Natal lie in the arrival of more than 150,000 indentured labourers brought to South Africa between 1860 and 1911, the system finally coming to an end at the behest of the government of India. At the same time, a smaller number of so-called passenger Indians came to Natal under their own steam. The core of the passenger community consisted of merchants, mainly Muslim but partly Hindu, from the west coast. However, they always included poorer relations and hangers-on. Indian merchants sometimes failed and were reduced to poverty in South Africa. Thus there were many poor Indian families in Natal as elsewhere in Africa from this kind of background. Nonetheless the indentured immigrants and their descendants were far and away the core of the working class. At first, the great majority were bound to work for the coastal sugar plantations but with time a larger and larger percentage, eventually the majority, were engaged in work for the colonial state, for the mines, on inland farms and in other enterprises.

Had the employers of indentured labour had their way, they would have brought to South Africa only healthy, working males. However, the Indian state refused to allow this. A minimum quota of women, forty per cent of the number of male indentured workers, were required to be brought to South Africa with the men. This included wives but also independently indentured women as well. We know quite a lot about the official and legal history of indenture but the social history of the indentured Indian immigrants is still undeveloped.[20] Only Jo Beall has paid particular attention to the situation of indentured women.[21] She has basically emphasized the vulnerability and what she calls 'ultra-exploitation' of such women, some of whom were fieldworkers in the canefields while others worked on tea plantations, much as in highland parts of India. As we shall see, in South Africa as in India, women finding themselves outside the protection of the family structure, even though liberated from the forms of exploitation that existed within, were in a very difficult situation, marginalised from conventional social channels and paid extremely badly when they found paid work at all.

However, I would like to suggest that this picture does not reflect the general situation of Indian women under indenture in Natal. For one thing, in order to induce Indian men to come to South Africa and to encourage the production of inexpensive food for the market, the indenture system permitted individuals to remain in the new country and do as they willed despite the increasingly intense

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[20] But see M.J. Tayal, 'Indian Indentured Labour in Natal 1890-1911', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 14, 4 (1978), pp. 519-47; J.D. Beall and M.D.North-Coombes, 'The 1913 Disturbances in Natal: The Social and Economic Background to "Passive Resistance"', *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, 6 (1983), pp. 48-81.

[21] J. Beall, 'Women under Indentured Labour in Colonial Natal 1860-1911' in Walker (ed), *Women and Gender*.

racist fears of the mass of white Natalians about Indian competition in such spheres as skilled labour and land ownership.[22] Until the punitive introduction of the infamous 3 pound tax in 1894 on free Indians, the large majority of Indians (and many, even afterwards) did remain in South Africa without re-indenturing themselves. In the wake of the mineral discoveries, South Africa offered a host of opportunities for Indians particularly as peasant farmers or market gardeners but often combined with service trades and a host of other occupations, by contrast with monoculture sugar islands such as Trinidad, Mauritius or Fiji to which indentured workers were transported at the same time. Harsh as indentured conditions were, a silver lining in the cloud thus existed once the five years of servitude were over.

Therefore I would posit that the main story for this period, one that has hardly been uncovered by historians, is one of the recreation of Indian social, cultural and familial life in South Africa. Following the work of Rajen Mesthrie on language, I would also posit that what is recreated was not exactly a duplicate of any particular Indian society but a new, creolised world that reflected mutual influences amongst Indian people and interaction with white, 'Coloured' and African people in the new environment. The emergence of new extended families amongst the poor and the workers, few of whom emigrated as a group from India, must have been an enormously important and absorbing aspect of life in this period. Some indentured men came to South Africa with wives, but in general, family life had to be reconstructed. Given the prevailing sex ratio (and the absence of mothers-in-laws),[23] I would argue that Indian women of childbearing age might have been frequently in a rather strong bargaining position to help structure this process with the more successful of the men coming out of indenture. A few examples of indentured women who succeeded in marrying wealthy men on the rise in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be cited.[24] Certainly fragmentary evidence suggests the wholesale involvement of women's energies in the process of developing complex accumulation strategies in the bosom of the reforming Indian families of late nineteenth-century South Africa. Where Indian families became involved in commerce, women often took part in entrepreneurial activities on behalf of the family.[25] Some Natal Indians believe that the insufficient number of immigrant women militated against the full reconstruction in South Africa of the caste system with its ritual disdain for women's labour outside of prescribed domestic duties.[26]

From early on in the history of Indian immigration to Natal, a growing number of Indian cultivators, craftsmen and petty producers can be discerned. The free Indians, who became the majority from the start of the twentieth century,

[22] See Freund, 'The Rise and Decline of an Indian Peasantry in Natal', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 18, 2, (January 1991).

[23] Gita Sen considers that mothers-in law in India conventionally have total control over the labour, mobility and personal relationships of younger women, Sen, 'Subordination', p. 134.

[24] V. Chetty, Biography of R.B. Chetty, History III essay, n.d. University of Durban-Westville; S.J. Bodasing, Biography of Babu Bodasing, History III essay, 1984.

[25] Interview with Mr. K.G., 19 January 1990.

[26] Comments of Pat Poovalingam in *The Leader*, 25 November 1960.

established communities, typically on the fringe of urban areas, where land was cheap and a range of economic activities relatively uncontrolled. Market gardening around Durban, based usually on the lease of Corporation land, was a major activity until the 1960s. It provided gardeners with little opportunity for accumulation on its own but it represented a useful core for a range of economic activities. In order to reduce costs, the family usually needed to expend time and effort on doing its own marketing. Some family members would be involved in other economic pursuits. The family as a whole might included members active in petty commerce, in traditional craft activity and in service jobs in town. As industry developed in Durban, Indian men would walk over the green hills to factory jobs.

Women were fully involved in such a familial nexus. A shrewd Natal capitalist noted in 1903 that 'a free Indian made his wife and children work as well as himself'.[27] 'All the Indians here, men and women and children, are busily ploughing the hillsides and planting same with mealies, tobacco, beans, etc'.[28] Women were found working in the fields, although this was associated with poverty and low status and abandoned when possible.[29] If Indian women worked outside the family for a wage there, they were paid half or less than men.[30] The wives of market gardeners sold produce and were crucial to the cost structure of the entire operation.[31] A study of the largely unskilled Indian municipal workers living in Magazine Barracks, near to the centre of Durban with easy physical access to the large range of commercial activities focussed there, suggested the considerable importance of 'casual' child and female labour to the family economy.[32] Such activities were economically vital but ideologically constructed as extensions of the domestic, subsistence sphere with which women were associated.

In more prosperous families, interview subjects have recalled large, complexly articulated relationships in which women took a more commercially active economic role. In a laundry owner's family, the wife effectively ran the business on

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[27] Sir James L. Hulett, cited in *Indian Opinion*, 14 September 1903.

[28] J.S. Done in *Indian Opinion*, 23 December 1906.

[29] N.R. Kandosamy,'A Brief History of the Glendale Sugar Mill,' University of Durban-Westville, History III essay, 1985,6;. S. Govindasamy, 'The History of the Indian Marketers of Cliffdale,' BA(Hons) essay, University of Durban-Westville Department of History, 1987.

[30] I.G. Halliday, 'The Indian Market Gardeners of the Durban Peri-urban Area', Masters thesis, 1950, University of Natal, Durban, p. 55; M.D. Lincoln, 'The Culture of the South African Sugarmill: The Impress of the Sugarocracy', Ph.D., University of Cape Town, 1985, p. 167 with reference to the sugar belt.

[31] S. Rampersad, 'Biography of Jaichoo Nanoo' University of Durban-Westville, History III essay, n.d.; V. Sirkari Naidoo, 'Survey of Income and Expenditure of the Indian Employees of the Durban Corporation Living at the Magazine Barracks, Durban', *South African Journal of Economics*, 14, 1 (1946), p. 48. See reminiscences in F. Meer with S. Skweyiya, S. Jolobe, J. Westmore and S. Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker* (Durban, 1990), p. 184. It is striking to contrast this interview which reveals the commercial orientation of family enterprise in Indian households and another conducted with an African informant, where the emphasis is on rural self-sufficiency and lack of dependence on the market.

[32] G.G. Maasdorp and P.N. Pillay, 'Occupational Mobility among the Indian People of Natal' in H.W. van der Merwe and C.J. Groenewald, *Occupational and Social Change among Coloured People* (Cape Town, 1976), p. 123.

behalf of a political activist-husband. The daughters-in-law sold cooked food to the workforce.[33] In another instance, from a rather later time period, some family women worked for a wage while others are remembered to have specialised in the cooking or the cleaning in a sprawling totalised extended family economy.[34] What appeared to white officials as slum quarters actually represented to the inhabitants an expanding space on the cheap urban periphery ideally suited to the pursuit of such activities.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, white social scientists in Natal concerned themselves in a systematic way with the Indian 'problem' in South Africa. Certainly, most South African Indians at the time were very poor and suffered particularly from substantial unemployment. It was rather typically postulated that the Indian family structure was partly to blame: too many dependents and too few working adults.[35] In reality, this was not really the case. Women, particularly given the extensive nature of domestic work in a large family and the lack of remunerative options, were most effectively put to work within the family accumulation engine on a basis that was as much or little exploitative as their relative bargaining power tended to determine. The economic strategy of keeping women at home had a distinct rationale. It was not the result of a tradition of demure seclusion or an other-worldly demand on the part of religion.

From Domestic Labour to Wage Labour

> These removals were done in the name of separate development — they were supposed to create conditions in which different groups could preserve their own culture and their own identity. But the great irony is that they have in fact broken down traditional ways of life. They have forced families into a single mould, the mould of the typical family you would find in any other urban industrial community in the world ...[36]

The 1904 census recorded only 236 Indian women in Natal employed outside of domestic and agricultural work. So things continued until World War II. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the situation of Indian women in employment changed substantially.[37] Between 1951 and 1970, Indian women in the country as a whole increased as a percentage of the (Indian) workforce from 7,3 to 18,6%.[38] Only

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[33] Interview with Mr. K.G.

[34] Interview, Mr. P.B., 19 January 1990.

[35] A.L. Muller, 'The Position of the Asians in Africa', *South African Journal of Economics,* 33, 2, pp. 128-29; L. Kuper, H. Watts and R. Davies, *Durban: A Study in Racial Ecology* (London, 1958); A.J. Arkin, Contribution of the Indians to the South African Economy 1860-1970, University of Durban-Westville Institute of Social & Economic Research Report 14, p. 262.

[36] .C. Saloojee, prominent Transvaal Indian Congress activist, cited in M. Hermer, *The Passing of Pageview* (Johannesburg, 1978).

[37] B. Young, 'The Industrial Geography of the Durban Region', Ph.D, University of Natal, Durban, 1972, p. 279.

[38] Arkin, *Contribution of the Indians,* p. 264.

1,518 Indian women worked in manufacturing in 1951. This figure doubled to 3,082 in 1960 and then went to 13,530 in 1970.[39] Where Indian women had been a very small component in the labour market, they became very significant. The movement of working class women out to waged work in Durban became the norm by the end of this time.

At first sight, this movement ties in to the conventional perspectives of modernisation theory: 'Modern' women abandon the household and the domestic economy as cash needs become more internalised and they reject seclusion as a shackle on their freedom; they become 'free individuals'. This has some truth to it. After World War II, Indian women become more available for wage work because their command of English improved and they entered first primary and then secondary education on a universal basis. The first secondary school for Indian girls only opened its doors in 1936. Whereas in 1954, girls formed only 15,6% of Standard 9 and 10 pupils in Indian schools, this figure rose to 28,9% in 1963 and 39,0% by 1973.[40] The first generations of Indian women workers were however largely crowded into low-paid, non-unionised factory work. In 1970, of all employed Indian women, 43% were production workers as opposed to 16% employed in services, including domestics and housekeepers, 15% in sales, 8% in clerical jobs and 8% in professional and technical work(mainly teachers).[41]

However, in Natal Indian society, this coincides with the impact of the Group Areas Act of 1950 which resulted in the removal of most Indians from the inexpensive physical sites where the compound family engaged in multiple activities could flourish with rather little outside control. Peri-urban settlements and slums, pockets of Indians in areas desired for white suburbs or, more significantly, for industrial development, were systematically destroyed. The homeowning Indian middle class had class-specific suburban terrain designated for its use (Isipingo Beach, Reservoir Hills, for instance) while the much larger working class began to be removed to large suburbs dominated by rented houses and blocks of flats and defined in class terms. To an important extent, the quality of housing in terms of amenities (electrification, running water, etc.) improved. Most of Indian Durban today lives in two huge areas of this description: Chatsworth to the south-west of the city built up during the 1960s, and Phoenix to the north-west, which is about fifteen years old and still being extended on a small scale.[42] There was a deliberate strategy to this drastic change moreover; the townships held embedded within their structure a ruling class idea about what respectable working class family life should be like.[43]

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[39] Ibid., p. 274.

[40] Maasdorp & Pillay, 'Occupational Mobility' in van der Merwe, *Occupational and Social Change*, pp. 246-47; G.C. Oosthuizen and J.H. Hofmeyr, *Socio-Religious Survey of Chatsworth,* Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Durban-Westville, Report 7, 1979.

[41] Arkin, *Contribution of the Indians,* p. 282.

[42] For survey research by J. Butler-Adam and W. Venter into life in the new townships, see Fiat Lux, 18, (January-February, 1983).

[43] I owe this idea originally to Jeff McCarthy.

These Group Areas townships were inimical to the old extended family life.[44] To continue with thoughts from the 1970s by Cassim Saloojee, a prominent Transvaal Indian Congress activist, who wrote somewhat wistfully of this change from the perspective admittedly of the Indian bourgeoisie:

> It was a patriarchal family and the father was the single authority ... they are forced to go to Lenasia but some of the city values have rubbed off on them and they don't go to the cheaper housing areas ... the father finds he has high monthly instalments to pay off on his house, high maintenance costs and high transport costs. And his wife now rents modern furniture, refrigerator, television ... Suddenly the girls are encouraged to go on to one of the commercial colleges which have opened and they become clerks and typists. They become independent of the family and the father's unquestioned authority falls away. The traditional patriarchal Indian family is being affected profoundly by these resettlements and I can see it will eventually emerge as a modern family like any other modern industrial family with all the strained relations of three generations living together.[45]

A 1978 survey by Butler-Adam & Venter indicated that 80% of Indian families were living in nuclear family units, perhaps with some extension into a grand-parental generation and that this represented the preferences of about two-thirds of those surveyed.[46] Fatima Meer's survey five years later indicated that about two-thirds of her working married women lived in nuclear families and one-third extended.[47] The variety of petty occupations typical for Indian women near to the commercial centre of Durban became far less possible to pursue. Small flats created space constraints that broke up the extended family and promoted the nuclear family. The decline of the larger family unit represented a change of considerable importance in the internal balance of power within the families. The elderly, including mothers-in-law, were dethroned from their strong position and a new nuclear parental authority ensued. Privacy in the nuclear family, never before available on a significant scale, was now possible and sometimes desirable. In a case study discussed at length by Fatima Meer, the working wife ensures after the birth of her third child, that there will be no further pregnancies.[48] For many, large numbers of children ceased to be wanted.

Life in the new townships was very much more expensive in cash terms than the old extended family structure allowed for in most cases. To pay for electricity and other services and in order to meet the rent, it proved essential for the Indian wife to help meet the cash needs of family life through earning a wage. According to one

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[44] See Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr, *Socio-Religious Survey*.

[45] Saloojee in Hermer, *The Passing of Pageview*. It has been suggested to me that this presents a precise parallel with the resentment that African men expressed frequently on the potential loss of their power over their womenfolk. Compare K.A. Eales, 'Patriarchs, Passes and Privilege: Johannesburg's African Middle Classes and the Question of Night Passes for Women', History Workshop paper, Johannesburg, 1987.

[46] Butler-Adam and Venter, survey research.

[47] Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 97.

[48] F. Meer (ed.), *Factory and Family: The Divided Lives of South Africa's Women Workers* (Durban, 1984).

male informant, 'if our wives don't work, we've had it'.[49] According to a female informant:

> We have to work. If we did not work our families would be in a fix. We just don't know what would happen. We wouldn't be able to buy clothes; we would not be able to pay our hire purchase instalments.[50]

Even the need to exchange services or pay for child care to meet the new constraints that this imposed did not alter the situation. Young women were helped in their pursuit of jobs by an increasing facility at coping with the world outside the family and immediate community space through language and other skills provided in school and enabled to make the transition through the rapid growth of industry in Durban, particularly in the garment industry. It was suggested to me that women frequently have less difficulty in the course of slack times than men in finding (low-paying) jobs.[51] Such jobs, however, have a dead-end structure; even in the middle 1980s, the majority lacked pension schemes or medical aid.[52]

As Indian women started to enter factory life, they made men uncomfortable, just as the Saloojee quote suggests. The *Leader*, a newspaper then associated with the Natal Indian Congress, contained many references in the late 1950s to suggest that the morals of Indian working women were questionable and threatening to men. Described variously as 'factory girls' or 'unemployed factory girls', such potentially uncontrolled women were accused of displacing male jobs, of theft and of functioning in Magazine Barracks as 'touts for abortionists'. In one bizarre story, violent gangs of girl workers were accused of assaulting respectable Indian housewives in the market to prevent them from taking action against their husbands' philandering in return for paltry material rewards and favours.[53] The message of undermining the conventional moral and power structure of the family is hardly hidden here. Grannies too feared the influence of education and work on Indian girls who would be led 'astray'.[54]

The reality was far more prosaic in general. Often the first move was into Indian-owned factories where, at least in theory, paternalistic relationships were established with Indian bosses.[55] Sometimes, slightly better conditions than African women workers experienced are or were part of this control structure. ('I used to work in Pinetown before. The factory had separate cloak rooms for Indian and African women. The African cloak room did not have a mirror and there used to be so much fighting over that'.[56]) Indian women came to work in factory jobs

[49] Interview with Mr. P.B., 30 November 1989.

[50] Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 111.

[51] Idem. and p. 254.

[52] Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 140.

[53] The Leader, 16 October 1959, 20 October 1959, 5 March 1960, 1 April 1960.

[54] *The Leader*, 29 June 1946.

[55] Talk by Pregs Govender, GAWU organiser, 1990, University of Natal, Durban. Private information from Ms S.H. and Mr M.P. on impressions from relatives who are employers about actual factory situations.

[56] Meer, B*lack-Women-Worker*, p. 12.

before African women in significant numbers but from the 1960s, their numbers have been insufficient as was once true for white and 'Coloured' women and they have been supplemented with and increasingly replaced by African women, a process still far from complete however.[57] In one survey, a majority of bosses still expressed a preference for Indian or 'Coloured' over African women judging them to be, 'more educated, more westernized, more versatile and ... ' with 'a better developed work ethic'.[58]

While Maria Mies is right to suggest for India that the movement of women into wage labour proletarianises and oppresses them in a particular way, I think the impact has been rather different on women of Indian origin in Durban. Indian women workers are not necessarily quickly taken up into a proletarian identity based on their new relation with capital. An informant from the trade union movement suggested to me that Indian workers generally in Durban have a sense of massive social upward mobility (still a family strategy) through education and hard work in any case: they see themselves as part of a process which will increasingly boost a new generation into white-collar work and middle-class status. In the wake of the historic example of white women in South Africa, more educated Indian women have moved in large numbers into office work a generation following the move of their mothers and older sisters into the factory.[59] For Indian women, factory work now represents almost the 'lowest employment opportunity' and relatively few older women work in factories.[60]

A survey suggests moreover that many women identify their labour as part of a continuing commitment to family income construction. They see work as adding to respect that can be earned from men. In such a context, many find repetitive and tightly-controlled jobs acceptable.[61] A trade unionist of Indian origin finds Indian women as a result often proud of their own dutifulness and docility.[62] One source suggests that they are less apt to involve themselves in trade unionism than African women.[63]

Yet Indian women may well feel positive about establishing new social relationships, even if acquired in brushing against the dictates of capital.[64] As Engels long ago suggested, the wage relationship in some ways can be liberating for the woman, increasing her self-respect and contact with other social elements

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[57] Ibid., p. 226.

[58] Ibid., pp. 231-32.

[59] Arkin, *Contribution of the Indians*, p. 279.

[60] Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 89.

[61] Butler-Adam and Venter citing T.D. Chetty, 'Factory and Family: Indian Factory Workers in Durban', University of Durban-Westville, M.A. thesis. See also Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, 151ff. In a massive survey, Fatima Meer's team found that Indian women in general tend to accept that men need jobs more than women (81,5%), that unemployment for men is worse than for women (79,9%) and that it is appropriate for women to be fired before men (49,6%). Some quarter of respondents thought men should earn more than women for the same work. Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 149.

[62] Talk by Pregs Govender, GAWU organiser at University of Natal, Durban, 1990.

[63] Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 78.

[64] See Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, for the considerable extent to which Indian women make friends on the job and find jobs through networks of friends, pp. 113, 143.

she would not meet in her family-bound world. This is the classic Marxist approach to the 'woman question'.[65] Certainly women from the trade union movement identified to me positive elements in such work. When wages and conditions of factory work are poor and there is little or no difference made with African women, Indian women workers can be very militant.[66] One survey suggested a fairly high level of Indian female job satisfaction (which may imply docility but also a preference for getting out of the home and encountering another world), just as Gavin Maasdorp twenty years ago identified a growing desire for outside work amongst a sample of Indian women from the North Coast of Natal.[67]

Industrial work has given some possibilities for existence that did not previously exist for single Indian women. While the extended family structure embraced such a range of economic activities, the woman who was deserted or widowed was in a very difficult position. Certainly in South African circumstances as Beall reports, Indian women fell through the safety net and outside of respectable society from early colonial times (perhaps more so before the family was reconstructed sufficiently solidly on South African soil) and were the object of concern of social welfare organisations. In the case of deserted wives, alcoholism has often been assigned the cause of the husband's downfall. One welfare survey from the early 1950s noted the systematic occurrence of such desertions due to a husband's drinking or particularly oppressive relations with in-laws.[68] In his play about Cato Manor life, *At the Edge*, Ronnie Govender refers to the incidence of wifebeating. The survey noted 'drunkenness among women especially those who frequent and linger around Indian bars' as a consequence. Family life could be extremely oppressive for women and sometimes ended in dissolution.

Women could, but only very exceptionally did, serve as heads of rural households or own land.[69] For agricultural labour, and there have always been some Indian women working in the fields, work was very hard and pay extremely poor. Women could find a little employment in the interstices of community life, as matchmakers, washerwomen or even as exorcists.[70] In *At the Edge*, Ronnie Govender uses to great effect such a woman exorcist figure. In India and again in South Africa, poor women in need of employment such as widows often became

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[65] M. Molyneux, 'The "Woman Question" in the Age of Perestroika', *New Left Review*, 183 (1990), pp. 23-49.

[66] Govender talk and Interview with P.H., trade unionist, 4 January 1990.

[67] G.G. Maasdorp, 'A Socio-Economic Survey of the Indian Community in the Tongaat-Verulam Region', M.Comm., University of Natal, Durban, 1966, p. 154. See also Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 151.

[68] Durban Indian Child Welfare Society, 1953 annual report, ms. Mabel Palmer File 7, Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban.

[69] In a massive survey of Indian farmers on the North Coast of Natal performed at the end of the 1960s, only 9,7% of land was found to be owned by women, J.J.C. Greyling, 'Problems of Indian Landownership and Land-Occupation on the Natal North Coast: A Socio-Geographic Investigation', Ph.D, University of Natal, Durban, 1969, I, p. 114.

[70] Indo-European Council: Unemployment Questionnaires, File 28, ms. Mabel Palmer, Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban.

dais or midwives, not very respected or well-paid figures albeit important to community reproduction.[71]

One 1949 survey shows that a very large section of early Indian female wage workers were in fact widows and divorcees. Of a sample of 100 women, 38 had no other source of household income. A somewhat larger number were trying to supplement the wages of a very poorly paid husband or father.[72] Industrial work has improved their chances in life and no doubt partly allows for the woman to survive on her own. Whereas divorce used to be described as being very rare amongst Natal Indians, with a far lower rate than amongst whites, from the late 1970s it has expanded very fast and the official divorce rate now for Indians in South Africa is comparable to that of whites at the time of World War II. (Asian divorce rate 0,36% 1975, 0,88% 1983, 1,14% 1986 vs. white rate 0,54% 1921, 0,83% 1936, 1,49% 1951, 3,75% 1986) For every eight marriages among South African Indians today, more than one divorce occurs. The number of divorced Indian women registered by the state rose only from 227 to 708 in South Africa between 1921 and 1951 but then climbed to 4,751 in 1985.[73] Wage labour must be both cause and consequence. Nonetheless women's wages are hardly generous and allow only limited encouragement at independence except for the highly-educated. They averaged less than half the male wage in a survey published in 1978 in urban Natal and even a smaller percentage in small towns and rural areas.[74] In a 1983 sample, 60,4% of Indian factory workers were married women while another 29,6%, largely young women, also lived in a family setting while unmarried.[75]

In the far more frequent cases where the family holds together, it is the process of being streamlined on a nuclear basis that imposes new pressures and offers new opportunities to Indian women. The woman's wage becomes a crucial part of the quest for a more affluent life style. Working class families extend themselves as far as they can with credit to purchase appliances, furniture and motor cars.[76] Men purchase cars which eat up a huge portion of their wages.[77] Women prepare significant quantities of meat and vegetables as opposed to the poor and unvaried diets of the past. Education is a resource for further mobility from generation to generation. The maximisation of waged work continually breaks up the possibility of a reconstituted domestic economy becoming effective again. This major historic change needs to be understood in terms of an analysis that neither excludes the household or the workplace. A real understanding of women's work in South Africa

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[71] For India, see P. Jeffrey, R. Jeffrey and A. Lyon, 'Midwifery and Childbearing in Rural North India' in H. Afshar (ed.) *Women, State and Ideology* (London, 1987).

[72] 'Survey of Unemployed Indian Women,' University of Natal Department of Economics, *Studies of Indian Employment in Natal, Natal Regional Survey 11* (Cape Town, 1961).

[73] Information from relevant annual South African Statistical Yearbooks.

[74] M. Sugden, *The Potential Indian Labour Force: Pietermaritzburg/Durban* (Pietermaritzburg, 1978), *Natal Town & Regional Planning Reports* v.37 part 2. In the Meer survey, married Indian factory workers typically earned about 1/3 of their husband's wage in the middle 1980s, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 119.

[75] Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 97.

[76] See Meer, F*actory and Family.*

[77] Meer, *Black-Woman-Worker*, p. 190.

today demands an analysis that will integrate both qualitatively and quantitatively the two economic and social circuits of experience. To a limited extent, the movement of working class women into wage labour has facilitated independence but it has far more significantly been part of a new accumulation strategy on the part of a nuclearised family with male dominance still embedded. The family, of course, survives. Indeed economically relevant co-operation between nuclear families related to one another, for instance over childcare, may remain intensive.[78] For women, family membership offers security and affluence potentially through the social networks it creates for a wife or daughter, through the material support a far-better paid man can provide and through the emotional and material help that may become available from children in time.

Conclusion

The historic experience of women's work in South Africa amongst the population of Indian origin can be summed up as follows. During the period of indenture, the family structures typical of Indian society were largely sundered in the poor, nucleated immigrant and heavily male population. The movement out of indenture involved a reconstitution of a new family formation that allowed a multiplicity of economic activities. In this formation, women were heavily active, as peasant farmers, as petty traders, as craftworkers in a process well under way before the start of the twentieth century. In the successful extended family strategy, it was preferable for economic as much as for cultural reasons that women be at home rather than at work for a boss and rather few Indian women were wage workers, less than any other population group in early censuses of employment. After World War II and especially from the 1950s however, women acquired new skills while the drastic demands imposed by population removals to state-built townships changed this situation very markedly. Industrial expansion, especially notable in Durban during the 1960s, propelled a rapidly increasing proportion of younger women to work. On the whole, this represents a new family strategy, that of maximising accumulation for a nuclear family but it can also be connected to some degree to a weakening of family life altogether and an individuation of the woman's economic role and her relation to capital.

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[78] I owe this insight to Tim Quinlan.