

Gender, the Indian Rural Economy and the Household Historical Perspectives on Migration from British India to Africa

Kalpana Hiralal

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1733-4643>

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

hiralalk@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the poor socio-economic and political conditions in India facilitated the migration of both indentured and free or “passenger” Indians to Natal, South Africa. The latter unencumbered by contractual labour arrived under normal immigration laws and hence were referred to as “passenger” Indians. Whilst the “push” and “pull” factors of indentured Indians to some extent have been documented, this has been largely absent for “passenger” Indians. This article examines male-centred “passenger” Indian migration in the context of gender, the rural household and economy in western India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This paper highlights that the male outmigration to a very large extent was governed by two factors: gender relations within the household and women’s role in the rural economy. Women were left behind in the towns and villages not because they were absent from the decision-making process during migration, but because their domestic activities were central in augmenting the rural household. This article obliterates the myth of the “passive” and “docile” female in historical migrations in the Indian diaspora by shifting the migration narratives from the traditional ports of settlement to the untapped ports of departure to acquire better insights to historical “push” factors that facilitated “passenger” Indian migration. It makes the colonial rural household, of which women were an integral part, the centre of analysis, thereby providing new perspectives on gender relations and how they shaped and influenced male-centred migration.

Keywords: migration; gender; rural; economy

Introduction

Gender has become an important category of analysis in historical migrations. The lives of Irish, Italian, Dutch and Jewish immigrant women have become the subject of numerous studies (Diner 1983; Friedman-Kasaba 1996; Gabaccia 1991; 1992; 1994; Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002; Sinke 2002; 2006; Vecchio 2006). The lives of Indian and Chinese women immigrants from Asia have also received attention both in the pre- and post-World War II periods (Gee 2003; Lee 2003; Mazumdar 2003; Yung 1995; Yung 2003; Zhao 2002). Both Chinese and Indian migration to America was male-centred with women arriving much later to join their spouses.

A consequence of male-centred migration is the women who are left behind. Pedraza (1991) has aptly stated that “flows of migration which are dominated by men require that we consider ‘the woman’s side’ when the women themselves are left behind in the communities” (1991, 311). Studies on the left-behind women have highlighted that male-centred migration was not a linear unproblematic process. It was far more complex. There were both external and internal factors that influenced the non-migration of women, such as patriarchy, gender relations, immigration laws, and the significance of women’s labour in the village agriculture (Engel 1986; Huifen 2006; Mazumdar 2003; Pedraza 1991; Reeder 2003). Engel (1986) in her study of male migration from Kostroma province to the cities of Russia in the nineteenth century alludes to the centrality of women’s labour to the family economy that placed greater restrictions on women’s migration (Pedraza 1991, 131). Mazumdar (2003) shares a similar trajectorial path in her analysis of the outmigration of female migrants who were left behind in China and India whose husbands had migrated to the United States (Mazumdar 2003). Mazumdar (2003, 58–72) aptly questioned, “why did the women not come?” In response, Mazumdar argues that male-centred migration was due to “the economic system” that was “built around male migration and female domestic labour” (Mazumdar 2003, 60). This subsequently shaped and defined who would migrate and who would remain behind.

Indian women immigrants from the Indian subcontinent who migrated to South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century shared similar trajectories of patriarchal and culturalist impediments, state immigration controls and the syndrome of the “women left behind.” In the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the desire for cheap labour in the British colonies led to the settlement of both indentured and free Indian communities from India in Fiji, the Caribbean, Mauritius, East Africa and South Africa. In South Africa, Indians who arrived under normal immigration laws were popularly known as “Asiatics,” “free” or “passenger” Indians because they paid their own fares and were not contractual labourers. “Passenger” Indian migration was characterised by male migration with women arriving only once their spouses became settled. The vast majority of these women led transnational lives. Whilst their spouses settled in Natal, the south-eastern shores of South Africa, trying to sustain a livelihood—as hawkers, laundrymen, shoe-makers, salesmen, shop assistants and clerks—they were charged

with managing the household and the children in India. Family links were sustained via letters and intermittent trips. Women arrived in Natal only once their spouses were financially stable. They came predominantly from what is today Maharashtra and Gujarat.

In South African historiography the histories of indentured Indians are well documented (Bhana and Brain 1990; Brain 1985; Meer 1980). A gendered perspective to indentured migration has, to some extent, provided interesting insights into issues such as agency, settlement, resistance, and exploitation (Badassy 2005; Beall 1990; Govinden 2008; Hiralal 2014a; 2014b; 2016). However, the lives of “passenger” Indian women are largely absent from the narrative of the Indian Ocean “circular migration” between Natal and India. Early works on the gendered dimensions of “passenger” Indian migration were cursory, focusing more on the settlement patterns of male migrants and less on the transnational aspects of migration (Bhana and Brain 1990; Hiralal 2007). More recently, “passenger” Indian migration has become a key area of research among some scholars. Dhupelia-Mesthrie’s (2009; 2011; 2014a; 2014b) studies on the lives of immigrants in the Cape Province in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have added to our knowledge on their experience in the context of families, household and immigration hardships. Her research illustrates the value of immigration records and how it is possible to learn nearly as much about women’s as men’s lives given the scarcity of archival sources on “passenger” Indians. Over the past few years, my own work has explored gendered dimensions within a comparative approach in the context of indentured, Chinese and “passenger” Indian women (Hiralal 2014a; 2014b; 2018a; 2018b). I have sought to explore male outmigration from western India in the Indian Ocean region in the context of agency, marriage, social and cultural norms and immigration controls (Hiralal 2018a; 2018b). This study adds to the current scholarship on “passenger” Indian women by problematising male-centred migration in the context of women’s centrality to the rural household and economy in western India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The disparity between male to female migration, to a very large extent, was governed by gender relations and economic factors. Women were left behind in the towns and villages not because they were absent from the decision-making process during migration, but because of their centrality to the rural household. Their domestic subsistence activities and agricultural work were central in augmenting the rural household. The peasant, cultivator and farmer, given his poor earnings, depended on the income of the small-scale domestic enterprise activities of the females in the household. During famines and agrarian crisis, he could migrate because his wife would continue to work in agriculture. This family strategy allowed him to retain control of the land whilst earning an income elsewhere. For these reasons, the women and children remained behind. This paper shifts the migration narratives from the traditional ports of settlement to the untapped ports of departure to acquire better insights into historical “push” factors that facilitated male-centred “passenger” migration. In this article, the colonial rural household, of which women were an integral part, becomes the centre of analysis, thereby providing new perspectives on gender relations and how they shaped and influenced male-centred migration.

“Passenger” Indian Migration to South Africa

The arrival of indentured Indian labourers in Natal in 1860 paved the way for the migration of “passenger” Indians. The early immigrants, few of whom were established merchants and traders, settled in Durban, as well as along the south and north coasts of Natal. Others moved inland and settled in Pietermaritzburg, Dundee, Ladysmith and Estcourt. The early immigrants did not come to settle permanently, but rather to scout new economic opportunities. The men left their families behind rather than uprooting them from their villages in India. They only called for their wives and children when they were financially stable. Given the poor socio-economic conditions in western India, the early immigrants were forced to seek better employment opportunities in Africa. Western India in the late nineteenth century was affected by famines, floods, plague outbreaks (cholera and influenza epidemics) and fires which caused widespread poverty and unemployment. Famines and diseases gravely affected cities like Bombay, Surat and hundreds of villages (Hiralal 2009).

The immigrants were single and married and were by no means wealthy. They were motivated to migrate by concerns for financial security for their families. Their aim was twofold: the first being the desire to earn money, and the second, to maintain their respective families with the money earned in South Africa. The majority of the new arrivals were struggling immigrants with little or no capital. In the late nineteenth century, the vast majority of people in western India depended on agriculture for their livelihood. The men who migrated as “passenger” Indians to South Africa came from predominantly agricultural and labouring backgrounds. They were tenant and peasant farmers, sharecroppers, husbandmen and labourers. Their womenfolk worked in the fields, and cultivated rice, millet, and vegetables, while others engaged in cotton spinning and weaving, thereby supplementing the household income. Thus, clearly, in the late nineteenth century the rural household in western India was a collective family affair.

History and Political Configuration of Western India

Western India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was under British colonial rule. The majority of the “passenger” Indian immigrants came from this region, from an area that is presently known as Gujarat. During this period, the region was politically fragmented and known as the Bombay Presidency. It occupied the north-east corner of the coast of western India. On the west of the Presidency was the Arabian Sea; on the north-west was the Gulf of Cutch (Campbell 1896). It included parts of present-day Maharashtra state, including the regions of Konkan, Nashik and Pune and Ahmedabad, Anand, Bharuch, Gandhinagar, Kheda, Panchmahal and Surat districts of present-day Gujarat. It also included parts of present-day Karnataka, such as Bagalkot, Belagavi, Bijapur, Dharwad, Gadag, Haveri and Uttara Kannada, Pakistan’s Sindh province and the British territory of Aden in Yemen. The northern and eastern parts of Gujarat consisted of several princely states which were ruled by local rulers under the administration of a governor. Several districts in central and southern

Gujarat, namely Ahmedabad, Broach, Kaira, Kheda and Surat, were under direct British rule. The Presidency was divided into four commissionerships and 26 districts with Bombay City as its capital. The British gained a foothold in India largely through the British East India Company (BEIC), but took control in 1819 after the defeat of the Maratha State (Campbell 1896). Over time, Bombay became the main seat of political and economic power in western India. New land policies, colonial governing practices and natural disasters were to change the economic and social landscape of this region. This was to seriously impact the livelihoods of the local Indians, leading to abject poverty and starvation in many parts of the rural areas. It was under these conditions that many male immigrants opted for better livelihoods by migrating to the cities or to faraway lands such as Africa, Mauritius, Fiji and the Caribbean.

Women's Status in India

Male-centred migration of “passenger” Indians must be viewed, to some extent, in the context of gender relations and roles within Indian society. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, traditional Indian society was governed by time-honoured patriarchal values. Women's role in society was socially constructed and culturally determined. Within Indian society, the family constituted the main unit of socialisation. It was hierarchical, clearly determining individuals' position by gender, age, and generation. In most instances, males held primary importance or superior authority, in particular, elderly males (Sarkar and Sarkar 2008, 104). Men were the breadwinners, the decision-makers in the family. Women within this family unit were relegated to a secondary or lowest status in terms of entitlements, rights and resources of the family. The ancient religious and socio-legal treatise was used to justify conventional social customs and reinforce women's subordinate status. The patriarchal interpretation of Hindu texts and philosophy defined women's identity in relation to male identity, thus “closing off any possibility of women forging independent identities” (Nair 1998, 520). Women were perceived as a subordinate group, to be protected by male members of society. According to the Laws of Manu, “[h]er father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence” (Browning 2003, 236). A woman's main purpose in life was to be a dutiful wife and a good mother. According to Manu, “[a] virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust and is devoid of any good qualities” (Doniger 2010, 326). Amongst the Hindu community, the concept of *stridharma* was zealously embraced, which dictated that an ideal woman was one who was chaste, submissive, loyal and hardworking. She was seen as the guardian of the home and a preserver of her culture. In the marital home, a dutiful wife was one who practised *pativrata* and who worshipped her husband “regardless of his worth or character, as if he were a god” (Nair 1998, 520). As one respondent stated, “I was taught if you die ... you must die in your husband's home but not in your parent's home ... After marriage, the parents feel proud if you die in your husband's house” (Nirmalabhen interview with author, 18 August 2009).

Customs and traditions clearly had a significant impact on the status and mobility of women. Orthodox views and practices regarding customs such as child marriages, the ban on widow remarriage, *purdah* and the general prohibition against women's literacy, collectively reinforced women's subordinate status. In a traditional Indian family, the birth of a son was celebrated whilst that of a daughter was much cause for concern. Sons were revered because they continued the patriarchal family lineage and were the main breadwinners of the family. The birth of a daughter was frowned upon as she was perceived as *paraya dhan*—someone's else's wealth as she migrated upon marriage. Moreover, daughters burdened their parents with dowry payments upon marriage, thus impacting on the family finances (Bergt 2012).

Child marriages were common in India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Social pressure, poverty, deep-rooted orthodox customs and gender norms perpetuated this practice. Given the low value attached to girls, child marriage was also used to control female sexuality and ensure reproduction. There was a high premium placed on the virginity of young girls as it impacted on her honour and her family's credibility and reputation in the community. Marriages were "fixed" at birth or even before, to "secure" their future. Once they reached puberty the wedding ceremonies would take place and the bride was sent off to her in-laws' home to start married life (Basu 2005, 183). Most marriages were "arranged" and were devoid of courtship, with girls having no part in decision-making in the selection of her spouse. Family members—parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents—played a collective role in choosing the prospective spouse. The lower value attached to a female also had an impact on her access to education. Her "productive" value was within the home and therefore educating females was seen as less of a priority than educating sons (Basu 2005, 183–86; Hiralal 2013, 1–21).

Whilst traditional gender norms relegated women to secondary status in society, her work within the domestic realm was far from insignificant. On the contrary, her domestic work made an important contribution to the income of the rural household. Women's daily work, which consisted of both agricultural and non-agricultural work, was merely seen as an extension of their traditional chores, but it was these domestic chores that, to some extent, facilitated the outmigration of males.

The Economy of the Indian Household

The women who were left behind in the rural villages in western India were diverse in terms of their religion, caste, language, and class. They constituted mainly Gujarati-speaking Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Jains. Amongst the Muslims, they constituted various sects such as the Memons, Khojas and Bohras. All three groups had strong mercantile roots, particularly along the coastal towns of Kathiawar and the Bombay Presidency. The Bohras were subdivided into Sunni and Shia Bohras. The latter for the most part were traders, but the Sunni Bohras were chiefly cultivators and a few engaged in manufacturing (Bhana and Brain 1990, 34–37; Hiralal 2009, 81–90). The Parsis were followers of the Zoroastrianism faith. Their ancestors fled Persia after the Arab conquest

of the region. In the Bombay Presidency Parsis were found in the district of Surat in places such as Olpad, Mandvi, Bardoli, Jalalpor, Chikhili, Balasar, and Pardi. They were mainly traders and cultivators (Government of Bombay 1888, 72). The Hindus were stratified along caste lines: traders (Vania, Lohanas and Bhatias), the artisans: Sonis (goldsmiths), Khattris (weavers), Mochis (shoemakers), Darji (tailors), followed by the labouring class, Dhobi (washerman), Kanbis and Kolis (Hiralal 2009, 81–90). Whilst one's caste was fixed at birth, their occupation, however, was flexible. This can be attributed to poor socio-economic conditions. Many individuals, plagued by poverty, unemployment and starvation, were forced to take up dual occupations, that is two or more occupations, outside their caste groups to sustain their livelihoods. For example, the village shoemaker (Mochi) not only made shoes, but also water bags, and all other articles of leather, which he would dye himself (Gait 1913, 402).

As alluded earlier, the vast majority of people in western India depended on the land for their livelihood. In the British provinces, the main occupations cited in the 1911 Census were “agriculture” and “labourers” (Gait 1913, 397). The main agricultural crops were rice, cotton, wheat, tobacco, and sugar cane. The rural population consisted of poor cultivators, peasants, farmers, and landless labourers, followed by village artisans, petty traders and merchants. The rural household was a family-oriented economic unit. It was a vehicle that facilitated small-scale peasant agriculture. Men, women and children collectively contributed to the family income. Gender relations shaped rural work. Men, given their primary role in traditional Indian society, were the head of the household, breadwinners, tilled the land, controlled funds and migrated for trade or other purposes. Women were tasked to rear the children, cook, clean and engage in labour-intensive work which was not only seen as an extension of their domestic duties but also given little or no recognition (Forbes 1996; Sen 2004). But women's labour-intensive domestic work was central to the rural household income and the economy. The vast majority of the rural population was poor. Very few owned land. An agricultural labourer, peasant farmer or smallholder held between two to five acres of land. This was not enough to feed his family. The peasant or cultivator had to supplement his income from other sources. In many rural households, women became indispensable in contributing to household finances. Women's labour within the rural household sustained the family income in times of famine, floods, epidemics, fires and drought (Sen 2004).

Women's work consisted of both agricultural and non-agricultural work. They were often assisted by their children. The agricultural activities included ploughing, sowing, weeding, reaping, threshing, and the removal of dry grass. In the Bombay Presidency, Bengal and Bihar, for example, many women collected and traded in forest products such as firewood, grass, fodder and cow dung. These were later sold in the local market. In Patna, women would gather crops and clear the field of weeds. In Gaya, a rural labourer's wife earned an income by husking rice, grinding grain and collecting fuel (Sen 2004). In this way, they were able to add to the rural household income.

Non-agrarian activities, which were merely an extension of their household chores, contributed immensely to the incomes of many rural households. Samita Sen (2004) has alluded to how in Bengal at the close of the nineteenth century women were associated with a wide range of non-agrarian activities. In most western districts, like Gaya, Saran and Muzaffarpur, the post-1918 war period accelerated an agrarian crisis. Many cultivators were forced to supplement their agricultural income within the rural household. This meant increasing dependence on women's small-scale household enterprises (Forbes 1996, 159; Sen 2004, 75–76). For example, these small-scale domestic industries involved animal husbandry, selling farm or cottage products, such as milk, ghee (clarified butter), traditional bread, processed grains, and oilseeds. Women also engaged in rice pounding and flour grinding which they sold in the village markets. In fact, in many homes, rice husking, a female-dominated chore, contributed significantly to the household income. Sen (2004, 75) has provided some very interesting figures regarding the nature and integration of women's small-scale industries to the rural economy:

In Bengal, as against 1.2 million engaged in agriculture, there were some 500,000 in grain processing, 200,000 in making and selling of agricultural produce and 340,000 in caste-specific occupations. In 1901, there were 1.4 million women in agriculture, 462,000 in grain processing and 200,000 in making and selling of forest products.

Women among the artisan classes also contributed to the rural household. They worked jointly with their spouses and assisted with the manufacturing of shoes, pottery, nets and ropes, and ginned cotton. According to Roy (2005, 137), among the tailoring, leatherwork, and pottery, “females of many of the artisan ... classes work with their husbands and relatives.” For example, the Darji women (tailors) assisted with stitching and hemming, the potters (Kumbhars), made earthenware crockery and their womenfolk assisted with this task. The weavers (Khatris) were dyers of cloth and wove silk and cotton (Roy 2005, 137–38). In the division of Navsari, both male and female members of the household used hand-loom to make cotton garments for the agricultural class. There was an average of two or three hand-loom in each house. The textile industry in the Bombay Deccan areas provided employment both for men and women. For example, in the urban communities, the women “help largely in the weaving and embroidery of wearing apparel and add as much as the husband to the monthly income of the family” (Roy 2005, 136). According to Roy (2005, 136), among the shepherd-weavers of Bombay, “one of the weaver's family, generally a woman or a boy [spins] the wool into yarn.” In the south of Bihar, women contributed to the rural household by spinning wool whilst the menfolk raised sheep and plaited coarse blankets (Roy 2005, 136). Thus, women's domestic work was significant and contributed to a very large extent to the rural household economy. Women's work was a bulwark against complete starvation, not only protecting the family from abject poverty but also providing men with the freedom to migrate to the cities, towns and across the seas, in times of an economic crisis.

Internal and External Migration

The centrality of women's labour in the rural household was clearly noticeable in the internal and external migrations. It clearly shaped and defined migration patterns. Both migrations were male centred, with males leaving home and females left behind in the villages. Internal migrations in western India were common during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In most instances, these migrations were short term, and not permanent. Poor socio-economic conditions and the need to supplement the household income forced many artisans, peasant farmers and poor cultivators to move from one village to another and to cities and towns. According to Roy (2016, 188), given the

high seasonality of monsoon agriculture, there was extensive under-employment among the peasantry. Agriculture rarely offered full-time work for more than 200 days in a year ... Year-round work was available in mills, mines and plantations. Even the relatively well-off peasant families could afford to send their adult males to non-agricultural wage work while recalling them to meet the peak season labour demand.

In addition, British colonial policy exacerbated the poor socio-economic conditions in western India by displacing the livelihoods of the agricultural labourer, cultivator, peasant farmer and artisans. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 created a group of zamindars who became proprietors or landlords over tenant farmers. This system worsened rural poverty as zamindars charged high taxes and many peasant farmers in their endeavours to meet the tax demand fell in debt by constantly falling into the hands of the loan sharks. The artisans were displaced by cheap, imported British goods, which flooded the Indian markets. The hand-loom industry in cotton and silk, which provided the primary income of many village cottage industries, could not compete with the cheaper textiles from England (Roy 2016, 101). Many weavers and spinners of silk and cotton were forced to abandon their craft and move to the cities, whilst others sought new opportunities as indentured labourers or free migrants in other parts of the British colonies such as Mauritius, Natal, and the Caribbean.

But this migration, whether internal or external, was predominantly male. The male, as the primary breadwinner of the family and the head of the household, left to seek wage employment in the factories and cotton mills in the cities. Women, on the other hand, were left behind for three reasons. First, to look after the children, second, to sustain the rural household, and third, to look after the land and farms. By leaving the wife behind in the village it allowed the male migrant and his family to earn a dual income: the wages earned as a factory worker and the income from the small-scale household industries run by women. Moreover, it also allowed the male migrant to retain ownership of his land. He was reluctant to let go of the land he held. According to Sen (2004), “[i]f however, a male migrant wished to retain his interest in the land and the homestead, he had to keep some part of the family—usually the wife and children in the village” (Sen 2004, 69). Sen argues that “single and temporary migration was the best

way for the migrant to retain his rights in the family land and property however low its productivity” (2004, 69–70).

Roy (2016, 189) concurs,

Even if the family did not own sufficient land, it made sense to retain a foothold in the village. In effect, the decision of the women to stay behind would imply a higher intensity of work for all members of the household, for women in self-employment and for men in wage employment. All this would mean that for quite a large proportion of the factory workers in the nineteenth century, the urban factor offered the chance of a reallocation of family labour between agricultural and non-agricultural work.

Male migrants seeking a better livelihood abroad were also guided by the same set of concerns. Many poor peasant farmers, cultivators, and artisans, as well as traders, also migrated to different parts of the British Empire, such as Mauritius, Fiji, East Africa and Natal. The “passenger” Indians who arrived in Natal in South Africa at the turn of the century were predominantly males from the Bombay Presidency, Kathiawar and Cutch. They came initially as sojourners, with no long-term intention of making Africa their new home. But as time passed they sought domicile status in Natal, the Transvaal and the Cape. As alluded earlier in the article, many did not immediately call for their families to join them in South Africa. The cost of sustaining a family abroad as well as a livelihood were deterrents for family migration. Moreover, the womenfolk left behind in India were maintaining the rural household and looking after the farms. The centrality of the women to the household can be discerned by the testimonies of early male “passenger” Indians. Kanjee Davah, an immigrant from the Bombay Presidency, informed the Principal Immigration Officer (PIO) in Natal, in 1913 that he arrived in the Colony in 1896, at the age of 12 and resided at 79 Prince Edward Street in Durban for several years. Upon the death of his father in 1895, he inherited property (land). He stated (Hiralal 2014b, 63–75; KCAL, IIAP: KCM 99/53/7) that it was his mother and brother who took ownership and supervision of the land:

While I was here before, my younger brother looked after my land. The land came to me from my father when he died about 20 years ago. My father was dead when I first came here in 1896. He had been dead about 5 years. When I first came here (Natal) I was 12 years old. I came to Natal leaving property in India because I could not make any money from the land and my uncle called me here. ... I did not sell my property because my mother was living, and she and my brother would not allow me to sell.

He further added that whilst both his parents were dead, it did not make it easier for him to bring his wife and child across the ocean (KCAL, IIAP: KCM 99/53/7):

They are both dead [parents] now. ... I intend to stay here and call my wife and child here. I did not bring them because there would be no one to look after my land in India. My wife looks after my land in India. ... I did not bring my wife because she has a small baby. I did not sell the land while in India last because my wife is living on the land.

Similarly, Mahomed Yousoof Kajee arrived with his father in Natal in 1897 when he was eight years old. He remained in Natal for several years and later married a woman in India in 1912. In 1913, he returned to Natal without his wife, as “she had property of her own there” and was “taking care of the property” (Hiralal 2014b, 67).

Thus, these testimonies allude to the critical role women played in the rural household in western India. More significantly, women’s decision to migrate was far more complex. It was shaped by socio-economic and personal factors and that some women did have a voice in the decision to migrate.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that the male outmigration of “passenger” Indians from western India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was far more complex than was initially understood. Males did not necessarily have complete authority in terms of migration decisions. The centrality of women’s role in the rural economy meant that in most instances she was to remain behind. The womenfolk provided men with the flexibility to move to cities, to be sojourners in overseas migration and more significantly to retain ownership of his land. The land which was scarce was not only a source of livelihood but also determined his economic status in society. The gendered roles in society and how each family member was positioned in the rural economy determined who went and who stayed. Problematising male-centred migration shifts gender and gender relations in the colonial rural economy in India from the margins to the centre in historical analysis. It broadens perspectives on migrations, negates gender stereotypes and encourages rethinking of traditional narratives, thereby contributing to “decolonising discourses” of knowledge production.

Biographical Note

Kalpana Hiralal is a professor of history in the School of Social Sciences at Howard College at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. She teaches both undergraduate and graduate-level modules on global history, women, gender and politics and culture and tourism. Her PhD dissertation focuses on the South Asian diaspora to Africa in the context of settlement, trade and identity formation. She is the co-editor of *1913, Satyagraha, Passive Resistance and Its Legacy* (Manohar 2015), the editor of *Global Hindu Diaspora: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Routledge 2017), the co-author of *Pioneers of Satyagraha: Indian South African Defy Racist Laws, 1907–1914* (Navajivan 2017) and the co-author of *Gender and Mobility in Africa: Borders, Bodies and Boundaries* (Palgrave 2018).

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