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A Space of Their Own: Indian Women and Land Ownership in Trinidad 1870-1945

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Abstract

Few places in the world offered 19th century women the opportunity that the British colony of Trinidad did: the chance to own land. Under the Land Commutation Scheme of 1869, the Indians who migrated there to work on the sugar cane estates for periods of five years or more were offered money and small parcels of land in lieu of their return passage to India. This paper shows how the scheme, and the sugar crisis in the West Indies, opened the door to a new world of opportunity for the Indian in Trinidad. By buying parcels of land together in certain areas, the immigrant who had never felt at home or accepted there was finally able to carve out and recreate the village he had left behind in India. For the Indian woman who inherited land from her parents, or who could use her savings from estate work to buy small lots on estates that were being broken up and sold, it was the chance to attain economic independence by cultivating her own land. Owning land also gave her social status in the community and more power within her own family. In some instances, it was the means by which she was able to walk away from an abusive marriage. As the keepers of the Hindu and Muslim faiths, women also tended to embrace their land as a space on which they could openly celebrate their religious festivals and weddings. Women saw the land as the source of her family's wealth and prosperity, and perhaps, more than the Indian men, saw the need to respect and preserve the environment and pass on these values to their children.
