



ISSUE 1 • April 2007

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.

Introduction

One of the most significant activities in which rural Indian women in Trinidad were engaged over the period 1870 to 1945 was the acquisition and ownership of arable land. Not only did it afford them economic independence, but also to a great extent, it empowered them within the Indian community. In fact, acquisition and ownership of arable land was the fulcrum on which the autonomy of the Indian woman rested. It underlay her importance within the domestic sphere and her ability to engage in independent economic activities that further enhanced her autonomy within her family and her community. The strongest Indian women were those who could combine all three factors – land acquisition, the economic activities that it facilitated, and their role in the domestic sphere. Each of these reinforced the other, but the basis of power lay in the women's ability to acquire and use arable land. Up to the 1940s in Trinidad, Indian women were acquiring land while other women could not, or were doing so on a very limited scale.

One common stereotype of Indians in Trinidad, particularly after 1870, was that they possessed an insatiable appetite for land. When the opportunity for land acquisition and ownership became more available from 1870 onwards, significant numbers of Indian men and women jumped at it. The trend continued well into the 1940s. For a people who by 1900 had started to settle permanently in a country to which they had first come as transient migrant labour, the acquisition of land was a necessary prelude to settlement. With money saved from their wages as estate labourers, they invested in land, the sale of which was one of the few opportunities offered to them. It was an investment, moreover, that could be passed on to succeeding generations. At the turn of the century, when an increasing number of estates in Trinidad were being sub-divided into small lots and put on the market because of the continuing crisis in the sugar industry, an increasing number of Indian females became landowners. Although there is no clear evidence as to what the Indian female wanted from the migration process, like the Indian man, she considered land to be a wise investment.

When eventually they were able to move off the estates at the end of their term of indenture, Indians instinctively sought to acquire land, a space of their own. The barrack system had left an indelible mark on the Indian's psyche. In trying to form communities where they could restore kinship patterns and cultural practices, land ownership was a crucial first step. In addition, agriculture was the main income earner in the country, and private ownership of arable land meant economic and social independence from the largely hostile wider society

Land acquisition schemes

In 1869, the governor of Trinidad, Sir Arthur Gordon, instituted a system known as the Land Commutation Scheme whereby Indian immigrants could receive Crown lands and money in lieu of their return passage to India after their indenture had ended. This scheme became the catalyst for the acquisition of land by Indians in Trinidad.

Even before Gordon put forward his scheme, however, it had already been noted that some Indians who had completed their indenture in the island were desirous of acquiring property and becoming permanent settlers. Significantly, they made full cash payments rather than instalments, which meant that they regarded land as an investment; they were investing their savings in land. It is also significant that they wanted to settle together, as small communities among those with whom they were familiar, perhaps to form enclaves where they could reconstruct their identity as Indians, and from which they could deal with the wider society. It was a society, after all, that they had felt isolated from since their arrival and certainly up until the early 1900s.

The Land Commutation Scheme was short-lived, in active operation for only two decades; and even within this time, only sporadically so. Several factors contributed to its faltering operation, among these was official hesitancy by the colonial authorities to allocate lands specifically for Indians. There had been a public outcry at what was seen as the favourable treatment of Indians. The scheme did meet with success, however, benefiting both Indians and the island as a whole as the following report indicates:

The number of Indian immigrants who have commuted their return passage for grants of land or of money or of both up to the 30th. September, 1874, is 1,240. Of these 739 received 10 acre allotments. Their wives (175) have received money grants of 5 Pounds each, and 332 men have (received) 5 Pounds and 5 acres.

These settlements... serve as a centre of attraction to the Coolies from other colonies, including numbers (from) Guadeloupe and Martinique. The direct money saving irrespective of the future, by the establishment of these settlers, has been up to date over 12,000 Pounds besides an equal number of acres in course of cultivation and paying rates towards local revenue...A thousand houses and gardens owned by labourers contribute far more to the safety of the country, to the security of property and to a wholesome social state than one great acreage owned by one man, there being no conservative force so great as the possession of property by a large proportion of the people. (This) augers well for its (Trinidad) tranquil future...In the tropics to suitable races the possession of a few acres in fee simply assures the moderately industrious, perfect independence with comparative affluence...¹

Under the Land Commutation Scheme, Indian females were to receive five pounds, money that could evidently be used to purchase land. The women, like their male counterparts, were eager to invest their savings in land. In Trinidad there were no regulations on who could buy land and how much. In this situation, the authorities' refusal to recognise marriages that were performed solely according to religious rites worked in favour of the Indian woman. Unregistered marriages were deemed legal by the state. This meant that an Indian woman could own, inherit, purchase and dispose of property as "femme sole", without the intervention or consent of her husband. The fact that, legally, their property belonged solely to them could possibly have been further inducement for Indian women to purchase land.

¹ Council Paper #35: Agent General of Immigrants Report for 1874.

Avenues for land acquisition 1900-1945

At the close of the 19th century, the sugar industry throughout the British West Indies was in crisis, and an increasing number of estates were being put on the market. In fact, from as early as the mid-1870s there began to appear in both the *Trinidad Royal Gazette* and other newspapers, notices such as the following:

For Sale

1. The "Laurel Hill" and "Cane Farm" estates situated in the Ward of Tacarigua will be sold either together or separately.
2. Woodford Lodge – 600 acres of land: 300 acres in canes and 50 acres in fenced pastures. Cultivation in good order. Buildings in thorough repair. Last sugar crop reaped to 1st May present was 405 hogsheads. The estate is well-stocked having 40 American mules and 18 head of Creole working cattle.²

Purchasing an entire working estate was out of the reach of the majority of Indians. However, by 1900, in an attempt to recoup losses, owners of sugar estates that were no longer profitable began to cut up their acreage into smaller lots and sell them at 10 shillings per lot. Many Indians bought up lots within their means, including a significant number of women, as an examination of the Assessment Rolls revealed. The Rolls showed that large estates were divided into smaller lots and that in certain areas, Lower Caroni Ward, for example, the purchasers were almost exclusively Indians. Estates such as Belle Vue, Ste. Helena, Mon Plaisir and La Florida were divided into pieces ranging from one lot to three acres.

Around 1903, Mon Plaisir Estate in Central Trinidad went out of production and was apportioned and sold to private individuals. A large number of Indian women bought lots from this estate. The Assessment Roll shows for example that Doolareah had purchased one acre and one lot. Quite a significant number of Indians. Both male and female bought one or two lots. Jassodra had bought one and a quarter lots and erected a house in 1918 valued at 25 pounds³. Others, like Butania, had bought one lot on which she erected a four-room house. She subsequently sold this piece of property to an ex-indenture female Indian, Gangeiya. Where land was available in small, affordable portions, Indian women took full advantage of the opportunity. An examination of land deeds of the period also confirmed that they also bought land from estates. Deed #1663 of June 1910 reveals that Raghwantia, a free female Indian labourer, had purchased from Trinidad Estates Company Limited a parcel of land comprising one lot at Caroni Village for the sum of \$35. The land deeds also confirmed that Indians were buying land from other Indians. Land deed #1372 of April 1903 was made for Bisnee, a single woman who had purchased two lots of land at Cunupia from Buckreediah for the sum of \$40. Buckreediah had purchased that parcel of Crown land for the sum of \$9.60.

² 299/25. *Trinidad Royal Gazette*, 1875: Report of the Crown Lands Office re: Ward of Montserrat.

³ We need a footnote on the currency being used i.e. why the shift between pounds and dollars, plus value of each in today's currency.

In addition to these women, some of whom had relatively substantial landholdings and who increased their property over time, there were many others who from the late 1890s and well into the 1920s owned and paid taxes for pieces of land ranging from one to two lots. Evidently, these lots were bought from the government, which had continued with the sale of relatively small portions of land to Indians in specially designated areas.

From the evidence, it is clear that there were substantial numbers of rural Indian women who had the wherewithal to make purchases of land, build houses and continue to pay taxes on their properties year after year. This purchasing power came from several sources. As an integral part of the agricultural labour force in Trinidad, rural Indian women worked for wages which, although not substantial, provided not only a means of subsistence, but also purchase money for land. From their meagre wages, they saved and invested in land, among other things.

Another way in which Indian women acquired money was through succession. Throughout the period, the government was met with frequent requests from Indian women to inherit their deceased husbands' savings. Notices, such as the following, appeared with great frequency in the *Trinidad Royal Gazette*:

Savings Bank Notice. A female Indian Immigrant named Allagamah, the widow of Mahomed, an Indian Immigrant lately residing on the St. Clair estate and now deceased, has applied for payment of the sum of 23 pounds, 15 shillings, and 10 pence deposited in the Savings Bank by Mahomed, together with the interest thereon. Notice is hereby given that the said sum of 23 pounds, 15 shillings and 10 pence and the interest thereon will be paid to the said Allagamah at the expiration of thirty days from the date hereof, there being shown no reason to the contrary. 19th August, 1868.⁴

Another notice indicated that a mother was laying claim to her son's money:

Savings Bank Notice. A female Indian Immigrant named Amehcooty, the mother of Balahistanen, an Indian Immigrant lately residing on the Caroni Estate, now deceased, has applied for payment of the sum of 13 pounds, 10 shillings and 10 pence deposited in the Savings Bank by Balahistanen, together with the interest thereon. Notice is hereby given, that the said sum of 13 pounds, 10 shillings and 10 pence and the interest thereon will be paid to the said Amehcooty at the expiration of thirty days from the date hereof, there being shown no reason to the contrary. April, 1867.⁵

These amounts were typical of what Indians had saved during their stay in Trinidad. It is not unreasonable to suggest that an Indian woman, faced with the prospect of life on her own, in the case where her husband had died, would seek to invest a portion of that money in land, particularly since it was available at prices she could afford and would offer a livelihood.

In addition to purchasing their own land, Indian women also acquired land through inheritance. Until the first two decades of the 20th century, the government of Trinidad was besieged by petitions, largely from female Indians, seeking waivers of escheat on

⁴ CO299/18: *Trinidad Royal Gazette*, 1868

⁵ CO299/17: *Trinidad Royal Gazette*, 1867

property formerly owned by their deceased husbands or other relatives. In nearly all these cases, the deceased had not left wills and therefore had died intestate. Indians were not in the habit of making wills. Here, the condition of illegitimacy that resulted from the non-registration of Indian marriages worked to exacerbate the problems heirs faced when seeking inheritances. If the owner died intestate, the land automatically reverted to the Crown. Those seeking to lay claim to it, usually the wife of the deceased, had to petition the state. Some of these women made the petition on behalf of their minor children and were given the titles to the land until their children came of age. The government did not recognise the cohabitation rights of individuals, that is, the rights of two people living together in a common-law union. Hence, a situation developed whereby the women would most commonly petition the Crown for their husbands' property on behalf of their children.

In all the petitions for land, Indian women pointed out that they had lived with the deceased for a considerable length of time, and that they had, by dint of hard work, helped in the acquisition of the property. More often than not, the Crown granted the waiver in favour of the female petitioner, although it was not unusual for the Crown to make extensive inquiries into any other heirs that the dead man might have left. In some instances where heirs were found, whether in Trinidad or India, they would be awarded the property or the proceeds from its sale. Since cohabitation rights were not recognised, it is not surprising such situations occurred. However, this was not the norm. It is noteworthy that if Indians arrived in Trinidad already married, whether registered or not, they were regarded as legally married.

It is not difficult to see that there might have arisen, the notion that the law was bent on taking land away from Indian women. In this sense, the law ignored the equity of women in relationships. Such a notion may also have spurred Indian women to buy their own land. The Assessment Rolls for the Lower Caroni Ward show clearly that a number of women acquired their properties through inheritance. Rasmee acquired three acres, 53 perches of land and a house at Caroni Savannah in 1903. The Registrar noted that:

The land was in the name of one Beelar who died intestate about one year and three months ago – no children. Rasmee lived with Beelar for thirty years previous to his death. No credit on the land and no permanent cultivation. Land transferred to Rasmee. Another quarree of land added in 1905.⁶

In some instances women inherited land from their parents. Bacheah inherited 10 acres of land and one house at Madras Settlement from her mother, Soomareah, who died intestate in 1905. The land was originally granted to Beharree, the father of Soomareah, in lieu of a return passage to India. Mantranie, Basmateah and Bagmaneah inherited three acres of land and two houses from their mother, Sookbassiah, on her death in 1923.⁷ The oral evidence bears out the fact that female Indians did inherit land from their parents. This was especially so where there was an absence of male heirs:

⁶ Assessment Rolls for Lower Caroni Ward, 1903

⁷ Assessment Rolls for Lower Caroni Ward, 1923

My father give me this piece of land here. He give me this when I went to live with me husband. He (her husband) did not have any house or land and thing. He didn't have nothing really. So me father give me this. Everything here he did put in my name.⁸

Women's status and the land

Agarwal argues that one of the basic requirements for improving the status of women is to enable them to acquire land.⁹ In this way, the women become agents of change and contributors to development. Land has durability and a certain permanence that no other asset possesses. Within the context of early 20th century Trinidad, owning land was one way in which the basic needs of both the individual, male and female, and the family could be met. Even if the Indians in rural Trinidad were materially poor, their ownership of arable land meant that they could feed themselves. The daily diet of the rural Indian labouring class consisted mainly of vegetables that they grew themselves such as tomatoes, okras, peas and beans; as well as staples of rice and roti (unleavened flat bread made from wheat flour). Meat was eaten only on weekends and on special occasions, and this was usually chicken that they raised themselves. Fish was also part of their diet, obtained either from the rivers, or from the sea for those who lived on the coast.

Land ownership provided the Indians in Trinidad with a means of sustenance. They could grow crops and raise livestock both for domestic consumption and for sale. Some rural Indian women were also among a large number of cocoa contractors, particularly in the 1920s.¹⁰ Generally, though, Indian women tended to engage in market gardening, or were rice and cane farmers. They preferred it to any of the other agricultural activities:

I buy land in Pasea, rice land. I did have a 1/2 acre of land we use to get good yield from it. But in them days is penny a pound I sell rice. We use to grind it and carry it in the market and sell penny a cup.

Then I did buy land, hill land in Caura, and as I tell you, I use to plant peas and okra, tomato and sorrel and corn. That too I use to sell in the market. It was easier and profit me more. And is my land, I what buy that land to plant on.¹¹

This situation was common to several of the women whose oral testimonies are used in this paper. One woman had bought land jointly with her husband that was cultivated in sugar cane and rice. After some time though, when she felt that her husband was drinking too heavily and squandering the family's money, she purchased land on her own:

Well, when I see he only drinking and we working and selling, planting rice, planting cane and we still couldn't make money so much. So I go and I buy one acre of land not too far from where we other land was. I hire two or three people to work on it. Well, the money coming in from that piece is my money. He can't touch that. Is that what really use to help me run the house and help me with them children. I still continue to work on

⁸ Mrs. D. Personal Interview. Paradise, Tacarigua, Trinidad. 14 March, 1997

⁹ Agarwal, Bina. *A Field of One's Own Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge South Asian Studies. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

¹⁰ Kathleen Phillips-Lewis, "Women in the Cocoa Industry in Trinidad" Ph.D thesis, University of Manitoba, 1994

¹¹ Mrs. S. D. Personal Interview. Cunupia, Trinidad. 27 November, 1997

the other land too eh. But I did get the idea to buy me own land from me mother, who did buy plenty land on she own in Sangre Grande.¹²

As a means of production, land gave rural Indian women an avenue to social and economic independence. They would engage in agricultural activities outside of the estate regime that generated income. And although the money was usually used for the family, it belonged to the woman to dispense with as she saw fit. Agarwal shows how the independent ownership of land by women empowered them:

Entitling women with land would, on the one hand, empower them economically, and on the other hand, strengthen their ability to challenge social and political gender inequalities. That is, land rights would enhance women's "freedom to achieve" (or "capability to function") in non-economic spheres as well.¹³

In the context of an emerging Indian community in the first four decades of the 20th century, this empowerment gave the woman a stronger voice within the family. According to the oral testimonies, women were aware that being landowners in their own right would give them their own income, and the ability to assert themselves. This is clearly shown in the following extract from a woman whose husband was at the time very much alive:

Look at all the things I do when I have me own piece of land. I don't have to depend on nobody. I work and mind me children. I build here (her house), and I even buy bicycle for he to sell on and he ent do that. So I had all this for meself because I could have buy land for meself.¹⁴

Such economic independence must be seen within the context of the family. From the oral evidence, it is clear that Indian women wanted to provide for themselves and their children. Land ownership facilitated this. It allowed them to make family provisions without having to depend on husbands. Clearly, within the context of the emerging Indian community of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, rural Indian women needed the economic security that land provided. They were not unaware that it also gave them leverage within the family and the Indian community. It was used almost as a guarantee that in old age they would be taken care of. There was always the tacit understanding that whoever took care of women would in all likelihood inherit her property.

Agarwal has shown how property mediates relationships between men and women, and also between women.¹⁵ Those who owned arable land had a range of possibilities. For one thing, within the emerging Indian village system this meant that Indian women could also claim a sense of identity, even 'rootedness' within the village, on their own, because as private proprietors, they had their own piece of earth within that village, an identifiable space as it were:

¹² Mrs. S. D. Personal Interview. Cunupia, Trinidad. 27 November, 1997

¹³ Agarwal, *ibid.* 39

¹⁴ Mrs. D. personal interview. Paradise, Tacarigua, Trinidad. 14 March, 1997

¹⁵ Agarwal, *ibid.* 15

Here in Las Lomas, when you see I get my own place what I buy for myself, nobody can't say I don't belong. Because this is mine. You know how it feel to have me own deed, it in my name. I feel more a part of this village. You know when you have your own land nobody can't thief that from you; and nobody can't put you out. Wheresoever you go you have that to claim as you own. You feel more a part of the place after that.¹⁶

Indian women needed to own land for themselves for many other reasons. If their priorities were different from that of their husbands, they were in a better position to act upon these. They were better able to control both what was produced on their land and the outcomes of production. They were also treated with a certain level of respect that they might not have had otherwise. The patriarchal structure of the Indian community was well established and was seen most clearly in the *panchayat*, the council of elders, made up of outstanding male members of the community.¹⁷ It was not unusual for these men to have considerable landholdings, a fact that perhaps enhanced their position within the village. Similarly, there were female landowners who could garner respect from the wider community because of their substantial landholdings. In addition, Indian women who were midwives or who possessed the knowledge of healing, and who were the custodians of the cultural practices of the group, had the respect of the entire community.

One respondent reminisced that her mother, who had owned a lot of land in the northeast of Trinidad, had had great influence within the village where they lived, largely because she was a landowner of some repute:

My mother first buy seven acres of land in Sangre Grande. That would have been in 1917. That was cocoa land that she start to work for sheself. In the 1930s, before the war, she start to rent 100 acres from the Mendez Estate, a cocoa estate in north Manzanilla. She eventually buy the 100 acres from the owners, buy a truck, give me father and then buy some more land for all she children. Well, people use to have a lot of respect for she though. In the village if anything happen, they must come and talk with she. She use to help out a lot of people, she give plenty people work on the cocoa, and she always have things, produce from the land, to give to people – like orange and fig (unripened bananas). So people always look to she nah. When you have the land, well in the village you standing.¹⁸

Independent land rights certainly made a difference to a woman's relationships with other family members. Not only did she gain economic equality with her husband, a fact that further enhanced her power and influence within the home, but also among other members of the family, particularly her sons. In the context of rural Trinidad, land offered both a sense of security and the potential for wealth. Particularly where women were widowed, if they had their own land, it was almost a guarantee that they would not be an economic burden on their children. If among Indians a widow was considered bad

¹⁶ Mrs. L. P. personal interview. Las Lomas, Trinidad. 25 April, 1998

¹⁷ See B. Samaroo, "The Indian Connecton: The Influence of Indian Thought and Ideas on East Indians in the Caribbean." in Dabydeen and Samaroo (eds.) *India in the Caribbean*, London: Hansib Publishing Ltd, 1987; and P. Mohammed "A Social History of Post Migrant Indians in Trinidad from 1917 to 1946: A Gender Perspective" PhD thesis, Institute of Social Sciences, The Hague, 1993, for information on the panchayat.

¹⁸ Mrs. S. D. personal interview. Cunupia, Trinidad. 27 November, 1997

luck, a widow who owned land was a different creature. The independent ownership of arable land gave her a certain degree of influence, if not power. As one woman recalls:

When the children father dead, he did leave some land. But I did have my own piece too. One of the bigger boys was already working the father land – cane and garden – before he dead because he did ailing for a long time. But I continue on my piece, and I have cow and thing too. So all the children know they woulda get something. Not only that, I have me own, so I don't have to depend on them, I wasn't a burden then. Sometimes, mostly, it better that way. They say, "Ma, let we help you", because they know I could do better, I could help meself.¹⁹

One of the most crucial benefits of land ownership by women was the ability to leave abusive relationships. Agarwal has noted that in the state of Bihar in eastern India in 1970, there was an extended struggle by men and women of landless households for rights to the land they cultivated. The women raised a demand for independent land rights, not only for the economic security it provided, but also because it impinged on marital relationships. She pointed out that the women:

...feared that if land titles went only to their husbands, they would be rendered relatively even more powerless, and vulnerable to domestic violence. Their fears proved correct: where only men got titles there was an increase in drunkenness, wife-beating and threats...while where women got the titles they could now assert: "We had tongues but could not speak, we had feet but could not walk. Now that we have the land, we have the strength to speak and walk."²⁰

Significantly, too, Agarwal found that by acquiring a piece of land, the woman had also acquired a separate, independent identity:

In Chaojua village, Croll (1978) notes, every poor peasant, man or woman, was allotted a piece of land. Where earlier women had been referred to as 'so and so' mother', now their own names were written in land certificates:" They had acquired a name alongside a share of land.²¹

These women knew that with the land in their own names they could leave their husbands, with or without their children, and be able to take care of themselves.

What is also evident is that Indian women, like Indian men, used land as an investment, recognising its ability to generate wealth. A perusal of the Country Books which contained copies of land deeds in Trinidad, showed not only patterns of inheritance among Indian landowners, but also that a significant number of Indian women were using their landholdings as mortgages and collateral. For example, land deed #1161 of 1900 showed that Sookanie of the Ward of Lower Caroni, shopkeeper, entered into an agreement with one Hasserat, also of Lower Caroni, whereby she mortgaged her land, a portion of the Belle Vue Estate, to him for the sum of \$198. Repayment was to be made by 25th May, 1901. A subsequent deed revealed that Sookanie did in fact repay the amount borrowed from Hasserat and discharged the mortgage.

¹⁹ Mrs D. personal interview. Paradise, Tacarigua, Trinidad. 14 March, 1997

²⁰ Agarwal, *ibid.* 39-40

²¹ Croll quoted in Bina Agarwal *A Field of One's Own Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, 40

Other Indian women were wealthy enough to lend money and to hold lands as surety. Deed #4820 of 1921 showed that Ramsonneelal of Jerningham Junction in the Ward of Chaguanas mortgaged his land to one Lydia Boodhoo, a shopkeeper, from the town of Tunapuna as security against a loan of \$1,750.

Some Indian women engaged in the practice of using land as mortgage as was the case of Soomaria, labourer, of the Ward of Upper Caroni who, in 1903 (deed #2310), mortgaged a piece of land, four quarrees, to one Padarat Pandit, driver, as security against a loan of \$350. With the money received, she purchased 16 acres of land, also in the same ward. Deed #2132 of 1907 showed that she had by then paid to Padarat Pandit the sum of \$954.16, which represented monies owed and interest on loans borrowed from him. That deed was one of release whereby Padarat Pandit consented to reconvey to Soomaria the two parcels of land that she had mortgaged.

A large number of deeds throughout the period show that Indian women bought and sold land as a means of generating wealth. The land deeds also show that in most, but not all instances, their sons were the heirs. Several of the deeds indicate that women left their lands to all their children, male and female, and sometimes to female children only. Whether they excluded their sons deliberately, or they had none, is not clear. Deed #270 of 1910 showed that Rajwantea of Arima had conveyed to her daughter, Soomdaree, and son-in-law, Teeluck, for one shilling sterling, and “of the natural love and affection” which she had for them, 15 acres, 3 roods and 39 perches of land situated in the Ward of Upper Caroni. Rajwantea had purchased that parcel of land from the Crown for \$76.77, as seen in deed #269 of 1910.

The non-commercial relationship Indian women had with their land

From an examination of the land deeds, it is clear that Indian women used and disposed of land in the same manner as Indian men. But did they have a special relationship with the land that was different from the men? For want of a better term, perhaps Indian women had a more ‘spiritual’ attachment to the land, one not necessarily shared by the Indian man. This is particularly evident in their attitude to residential space. There was a clear difference in how women treated residential land and agricultural or commercial land. With agricultural land, their attitudes were very similar to the Indian men – it was a unit of production to be developed and utilised to its fullest potential. In the residential or domestic land, here ‘spirituality’ was expressed.

This is particularly so when one looks at the role women played in various cultural practices, particularly weddings and festivals, and the importance of having one’s own property. In the words of one woman who had lived in the barracks to have one’s own house and one’s own piece of land meant that one could celebrate important festivals in an appropriate manner. Since women were the ones generally involved in preparations for the festivals and rituals, they were they ones who perhaps felt a greater affinity to their private piece of land. What is also noteworthy is the great pride a woman took in having her own house and keeping it in the best possible order:

To have your own roof, your own house, was everything for me. I was glad to have me own place. When you living in the barracks, nothing is yours. When we get we piece of land in the village, first thing I do is plant plenty flowers, trees, I make a nice flowers garden. And I make a special place to put up me jhandi. There I plant sweet flowers, chamelhi and hibiscus and I keep there clean. I make a bedi and I have the Shiva Lingam, where every morning after I bathe I go to throw water. It give you a peaceful feeling to just have your own clean place and to do your worship.²²

What this woman has described is a daily morning ritual prescribed for Hindus. In every Hindu home there is a special corner of the front yard where a small space is reserved for the purpose of this private worship. This area must be spotless and beautified with flowers.

When an Indian built a house, no matter how humble, a simple but crucial ceremony had to be performed. Both Hindus and Muslims performed a similar ceremony, which indicated that the practice was perhaps part of Indian culture rather than a particular religion:

First, you have to put the four corners of the house. Then in one corner, the one facing the north-east, you have to dig a little hole. Here you going to make a small offering to Dih Baba – he was like the spirit in the earth. Whatever you doing, building house, or when is crop time – planting rice or cane, or anything, and cutting, you must give He something or things wouldn't go good. You just asking Him for things to work out.

Well now in the hole, you will put some silvers, like one shilling, a little rice, a sopenee (a small seed) and some doob grass. Sometimes the Pundit use to come and tell we what to do, and pray, but then we could do it by weself. When we build here, me husband didn't have time with that, but I wanted to see things go good. We have to give thanks to Mother Earth because is there where everything come from.²³

At weddings the earth played an even more central role, with Indian women being integral to the ritual:

Well, when wedding time come we have to go on the first night to get dirt. Only ladies and girls going and we singing and dancing. When we reach by running water, it have to be clean, so the water have to be running, all the women would sing and dance and they would share meethai, give everybody. Then the young sister of the bride, she what have the tray on she head. And we collect the mud and she carry that go for the wedding...From that we taking and making the bedi where the wedding will take place.²⁴

One festival of signal importance to Hindus is Divali. While resident in the barracks, they could not celebrate this festival in all its splendour. However, almost as soon as Indians started to form village settlements, there was an expansion in the way Divali was celebrated. Also known as the Festival of Lights, it symbolises the triumph of light over darkness, the return of Lord Rama from exile. Divali is celebrated on the darkest night of the year, and hundreds of small earthen pots, *deyas*, filled with coconut oil and a cotton wick, are lit and placed all around the house and the yard. Nowadays, *deyas* are

²² Mrs. P. personal interview. Guaico Tamana, Trinidad. 7 February, 1997

²³ Mrs. S.D. personal interview. Cunupia, Trinidad. 27 November, 1997

²⁴ Mrs. R. personal interview. Guaico Tamana, Trinidad. 7 February, 1997

commercially produced. However, long ago they were all handmade, as one respondent explained:

Long ago we making we own deya. Some weeks before Divali, we have to go by the river and collect white dirt. We bringing it home and putting a little water in it. Then we forming it into little pots with we hand. You making a lip in the top to put the wick in. We use to make plenty, two dozen, three dozen and thing. Then you have to put them out to dry. When they dry for a few days, they ready for you to use. Even when other people start to make deya to sell, the one you use inside the house to do the Lakshmi puja, that one we continue to make with we hand. Everything had to be clean and it wasn't hard to do. All the ladies them did know how to do that.²⁵

It is still the practice among some Hindu families for the woman to make one deya for the Lakshmi puja. For the festival of Divali, in particular, to have their own space was important to the Indian family, especially the women. It meant that their yards could be cleaned and filled with lighted deyas on the night, and that they could get the earth to make their own deyas.

Indian men tended to have a more commercial attitude toward the land, i.e. it was just another factor of production. They acquired land almost exclusively for commercial enterprises, whether for cane, rice, livestock or as a form of investment. Although the same is true of Indian women, their approach to land use was more holistic. Indian women seemed to be more aware of the interconnectedness of land use and its impact on the environment. It was the woman who tended to plant fruit trees, flowers and shrubs around the house, and who tended to engage in market gardening. One interviewee expressed a rather interesting point about the difference in attitude:

When you buy a piece of land, the man want to cut down all the trees and clear it out, so he could plant whatever he want easier. So he go come and cut down all the trees and thing, and just plant what he want. But you see, he not cooking, he don't have to worry where we getting firewood. Is we the woman who cooking every day and who have to get the firewood, we know how hard it is. So for we it better if you leave some of the trees in the land. At least that way we have wood (for fuel). Then them man and them only want to see money to spend, to drink. I want to feed me family, sell a little something. But I like to see the trees and thing too. We taking from Mother Earth, we must give she back something too. So we don't take away everything, we leaving some trees and the grass and thing.²⁶

Land ownership in practice

The life histories of two women show how important owning land was in rescuing them from abusive relationships. These life histories must be seen as representing circumstances that although not rare, were hardly the norm. It was more usual for Indian men and women to live together regardless of the domestic situation, and to buy property in common. Even when the woman bought property on her own it was with the full knowledge of her husband, as was the case of the third woman interviewed. That the following situations existed, however, is also undeniable.

²⁵ Mrs. S. D. Personal Interview. Cunupia, Trinidad. 27 November, 1997

²⁶ Mrs. G. M. Personal Interview. Maracas, St Joseph, Trinidad. 4 February, 1997

SP was born in 1908 on the Aranjuez Estate where both her parents were indentured. At the age of 13, she had an arranged marriage to DD who lived and worked on a cocoa estate in Maracas, St. Joseph. On marrying him she moved to this estate. Her marriage was to be a short-lived affair. DD was an extremely cruel husband who subjected SP to continuous physical abuse. Five years and three children later SP returned to her parents' home in Aranjuez. They did not accept her: she had become a source of shame to them, and they were prepared to send her back to her husband as was the custom in the 1920s. She then took matters into her own hands. With her meagre savings, she rented a barrack room in the San Juan area where she moved with her three children.

To maintain her children and herself, SP became a milk vendor. Leaving her children in the care of barrack neighbours, she would go to the village shop at four o'clock in the morning where she would purchase milk from the dairy farmers, who brought the milk to the shop from their farms. She would then make her way into Port-of-Spain, from where she would walk to Belmont, a suburb of Port-of-Spain about four kilometres away to sell the milk to regular customers.

With this money, SP bought vegetables at the Central Market on George Street in Port-of-Spain, which she would retail at the San Juan market on a Saturday morning. During this period, she started a relationship with another man, a fellow vendor. The relationship soon turned abusive. When he threatened to kill her, she and her three children moved from San Juan in north Trinidad to Penal in the southern part of the country, some fifty kilometres away, in 1935. She lived here for 10 years and sold vegetables at the Penal market. She would travel into Port-of-Spain to the Central Market on a Thursday to purchase market goods, vegetables and fruits from wholesale vendors which she would then retail at the Penal market on Fridays and Saturdays.

It was at the Central Market she heard that an estate owner was selling pieces of his estate in the Santa Cruz valley in foothills of the Northern Range. She purchased one acre from him in instalments. She moved to Santa Cruz in 1948 with the younger of her two daughters, leaving her elder daughter and a son in Penal. The land she purchased was very near to a small river. SP employed two men to divert the river into her land to grow watercress. She and the workers cultivated other short-term crops too, such as patchoi and tomatoes, which she sold in the San Juan market on Sundays. She also planted banana trees on a portion of the land and sold the green bananas. She continued to sell at the Penal market on Fridays and Saturday mornings, staying at the home of her elder daughter who had married a man from Penal when she did so. By selling at both markets, and by throwing "sou-sou", a system of savings, with her acquaintances, SP was able to pay off the instalments on the land by 1954.

Until her death in September 1985, she continued to live on her own land. In the 1960s, she had stopped cultivating watercress. She bequeathed the land to the daughter who had lived with her in Santa Cruz. She continued to sell at the Penal market and the San Juan market until two weeks before her death.

Another woman for whom owning land was a blessing was RB. She was born in 1905 and lived in Curepe. She had an arranged marriage at age 14 to IM, and went to live with him at Tacarigua. Both she and her husband worked on the Orange Grove Estate. Her husband bought nine acres of land in Caura, where they grew crops for home use and for sale in the Central Market at Port-of-Spain.

RB subsequently left the estate entirely and went to work full time in their garden at Caura. She also bought several cows and sold milk. With the help of her children, she cultivated the nine acres at Caura in peas, sweet potatoes and eddoes which were then sold wholesale at the Central Market. Her husband had also left the estate and worked hauling and transporting gravel from the river.

By the mid-1940s, RB had borne 12 children, six girls and six boys. Her life with IM was filled with constant physical abuse and violence. He was an alcoholic and a stick fighter who attracted many women and was in turn a womaniser. In November 1946, IM dealt her a blow to her left shoulder with an axe. She managed to escape him and fled to her sister's place.

After this attack, she took out a restraining order against him and never returned. Through her vending at the Central Market, she heard from her friend, SP, of land being sold in Santa Cruz. She purchased one acre of land quite close to where SP had bought hers, and moved at the beginning of 1949. She brought with her four of the cows that she had left at Tacarigua, and her second youngest son. In Santa Cruz, with the help of this son and two workers, she cultivated the land, while continuing to sell milk to a large dairy farmer who was contracted to supply a factory.

RB insisted on educating her daughters rather than her sons. All of her daughters were educated, four up to secondary school level; two went on to tertiary education. She did not want her daughters to suffer the same fate that she had. Eventually two of her daughters moved to Santa Cruz with her. When they got jobs, they insisted that she stopped working. True to her word, RB never visited IM, even during his prolonged illness. He continued to live at Tacarigua until his death in April 1985. RB died in October 1985, one month after the death of her friend, SP.

Born in 1895 in India, AK was a very young girl when she came to Trinidad with her parents. They were indentured on a cocoa estate in Sangre Grande where she grew up. She had an arranged marriage in 1909 at the age of 14. She moved with her husband, who was born in Trinidad, on to one lot of land that was given to him by his mother. They lived quite close to her mother-in-law who owned five acres of cocoa land. AK worked for her mother-in-law on the estate "breaking cocoa", for which she was paid. Her husband was a road worker. AK bought a cow and was encouraged by a Spanish woman to sell the milk. With this extra money and what she earned from working with her mother-in-law, plus some of her husband's income, they bought seven acres of land in Sangre Grande. They moved there with their four children in 1917. On this land, which had bearing cocoa trees, AK began working for herself. Her husband continued to work on the road.

In the 1930s and after 11 children, AK decided to expand her landholdings. The Mendez Cocoa Estate in north Manzanilla had gone out of business and was being offered for rent. Its 425 acres were being offered for \$400 annually. She discussed this with her husband who, according to her daughter, adamantly refused to rent the estate. AK eventually rented about 100 acres and moved with some of her children on to the estate. Her husband stayed in Sangre Grande. She chided him for being a coward, for being afraid of “Loupe Garhou”, a mythical figure akin to the werewolf, who was said to live in the heavily forested areas of Trinidad.

AK hired workers to grow citrus and bananas, which she then sold at the wholesale market. Just before World War II, according to her daughter, the 100 acres started to make a profit and AK renovated the house in which she and the children had been living. When her husband saw the turnaround in profits, he came to live with her, bringing the rest of the children. She bought a truck, which her husband used to deliver gravel. With profits from the estate, AK bought land for her children and educated the last three boys and her youngest daughter. On her death in 1990 at the age of 95, AK had seen three sons migrate to England. By then her landholdings had increased by a further 100 acres in Sangre Grande and north Manzanilla. AK had eventually bought the piece of land which she had first rented from the Mendez Estate.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been the central role that land played in the lives of rural Indian women up to the 1940s. What was termed by others as the insatiable Indian thirst for land was in fact a logical step for migrants establishing themselves as a permanent community within a host society that, for a relatively long time, from 1870 to 1945, viewed their permanent presence as their interlopers into the society. The Indians who migrated in the 19th century as indentured labourers in the other British colonies were generally landless peasants who had been victims of the economic policies of the British in India. As Marina Carter has said:

The policies which the British in India introduced to stimulate economic growth contributed to deprive peasants of their land and artisans of their craft.²⁷

It was little surprise therefore that one of the first things Indian migrants sought to acquire was land. They had understood in India firsthand the economic and social effects of land ownership. In India, women would have had very little say in issues concerning land distribution, but in Trinidad, the situation was different. Here they had direct, unhindered access to land, and they took full advantage of it. Like the Indian men, they were only too aware of the value of private land ownership: it was a means of production; some land ended up in large-scale, commercial agriculture, although the majority remained at the subsistence level.

²⁷ Marina Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy: The Testimonies of Indian Women in 19th Century Mauritius* (Stanley, Rose Hill, Mauritius: Editions de L'Océan Indien, 1994) 18.

In rural communities that were agrarian based, ownership of land was crucial. It gave Indian women the ability to be producers, to generate independent income, and in some instances, very real wealth. Independent ownership of land also gave her a tool that could be used in gender negotiations within the home and in the wider community, and economic independence from the state. It was the most crucial lever that these rural Indian women held within the Indian community. And as parents, they perhaps naturally conveyed a concept of land veneration and acquisition to succeeding generations.