

ABSTRACT

This study places rural Indian women in Trinidad at the centre of the historical experience of Indians in Trinidad. It shows how these women used several factors that existed in the rural Indian community in Trinidad over the period 1870 to 1945 to gain a degree of power and influence that had hitherto been denied them.

It embraces several issues, of which land acquisition and economic activities are the most crucial factors by which rural Indian women achieved standing within the Indian community. It also examines the themes of marriage and divorce, as well as the domestic activities of these women, in a recreation of their daily lives. All of these factors impacted on the lives of these women, creating for them a space of their own.

These became the levers by which the women were able to engage in a continuous process of working out terms and conditions under which their lives were lived in relation to their men and to the community at large. So, whether the wider, non-Indian society viewed their lives as one of subservience, where a static stereotype of these women remained virtually unchanged for the entire period under study, their own life experiences reflected a dynamism within the Indian community, one where the women held real, if limited, authority.

For the majority of them, attendance at school was not allowed; and where they did attend it was at best sporadic and for a brief period in their early childhood. Therefore these women used what was available to them, the

cracks in an otherwise solid patriarchy, to achieve their ends. This thesis is a vindication of their presence in Trinidad.

Key Words: gender, women, Indo-Trinidadian women, rural life.

DEDICATED TO THE SPIRITS OF MY GRANDMOTHERS.