

Beyond being *koelies* and *kantráki*

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Constructing Hindostani identities
in Suriname in the era of indenture,
1873-1921

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Contents

List of Figures	9
Preface	11
Acknowledgements	14
Glossary	16
1 Introduction	23
Introduction	23
The historiography of Hindostani immigration and settlement in Suriname	27
Perspectives on Indian migrants in the literature on the Caribbean	32
Identification and intersectionality	37
Reconsidering analytical categories	40
Understanding mobile lives	43
Reading sources along and against the grain	46
Engaging with visual traces	50
My position	53
Structure	55
Terminology	57
Note on names and spelling	57
2 Becoming Migrants	59
2.1 Being recruited and registered	59
<i>Introduction</i>	59
<i>Concerning the bureaucratic identities of potential migrants</i>	65
<i>Views on overseas migration in the regions of recruitment</i>	66
<i>Rahman Khan's story</i>	69
<i>Being recruited by the Suriname Agency</i>	72
<i>Living at the sub-depot</i>	78
<i>Being registered</i>	81
2.2 Identification in transit	85
<i>Transport to Calcutta</i>	85
<i>The geography of the Calcutta depot</i>	90
<i>Entering the Calcutta depot</i>	94
<i>Living at the Calcutta depot</i>	100
2.3 Crossing the <i>kala pani</i>	103
<i>Embarking</i>	103
<i>The geography of the ship</i>	105

	<i>Moving within confines</i>	109
	<i>Living and dying at sea</i>	114
	Conclusion	117
3	Being <i>Kantráki</i>. Confronting Indentureship	119
3.1	Immigrating to Suriname	119
	<i>Introduction</i>	119
	<i>Ascribed identities in the Colonial Reports</i>	122
	<i>Arriving in Suriname</i>	125
	<i>Inspected by the immigration agent</i>	128
	<i>Staying at the 'koeliedepot'</i>	135
	<i>Registered identities in the immigration register</i>	140
	<i>The interpreter as go-between</i>	143
	<i>Navigating the plantation</i>	145
3.2	Being <i>kantráki</i>	149
	<i>Working under contract</i>	149
	<i>Facing hierarchies on the plantation</i>	152
	<i>Undergoing methods of control and coercion</i>	155
	<i>Acts that speak</i>	158
	<i>Acts that speak louder</i>	161
3.3	Beyond being <i>kantráki</i>	164
	<i>Interference in daily lives</i>	174
	<i>(Re)Shaping gender roles and family life</i>	170
	<i>Culinary encounters</i>	174
	<i>Fashioning selves</i>	179
	<i>Practicing religious and communal life</i>	184
	Conclusion	194
4	Becoming Transient Settlers. Establishing Rural Communities	197
4.1	Post-indenture dilemmas	197
	<i>Introduction</i>	197
	<i>Not once and for all</i>	200
	<i>The 'koeliedepot': Awaiting a possible return</i>	203
	<i>Exchanging letters</i>	205
	<i>Pleas from India</i>	208
4.2	Gaining a place	210
	<i>The settlement scheme and its legal context</i>	210
	<i>Choosing a place of residence</i>	213
	<i>Gaining access to land</i>	220
	<i>Building a home</i>	223
	<i>(Self-)Government in the districts</i>	227
4.3	Occupational identifications	231
	<i>Making a living through agriculture</i>	231
	<i>Beyond the established path of employment</i>	234
	<i>Gendering labour and family</i>	239

	<i>Raising and educating the next generation</i>	243
4.4	Cultural and religious positioning	244
	<i>Khan and his family</i>	244
	<i>Shaping religious connections</i>	246
	<i>Transforming cuisine and culinary distinctions</i>	250
	<i>Appropriating styles of dress</i>	253
	Conclusion	260
5	Becoming Surinamese Citizens? Contested Identifications in the City	262
5.1	Place making in the colonial city	262
	<i>Introduction: Roads to Paramaribo</i>	262
	<i>Paramaribo in Dutch colonial designs</i>	265
	<i>Countercultural spaces</i>	270
	<i>Taking possession</i>	276
5.2	Redefining urban occupational identifications	277
	<i>Destabilising the image of the shopkeeper and trader</i>	277
	<i>Hindustani women working with and against stereotypes</i>	284
	<i>Entering the 'Afro-Surinamese' market</i>	287
5.3	Inscribing the cultural landscape	291
	<i>Building houses in Combé</i>	291
	<i>The Sital Persad family: Negotiating class, caste, gender, and religious stereotypes</i>	294
	<i>Being Hindu or Muslim in a Christian city</i>	298
5.4	Inscribing the political landscape	301
	<i>Hindustani participation in the public celebration of Queen's Day</i>	301
	<i>To be considered foreigners no longer</i>	306
	<i>Representing the interests of all Hindostani residents?</i>	312
	Conclusion	318
6	Conclusion	320
Annexes		
Annex 2.1	Emigration agents 1872-1916	327
Annex 2.2	Overview of ships transporting emigrants to Suriname from Calcutta, 1873-1916	327
Annex 3.1	Immigration agent/agent general (1872-1925) and interpreters Hindostani/Bengali (1873-1920)	329
Annex 3.2	British consuls, 1873-1921	331
Annex 3.3	Ten plantations with the largest number of Hindostani indentured labourers in 1875, 1880, 1885, 1890 and 1900	331
Annex 3.4	Ten plantations with the largest number of Hindostani indentured labourers working on average per day in 1915 and 1920	334
Annex 3.5	Number of Hindostani deserters and returnees as mentioned in the Colonial Reports, 1873-1917	335

Annex 4.1	Total number of users at government settlements in 1900, 1905, 1910, 1915 and 1920	337
Annex 4.2	Hindustani buyers of land for more than one thousand guilders in 1900, 1901 and 1902, in order of amount of money spent	340
Annex 5.1	Occupations listed in the 1921 census	342
Dutch Summary		345
Bibliography		349
Index		371

List of figures

Images

Figure 1.1	Waterkant by unknown, circa 1903	24
Figure 2.2	Title page of Rahman Khan's autobiography	71
Figure 3.3	Immigrants being inspected upon arrival at Paramaribo, circa 1885	129
Figure 3.4	Detail of figure 3.3	132
Figure 3.8	Immigrant depot in Combé, Paramaribo around 1910	137
Figure 3.9	'In the <i>koeliedepôt</i> ', between 1906-1913	139
Figure 3.10	Plantation Zorg en Hoop at Commewijne, 1904	147
Figure 3.13	Labourers' barracks and apothecary at plantation Geyersvlijt, circa 1920	166
Figure 3.14	Barracks for the indentured labourers, 1887	176
Figure 3.15	Immigrant barracks and a storehouse at plantation Morgenstond, circa 1904-1940	179
Figure 3.16	Arrival in Suriname of immigrants from British India, circa 1900-1916	180
Figure 3.17	Immigrants at the depot in Paramaribo, before 1885	180
Figure 3.18	Group portrait of labourers at plantation Spieringshoek, circa 1880-1900	183
Figure 3.19	Plantation Waterland, circa 1895-1910	185
Figure 3.20	'Tadja', circa 1882-1902	191
Figure 3.21	<i>Taziyás</i> , circa 1903	193
Figure 4.6	Hindostani settlement in Suriname, circa 1920	225
Figure 4.7	Hindostani vegetable grower near Paramaribo, 1921	225
Figure 4.8	Two Hindostani children riding a cart, circa 1900-1920	235
Figure 4.9	Market at the Lelydorp train stop, circa 1910-1930	254
Figure 4.10	Details of Figure 4.9	254
Figure 4.11	Five women harvesting manioc, circa 1912	256
Figure 4.12	Hindostani woman with a zebu at Meerzorg, circa 1921	256
Figure 4.13	Hindostani men constructing the railway track in Marowijne, 1904	258
Figure 4.14	Group of Hindostani residents and guests at the first <i>Bhágwat</i> at Meerzorg, 1914	258
Figure 4.15	Detail of Figure 4.14	259
Figure 5.2	Governor's Palace at Paramaribo by unknown, circa 1890	267
Figure 5.3	The Judicial Court, Financial Department and Governor's Secretary, circa 1890	268

Figure 5.5	A yard in Paramaribo, circa 1920	274
Figure 5.7	Advertisement of Lutchmansing, 1910	282
Figure 5.8	Advertisement of Widow Ramyad, 1916	282
Figure 5.9	'British Indian <i>koelie</i> shop (Watermolenstraat)', between 1895-1898	284
Figure 5.10	Market at the Heiligenweg in Paramaribo, circa 1885	289
Figure 5.11	Market at Paramaribo, 1921	289
Figure 5.12	'Houses of free British Indian <i>koelies</i> (Combé)', between 1895-1898	293
Figure 5.13	Postcard with title 'At Combé, houses of British Indians', circa 1910	293
Figure 5.14	Hindostani participants in the procession during a royal birthday, before 1905	302
Figure 5.15	Suriname population gathered on Queen's Day, circa 1910	305
Figure 5.16	Unveiling of the bust of Mr G.H Barnet Lyon, 1908	309

Maps and plans

Figure 2.1	Political divisions in British India, 1909	60
Figure 2.3	Railway network in the area of recruitment, 1893	87
Figure 2.4	Map of Calcutta, 1893	88
Figure 2.5	Detail of of Garden Reach in Calcutta, 1887	92
Figure 2.6	Ship plan side view, 1884	107
Figure 2.7	Ship plan of upper deck, 1884	108
Figure 3.1	Map of Suriname, 1899	126
Figure 3.2	Detail of figure 3.1	127
Figure 3.5	& figure 5.1 Figurative map of Paramaribo, sheet 74, 1885	134 & 266
Figure 3.6	Detail of map of Paramaribo, 1916-1917	135
Figure 3.7	Figurative map of Paramaribo, sheet 80, 1885	137
Figure 3.11	'Plan of factories and buildings of pl[antation] Resolutie', 1873	149
Figure 4.4	Detail of Map of the Government Settlements, 1908	218
Figure 4.5	Legend of Map of the Government Settlements, 1908	218
Figure 5.4	Detail of map of Paramaribo, 1916-1917	271

Tables

Figure 3.12	Table of types of complaints filed against plantation staff or authorities	157
Figure 4.1	Number of letters sent and received, 1898-1926	206
Figure 4.2	Annual Hindostani arrivals and 'end of contract -certificates' granted, 1898-1926	206
Figure 4.3	Types of land occupation Hindostani were involved in, 1899-1913	217
Figure 5.6	Details in the immigration register on shopkeepers/traders listed in the almanacs	280

Preface

In Suriname he had worked. All he was capable of, he did it. With what respect do people talk about it? Do they know there were ever indentured labourers? Do they know that their blood was shed in this earth? Is it known they were shot at?¹

The Sarnámi poet Jit Narain wrote about ‘The indentured labourer’ in 1993. He wondered whether white Dutch citizens knew that slave labour in Suriname was replaced by indentured labour in 1873. That this was another form of bound labour. If they realised that more than 34,000 labourers were recruited in the north of India from 1873? If they were aware of the penal sanction attached to the five-year contract? If they had heard about the violence used, when resistance against the plantation regime occurred? More than twenty years after Narain, Shantie Singh published the novel *Vervoering* (meaning transporting or transportation, but also rapture or ecstasy). The plot centres around eighteen-year-old Ramdew, who arrived in Suriname in 1912 as an indentured labourer, and the generations who came after him. In the afterword, Singh explains that although her book is fictive, it is the result of her desire to know more about her own history. She states:

Because often I feel like a walking mystery when I hear myself explain again that my parents are from Suriname, my ancestors from India, and I myself was born and raised in the Netherlands.²

Singh feels there is a continued lack of knowledge about Hindostani history.

‘Doing history’ is something not only professional historians engage in. Novelist, poets, journalists, activists, authors, television makers, genealogists and others write histories and provide perspectives on the past as well. They question existing narratives, question which voices feature most prominently, and what counts as ‘legitimate’ history. Many of them are interested in what the past means for us today.³ In the last two decades Hindostani historians, activists, authors, poets, television makers, jour-

1 ‘In Suriname heeft hij gewerkt. Alles wat hij aankon, heeft hij gedaan. Met welk respect praat men erover? Weet men het dat er ooit contractanten waren? Weten ze ook dat hun bloed in deze aarde heeft gevloeid? Is het bekend dat op ze is geschoten?’ Jit Narain, ‘De contractant’ in: Michiel van Kempen en Jan Bongers eds., *Sirito*. 50 *Surinaamse vertellingen* (Paramaribo: Kennedy Stichting, 1993) 199.

2 ‘Vaak voel ik me namelijk een wandelend mysterie als ik mezelf opnieuw hoor uitleggen dat mijn ouders uit Suriname komen, mijn voorouders uit India, en dat ikzelf geboren en getogen ben in Nederland.’ Shantie Singh, *Vervoering. Vier generaties, drie continenten* (Amsterdam: De Geus and Oxfam Novib, 2014).

3 Mark Donnelly and Claire Norton, *Doing History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011) xiii, 155.

nalists and others in Suriname and the Netherlands have reclaimed and reshaped the history of migration and indenture. Poets and novelists highlight the experiences and perspectives of the migrants and connect these to the present. They share the idea that there is a need to explore the experiences and points of view of the first generation. Despite the expansion of the historiography over the last two decades, which I have described in more detail in the introduction, they feel there is still a lack of attention to and knowledge about this history among the general public, especially in the Netherlands.

Moreover, novelists and filmmakers are motivated to correct infavourable and painful depictions of the first generation in historical documents. Mala Kishoendajal states that she wanted to write the novel *Kaapse goudbessen* (Cape Gooseberries or literally Golden berries of the Cape) in which she portrays the lives of Hindostani indentured labourers, because of '[t]he historical value of a rarely described Dutch cultural group and its rooting and uprooting'.⁴ She highlights the importance of telling a personal story, because Dutch colonial authorities reduced personal histories to the size of 'one meagre A4 page'.⁵ She portrays members of the first generation as people with hopes and fears, with aspirations and personalities. As such, Kishoendajal is motivated to paint a more human depiction of the first generations than she has been able to uncover in historical documents. She shows how the personal lives of indentured labourers could be affected by violence and imprisonment, when a family falls apart after the husband is sentenced to six years of forced labour.

The film 'Tetary. Over strijd, moed en opoffering' (Tetary. About battle, courage and sacrifice), which was broadcasted on television in 2013 by Omroep Hindoe Media (or o.h.m.) portrayed the violence and exploitation that the system of indentured labour in Suriname was based on. The narrative centres around the historical figure of Janey Tetary, a Muslim female indentured labourer who participated in resistance at sugar plantation Zorg en Hoop in 1884. By making Tetary central to this retelling of the history of Hindostani indenture in Suriname, the historian Radjinder Bhagwanbali showed that women also participated in resistance.⁶ In September 2017, a bust of Tetary was revealed in Paramaribo, paid for by crowdfunding. This monument replaced the bust of the Dutch colonial official and immigration agent George H. Barnett Lyon.⁷ So, not only do these activists want to instate Tetary as a heroine, but they also aim to end the public honouring of a Dutch colonial official, even if he had been honoured by the Hindostani community as their liaison to Dutch colonial authorities.

Hindostani authors humanise Hindostani indentured labourers and visualise the violence and exploitation that many indentured labourers have experienced, but attention is also drawn to social problems with historical roots. In her MA thesis, Shari-ta Rampertap addresses violence towards women on the plantation, the change from

4 'De historische waarde van een nauwelijik in de literatuur beschreven Nederlandse cultuurgroep, en zijn wortelings- en ontwortelingsperikelen' in: Mala Kishoendajal, *Kaapse goudbessen. Kroniek van een illusionaire vrede* (Haarlem: In de Knipscheer, 2015) 322.

5 'een summier A4'tje' in: Kishoendajal, *Kaapse goudbessen*, 322-323.

6 Tetary. *Over strijd, moed en opoffering* (Omroep Hindoe Media: 1 and 8 June 2013).

7 See: www.tetary.org (accessed 25 October 2017). For more information about the establishment of the bust of Barnett Lyon, for which members of the Hindostani elite raised money between 1905 and 1908, see chapter five.

self-conscious women of the first generation, who sometimes had multiple partners, to the control exercised by parents over the sexuality of their (second generation) daughters, and the re-establishment of norms relating to femininity and masculinity.⁸ Rampertap shows how these renegotiations of gender roles of the first and second generation were bound up with migration and indenture.

All these different retellings of the history of Hindostani migration and indenture wish to highlight agency. By showing how Hindostani recruits, migrants, indentured labourers, and (temporary) settlers tried to maintain control over their own lives, they become actors in their own right. By way of my research I support this meaningful project that contests the colonial legacy by listening to other voices of the past.

8 Sharita Rampertap, 'Ká bhail?' 'Wat is er gebeurd?'. Veranderende posities van vrouwen in de Hindostaanse gemeenschap in Suriname, 1916-1950 (MA thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 29th of August 2011).

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