

Ramharack, Baytoram. (2019). *Jung Bahadur Singh of Guyana (1886-1956): Politician, ship doctor, labor leader and protector of Indians*. Chakra Press: San Juan, 378 pages

Ravi Dev

To cite this review: Dev, Ravi. (2021). 'Review of *Jung Bahadur Singh of Guyana (1886-1956): Politician, ship doctor, labor leader and protector of Indians*, by Baytoram Ramharack (2019, San Juan, Chakra Press, 378 pages), *Papers on Indenture: Indenture Reviews*, vol.1: 3-5.

<https://girit.ac.fj/id-2021-dev/>

Date Published: 11 October 2021

Other articles in this volume: <https://girit.ac.fj/current-issue/>

Editorial Board: <https://girit.ac.fj/editorial-board/>

Notes for Contributors: <https://girit.ac.fj/notes-for-contributors-2/>

The role of the medical doctor on the ships that accompanied the girmitiyas from ancestral India to the colonies and vice versa during the indenture system remains, to a large extent, an area of darkness. It is an area that has been understudied or 'lost' in history. The one notable exception is the role of Dr. Theophilus Richmond, a medical doctor who was commissioned by the British government and the planters to accompany the girmitiyas on the *SS Hesperus*, one of the first ships that arrived in British Guyana in 1838. That study, based on the contents of Richmond's medical notes, edited by David Dabydeen et al, revealed previously unknown information about the important role of the ship doctor in attending to the needs of the jahajis on board the ships. Richmond did not live to tell us much more than what his diary revealed because the young doctor succumbed to yellow fever two months after arriving in the colony.

Dr Baytoram Ramharack's book on Jung Bahadur Singh offers much greater insight into the role of a ship doctor. JB Singh's interest in this area

started when he was 16 years old, as he moved from being a compounder to a nurse and from being a medical doctor to occupying the highest medical position on board the ship – that of Surgeon Superintendent. Between 1920 and 1949, JB Singh made at least four trips as Surgeon Superintendent, out of the 24 total trips during his lifetime.

The publication of this narrative on Jung Bahadur Singh of Guyana is an important achievement which provides its readers with a wealth of information that goes beyond JB Singh's role as a ship doctor. One is left with the feeling that Singh was an iconic leader of Guyana very much in the tradition of Dr. Cheddi Jagan, the leader of the country's independence movement. JB Singh is described as a 'protector of Indians/ in British Guyana. The author unearthed information that provides a detailed account of JB Singh's other roles befitting of being a 'protector' of the girmitiyas: politician, labor leader and medical doctor.

Born on June 14, 1886 in West Bank Demerara in the former Dutch village of Goed Fortuin (Dutch for 'Good Fortune'), JB Singh shared ancestral linkage to Nepal, a feature unusually distinctive to that of the almost 240,000 girmitiyas who were taken to Guyana between 1838 to 1917.

As a politician, Singh was the first Hindu to be elected to the British Guiana Parliament in 1930, following constitutional reforms in the colony. He was a member of the British Guiana Legislative Council for 23 years, until his electoral defeat in 1953. As a legislator, JB Singh presided and deliberated on almost every parliamentary committee, during which time he loyally represented the members of his multi-ethnic Demerara-Essequibo constituency.

As a well-respected leader of the Indian community, Singh became a trusted mediator, using his 'good offices' to resolve labour disputes between girmitiyas on the sugar plantations and the plantation owners. This was long before the formation of the first major labor union representing the largely sugar workers, the Man Power Citizens' Association (MPCA), of which Singh was a trustee and advisor.

Singh was among the few qualified medical doctors who initially returned to serve his country (colony at the time) following graduation from Edinburg University in 1919. As a seven time elected president of the leading Indian organization in the colony, the British Guiana East Indian Association (BGEIA) he fought relentlessly to expand the franchise for all Guyanese, particularly Indians, many of whom were prevented from voting due to colonial restrictions. He established the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha, demonstrating his commitment to his Hindu values, while he continuously advocated for the rights of Indians to be cremated. He was the first Indian to be officially cremated in Guyana, at a ceremony that witnessed one of the largest processions of its kind.

As the official biographer of JB Singh, Dr. Ramharack makes a useful

contribution to Indian historiography in the Caribbean.

Drawing primarily from information gathered during interviews, a review of archival materials and documents, scrutiny of parliamentary records, as well as the writings of JB Singh himself, the author presents a narrative which engages the reader's attention. This is a welcomed narrative.

Reference

Richmond, Theophilus. (2010). *The First Crossing* (with an Introduction by David Dabydeen, Jonathan Morley, Brinsley Samaroo, Amar Wahab & Brigid Wells), Guyana: The Caribbean Press for the Government of Guyana