

immigrated to countries in Europe and North America. The senior author came to Canada for higher studies, and later chose to make this country his home.

Our Family's Journey: From India to British Guiana and on to Canada

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to retrace our family's journey out of India to British Guiana (now Guyana), and later to Canada. Since the abolition of African slavery in 1838, plantation owners in the colony of British Guiana were determined to continue the lucrative sugar trade with Europe. However, newly freed slaves refused to work on the plantations, forcing planters to seek more reliable sources of replacement workers. These were recruited first from Portugal, then China and later India. The last group proved highly suited for plantation work. Not only did they complete their terms of indenture, but many bought land and established businesses. Our maternal great grandparents arrived in British Guiana at about the same time (ca.1860) as Indians were taken to other British colonies (Caribbean and Belize in Central America); our paternal grandparents came later (1896), twenty-one years before Indian immigration to British Guiana was abolished (1917). For half a century thereafter, Guianese Indians prospered and thrived; however, independence from Britain (1966) produced unexpected political upheaval, economic uncertainty, racial discrimination and cultural erosion. These engendered a climate of fear, and overt feelings of mistrust and hostility. Consequently, many Guyanese

Introduction

Throughout human history, people have been moving and settling in new places. Migration involves individuals, family units or large groups, and can be voluntary within one's own country, or beyond. Those who migrate voluntarily to live in different countries are referred to as 'immigrants'. It can also be involuntary, e.g., ethnic cleansing, human trafficking and the slave trade.

Information for this paper

This is the story of our family's migration journey. Much of the information presented in this paper is not published in historical records, but rather handed down orally from one generation to the next. Such traditions serve to keep ancestral history alive and preserve the past. They also allow us to appreciate the politics and dynamics of survival in a changing world.

Before the 19th century, few people born in the Indian subcontinent were found in the Americas, Europe or West Africa. Despite fear of the *kalapani* (black waters) that constrained some would-be immigrants from venturing abroad (Tumbe, 2018), Indians started arriving in British Guiana after the abolition of African slavery (1838).

Our maternal great grandparents arrived long before our time; our *Aja* (see Glossary of Terms) died just prior to our births; *Nana*, followed shortly thereafter. Stories about our families' journeys were told and retold by *Nanee* and *Ajee*, aunts, uncles, older cousins, jahajees, village elders, and *Pa and Ma* before their passing within the last two decades. Our grandparents and parents could speak Hindi and the local English dialect. Just prior to leaving India, both *Aja* and *Ajee* had been living independently in parts of India away from their families. They were reluctant to discuss this aspect of their past. Regardless, they were determined to chart a new course in a faraway country.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to:

- (1) Retrace our family's journey out of India to British Guiana and thereafter to Canada;

(2) Document aspects of Guyanese life in the middle of the last century.

Where we came from - India: a brief history

History of India begins with the birth of the Indus Valley Civilization (pre-Vedic period), and the emerging eminence of the Aryans (Vedic period). India's strategic location makes it the crossroads of cultures from China to Europe, and the centre of the Indian Ocean trading network. (Bose & Hassen, 2013). The continual arrival and integration of migrating peoples have added to India's wealth of diversity. By the fifth century, large parts of India were united under Emperor Asoka—who also helped spread Buddhism across Asia and other parts of the known world. In later years, Hinduism gained ascendancy throughout the Indian subcontinent and much of South East Asia.

Islam first came to India in the eighth century, and by the 11th century became established in parts of South Asia. Fatah (2013) reiterated observations by Durant & Durant (1963) that the Muslim conquest is probably the bloodiest story in history. Yet, a resilient India managed to survive the onslaught with some semblance of cohesiveness. By the 17th century the Mughal Empire began to crumble, paving the way for regional states to assert their individuality. In subsequent battles for supremacy, the invading British emerged victorious. But simmering uneasiness culminated in the First War of Independence of 1857-1858. This was brutally crushed by the British. Queen Victoria became Empress, and India the crown jewel of an expanding Empire around the globe.

British Administration in India

The new rulers put in place land revenue generating systems designed to fund their consolidation of power in India, in addition to exploits and conquests world-wide, plus the industrial revolution back home. Policies that indirectly promoted deindustrialization led to India's decline from a major manufacturing and trading power to a poorer, subservient colony. Local administration was left in the hands of the newly created self-serving brown elite dedicated to preserving harsh British rule.

The Old Colonial Economic System

Under this system, resources (raw materials, human) of any colony (e.g., India) were exploited for the benefit of the mother country (in this case, Britain). For example, rather than continuing as a major exporter of finished textile goods, raw Indian cotton was transported to Britain for the manufacture of expensive clothing for sale both in Europe and India.

Post-slavery labour

The Abolition of Slavery Act came into effect on August 1, 1834 throughout the British Empire. It proclaimed: 'Slavery shall be and is hereby utterly and forever abolished and declared unlawful throughout the British colonies, plantations and possessions abroad' (Mohabir, 2005). In 1838, African slavery was abolished in Belize, the British West Indies and British Guiana.

Up to this point in British Guiana, former slaves provided a plentiful supply of cheap labour. The lucrative sugar trade with Europe helped make plantation owners very wealthy, and concurrently achieve an enviable status in high society. But the newly freed slaves cherished their freedom and refused to work on the plantations. Some of these began losing money, while others had to be abandoned. Faced with the prospects of dire economic consequences, planters requested the British Government to find another source of cheap labour to replace their former slaves.

Slave replacements

Portuguese

Between 1835 and 1882, Portuguese indentured immigrants were brought from the north Atlantic island archipelago of Madeira to British Guiana. Despite being fellow Europeans, Protestant British planters discriminated against the mainly Roman Catholic Portuguese immigrants, relegating them to 'non-whites' status. However, after serving their time and leaving the plantations they established successful private businesses, quickly becoming Guyana's emerging commercial middle class (Merrill, 1992).

Chinese

In 1853 another group of indentured immigrants was brought to British Guiana from south China. Like the Portuguese, many left the plantations and entered the retail trade. Some who took up farming are credited with the introduction of wet rice cultivation. Ishmael (2013) notes that by the time Chinese immigration was discontinued, a total of 13,541 had been brought into the colony.

Indian indentured slavery (1838-1917)

India was part of the British Empire and teeming with able-bodied people, many unemployed and desperate to go for work anywhere. Indian soldiers were recruited and shipped around the world to fight British wars, and thousands recruited as indentured workers to work in British-owned plantations overseas.

On May 5, 1838, the first batch of 396 Indian indentured immigrants arrived in Port Georgetown (British Guiana) on board sailing ships the *Whitby* and the *Hesperus*. Although for centuries, Indian sailors and mariners (*Lascars* as they were generally known), had been traversing the Seven Seas (Arora 2004, Ewald, 2000), arrival of these vessels marked the first official record of Indians coming to the Western Hemisphere under the new system euphemistically called 'Indentureship' – in reality, the new slavery (Mohabir, 2005). Obviously, previous declarations that slavery be 'abolished forever and declared unlawful' applied only to Africans—not to the Indian immigrants who replaced them.

Some eight decades later when harsh conditions and continued immigrant mistreatment led to demands for abolition of the system, a total of 238,909 Indians had already arrived in British Guiana, but only 3,000 in Belize (Jagessar, 2006).

It is important to note that many years after their contracts expired, some immigrants (including one from our village) did return to India. The last ship (MV Resurgent) left Port Georgetown (*Pers. Obs., 1955*). However, the vast majority and their descendants chose to remain in the colony. Some continued to work for wages, others started private businesses, but many more bought land and cultivated crops, e.g., rice. Almost single-handedly, Indians build the rice industry, using know-how from their home provinces in India.

Our maternal ancestors in British Guiana

Maternal Great Grandfather #1: Chitbahal Singh

Our *par nana* was Chitbahal Singh. He arrived in Leguan Island, Essequibo River circa 1860. Sugar cultivation was already in decline following the departure of the Dutch in 1815. Other crops, notably rice, were cultivated by former indentured immigrants. A free man, *par nana* and *par nanee* had two sons and two daughters. No one knows for sure his province of origin in India. However, his surname 'Singh' revealed that he was Hindu of the Kshatriya warrior caste, perhaps Panjabi or Pathan—as phenotypically, his offspring and their descendants' resembled people from northwestern India. Like ex-soldiers deported to Belize (Mahabir, 2011) there are stories that *par nana* fought against the British in the 1857 Indian War of Independence prior coming to British Guiana.

Maternal Great Grandfather #2: Jai Mangal Doobay

Our other *par nana* was Jai Mangal Doobay. He arrived circa 1850's on the East Coast of Demerara, British Guiana. People with the surname *Doobay* (*Dube*) hail mainly from the provinces of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar in India. He and *par nanee* had six sons and two daughters.

Nana: Seepersaud Doobay

The third of six brothers, *Nana* was born in 1894 in British Guiana. An enterprising young man, he ran a major General Store in the African village of Den Amstel, West Coast, Demerara. Shortly after his marriage to *nanee* (circa 1918), he sold the business and moved to Leguan Island to live near *Nanee's* parents. Here they owned and operated a successful one-stop shop, *The Kingston Cash Store*. Together, they had two sons and three daughters, *Ma* being the youngest. Later, her brothers (our *mamoo's*), started an island taxi service, and later bought more land, a rice combine harvester and built a modern rice mill at the adjacent village of Dorn Haag. To this day, the family still runs the rice factory. It produces packaged rice for export to the Caribbean and other markets. Most of our cousins now reside in the USA, UK and Canada. Others choose to live in Guyana but regularly visit family and friends living abroad.

Nanee Shankalli Singh

Nanee was born in 1900, the second daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Chitbahal Singh. We still remember her as being of very fair complexioned, stout and of medium height. Her peering penetrating blue-green-eyes would quickly be sensed if we grandchildren needed her attention. She loved dearly and inspired us all during her eventful life, pampering us with goodies and telling us bedtime stories. She passed away quietly in 1956.

Our paternal ancestors in British Guiana

Aja and Ajee met on the Ship

Both were passengers on board the same ship which left Port Calcutta bound for Plantation Windsor Forest, West Coast, Demerara, arriving in 1896. At the time of boarding, *Aja* was in a dilemma because only applicants with a farming background were officially recruited. As a high caste Brahmin, he had to convince the *Arkati* (immigrant recruiter) to conceal his identity and register him as an 'Ahir' (agricultural worker). His name was *Ramkisshan Mishra*.

At that time in British Guiana, Indian women of marriageable age were in short supply. *Aja* was single, unattached, and anxious to get married and start a new life. After boarding the ship, he was attracted to a fair, tall and blue-eyed dame named *Pyagi*. She was pregnant with her first child and travelling alone. Knowing that bearing a child out of wedlock could bring dishonour to the family (Basu, 2013), she decided to escape secretly from home and board the ship. So, when dashing and handsome *Aja* proposed marriage, she readily agreed. Toward

the end of the journey, our eldest *chacha* was born. His biological father unknown, he was named (*Laxminarayan*). Today, his sons go by the surname—Narain/Narine. His descendants live in Canada and the USA.

Aja's Profession

Although Aja and Ajee were silent about their lives in India, Aja did say that his home province was Madhya Pradesh. Ajee would reminisce about living in Ghaziabad (near Delhi) before boarding the ship. Immigration records put Aja's family district (place of residence) as Varanasi (Benares, UP), and Ajee's district as Garhwal (present day Uttarakand). Later Aja would receive mail from Benares Hindu University. These were delivered at their Windsor Forest home, addressed to: *Dr. Ramkisshan Mishra, PhD*. Pa explained to me that Aja had taught Sanskrit there. He showed me a cabinet with a large collection of scholarly Sanskrit books and letters.

Aja's Gotra

One thing Aja was very proud to reveal was his *gotra* (lineage). He insisted that Pa pass on this information to his sons and their descendants. His ancient ancestor was Gautama Rishi, progenitor of *Rishi* Katyayana who served as Minister of Diplomatic Affairs at *Raja* Dasratha's court (Ajodhya, UP). He was a member of the King's regal mission to Mithila (in present day Nepal) for the wedding of Prince (Lord) Ram to *Mata* Sita following the *Swayamvar* (bridegroom selection) ceremony (Tiwari, 2013).

Our Ancestral Village, Guyana

Prior to 1908, our ancestral village Windsor Forest used to be an important sugar producing plantation. Later, the resident population changed to include a mix of mainly Indian immigrants, plus Chinese, Africans (descendants of Barbadian African immigrants) and a few Europeans who managed the estate. However, financial difficulties forced plantation owners to neglect the village sea defences (dykes) as well as paying taxes to the government. Eventually, they ceased sugar cane cultivation and abandoned the plantation. The government then took control of the estate, and sold off the land to residents. With their savings, Aja and Ajee were able to acquire a house, a few house-lots and plots of land for rice cultivation.

From our earliest recollection since the 1950's, our parents lived at the Aja and Ajee's family residence in Martha Street. It was a massive five-bedroom colonial style house made of pitch pine (*dhoop*), a stone's throw just north of the former plantation estate manager's yard. Pa had a total of eight siblings, all of whom lived with their own families at various times in the same house.

Audacious Ajee

Ajee was tall, strong and stately. Audacious and always on the move, she insisted that I accompany her on many long walking trips to weddings and other social events. She spoke only Hindi, refusing to speak the *bhasha* (language) of the '*Angreji*' (English). Weren't they the same people responsible for enslaving our people, she would ask rhetorically? In her later years though, she did reluctantly use a few words of broken English in conversations with us. She lived a good life, but one night in the late 1950's she went to bed as usual, but never woke up. She was at least 80 years old.

Our parents

Pa

Up to the 1960's, the Laws of British Guiana's didn't recognize traditional Indian (Hindu and Muslim) marriages. Thus, Pa and other immigrant children were automatically 'bastards' (illegitimate), meaning that he could legally use only his given name—in this case it was *Harinarain*, but not his family surname *Mishra*, or *Misir*. In later years when the Law was amended, Pa retained a lawyer to prepare a deed poll that added 'Misir' to our name and also those of our brothers. But he continued to use his erstwhile legal name *Harinarain Ramkisshan*.

During his long life of eighty-three years, Pa attempted many things. He was trained as a goldsmith, but later became a successful rice farmer and a vegetable grower. He didn't want his children to work as hard as he did, but he did manage to instil in them the importance of a sound English education. This, he was convinced, would liberate us from the shackles of the indentured mindset and ensure career opportunities for a brighter future. As he would say: '*To be successful, you must beat them at their own game!*' Our only regret though is that we are not as proficient as we'd have preferred in matters of Indian culture and language, especially Hindi *bhasha*.

Ma

Ma was better known as *Surujdai Doobay*, though officially her name was recorded as *Jumni*. Once the Headmaster of her Anglican Primary school suggested that she become a school teacher, but first she must start attending 'Sunday school' where Christian education was taught. Knowing this was a front for conversion to Christianity, Nana refused.

Pa was 21 and Ma 15 when they got married in 1941. Before leaving the family home a few years later, they built a 5-room house on Third Street, in the same village not far away. Later they would build a much larger, more comfortable house. As Ma used to say, 'We built this house for all eight children.' But

little did she know that no one would stay long enough in the country to occupy this mansion.

In their later years at Windsor Forest, Pa and Ma devoted their spare time serving the local Windsor Forest Hindu Community. He and fellow devotees established a Ramayan Society (जीवन मुक्त रामायण समाज) that helped train many young people in music, singing and *kirtan* (story narration). They both passed away while living with the senior author and his family in Toronto some years ago.

Changes in British Guiana

Golden Age (1917-1962)

Guyana is a country of contrasts. Blessed with fertile soil, dense forests, productive grasslands, and abundant water and mineral resources, she remains poor in human resources. Ironically, it is blighted when it comes to what matters every day to the people – good governance.

The period following the end of indentureship up till the early 1960's can be considered Guyana's Golden Age. The Great Depression of the 1930's and World War II had little adverse impact on a largely self-sufficient country. Some Guianese did volunteer in the war effort in Britain. Upon their return they would inspire us with wonderful stories. These encouraged young people to go abroad to study to become qualified in various professions and become accountants, doctors, engineers, lawyers and other professionals, and return home to live and serve the country. The rice, sugar and mining industries were all booming. And children of former Indian immigrants were being educated and taking their rightful places in various fields of endeavour in British Guiana.

Geopolitics and turmoil

The 1950's were a decade of political awakening and soul-searching. The independence of India (1947) encouraged sister colonies to demand an end to colonial rule. In Guyana, broad-based popular support helped elect the People's Progressive Party (PPP) led by Dr. Cheddi Bharat Jagan. However, his style of confrontational radicalism during this Cold War era alienated the British and the US who considered him a 'communist'. Not unexpectedly, Dr. Jagan's call for political independence went unheeded. After only a few months in office, the Constitution was suspended and his party ousted from power (1953). The party's African faction soon broke ranks with the PPP and formed the rival Peoples National Congress (PNC) led by Mr. Forbes Burnham. Subsequently, the PPP did win a few more elections, but lost the trust of Britain as well as the world's

foremost non-communist US superpower.

Dark Days and Election Reform

The early 1960's is recorded as the darkest period when a once peaceful and prosperous country was transformed into a sea of turmoil—thanks to geopolitics and covert foreign support for local anti-PPP groups. During 1962-64, the capital city Georgetown was set ablaze, with Indian-owned businesses and property targeted. Race riots, ethnic cleansing, the raping of Indian women, and loss of life led to forced internal migrations. One notorious incident was the 1964 'Wismar Massacre' (Ali, 1993). The British government thereafter introduced electoral reform – a new system of proportional representation which saw the defeat of the PPP and brought the African-dominated PNC-coalition to power.

Independence and Mass Exodus

In 1966 the British government handed political independence to this coalition which soon began a distinctly pro-African, anti-Indian drive. During a period of 28 long years of PNC African dictatorship, foreign companies and private businesses were nationalized, and workers became employees of the state. A PNC party ticket was needed to obtain and retain jobs or do business. Widespread discrimination for jobs based on race and party affiliation became commonplace. On top of this, the Indian population became terrified by aggressive cultural assimilation measures designed to promote *One People, One Nation, One Destiny*.

Meanwhile, the anti-communist West conveniently turned a blind eye as our once prosperous country descended into anarchy and chaos (Bisram, 2014; Ishmael, 2013). Naturally fair-minded Guyanese (but especially Indians) became scared and began to leave *en masse* for overseas destinations.

To this day, our country continues to be plagued by mutual mistrust, continuing brain drain, and the outflow of wealth. The national population count remains virtually unchanged at the 1960's level (~750,000), and still declining (Kaieteur News 2011). However, recent discoveries of massive offshore oil reserves may help stem the brain drain and also perhaps the population decline. Guyana may get another day in the sun!

My (senior author's) coming to Canada

I grew up in a rural rice-farming community. Being the eldest son in a family of 8 siblings, my job was apparently to help Pa and Ma make ends meet and feed the growing family. I was required to work in the fields, attending school only when there was nothing else to do. Despite this, to everyone's sur-

prise, I actually started excelling at school and won the admiration of my teachers and fellow villagers alike. However, the deteriorating political situation coupled with diminishing opportunities was already forcing many Guyanese to leave the country. I passed all the exams and for nine years served as a teacher at both primary and secondary levels. I was appreciated and respected by students and parents alike. And so, with excellent prospects for career advancement, I never really wanted to leave, especially as an ‘immigrant’ to a foreign country. For one thing, I never wanted to live through horrors of what our ancestors experienced after leaving the shores of India for British Guiana (as I thought at the time). So, in 1973 I left home to pursue higher studies in Canada—hoping to return at some future date to serve our country should the political situation improve. Sadly, that wasn’t meant to be.

Marriage and family

Two years later I met and married Ramdai Tiwari Balbahadur in Scarborough, a suburb of east Toronto. Thereafter, we moved to western Canada where I was finishing post baccalaureate studies at the Universities of Manitoba (MSc), and later at Alberta (PhD).

Formerly of Zeeburg, West Coast, Demerara, Ramdai comes from a well-known family of professionals—accountants, educators, engineers, mathematicians and scientists. Her father Ganesh Tiwari Balbahadur (*Pitaji*) was a learned *purohit* (*pandit*). According to Rampersaud Tiwari (Tiwari, 2011), Brahmins like Pitaji were ‘scholarly men of sterling stock and heritage’. He was highly respected among his peers, being widely recognized as a specialist in Hindu Astrology and Astronomy (*Jyotishi Gyaan*), the Shastras (Hindu canon law), Karma Kand (Hindu Rituals), languages (Sanskrit, Hindi, and English) and Mathematics (*Ganik Vidya*). He completed his mortal journey in this life on 29th February 1980, four years to the date after his Dharmapatni’s (*Mataji*’s) passing.

Ramdai’s family traces their *gotra*—in her case to *Maharishi* Parasar, father of Veda Vyasa (who re-composed the primordial single Veda into the four Vedas). Her family still maintains contact with extended family members in UP, India. One of her cousins Kanak Tiwari served as a Naval Officer on the *INS Godavari* which docked at the Port of New York harbor in 1976 for the US Bicentenary Celebrations. I, on the other hand, know of no living ancestral relatives in India.

New generations

Our son Anil was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba; and daughters Renuka and Nina in Edmonton, Alberta. After my formal studies, we moved to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan where I conducted research at the University of Saskatchewan.

Although I enjoyed my work, I felt a palpable sense of cultural isolation. Determined to escape the powerful forces of assimilation, we came to live in Toronto in 1986. Here, I feel more at home amongst the many people I know, and many more I’ve come to know. Here it’s so different living in freedom not fear, unlike in my *matri bhoomi* Guyana where agents of the state may lurk unseen. All three of our children have long completed their education up to the tertiary level in Ontario. They are now established professionals in their own right.

Indian Diaspora

Over the years, Indo-Caribbean people have migrated to the USA, Canada, the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Latin America (Wikipedia, 2016). Today more than 25 million of the Indian Diasporas live in countries around the world (Tumbe, 2018).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our ancestors were young and adventurous when they braved the *kala-pani*, leaving India for the unknown, in this case British Guiana. Senior author couple chose Canada and started a new generation, demonstrating the opening of countries’ borders to immigrants. In some ways, we have come full circle. All of our three children are married to offspring of parents born in India. We have five grandchildren.

Not all of the indentured labourers taken to British Guiana from India were destitute ‘coolies’ picked up from the slums of large cities. Some originated from other parts of the country and some had, or later earned, exemplary credentials. They adapted to both opportunity and danger, weaving new threads into the continuing fabric of our history.

As Indians of the diaspora, we need to be brave and strong, respect all and fear no one. The world is too little for big conflicts. A delicate complex of order and liberty, culture and peace, our civilization is besieged by disruptive forces and nefarious elements, both from within and outside.

Increasingly, the internet, global trade and the ongoing migration of skilled professionals are opening opportunities for young people as they follow their dreams and live their lives in new places they come to call home.

Our journey continues.

Glossary of terms**Family:**

Aja	Paternal grandfather
Ajee	Paternal grandmother
Dharampatni	Wife
Ma	Mother
Mata	Mother (reverence)
Mataji	Mother-in-law (my usage)
Nana	Maternal grandfather
Nanee	Maternal grandmother
Pa	Father
Pitaji	Father-in-law (my usage)
Par Nana	Great grandfather
Par Nanee	Great grandmother
Mamoo	Maternal uncle
Chacha	Paternal uncle

Others:

Ahir	Worker/person of agricultural caste
Angreji	English
Arkati	Immigrant recruiter
Bhasha	Language
Brahmin	Member of the priestly or educated class
Caste	A traditional social organisation in India and elsewhere
Coolie	Hindi word for porter; in Guyana, a <i>derogatory</i> term for Indians
Dhoop	Pitch pine: a fragrant hardwood
Gotra	One's lineage
Jahajees	Indian indentured workers who immigrated to British Guiana and other colonies as shipmates on the same voyage.
Maharishi	Great (revered) saint
Matribhoomi	Motherland
Pandit	Pundit, a learned man, versed in Hindu scriptures; aka. Purohit
Purohit	Hindu priest who performs sacred rituals
Raja	King
Ramayan	Hindu holy book
Rishi	Saint
Sunday Bible studies	Christian education for the conversion of Hindus & others to School Christianity.
Swayamvar	Ceremony to select a bridegroom from eligible contenders.

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