

## From Suriname to India: The Remigration of Hindostanis, 1878-1921

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### Abstract

*The Indian Indentured Labourers had the right to return after finishing their indentureship period to British India; in most colonies this was after five years but in some colonies like Guyana it was later extended to 10 years. The cost of return was to be paid by the colony. The returnees were, after arrival in Calcutta, received by the Protector of Immigrants and stayed at the barracks. After acquiring their savings and belongings they returned to their town or village. This article focuses on the remigration of Indians of the Dutch colony of Suriname.*

### Introduction

The Dutch Colony of Suriname, situated on the northern tip of South America, was one of the last colonies to introduce indentured labour from India. In 1870, after extensive negotiations, the Dutch and British governments signed a 26-article treaty, agreeing to the employment of indentured Indian labourers in Suriname. This *Cooly Treaty (Koelietractaat)* was not implemented for another three years; it was only on 5 June 1873 that the ship *Lalla Rookh* arrived in Suriname with 410 emigrants, having left the port of Calcutta in February. Within one year (between June 1873 and April 1874) seven ships followed, bringing almost 4,000 Indian workers to Suriname. In total, 34,304 Indian workers were received across 64 ships between 1873 and 1916 (De Klerk, 1953: 72, 73, 176). It is important to note that these Indian emigrants remained British subjects in Suriname. Their descendants did not become Dutch subjects by law until 1927 and by that point the majority had been born in the colony. Due to their status as strangers in a foreign colony, special arrangements protected them. According to Article 9 of the *Cooly Treaty*, the Indian labourers indentured to Suriname had the right to a free return-passage after five years. It also stated:

If he consents to contract a new engagement he will be entitled to a bounty and will retain his right to return-passage at the expiration of such second engagement. The right of the immigrant to a return-passage extends to his wife, and to his children who quitted India under the age of ten years, as well as to those born in the Colony.

This paper focuses on the re-migration of Indians of the Dutch colony of Suriname. They designated themselves as Hindostanis (Hindostanen) in reference to their land of origin - Hindustan being one of the original names for India (Choenni and Choenni, 2012: 51)

### Method and Sources

This article is based on extensive archival research and an oral history study conducted during 2011-2015, when I was the Lalla Rookh Professor of Hindostani Migration at the Free University Amsterdam. It resulted in a voluminous book published in Dutch in 2016, entitled *Hindostaanse Contractarbeiders* (Hindostani Indentured Labourers) 1863-1920, and included an extensive bibliography of primarily Dutch sources (pp.707-725). Besides the annual reports and proceedings collected and published by L. Sarup-Gajadhar in various volumes (Kolkatta, Aldrich International), the most important sources

are the yearly colonial reports (*Koloniale Verslagen*) for the Dutch Parliament, published during 1870-1930. The Immigration Department in Suriname, headed by the Agent-General, compiled these *Koloniale Verslagen* and reported in detail (including demographic statistics) on the British Indian (Hindustani) indentured labourers. An important Dutch report was written in 1903 by Major (retired) P. Wiersma. Wiersma was sent to India in 1902 from Jakarta (then the capital of the Dutch East Indies) by the Dutch government to study the recruiting system for indentured labourers.

I have also consulted the relevant files of Indian Office Records (IOR) in the British Library. A database of Hindostani Indentured labourers contains the records of 26,249 persons, which amounts to 76.5 percent of the total arrivals, the other records having been lost. These records reveal who re-migrated to India and who returned to Suriname. The fieldwork reports of Grierson in 1883 (on Bihar) and Pitcher in 1882 (on Uttar Pradesh) are also informative about returnees in India. I have also interviewed more than a hundred children and grandchildren of indentured Hindostani labourers in Suriname and The Netherlands, often in Hindi. Parts of these interviews were in cooperation with my sister Gharietje Choenni (Choenni and Choenni, 2012). Most of the data in this article is based on these sources.

### Returnee Statistics

More than a third of the 34,304 Indian workers (11,512) returned to British India at the expense of the Dutch government.<sup>1</sup> Yet, significantly, in spite of the gratis opportunity to return, the majority of the emigrants settled permanently in Suriname. They received approximately five acres of fertile land free of rent for six years and a hundred guilders (equivalent to the cost of the return passage).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, over a quarter (9,725) of them signed a sec-

<sup>1</sup> This calculation is based on the period 1878-1878 covered by De Klerk (1953: 159). A catholic priest, Dr. J.M.M. De Klerk (b. 1903) was sent to Suriname to convert Hindostanis to Catholicism and wrote a PhD thesis on orthodox Hinduism, followed by a seminal book on the immigration of Hindostanis to Suriname. De Klerk was acquainted with many indentured labourers and could speak Hindi. However, De Klerk did not write extensively on return of the workers to British India. Almost one in ten, approximately 3,000 indentured labourers, settled in Suriname as free colonists from other Caribbean colonies during 1873-1920 (De Klerk, 1953: 177). The main reason being that they could relatively easily obtain land in Suriname.

<sup>2</sup> An able-bodied man could earn 60 cents in Suriname (*12 anna or bara-anna*), which was equivalent to 0.25 dollars in the British Colonies. Suriname's 64,000 square miles, including a fertile coastal area, was sparsely populated. In 1862, the population was 52,963. This rose to 72,144 in 1900, including the Hindostanis. The Dutch Government

ond contract for a further five years in Suriname and received an extra premium of hundred guilders.<sup>3</sup> After settling, these Indians and their descendants became successful small farmers in due course. This essay intends to explore the return of this group of indentured labourers and their offspring from Suriname back to India.

Compared to other colonies, Suriname provided more favourable conditions for return to India. The Indian worker could return to India after five years of service, with his wife and any children born in Suriname, at the cost of the Dutch government. The Dutch government and the planters wanted to extend the work required to gain the right of free return to ten years' service, as had been the practice in the British colonies since 1890. The British government, however, refused; this would have meant repealing the *Cooly Treaty* of 1870. In particular, the Protector of Emigrants, Dr. D.W.D. Comins, who had visited Suriname in 1892, was against altering the treaty. The third Agent-General of Suriname, C. Van Drimmelen (Protector of the Hindostanis between 1903 and 1920) was also against the extension to ten years. He had stated that favourable return conditions made it easier to recruit labourers in India for Suriname, an opinion that was confirmed by the Sanderson Commission.<sup>4</sup> However, Van Drimmelen was also fiercely against the return of Indian workers to India. He argued that they had more freedom and a higher income in Suriname than in India. Van Drimmelen was convinced that some workers took up free passages to India only to return to Suriname within a short period of time, sometimes in less than a year. He pleaded in vain that children born in Suriname should not be allowed free passage to India (Van Drimmelen, 13 October 1906, nr.1153).

Other colonies placed more limitations on obtaining free passages. In Fiji and Jamaica, the Indian worker lost the right to free passage when he/she had not taken it up within two years of the expiration of the indenture contract. In British Guyana, the returnees had to cover part of the costs (Roopnarine, 2009: 74-5). The returnees from Suriname retained a full free passage, unless they accepted the premium of 100 guilders. A small group who remained in Suriname

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encouraged the permanent settlement of Hindostanis in Suriname on so-called Government land (*Gouvernementsplaatsen*) where plots had been prepared for agricultural use by Indian settlers since 1895.

<sup>3</sup> Calculated from the data of the *Koloniale Verslagen* (see Choenni 2016: 462), around 1878 one rupee was worth 1.20 guilder (or *f*.1.20 - *f* is for florin) and one Guyanese dollar was 2.40 guilder (*Koloniaal Verslag 1879*).

<sup>4</sup> *Report of Minutes* (1910); De Klerk (1953: 151-2, 162-3). See: IOR/L/PJ/3/201, File 842, 23 May 1881; IOR/L/PJ/6/79, File 1277, 1 August 1882; IOR/L/PJ/6/79, File 1277, 1 August 1882; IOR/L/PJ/6/41, File 842, 23 May 1881; IOR/L/PJ/6/82, Files 1493-1494, IOR/L/PJ/6/104, File 1386, 15 August 1883; and IOR/L/PJ/6/780, File 3364, 5 October 1906. See also: *Nota* (Report) *Van Drimmelen 1906, nr.1153*.

never accepted the premium and therefore retained their right to return to India at the expense of the Dutch government until the 1930s.

### A Comparison

Despite the more favourable conditions in Suriname, there is little variation in the number of returnees between most colonies. On the whole, around a third of the workers travelled back to British India. Fiji, where immigration had started in 1879, six years later than in Suriname, had a slightly higher percentage of returnees. Trinidad and Guyana had marginally lower return percentages, as did Mauritius and South Africa (Natal), where the proportion of returnees was 31 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively. Table 1 shows the returnee details.

It is crucial to bear in mind the parameters framing Indian entry in to these colonies. Under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi, and concerns by white South Africans about the increasing Indian population, South Africa stopped the recruitment of indentured labourers in 1908 (Northrup, 1995: 130). In Mauritius, by 1911 a large Indian population had already settled and further recruitment in India for this colony was no longer necessary. The last labour ship to Suriname arrived in 1916, the timing of the cessation being dictated by a shortage in available ships during the First World War, rather than a surfeit of labour.

**Table 1. Indian Labour Arrivals and Returnees**

Colony	Arrivals	Returnees	% Returnees
Surinamee	34,304	11,512	34 %
Mauritius	453,063	134,870	31%
Trinidad	145,000	43,500	30%
Guyana	238,000	66,140	30%
Jamaica	36,412	12,109	33%
South-Africa (Natal)	152,184	42,610	28%
Fiji	60,000	22,800	38%
Guadeloupe	42,000	10,500	25%
Martinique	20,000	4,000	20%

(Sources: Shepherd 1992; Mansingh 1995; Laurence 1994; Choenni 2016).

In other colonies, such as Malaysia and Burma, the return rate was much higher, namely 90 per cent and 71 per cent. However, these colonies did not have indenture systems but maistry or kangani systems. This meant that the Indian labourers were recruited and employed by an Indian sardar (headman),

who often returned with them to India after their labour contract had ended.

There were several reasons for return to India. Most Indian workers went to the colonies purely to earn money and always intended to return to their homes. Therefore, the primary reason for the return was to return with the money they had earned and saved. Some returned unexpectedly, having had bad experiences in the colonies, or became homesick. They had no doubt compared their life in the colonies with life in India and decided to return. A third group returned to their *janmabhumi* (land of birth) to die, because they considered the colony only as their *karma bhumi* (land of work). Assistant Captain C. White, who witnessed one of the last return transports from the Caribbean and the embarkation in Trinidad, remembers that the returnees were dressed in their best clothes and observed:

Old men sat around, youngsters crowded, and women jingled their bracelets. All seemed happy at the prospect of seeing India... some of the East Indians of Trinidad had not seen Calcutta for fifty years, and one old fellow told me that he had arrived on the island with father when he was twelve years old, and that now, at the age of sixty-eight, he was returning to Calcutta for the first time. He said he would wait at Calcutta "till death come", and he seemed to regard this as a jolly prospect. Many of these ... were like that - returning to the banks of the Ganges to retire on their savings after a life-time of labour on the plantations of Trinidad. Others, more well-to-do, were travelling to the land of their fathers for a holiday and were accompanied by their women and children.

Others returned with the intention to visit their family before going back to the colonies. Based on the statistics in the yearly colonial reports on Suriname, it is estimated that 20 per cent of the Hindostani returnees succeeded in migrating again to Suriname (approximately 900 returnees) and to other colonies.

Among the returnees from Suriname there was a special category: the destitute, paupers and those unwilling to work. The Dutch government implemented return of those in this category. More than 10 per cent of the returnees from Suriname to India belonged to this group. Other colonies treated this category similarly. Between 1838 and 1859, for example, the Guyanese government 'returned' 3,584 Indians and among this number were 'blind persons, lepers, criminals and sick persons' (Cross, 1996: 17). After 1920, these 'paupers' were forcibly returned. On the steamer *Sutlej*, which left Georgetown in 1929, 97 of the 520 returnees were termed 'paupers'. In 1931, more than half (56 per cent) of the returnees from Trinidad were 'destitutes' being returned at

the expense of the Trinidad government.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the approximately 12,000 returnees from Suriname were men (61 per cent), while one fifth were women (21 per cent). Almost one fifth of the returnees (18 per cent) were children born in Suriname who were also entitled to a free passage (Hoefte, 1998: 164). It is clear that fewer women returned to British India than arrived in the colony (35 per cent of arrivals vs. 21 per cent of returnees). Regardless of the opportunities to settle in the colonies, for indentured women such as widows and ‘fallen women’ (prostitutes or those who had committed adultery) the option to return was obsolete. As Hoefte remarked, many would be ‘despised and mobbed’ in their village or they would have to spend significant amounts of money to be reinstated in their caste.

### Return Transport and Savings

The twenty-two return transports to India prior to 1921 were mainly ships that had also brought Indian migrants to Suriname or Guyana. Steamers made the journey shorter and more comfortable than sailing ships. However, almost two thirds (7,263, or 63.8 per cent) of Hindostani returnees travelled back to India on the latter, while only 4,128 (36.2 per cent) went by steamers. Arrivals in Suriname were by much the same modes of transport, with two thirds coming by sail, but the return journey was on average longer than the journey from India to Suriname. Table 2 provides details on the returnees as per official records.

The returnees who saved money or invested in jewellery and coins, took them to India. The amount of money deposited by them and the value of the jewellery and coins handed over to the ship’s surgeon for safekeeping was recorded for each passenger. The money was transferred to the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank in Calcutta and upon arrival returnees presented a cheque to collect it. The jewels and coins were handed back at the Suriname depot in Calcutta. In order to get an indication of the average sum of money taken back to India, it is possible to compare the records of two years: one ship carrying a high value of savings, and one ship with a low amount of money deposited. Only the men have been included in the calculations, as it is assumed that the women belonged to families and had a male partner. In 1894, the returnees on the ship *Silhet* deposited 115,387.56 guilders in cash and 9,218 guilders-worth

<sup>5</sup> See: IOR/L/PJ/6/626, File 289, 13 February 1903; IOR/L/PJ/6/630, File 554, 19 March 1903; IOR/L/PJ/6/705, File 23, 2 January 1905; IOR/L/PJ/6/744, File 137, 28 December 1905; IOR/L/PJ/6/756, 6 April 1906; IOR/L/PJ/6/839, File 4283, 13 December 1907.

of jewellery and coins. On average, the men took back more than 350 guilders. In 1911, the returnees on the ship *Sutlej* deposited much less money: 57,995.86 guilders and 10,800 guilders-worth of jewellery and coins. On average, the men among the returnees on this ship possessed more than 130 guilders (McNeill and Lal, 1914: 180).

**Table 2. Return transport and value of jewellery and coins carried (in guilders), 1878-1921**

Year	Ship	Men	Women	Child	Total	Money Carried	Jewels/Coins
1878	Philosopher (1)	265	114	107	486	44,100.25	2,203.65
1879	St. Kilda (2)	207	80	46	333	23,110.85	2,350.-
1884	Silhet (3)	298	131	108	537	115,387.575	9,218.-
1886	British Peer I (4)	331	136	156	623	78,287.425	8,900.-
1887	John Davie (5)	290	98	92	480	37,908.015	10,333.-
1889	Jumna I (6)	237	142	148	527	95,126.345	20,045.-
1890	Jumna II (7)	333	116	121	570	71,675.18	10,746.-
1891	British Peer II (8)	360	122	119	601	86,034.095	16,563.-
1895	Grecian (9)	339	142	124	605	89,687.37	15,501.35
1897	Foyle* (10)	131	49	33	213	26,837.37	3,697.60
1898	Arno (11)	434	157	152	743	91,588.72	14,750.-
1899	Clyde* (12)	157	36	21	214	35,933.765	2,501.50
1900	Erne* (13)	142	49	38	229	40,600.30	5,572.25
1903	Rhone* (14)	236	50	32	318	48,245.54	5,673.-
1904	S.S. Indus* (15)	189	41	35	265	27,787.425	5,099.-
1905	Avon (16)	485	134	115	734	80,084.71	11,433.50
1907	S.S. Mutlah I*(17)	182	29	20	231	33,311.00	4,322.50
1909	S.S. Mutlah II (18)	371	76	54	501	38,700.325	4,026.50
1911	S.S. Sutlej (19)	418	105	80	603	57,995.86	10,800.-
1913	S.S. Mutlah III (20)	488	106	74	668	70,323.45	-----
1920	S.S. Madioen (21)	586	205	183	974	187,874.71	29,625.--
1921	S.S. Sutlej II (22)	513	199	174	886	201,113.00	25,000.--
<b>Tot.</b>	<b>22 Return ships</b>	<b>6,992</b>	<b>2,317</b>	<b>2,042</b>	<b>11,351</b>	<b>1,501,628.--</b>	<b>197,388.--</b>

(\*These ships left from Georgetown (Guyana)  
(Source: Choenni, 2016: 509.)

Over the period 1878-1921, the total sum money recorded across the twenty-two return transport is 1,501,628 guilders. When this figure is divided between the total returnees (11,351), the average amount saved by a Hindostani returnee comes to 132.29 guilders. Allowing for nil savings by the destitutes (10%) and children (20%), the average amount of money saved per adult was at about 200 guilders.

Roopnarine provides a different set of figures; he states that the returnees from Suriname arrived in Calcutta with an average of \$77 (1873-1916), while those from Guyana had \$51 (1875-1910); those from South Africa (Natal) had \$48 (1902-1907) and those from Trinidad possessed \$67 (1899-1907) (Roopnarine, 2012: 137). These sums converted into guilders (\$1 was 2.40 guilders) meant that the average Hindostani returnee from Suriname took home 184.80 guilders.

It is clear that those returning from Suriname deposited on average the highest amount of money vis-à-vis returnees from other colonies. Conditions for savings in Suriname appear better than those in other countries. Savings in all colonies, however, were attained through thrift and very sober lifestyles - or *phet kat*, which meant cutting back on your food - and supplementing incomes by selling agricultural products.

### Returning after 1921

Most of the twenty-two return ships departed from Paramaribo (the capital of Suriname). Six left from Georgetown (the capital of Guyana), as when it was apparent that there were not enough prospective returnees for a full ship, they were sent to the coolie depot in Georgetown and waited to embark there. The latter took several days. During the First World War there were no return ships and returnees had to wait until 1920, when a Dutch steamship was chartered to bring Javanese indentured labourers from Java to Suriname. In the meantime, an influenza epidemic broke out in Suriname, reaching its height in 1918 and claiming the lives of a small group of migrants waiting to return. In 1921, the steamer *Sutlej II* embarked upon the last voyage carrying labourers back to India directly from Suriname. Its passengers returned with the highest recorded savings in money and jewellery.

After 1921, a small number of workers returned from Suriname via Guyana at their own expense. In 1922, 150 migrants wished to return to India but only 15 succeeded in paying for their voyage. In 1924, (29 August), 38 Hindostani returnees embarked in Georgetown for India, arriving in Calcutta on 18 October 1924 (*Koloniaal Verslag*, 1925). A larger group of Hindostanis, comprising 39 men, 11 women and 30 children, managed to return in 1926 on the

steamer *Chenab*. Many gave the reason for their return as a desire to visit family and specifically parents (*Koloniaal Verslag*, 1927). Out of the adult passengers, 18 had deposited a total of 9,566.62 guilders and 13 possessed jewellery with an average value of 2,873 guilders.

By 1929, only 20 Hindostani workers journeyed back to India (De Klerk, 1953: 159). One of the last return ships from the Caribbean colonies on the new steamer *Ganges* was arranged in 1936. Almost a third (254 out of 865 returnees) were older than 50 and many had left India more than 30 years earlier (Roopnarine, 2009: 76). The majority of them were from Guyana and Trinidad, which were much larger colonies, and only a small portion (18 in total) was from Suriname.<sup>6</sup> The respective sizes of the different Caribbean colonies are evident in the numbers of intending returnees. For example, in 1930 in Trinidad, 42,000 Indian workers wanted to return to India, but the provisions, including ships, were not available. 1,012 of them were actually able to return in 1931.

During the Second World War, return voyages ceased entirely. In the 1930s, return to India from Suriname organised by the Dutch government had closed down, despite protests from some Hindostani organizations. The demand for them remained high, and in 1948, around 1,500 Indian workers in Suriname were still registered as desiring repatriation. After the end of the Second World War, the last return voyage from the Caribbean colonies was in 1954.

The Indian (newly independent) government was not happy with the arrival and settlement of returnees in India. When the 1954 return transport arrived, the Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru commented disapprovingly on this as: 'Thetar log agaye', or 'the stubborn people have come' (as cited in Bahadur, 2013: 169). He had strongly advised the Indians in the colonies to settle there and become good citizens, whilst maintaining that they must not forget India and keep the name of Mother India (*Bharat Mata*) in high regard.

On the journey back, the returnees wore tin plates marked with their identification numbers around their necks. Both a representative of the Surinameese government and a Surinameese surgeon accompanied them, yet the passengers were subject to poor health on board, with outbreaks of diseases

<sup>6</sup> It was notable that for the first time the ship's doctor (surgeon superintendent) on the return voyage was someone who resided in the Caribbean and was qualified as a surgeon, having qualified at the University of Edinburgh in 1917. Dr. J.B. Singh was married in Paramaribo, in 1910, to Alice Bhagwandy, the daughter of the first Hindostani leader and head interpreter Sitalpersad Doobay, the aide of the Agent-General. After their marriage and the Hindu wedding party in the Koeliedepot they moved to Guyana. Dr. J.B. Singh and Alice Bhagwandy became leaders of the Indo-Guyanese community (Mangru, 1996: 229).

such as measles and a high death rate. Remarkably, however, in regard to Suriname, the average death rate on the return voyages was lower than for those arriving in Suriname, despite the presence of destitutes among the returnees. There was some variation depending upon the mode of transport. On the sailing ships the average percentage of migrants who did not survive the return journey was 1.6 per cent, while among arrivals it was 2.6 per cent. The death rate on steamers was relatively lower, with 0.96 per cent of returnees dying, compared to 1.3 per cent of arrivals in Suriname. In total, the death rate on the twenty-two return voyages was 1.2 per cent (138) comparable with 2.1 per cent (714) on the 64 ships that arrived with indentured labourers (calculated from the *Koloniale Verslag* 1873-1927).

Interestingly, the birth rate was also lower on return voyages than on arriving vessels. For the former, the birth rate was 0.90 per cent on the sailing ships and 0.16 per cent on the steamers. On arriving ships it was 0.56 per cent and 0.83 per cent, respectively.<sup>7</sup> According to Emmer few pregnant women were on board steamers returning to India, accounting for the low percentage of births (Emmer, 1989: 413). It should be remembered that there was a low percentage of women on return voyages in general: only 20 per cent of returnees were females over 10 years old, compared with the 30 per cent present on ships arriving in Suriname.

Upon travelling back to their 'homeland', some of the returnees believed that they should arrive as Indians and behave as such. For example, their clothing should be changed appropriately. Ramesar includes the observation of Linton Gibbon, an assistant to the quartermaster on a return voyage from Trinidad to India in around 1904. He recorded upon nearing Calcutta:

All the Indians communicated that they did not want to set foot in India looking like Trinidadians [i.e. in dress]. They wished to look like Indians, like Hindus ... so they were given all kind of cotton to make cotton *capras* (clothes). They insisted on shaving their heads, leaving only a little top-knot or chorkee. There was no one to save them, and the captain refused to let the Indians use the razors of which there were some 50 on board. Instead the sailors were ordered to shave the Indian's heads. The sailors were novices, unaccustomed to this 'barbering' so they took a few days to finish the task, shaving a few heads per day of the 500-600 men (not the women) ( as in Ramesar, 1994: 63-4).

Linton Gibbons mentions that many Indian men were bleeding after the

<sup>7</sup> These percentages are calculated as the percentage of those born out of the total number of emigrants on the ships to and from Suriname.

shaving. The returnees disembarked on the banks of the Hooghly at Garden Reach, where the depots of the recruiting agencies were situated. It must have been a curious spectacle to see hundreds of Indians disembarking with shaven heads and *choorkis* at the port of Calcutta. They were housed in the depots of Calcutta for some days in order to make administrative arrangements and quarantine before their onward departures.

One problem faced by indentured Indians was that after finishing their labour contract, whether of five or ten years, they often had to wait for a return voyage due to the difficulties in chartering return ships. Delays occurred when a ship was not immediately available for a group of workers who had arrived on the same ship in Suriname and therefore commenced and ended their contracts simultaneously. For example, those labourers who had arrived in April 1898 and finished their five-year contracts in 1902 had to wait until 1903 for a ship to be chartered. The relatively small number of returnees from Suriname was not sufficient to justify a yearly voyage to India. In the meantime, the returnees had to wait in Suriname and the Dutch government had to take care of them, rather than the planter they had worked for. The British Consul residing in Paramaribo protected them. Still, some official complaints were lodged at the British consul office about these delays. Returnees complained that they had to spend their savings to live. According to the McNeill and Chimman Lal report (1914), which was the outcome of a British government commission to evaluate Indian emigration to the Caribbean and the living conditions there, few complaints were made about the return voyages themselves. The scarcity of grievances is confirmed by the yearly colonial reports of the Dutch government. According to the Cooly Treaty of 1870, it was obligatory that the Protector of Immigrants interview the returnees about their return voyages and report back to the Dutch government. The archives, including the yearly colonial reports on Suriname, turn up little directly about the return voyages. One return voyage from Suriname in 1898, with the sailing ship *Arno*, is described as having had 'troubles' (*moeilijkheden*). The *Arno* arrived in Calcutta on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1899, more than a half year after its departure from Paramaribo. It had docked in the port of Pernambuco, Brazil shortly after leaving Suriname and the British consul there had to mediate between the returnees and the ship's captains. The troubles themselves are not described (De Klerk, 1953: 155). The return ships were British ships, mostly of the Nourse Line shipping company, which specialised in 'Cooly transport'. Only one return voyage was with a Dutch steamer, the *Madioen*, in 1920; it is reported that this voyage to Calcutta ended satisfactorily (*Koloniaal Verslag*, 1921).

Once in Calcutta, those who had a cheque went to collect their money from the bank in rupees and annas, and were addressed as *chequewallahs*. Many returnees stood out with their strange behaviour and clothes. This was

not without its dangers - some Calcutta gangs specialized in robbing the returnees immediately after they had collected their money. They particularly targeted those who hired *tangas* (horse drawn carriages) to go to the bank (Ramesar (1994: 62). After these robberies, it was suggested that paying the cheques out in the districts of the returnees' villages would perhaps be more practical, but administrative complications meant that this proposal could not be implemented. Those who had collected their savings in Calcutta were also afraid, with good reason, to then travel onwards to their villages due to fears of being robbed on the way. However, some needed no help in dispensing with their earnings and dissipated them in a short time, becoming poor again in India (Pitcher, 1882: 105).

Returnees were called *tapuhua* in India. This meant somebody from the *tapu*, or island, as many thought that the colonies were synonymous with islands. As already remarked, the *tapuhuas* could often be recognized by their strange 'non-Indian' behaviour and clothes. One of the identifier changes in character was that they had become too self-assured and independent. For example, the Immigration Agent of Trinidad and Fiji, O.W. Warren remarked that there was a difference 'between a Cooly leaving India and a returned Cooly', when he gave evidence at the Sanderson Commission in 1910. He said that coolies leaving India would approach him and touch his feet but those returning would shake his hand and ask 'How are you?'. He also claimed that many returnees chose to leave India again because they considered it 'too unhealthy' (*Report, Minutes of Evidence, 1910*). Banarsidas Chaturvedi conducted research among returnees and in particular with those from the Caribbean. He concluded that not only had the returnees changed during their time away, but India had changed too (Sannyasi and Chaturvedi, 1931: 17).<sup>8</sup>

Some returnees may have lived for some time in their villages prior to departure for the colonies, but their changed behaviour due to their time away made it difficult for them to re-acustom themselves with the hierarchical caste rules in India. This could lead to friction. Sometimes returnees decided to re-emigrate. De Klerk recalled the story of the paternal grandfather of a prominent Hindostani family in Surinamee belonging to the *Chamar* (leatherworkers) caste:

When he rested after his return in his village he sat before his

<sup>8</sup> Sannyasi and Chaturvedi stated: 'Such a journey would anyway entail a relaxation of social strictures on caste purity. However what often happened on their return was being accorded a status of an outcaste... at least one-fifth of all returnees from the colonies became stranded in Calcutta. Many of them were old, infirm and destitute often unable to trace their villages, kinsfolk or reintegrate into caste proud communities' (1931: 17).

house on a *khatiyá* or *carpai*, (a light bedstead consisting of a web of rope or tape netting). He had been accustomed to sit in that manner in Suriname. But he had not realized that the tyranny of the caste hierarchy still existed in India. A Chamar – that was his caste - was not allowed to sit on a *khatiyá*, but only on the floor or the ground. A Brahmin (someone belonging to highest caste) of the village saw this violation of caste rules. He approached him and knocked him as a punishment with his *kharao* (wooden sandal) on his head. After this beating this returnee reconsidered his decision. He realized that social sphere in his country of birth was too oppressive for him. He decided to return back to Suriname and acquired a new agreement. He became later a businessman in Suriname. Interestingly his descendants became highly educated and some married Brahmins in Suriname (De Klerk, 1953: 157).

Many returnees became stranded in a pitiable situation in their birthplace. Some were not recognized because they had changed their name from that of their father, or they were not believed because they were considered to be dead; after hearing nothing from the person in more than five years this conclusion was not unreasonable. Others could no longer locate their families; they might have moved villages, or sometimes the address itself had been changed or even the name of the village. In other cases, their parents were already dead. Poverty was another reason to leave home villages again and to head back to the colonies. Some returnees never made it back to their villages due to fear of rejection. This was especially the case among returnees who had left their family without any notice or following conflicts.

Returnees who re-united with their family could be initially exploited and then repudiated. For example, a young worker who returned to his village was expelled as a *pariah* (outcast) after he had spent all his money and was declared *maila* (filthy) because he had crossed the sea (*kala pani*) (Weller, 1968: 109). Due to his *maila* status, it was assumed that nobody would marry him or marry into his family. Others were shunned from the village because they no longer fitted within the social structure there. Not only were many returnees weak after their travails, they could also be perceived as a nuisance.

A familiar example in Suriname is the story of a female returnee who was not accepted anymore by her family in India. She retreated as an outcast into the jungle of the Sundarbans (*Achut ban ke Sundar Ban men chalge*) (Choenni, 2016: 532). Another example is of a woman belonging to a higher caste who had married a man from a low caste. They had lived ten years in Suriname and returned together to India. Yet, once there he was repudiated by her with the remark, 'You low caste man, I have nothing more to do with you'

(Roopnarine, 2009: 28).

In some cases, a reconciliation ritual was performed when a family member who had fled to the colonies returned and was reunited with their relatives. These rituals cost money; not everyone could afford them. Some chose not to pay the priests (*pundits*) for its performance. Even if one were accepted by ones family and village, it could be difficult to find employment (lack of it having been a common reason for their departure in the first place). Those returnees who no longer had relatives and friends in India were still confronted with fewer opportunities in an already overpopulated country.

The returnee Totaram Sanadhya, from Fiji, mentions the case of the Brahmin Guljari Lal, who returned in 1914. Guljari had with much effort saved 800 rupees during his eight years in Fiji. A practising *pundit* and Brahmin, he regularly obtained *sidha* (alms, such as food) from pious Hindus and could save money. However, his brother insisted that he return to India. Guljari decided to acquiesce and the Hindus in Fiji gave him extra donations when they heard that he would return to the holy land of India. When he arrived back in his village, he handed over all his savings to his brother for safekeeping:

Guljari told the villagers about his journey to Fiji and stated that this journey could be considered as a pilgrimage. Still he had to pay for the rituals to be re-instated in his caste and a *katha* (holy reading) meeting from the Bhagvat Gita (the holy Hindu scripture) would be organized. People from five or six neighbouring village would be invited. The religious feast would cost 700 to 800 rupees. When Guljari asked his brother to give him his savings back, his brother refused to give him his money. Soon he learned that the villagers had outcasted him, because he was not able to pay for a *katha* meeting. His brother became his enemy and Guljari was now hated in his village. The returnee Guljari experienced that he was cheated. He wrote a letter to his friends in Fiji explaining his problems and his wish to return to Fiji. Hindus in Fiji collected money for him. Guljari was able to go back to Fiji paying a passage with this money and settled permanently in Fiji (Sanadhya, 2003: 71-2).

Not all returnees experienced a downturn in their fortunes in India. Some returnees became successful and bought land there. A couple of them even became zamindars (big landowners) and inspired others to migrate to the colonies (*Report of the Commissioners*, 1910: 83). A familiar example is the case of a rich returnee from Trinidad. He brought not only his Indian wife with him to India, but also his Creole *sautan* (co-wife) (Weller, 1968: 107, 109). However, the overall impression is that the majority were not successful.

Some returnees, disappointed about the living conditions in India, tried to qualify for a new agreement. How many returnees regretted their decision and resettled themselves back in the colonies is unclear, but it is evident that a large number of these returnees failed to get a new agreement. Not all returnees had intended to stay in India permanently and planned to re-recruit themselves under false names. Fraudulent claims within the recruitment process were not unheard of. Returnees were not in high demand by the plantation owners, therefore recruitment in India was very stringent for them, necessitating false identities. Many returnees were weakened by their previous labour and were considered critical towards accepting orders. Still, on most ships to the Caribbean a proportion of the workers were re-indenting from India with a new agreement. In 1887, for example, more than 13 per cent of the Indian workers that went to Trinidad consisted of returnees (285 of the 2,185 workers). On the ships to Guyana, 7 per cent of the workers between 1890 and 1902 were returnees who had served in other colonies (Bahadur, 2013: 68). Many returnees from Suriname tried to return to Suriname but on lack of success, headed elsewhere. Between 1885 and 1894, some 175 returnees from Suriname in India succeeded in acquiring agreements for Trinidad (Weller, 1968: 165). Some resorted to paying for their own passages, presumably as free migrants.

### The Queen of Sheba

On board the ships, returnees who had obtained new agreements were not popular among the crew and the first-time workers; they were often considered instigators and dishonest, having sometimes resorted to enrolling themselves under another name. It is also alleged that some returnees abused the system by using their free passages to see India again before travelling back to the colony on a new agreement. One returnee even openly stated at his embarkation for India, 'I will come back' (Weller, 1968: 110).

The Indian *Queen of Sheba* provides an interesting case study. In 1877, on the coolie sailing ship *Sheila*, a rich and very pretty woman of 40 years returned at her own expense from India to Trinidad. A widow, she had made a fortune as a businesswoman in Trinidad and was named the *Queen of Sheba* by the ship's crew. Upon travelling back to India, she was not allowed to retain her caste because she refused to pay the high price that was demanded. She left India and told Captain Angel that 'India is a just place for only coolies'. When the ship stopped at the island of St. Helens, she bought the whole catch of fish and treated the workers to a fish feast. This rich and independent Indian lady was clothed in luxurious Indian dress and wore expensive jewellery. Her picture is on the front page of Captain Angel's book (Angel, 1995: 90).

It must be mentioned that the returnees who disembarked in Calcutta

were often not desired as permanent settlers there. Most of the returnees who tried to obtain new agreements in Calcutta had to stay temporarily on the banks of the Hooghly River and watch the ships depart. They retained the idle hope that they would obtain new agreements for the colonies, where living conditions were better than in India. According to the ambassador Maharaj Singh who visited British Guyana, the workers had a better life than their companions who stayed behind in India. He concluded that in the colony they were more independent, the burden of caste was extinct and there was no *purdah* (isolation of women from public life). According to Chaturvedi, the personality of these workers may have changed during their stay in the Caribbean, making them less servile, but they lived in Calcutta in pitiable circumstances. They settled in the area of Matiaburz (Metiaburuz), a suburb of Calcutta opposite the port area of Garden Reach where the depots were situated. According to Chaturvedi, one fifth of all returnees were stranded in Calcutta and they became 'outcasts' in Indian society. They lived there, 'dispersed among this district in bustees, infected by malaria, without work, care and medical treatment' (Sannyasi and Chaturvedi, 1931: 17).

A Surinameese delegation consisting of the head-interpreter Sitalpersad and Pundit Ramharakh, companions of the returnees on the return voyages, came across ex-indentured labourers from Suriname who lived like outcasts in Matiabarz in the 1920s. Many of them could not go back to their birthplace, or had been driven from it, and were attempting to obtain new labour agreements (De Klerk, 1953: 156).<sup>9</sup> Many returnees had become physically weak and even disabled and therefore were considered burdens upon society. Even without physical changes, it was difficult to mentally adjust back to the old customs, particularly for women and they became homesick for Suriname, regretting their decision to leave. They pleaded in vain to Hindostani representatives for them to request that the Dutch government organise their return there.

The disillusioned returnees who settled in Calcutta became a problematic group for the Indian authorities. Mahatma Gandhi and the influential minister C.F. Andrews complained about the costs of feeding the returnees and inducting them back into normal life in British India (Shepherd, 1992: 102). Mahatma Gandhi described the fate of these returnees as 'pathetic'. According to him they had jumped from the frying pan (the colonies) into the fire (India). It was considered better that they be sent outside of India (Shepherd, 1992: 103).

In the beginning the British government had vainly tried to block the plans of the colonies to allow the workers to return to British India, because the

<sup>9</sup> De Klerk quotes a study by Emile Dennery (*Foules d'Asie*, nd: 212-214), who, while in Calcutta, met some hundred returnees from Guyana who had been very disappointed in their expectations.

assumption was that the returnees would claim the jobs of the Indians who had never left. This was also one of the reasons behind the liberal Indian politician G.K. Gokhale pleading for the cessation of Indian emigration. In 1912, Gokhale had introduced a resolution in the Indian parliament prohibiting indentured labour. He stated that the indenture system deprived the people of their freedom. The famous female poet Sarojini Naidu agreed that the indenture system was merely a replacement for slave labour. The nationalists believed that it should be seen as the transitional stage between slave labour and free labour.

### Cessation of Indian Indenture

Besides the problems caused by returnees, the recruitment and emigration of strong and healthy Indians was objected to. Pundit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Mahatma Gandhi, in particular, insisted on stopping indenture as soon as possible. Gandhi was markedly against the return of workers to India; afraid of the social repercussions and possible unrest, he wanted to prevent those in South Africa from coming back. This was despite the fact that he himself had lived in South Africa and returned to India. The British government reluctantly agreed to end the indenture system on 12 March 1917 (Tinker, 1974).

The cessation was severely regretted by the Surinameese government and the Hindostani community in Suriname. Quoting the British report of McNeill and Chimman Lal from 1914, they pleaded that the indenture system and immigration to Suriname had more advantages than disadvantages. On the Dutch steamer *Madioen*, a Hindostani delegation left in 1920 to plead for the re-opening of indenture. Members of the delegation were H.N. Hajari, an official of the Immigration Department; head-interpreter Sital Persad; son-in-law of Sitalpersad; the aforementioned Dr. J.B. Singh; and the wealthy businessman Lutchman Singh, a prominent Hindostani leader. They had a meeting in Varanasi with Pandit Mohan Malaviya and talked with Mahatma Gandhi and Muslim leader Shaukat Ali in Ahmedabad. They also pleaded with Chimman Lal, then mayor of the city Meerut. Although, according to the delegate Hajari, their counterparts were impressed by the good treatment and position of Hindostanis in Suriname, they rejected a re-opening of indenture. Only Chimman Lal was in favour (De Klerk, 1953: 178-9). When, on 18 March 1918, the Cooly Treaty of 1870 was repealed by the British government, it was stated in an authoritative publication in Suriname that 'we have had the opportunity during 45 years to populate Suriname with British Indians, but compared to Demerara we have profited less' (my translation).

In 1922, a new effort was made to restart indenture from India. A few hundred workers left for Mauritius, most of them being returnees from the Caribbean, South Africa and Fiji. However, afterwards, emigration from India

based on the indenture system stopped forever. In 1922-24, the immigration agency of Suriname and the main barrack (depot) in Calcutta were liquidated. In 1927, the Hindostanis in Suriname, who were until then British subjects, became Dutch subjects. The protection extended by the British government ceased and the British consul left Suriname. The immigration department in Paramaribo was liquidated in 1932, along with assistance for Hindostani returnees (De Klerk, 1953: 180-1).

## Conclusion

The indenture agreement between the Dutch government and the worker was signed in order to supply temporary labour. While some workers were misled about the details, a majority took the opportunity to earn money, possibly initially with a view to returning to India with their savings. There were also those who knowingly left India permanently for a better life compared to oppressive situation there. Two thirds of Indian workers settled in Suriname did not use their free passage to India. This would indicate that they estimated their life to be better in Suriname than in British India. Suriname may not have been a British colony but as British subjects, workers could easily obtain land after finishing their service. Furthermore, many of those who did return to India regretted their decision and spent time and energy attempting to reengage for Suriname.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the return of Hindostanis from Suriname to India was hardly a success. Further research on the disillusioned returnees and their offspring in India, as well as their memories of the colonies, is necessary.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the Protector of Emigrants in Calcutta stated (on 18 February 1893) to the Government of Bengal that ‘many Indians were induced to emigrate only because they would eventually be able to return to their country, friends and family’. The Indian Government was of the opinion that ‘if the return passage was completely abolished, then the Indians probably would not wish to emigrate’ (see Weller 1968: 101,103). Desai and Vahed (2010: 2-4) refer to the disillusion of the Indian returnees from South Africa. In Suriname, I detected the myth of the *bharmai deis* (inveiglement). In total 52,330 emigrants were recruited for Suriname, but only 34,395 embarked at Calcutta for Suriname. The dropout rate was 34.3 percent (17,935). The most important reason for dropping out was the several stringent medical tests. The emigrants then had to sign an agreement with the Dutch government. The (assistant) magistrates in India were responsible for the procedure and the Protector of Emigrants in Calcutta re-affirmed it (Wiersma 1903).

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