

Decolonizing the historiography of indentured labour in Suriname

Sandew Hira
July 24, 2015

The case of Suriname

Dr. Radjinder Bhagwanbali is the most productive historian regarding indentured labour in Suriname. He has produced three books on this topic, starting with his dissertation *Contracts for Suriname – Labour Migration from British India under the Indentured Labour System 1873-1916*. This study dealt with the system of recruitment in India.

His second book titled *The New Avatar of Slavery – Indian Immigrants under the Indentured Labour System in Suriname 1873-1916* goes in depth into the functioning of indentured labour on the plantations in Suriname.

His third publication *Tetary the obstinate – The Resistance of Indian against the Indentured Labour System in Suriname 1873-1916* is a study of resistance against the system.

Bhagwanbali is a classic historian. He avoids speculation. He immerses himself in the archives. He painstakingly gathers the details that show how the system worked.

The picture is astonishing. Here are some of his conclusions:

1. Migration was not an individual action. It was an organized system where the colonialist had the lead and control. The former enslaver-planter placed an order to recruit labourers. It was not the other way round, that the labourers were offering themselves for work on the plantations.
2. The system of recruitment was based on deception. The workers agreed to a contract without any idea of what they were going to experience in a system of oppression and exploitation. The reality of indentured labour was hidden in the recruitment.
3. In the labour camps (we don't use the word 'plantation' because it does not reflect the actual conditions) the reality was horrendous. The workers lived in the same houses as the former enslaved Africans. They performed the same tasks. They endured the same system of racist treatment. Bhagwanbali provides details of the use of the whip. He cites names and the number of lashes individual Indians received, women included. The medical situation was really bad. The number of people who died in the period of indenture ship was extremely high: 16% (5.500 out of 34.000).
4. In the period 1873-1916 there were 40 uprisings in the labour camps quelled by police and military: 31 workers were executed in two of these uprisings: 24 in labour camp Mariënborg and 7 in labour camp Zorg en Hoop. Among those executed was a young woman, Tetary, the only female who actually led an uprising of indentured labourers.

Tetary, gender and revolt

Until the publication of the third book of Bhagwanbali nobody in the Suriname community knew the name of Tetary. Recently a two-series documentary has been produced by Sandew Hira on Tetary and the uprising in labour camp Zorg en Hoop. The documentary dramatized the background and the events of the uprising. It was broadcasted by the Hindu Broadcasting Corporation in Holland and shown in Suriname in June 2013.

The documentary devoted a fair portion of the time to the position of women during indenture ship. A young historian working in the National Archives of Suriname, Tanya Sitaram, was

the lead narrator in the documentary. She provided the analysis of gender, indenture ship and revolt. The lead actrice, Kajol Tahdil (see photo), was shown in a discussion between young women reflecting on their lives and in heated debates with men. Sitaram is currently working on a master thesis on women and indenture ship.

There are two schools in the study of indenture ship in Suriname. The differences between these schools are on three levels.

The first is the level of conceptualization of colonialism. The old school – which I named *scientific colonialism* – accepts the legitimacy of colonialism. Colonialism as a system is not questioned. The new school – which I term *decolonizing the mind* – questions the right of one people to conquer and rule other people. The different conceptualization is reflected in different concepts that are used such as the concept of plantation versus labour camp.

The second is the level of research. The old school focuses on descriptive narratives with implicit assumptions regarding the legitimate morality of colonialism. The new school provides analysis of historical facts and focuses on the humanity of the indentured labour and the inhumanity of colonialism.

The third is the level of policy implication. The study of Bhagwanbali produced detailed personal information about the Indians that were executed in the labour camps. One policy implication is that we pose the question: does the family of these people in India know what really happened to their kin in Suriname. The colonialist did not bother to report to the family what happened. Our legacy is to do our utmost to trace their relatives in India and recount to them what heroic actions they were involved in. Naturally this means that we set in motion a process of fundamentally questioning the system of colonialism.

This is the experience of Suriname. I wonder if something similar is happening in other countries.