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When no one is left to tell the story,
would there be no history?

On History:
Fact,
Fiction,
&
Factions

Fact, Fiction &
Faction:
A Selection
of Published Works

Indian Indentured Labourers of Guyana – A Historical Fiction Perspective¹

Khalil Rahman Ali

Abstract

My discourse here is about the fictional portrayal of these amazing ancestors, showing what kind of people they were, what made them endure and eventually overcome the hardships they faced, and how they helped to shape us, their descendants. I do not wish to dwell too much more on the hurt, pain, and suffering of our hard-working ancestors, but more on their resilience, inner and outer toughness, their unbounded capacity and willingness to succeed against such intimidating odds.

On the 5th of May 1838, a long arduous journey was completed by the first Indian Indentured labourers to work on the British-owned sugar plantations in the then British Guiana (now, Guyana). That migration was prompted by the end of African Slavery in the colony in 1834.

Guyana, where I was born, is still the only country in South America with English as its primary language. It is about 83,000 square miles in size with a very fertile coastland, resource-rich hinterland and a population of only about three quarters of a million people. Guyana's immediate neighbours are Venezuela to the west, Brazil to the south, Suriname (or Dutch Guiana) to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the north. Other neighbours of relevance due to shared cultures are the key islands in the Caribbean, including those where Indian Indentured labourers were taken to-- Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, St Lucia, Grenada, St Vincent, St

Kitts, and Nevis. The French took Indian Indentured labourers to Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana. The Dutch took their lot of Indian labourers to Suriname.

Shortly after the end of African Slavery the plantation owners were filled with anxiety regarding where the replacement labour would come from. An initial migration of Portuguese labourers from the island of Madeira situated in the Atlantic Ocean was undertaken, but this was not as successful as anticipated. Madeira was once the world's largest producer of sugar, and the Madeirans were Ali / Indian Indentured Labourers of Guyana expected to be most knowledgeable and suitable sugar plantation workers. However, the challenging working and living conditions in Guyana quickly took their toll, and after a series of stops and starts in the migration those that remained in the colony took to other opportunities on offer and soon began to thrive in various business enterprises.

Other sources of plantation labour were also tried, but without much success. These included European workers from Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and Malta. Meanwhile, the former African Slaves were not happy about the Apprenticeship System that was being imposed on them in an effort to keep them employed on the sugar plantations. The freed people rightly opposed the system and many moved away from the plantations to work in gold mining in the hinterland and ground provision farming on the small pieces of land that they were allocated.

So, a request was made by John Gladstone, a plantation owner and the father of the then British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, seeking workers from India. This was arranged through the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the first recruits were placed in a holding Depot in Calcutta in January 1838.

The first two ships, the S.S. Whitby and S.S. Hesperus, carrying 414 workers then left the port for an arduous and fearful sea journey of 112 days across the Indian Ocean, round the Cape of Good Hope, and through the South Atlantic Ocean, to Guyana. A total of 18 died on this awful journey and the bodies were unceremoniously dumped into the sea. This must have been a most harrowing and hurtful experience for the survivors.

This hardship was only the beginning of what followed when they finally arrived in Guyana on the 5th of May 1838. They were distributed to the various plantations in much the same way as the former African Slaves. The majority of the workers were the Dangars from the hills of West Bengal. They had no experience of such sea journeys or the hostile working and living conditions they were confronted with. In addition, there were many incidents of punitive fines, painful beatings and other

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punishments for minor misdemeanours which were reported both within and outside the colony. This mistreatment and horrible experience was likened to that of another form of slavery, and is well described by Hugh Tinker in *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (Hansib Publications, London, 1993).

After significant protestations by the British Anti-Slavery Society in the British Parliament the migration was suspended in 1839. 236 Indians took the offer to return to India, leaving 60 who opted to remain in the colony. There has been no detailed account of the pain and suffering of the 100 who perished in such a short time after their arrival.

The migration resumed in 1843 with the introduction of better checks at the holding Depots in Calcutta and Madras, the promise of improved medical care prior to and on the sea journeys and more acceptable working and living conditions in the colony.

My discourse here is about the fictional portrayal of these amazing ancestors, showing what kind of people they were, what made them endure and eventually overcome the hardships they faced, and how they helped to shape us, their descendants. I do not wish to dwell too much more on the hurt, pain, and suffering of our hard-working ancestors, but more on their resilience, inner and outer toughness, their unbounded capacity and willingness to succeed against such intimidating odds.

In my first historical fiction novel, *Sugar's Sweet Allure* (Hansib Publications, London, May 2013), Mustafa the eighteen year old principal character, had to leave his village outside Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, in 1843, with the desire and hope of finding work and earning enough money to return for Chandini, his childhood love. He headed eastwards on foot along the historical Grand Trunk Road, hitching rides on bullock carts, taking a small job by the roadside and finally unwittingly boarding a cart which was taking new recruits to Calcutta.

Mustafa was not formally educated but he had access to the tenets and teachings of his Islamic faith and had listened to the stories of the Ramayan and Bhagwad Gita. He experienced more philosophy and words of wisdom as he and his new companions ventured through places such as Allahabad, Varanasi, Bodhgaya, and Gaya. He even spent some time at the Holy Trinity Church in Allahabad, learning some English and the Christian way. Such exposure to these major religious teachings and practices clearly contributed to his widened spiritual wellbeing.

In addition to this, Mustafa and his fellow workers were suddenly being placed in situations which were unfamiliar to them. Most of them had never travelled together as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Shudras, and Muslims. They soon had to learn how to adapt to each other and to

the new environments such as in the Bhawanipore Depot in Calcutta. This togetherness gave birth to the idea of being "Jahajis" who recognised that they needed to cast their differences aside as they faced up to the perilous sea voyage to a place they knew very little about.

The Jahajis found a new strength in their unity and they became more supportive and protective of each other. The concept of Jahaji became an unwritten code to use whenever the need arose, especially when they arrived in the strange colony where they encountered even more people of different races, including the highly suspicious former African Slaves, the Portuguese, the native Amerindians, and from 1853, the Chinese.

Mustafa and Kanhaiya, his adoptive brother whom he befriended on their ship, were easily spotted as potential leaders of the working gangs by the British Drivers or Foremen, or, in their case, by Ragubir who was one of the survivors of the initial migration. Ali / Indian Indentured Labourers of Guyana The Jahajis quickly realised that one way to survive in their new situation was to reach out to their new neighbours. Despite the lack of understanding of each other's languages, they managed to achieve this collaboration over time. This Indian capacity to adapt to such multi-faceted environments is still evident wherever we happen to be in the world.

Of course, such assimilation was never going to be easily accomplished when the over-riding priority of the plantation owners was to have the sugarcane planted, harvested, and the sugar produced through the absolute commitment to the tasks by everyone on the plantations. It was much more important to the owners for the workers to be restricted in their movements in and out of the estates. But Mustafa knew how to get around such restrictions by cleverly using Ragubir's longing for the affections of the beautiful Mumtaz to obtain passes for a visit to find his friend Ishani on another estate. Not only were the passes secured, but the transport was also laid on for the trip by the love-struck Ragubir. There is a saying in Guyana that 'the stricter the government, the wiser the population.' Mustafa and others like him could easily have coined this phrase.

This shrewdness and cunning allowed our ancestors to carve out benefits from any situation, take risks, and pursue the opportunities that were presented to them. When news came back from India about how bad conditions were there, Mustafa, Kanhaiya, Ragubir and others thought long and hard about returning to their homeland at the end of their initial three or five years contracts. Mustafa in particular was torn between his desire to return for Chandini and the allure of more regular work, improving living conditions, better relationships in their communities, their own

pieces of land, and the encouragement to stay by the plantation owners and their managers.

So, having built up a good reputation as a leader and well-respected young man, Mustafa listened to the persuasive arguments made by his friends. He finally decided to stay on in the colony to develop his business and he eventually got married on the estate. This was a courageous and pioneering decision. Having done so, Mustafa and his friends set out to build their own houses, cultivate rice on their small plots of land, acquire further acreage when they could afford to do so, open small retail outlets, and most importantly of all, took on the task of building their communities through their religions and customs. Hindu Temples and Muslim Mosques began to emerge in each of the sugar plantations and their constituent villages across the colony.

The celebrations of major festivals including Holi (or Pagwa), Deepavali, and Eid were vibrant and caught the attention and interest of the other peoples of the villages as well. Traditional Indian folk music and songs were always prominent and played an important role in raising spirits and morale. It is not surprising that Guyana has national holidays for Holi, Deepavali, Youman Nabi and Eid ul Adha, alongside the Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas.

This love for entertainment and celebrations also saw the increasing tendency for the men in particular to consume the very potent locally distilled Guyana rum. Mustafa, Kanhaiya, Joshua and others tried in vain to encourage the workers to restrict their drinking habit. Sadly, this love for rum, beer and illicit drugs continues to be a serious issue for Guyana.

The first ever historical fiction novel about the Indian Indentured labourers of Guyana, *Lutchmee and Dilloo* was written in 1877 by the Indian born John Edward Jenkins, an English lawyer, politician and author. He essentially focussed the story of Lutchmee and Dilloo on their plight and struggle that they faced in the colony. Dilloo is portrayed as a hot-tempered but hard working Indian labourer who was more than prepared to fight for his rights even if this meant abusing his steadfast wife, Lutchmee. Dilloo saw unfair practices and never succumbed to injustice right through to the end that saw as well a momentous fight with his arch enemy, Hanooman.

It is important to emphasise the very significant roles played by the Indian women indentured labourers who were for many years in the minority. The compelling story of *Coolie Woman* by Gaiutra Bahadur, (Hurst, 2013) expresses the experiences of Indian women who carried the dual burdens of back-breaking manual labour as well as incessant demands for sexual favours. The latter was primarily due to the greatly disproportion-

ate ten to fifteen percent of women to men over the early years of the migration, and which only ever reached equal numbers in later years up to the end of the traffic in 1917.

Despite such extraordinary burdens and abuses, these women and their descendants have emerged as highly intelligent, formidable, and amazing leaders and influencers in their families, communities who have even reached the highest offices. It is absolutely vital for us all never to forget or casually dismiss the amazing sacrifices, resilience, and outstanding drive of the women of the Diaspora who still continue to inspire and lead their families wherever they are.

The fighting spirit of female martyrs who stood at the very front of the workers and who took action by organizing strikes in the estates in Leonora (1869), Lusignan (1912), Enmore (1948), and Leonora again (1964), must never be forgotten. Such actions of leadership, bravery, and in many cases, ultimate sacrifices by heroines such as Sumintra and Kowsilla (known as Alice) are referred to in *The Domino Masters of Demerara* (Hansib Publications, London, 2015), the second of my intended trilogy of the related historical fiction.

The Indian women have also exhibited a strong affinity for business. It will not be unusual to find that behind many successful Indian business families and companies in Guyana, the most influential drivers have been the women. They have used great insight to spot opportunities, known how best to handle Ali / Indian Indentured Labourers of Guyana customers and encourage the men to take more risks. They have calmly allowed the men to take the plaudits and credits for the successes whilst quietly going about their business in the background.

Indian women not only took on their responsibilities as labourers in the working gangs, but also their commitment to managing their households and looking after the children. They taught the children about their culture, religion and language of their heritage. This was principally Hinduism alongside Bhojpuri, and for Muslims, Islam and the Arabic language.

Humour has always played a considerable role in helping anyone to cope with the stresses of life. It is also used as a device by individuals and communities to make light of their circumstances, especially when these are dire. Mocking or aping those in authority is another way of reducing the impact of the harm that they effect.

The exploits of the characters in *Sugar's Sweet Allure* and *The Domino Masters of Demerara* are combined with their ability to see the lighter side of almost every situation they encountered. This dry wit and ability to find laughter even when there was so much hurt and pain around them,

was and still is, very evident in the melting pot that is Guyana. Humour was to be found even during the ghastly years of racial disturbances between people of Indian and African descent in the towns and villages of Guyana during the early 1960s. The senseless beatings and murders committed by both sides left horrid scars on the minds of Guyanese then and the mistrust is sadly still evident to this day. However, incidents such as the many failed attempts by Indian vigilantes on the life of an African police informer were typical of the humour that is recounted in *The Domino Masters of Demerara*.

The Indian people of Guyana have also managed to create a popular fictional character by the name of Balgobin. Everyone tries to create incidents and jokes featuring the cunning of Balgobin who is generally assumed to be of low intelligence, but always gets the upper hand. Indeed, Balgobin is now officially recorded as a character for posterity, through the publication of *The Balgobin Saga* by Petambar Persaud (Hansib Publications, London, April 2009). A typical Balgobin joke which I heard very many years ago concerns his clumsy attempts to do well in school. He goes home in tears and complains to his father about being punished for not spelling correctly. His very enraged father takes him back to school and confronts the teacher. "Why do you ask the boy to spell such big animals like Cow? Why not ask him to spell little things like Mosquito?"

Interestingly, Balgobin is similar to the "Paddy" or "Murphy" character that the Irish people in the UK tell jokes about. I think that when a group of migrants in any country can begin to make jokes about and laugh at themselves it is a sign of maturity, of confidence, and of a sense of being well established in the new environment.

Of course, peoples of Indian descent in Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, Mauritius, Fiji, Reunion, East Africa, and indeed South Africa can easily identify with the characterisations reflected on in my writings, and indeed of others.' I trust that more of such stories will continue to be written for everyone in the Indian Diaspora and other peoples of the world to enjoy and reflect upon. This will hopefully be one more way for us all to live in mutual respect, peace, and harmony.

Author

Khalil Rahman Ali is a London based writer. Originally from Guyana, he studied finance and accountancy in London, and after a successful career in the British

Health Service as a Management Accountant and Operational Director, he took early retirement to pursue a lifelong ambition to write. He researched his ancestors, and wrote *Sugar's Sweet Allure* (Hansib Publications, London, 2013), a historical fiction novel based on his great grandfather. His second historical fiction novel is *The Domino Masters of Demerara* (Hansib Publications, London, 2015). The third book, *Paanch Parivaar or Five Families* is due for publication in early 2017, and is intended to coincide with the commemorations of the centenary of the end to Indentured labour in 1917. Khalil is a keen Indian musician, composer, and singer and performs regularly in mehfilis, satsangs, and concerts mainly for charities. He has produced two CDs, Bhajan Varenayam and Islamic Naats. email: kra137@yahoo.co.uk