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The El Dorado Complex in the Shaping of Indo-Guyanese: A Revisionist Perspective

by

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In February 1594 Sir Robert Dudley made inquiries about the rumoured Empire of Guiana...He sent a small boat to investigate and its crew returned, after great hardships, to say that the natives had told them of goldmines so rich that the people of the country powdered themselves with gold-dust.

Michael Swan (1957)

Guyana has always been a land of fantasy. It was the land of El Dorado....

V.S. Naipaul (1991)

Guyana, for all its independence and its symbols of nationhood, has never been a closely-knit society...the ethnic divide made this almost impossible. There is hatred between the various ethnic groups with the darkest of the races being reserved for the greatest hatred.

Leader, Kaieteur News, 6 February 2014

Shortly before he died, the eminent American historian, Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, (1917-2007), reflected on an imperative of the historian: ‘[C]onceptions of the past are far from stable. They are perennially revised by the urgencies of the present. When new urgencies arise in our own times and lives, the historian’s spotlight shifts, probing now into the shadows, throwing into sharp relief things that were always there but that earlier historians had carelessly excised from the collective memory. New voices ring out of the historical darkness and demand attention...History is never a closed book or a final verdict. It is always in the making’. Sudhir Kakar, the internationally-renowned Indian psychoanalyst, explains how this works at the level of the individual, with profound implications for the shaping of identity – a collective but wildly eclectic endeavour of the imagination: ‘We know that what is psychologically significant is not what has happened to us but what we believe occurred. The fictions we tell ourselves about our past and our lives are indispensable to keep at bay the truth that may shock us out of our ever-precarious sense of well-being and self-worth’. Narratives (usually imaginary, didactic tales: proverbs, myths, legends) are at the heart of the shaping of identity. Fact, Fiction and Fantasy are at the core of the identity project.

Stuart Hall defines identity thus:

Silencing as well as remembering, identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narrative, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they come from.
Narratives of India have been the most instrumental factor in the shaping of Indian identity in British Guiana (Guyana since 26 May 1966). From the beginning of indentureship to the present, diverse conceptions of homeland – ‘many Indias’ – have been central to redefinition of self. It seems that however strong the sense of belonging to the new land has become, the necessity to look back, to create Indias of the mind, is inescapable. Becoming Indo-Guyanese, therefore, required the embracing simultaneously of multiple, often imaginary and contradictory, constructions of that homeland. Fact, fiction and fantasy are, indeed, interlaced in the reclaiming and reshaping of identity. As Bombay-born Salman Rushdie observes:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants, or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being muta ted into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge…that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, **imaginary homelands**, Indias of the mind [emphasis added].

This does not invalidate the project of reclamation or selective retrieval; indeed, it is arguable that for the foreseeable future imaginary Indias will, ineluctably, animate the construction of identity in Guyana, Trinidad, Mauritius, Suriname and Fiji, the principal colonies of Indian indentureship. Besides the more marginal the physical and cultural engagement with the ‘real’ India, the more ‘imagined’ are their constructions of that homeland. These ‘Indias of the mind’ are likely to be totally unrecognisable to Indians in India; in fact, they may evoke incomprehension, even ridicule, if presented to them, but their validity, indeed centrality, to Indians in the diaspora is not lessened. For the imagined Indias are not meant for the consumption, and do not necessarily require the empathy (however desired), of those in the homeland; they are, paradoxically, the foundation of the adaptation of Indians overseas to their new space. To look back, therefore, is indispensable to apprehending the present and the necessity for continual redefinition of self, in the diaspora. Between the 1890s and the 1930s, as I argue in *Mother India’s Shadow over El Dorado* (2011), Christian Indo-Guyanese intellectuals and professionals in particular, such as Joseph Ruhomon, J.A. Luckhoo, Peter Ruhomon, J.I. Rampal and J.W. Chinapen, were energised and elevated by an infinitely malleable ‘Mother India’. Indeed, for these thinkers, myriad constructions of a resurgent *Bharatmata* or Mother India, whose ancient greatness was retrieved and validated through western scholarship – now transformed into a morally robust, Gandhian India – seen to be in revolt against colonial rule – were at the heart of the shaping of Indo-Guyanese identity.

But I wish to examine a vastly more popular, powerful and enduring vision of this imagined homeland, a composite India – not eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar, the source of about 85% of the Indian migrants to British Guiana – in terms of the mythical past juxtaposed with a collective amnesia enveloping that real India whence the ‘bound coolies’, the indentured labourers, originated. It is my contention that because the latter was constructed to conceal the unimaginably harrowing context of the flight of desperate men and women, their ‘real’ India had to be silenced, if not erased, and reimagined to fortify them psychologically – to ignite and reconstruct
personas of hope in the new land, however trying or supposedly transitory the indentureship interlude. Forgetting, as Stuart Hall tells us, is a vital ingredient in narratives that help to make new identities; so, too, a mythologised past that speaks of ancient glory, preferably a golden age – contriving an El Dorado of the past, so to speak, that came to fruition. Creative amnesia, therefore, was a vital component of this exercise. Hinduism’s literary heritage could be mined for this rehabilitative project of the imagination.

The Indo-Guyanese master narrative would draw its essence from, and have its parameters defined by, the great Hindu text, the *Ramayana*, a quintessential classic of exile and glorious return. It would also absorb the constructed ideal of Indian womanhood, embodied by the unimpeachable loyalty and self-abnegation of Sita, the wife of Lord Rama – the hero – who returns triumphantly to rule in Ayodhya after 14 years of banishment, shared exile and privation in the Dandak forest. *Ram Raj* (the rule of Ram) ushers in the Golden Age. The absence of poverty and pain, petty jealousies, disease, hunger and death was the antithesis of life in 19th century eastern UP and western Bihar. But the appeal of *Ram Raj* is understandable: it offered flight from the meanness and meagreness – the futility of bare existence – that engulfed, and still does the lives of hundreds of millions in contemporary India. The theme of Rama’s banishment could be appropriated, assuaging the trauma of the void created by the abrupt rupture with the homeland, the loss of the familiar, though steeped in despair for the lower castes and untouchables. It lent plausibility to the notion of return, however feared or illusory, after the trials of indentureship; it offered catharsis, as the Indo-Fijian literary critic, Vijay Mishra, observes: ‘Both Trinidad and Fiji (one could add to them Trinidad and Guyana, etc.) easily become the forest of Dandak in the *Ramayana*, a temporary state from which Rama and Sita would someday return. It was a perfect structure and Indians in Fiji responded to it with enthusiasm. It also ameliorated any severe psychological pressure at work in the society; it was, in one way, an escape which transcended men and gods’.

A good deal of the *Ramayana* narrative is set in the part of north India whence most of the indentured labourers originated; they could readily empathise with and possess its principal characters: the gods are rendered anthropomorphic. Rama epitomises virtue, devotion, honesty, and a tenacious pursuit of duty, however adverse the circumstances. He lifts humankind above worldly frailties to the plane of the divine while rendering himself accessible to human appropriation, with many of the shortcomings of the latter. Sita’s self-abnegation – her subordination of personal needs, the primacy of her loyalty and devotion to her husband – embodies what is most admirable in the Hindu woman, the essence of her being. She is a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, etc., but her individuality and personal prerogatives are sublimated to the urgencies of the joint family. And in a patriarchal society where, as Professor S.N. Vyas observes, ‘woman was generally treated as a sort of property, the owner naturally having the right to do what he liked with her’, the right to define remained a monopoly of the male. Sita’s embodiment of piety, devotion and endurance was perpetuated on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. Although women did acquire a greater degree of autonomy, Indo-Guyanese women acquiesced in this conventional masculine construction because patriarchy, though challenged, was retained within the Brahminic framework of Hinduism, although the latter was modified and revolutionised in terms of the traditional caste hierarchy. Besides it was safer: it absolved women of revisiting their provenance in eastern Uttar Pradesh and western
Bihar, with its potential for releasing many silenced narratives of despair, separation, rupture, shame and guilt. The Sita persona helped them to close the book. It is generally not known, but significant, that about two-thirds of the female indentured labourers went to Caribbean plantations on their own, unaccompanied by any relatives; 82% were aged between 10 and 30. Even more indentured men declared themselves as ‘single’. There was a lot to hide. As Joseph Ruhomon remarked, tartly, in 1937, nearly a century after the first ‘bound coolies’ arrived in British Guiana on May 5, 1838: ‘Our forefathers, for some ugly reason or another, left the shores of Mother India’.

Amnesia and fantasy are at the fount of the construction of Indo-Guyanese identity. This was an imperative of self-preservation and the regeneration of self in the new land. Individually and collectively, not to forget the agonising reality of lives in India, blighted by famines and the loss of child-wives and child-husbands; child-wives marooned in the homes of oppressive in-laws, having been deserted by husbands who had escaped, internally or overseas, to greener pastures; consequent ‘infidelity’ actuated by chronic poverty and sexual deprivation; the placelessness of widows in Hindu society – indeed, the ‘immemorial poverty’ (Naipaul) of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar – was to self-destruct. Hardly any had the mental resources to accommodate such a past with a measure of equanimity; it is unconscionable to expect them to. It had to be erased by silence, but because they were all in the same boat, women and men, it was easier to navigate away from the quicksand of that unimaginably painful reality. They knew where to draw the line, not to burden each other to unmask the dark private recesses. They kept that past submerged: nothing would detach them from their cultivated amnesia. They had come to believe their silent reworking of the truth – and so have their descendants.

They could absolve themselves of any responsibility for their flight, attributing total agency to the infamous arkati, the legendary, shadowy anti-hero, an unexamined folk figure of unmitigable infamy, who supposedly duped all into ‘a new slavery’ and lured women in particular into a veritable narak (hell) – a constructed universe of moral depravity, rampant debauchery and unexampled degradation, on the plantations of the sugar colonies. This was not only, by and large, a distortion of conditions under indentureship; it was an ironic narrative, redolent of a displacement tactic, more reflective of eastern UP and western Bihar, whence they had fled. Their submerged guilt for leaving India for good and severing all links to the homeland, though largely comprehensible, could be mitigated by this imagined ‘new slavery’, the plantation reality as narak (hell). But another equally valid rationale for this potent narrative of ‘suffering’, what I call ‘double-billing in the historiography of oppression’, was actuated to counter resilient African antipathy to indentured migrants (whose introduction they were made to partially subsidise), perceived as subverting their enhanced bargaining position with their former owners, the sugar planters. Having received no compensation for their enslavement over more than two centuries, freed Africans experienced the rapid erosion of their embryonic bargaining advantage of the 1840s, with the accelerated importation of indentured labourers throughout the latter half of the 19th century. By the 1890s they saw Indians as the greatest threat to their future in the colony – as the numerically and economically ascendant group, whom they regarded as pampered by planters, while they languished in penury as a result: the ‘alien coolie’ was here to stay, with potential to dominate. This was exacerbated by fears that prominent Indians, such as J.A. Luckhoo and Dr William Hewley
Wharton, were committed to creating an ‘Indian Colony’, with the possible renewal of immigration from India, after the end of indentureship in 1920. African apprehensions were sustained in the 1930s, when prominent Indians, such as Peter Ruhomon and C.R. Jacob, advocated building of a ‘greater India’ in Guyana. This imbedded a resilient fear among African Guyanese that they would lose everything to the Indian juggernaut. Moreover, the notion that British Guiana is an El Dorado, with stupendous resources, has fed continual apprehension between Africans and Indians that whoever inherits the kingdom is on the royal road to a Golden Age. This bred fantasy into the psyche of its peoples, with a penchant for grandiloquence: its rivers big enough to swallow Barbados at their mouths; these rivers so long they must run to the moon; the mountains in the interior (totally inaccessible) must be pregnant with gold, diamonds – wealth of unimaginable vastness. This promise of El Dorado is alive today, with the prospect of an impending oil boom and massive mineral wealth awaiting exploration in the interior.

Occupied by the Dutch in the late 16th/early 17th centuries, Guyana (British Guiana until May 1966) required monumental effort to achieve a modicum of colonisation along its narrow coastal belt. They had tried to circumvent the necessity for onerous hydraulic works by establishing the early settlements upriver, away from the flat coastal land, the mangrove swamps below sea-level. That soon proved futile because the fertility of the soil diminishes rapidly away from the alluvial coast, in the hilly sand and clay belt. However, only the Dutch, with access to enslaved African labour and their peerless mastery of ‘empoldering’ – the reclaiming of land through a complex drainage and irrigation system – could have constructed and maintained the astounding, labyrinthine system of dams, embankments, canals, drains, ditches, ‘kokers’ or sluices, without which the narrow coastland is uninhabitable. From this inauspicious beginning, Guyana never did manage to become a mature slave colony, like Jamaica, Barbados or the Leeward Islands; yet it engendered a potent rebellious spirit among enslaved Africans fed by the inhospitable environment.

Because of Guyana’s relative underdevelopment when emancipation came in the 1830s, freed Africans were able to buy abandoned estates or crown land in the vicinity of sugar plantations, to create their own villages. This was the source of the militancy of the African people in the 1840s, as they sought to strengthen their bargaining position with the sugar planters. In 1842, in the counties of Demerara and Essequibo, the freed people went on strike when the planters reduced wages unilaterally. There was division in the ranks of the latter; the labour supply was eclectic; many small plantations could not compete in a free labour environment. The workers were therefore able to force a reversal of the wage-slash. In 1848, however, when these African workers took similar action against another wage-slash, the planters resisted their demands successfully. They had been fortifying themselves since 1845, having introduced over 11,000 indentured labourers from India and more than 10,000 from the Portuguese island of Madeira. The plantocracy were resolved to halt the demonstrated capacity of Africans to negotiate wage rates on their own terms, as they combined farming their own land with strategic seasonal labour on the estates.

Indian indentureship, therefore, was introduced specifically to enable sugar plantations to retain a body of contract labour (‘bound coolies’), in a colony where the freed African people were erroneously perceived to have abundant options for independent livelihood. Moreover, the fact that one-third of the funding of
indentureship originated from general revenue, to which Africans contributed inordinately through high indirect taxation on items of popular consumption, meant that they were, in reality, subsidising a system designed to curb their fledgling assertion of rights. This was the context of African rejection of Indian indentureship as necessarily subversive of their welfare. It was aggravated by the perennial hydrological hazards on the coastland of Guyana. Floods and alternating droughts in conjunction with chronic malaria, in an environment dominated by the order, size and power of the drained and irrigated sugar plantations, were detrimental to agricultural initiative in the aftermath of slavery and imbedded in Africans inexpressible hurts – colonial oppression, then ‘Indian racism’, as they perceived it.

Immeasurably more than in environmentally gentler Trinidad (another major destination of indentured labourers from India), every perceptible advance by Indians would evoke and reinforce aggrieved sentiments among African Guyanese. A sense of victimhood was magnified, internalised and perpetuated by this hard land. In the graphic imagery of the historian, James Rodway (1848-1927): ‘Every acre at present in cultivation has been the scene of the struggle with the sea in front and the flood behind. As a result of this arduous labour [of Africans] during two centuries [of slavery], a narrow strip of land along the coast has been rescued from the mangrove swamp and kept under cultivation by an elaborate system of dams and dykes. Scattered along the rivers and creeks lie a thousand abandoned plantations, most of them indistinguishable from the surrounding forest; these represent the failures of the early [Dutch] settlers. At first sight the narrow line of sugar estates seems but a very poor show for such a long struggle with nature, but when all the circumstances are taken into consideration it is almost a wonder that …[British Guiana] has not been abandoned altogether [emphasis added].’ Rodway’s discerning assessment has stood the test of time.

In 1943 Dr F.C. Benham calculated that the cost of maintaining the hydraulic systems on the plantations that year alone was $459,000 or $2.79 per ton of sugar produced. He conveyed in bewildering detail the Byzantine geometric patterns etched on this reclaimed land: ‘Each square mile of cane cultivation involves the provision of 49 miles of drainage canals and ditches and 16 miles of high level waterways. If these figures are raised to cover the whole area under cane the sum total approaches 5,000 miles. Some estates do, in fact, have more than 300 miles of waterways to maintain.’ This is incomprehensible to outsiders, while Guyanese are inclined to take it for granted – at their peril, periodically. Walter Rodney dramatized the Herculean effort extracted from Africans in the making of this unlikely colony, on the periphery of the Amazon basin: ‘This meant that slaves moved 100 million tons of heavy water-logged clay with shovel in hand, while enduring conditions of perpetual mud and water.’ The bitterness engendered among African Guyanese found violent release in the Berbice Rebellion of 1763 and the Demerara Rebellion of 1823. The brutal suppression of these legendary quests for freedom is deeply lodged in their consciousness and was perpetuated by Guyana’s unconquerable hydrological challenges and malarial scourge – as well as the scale of Indian indentureship in the latter half of the 19th century.

It required coerced labour to maintain plantation agriculture; but it was also necessary to create El Dorado to sustain effort. Guyana needed (it still needs) myth to provoke initiative. Fantasy is endemic to its psyche. It breeds inexhaustible visions of riches in the bush. The inaccessibility of the interior of the colony, to most Guyanese, deepened
the myth and lent plausibility to its most surreal representations. Ever since Sir Walter Raleigh’s delusional quest for El Dorado, towards the end of the 16th century, Guyana’s ‘maidenhead’ is ever on the verge of being penetrated.

Fantasy found a hospitable space, too, in the imagination of the colony’s indentured labourers from India; it would vacillate between the exuberant and the melancholy. Escapism has always been instrumental in coping with the harsh Guyanese reality. In a strange way, Indians in the colony were doubly fortified: the yearning for a golden age, bred by the Ramayana, encountered the extravagant promise of El Dorado, deepening the millennial proclivity of the Indo-Guyanese mentality. It had ideological reverberations, with a delusional strand. By the 1890s, an element of Aryanism had seeped into the seminal thoughts of Joseph Ruhomon (1873-1942); it spoke of a supposed racial affinity between Indians and Europeans. In the 1920s-30s J.A. Luckhoo’s (1887-1949) advocacy of an Indian colony in British Guiana, as well as the idea of a ‘greater India’ in the colony of Peter Ruhomon and C.R. Jacob, were permeated by the grandiloquent. These were accompanied in the mid-1930s by the fantastic ideals of governance of the foremost Indian trade unionist in the colony, Ayube Edun (1893-1957), enunciated in his book, London’s Heart-Probe and Britain’s Destiny. After the Second World War, Indians would place their faith in the greatest, though totally sincere, dreamer of them all – the irrepressible Marxist, Cheddi Jagan (1918-97).

Of the 238,909 Indian labourers taken to British Guiana between 1838 and 1917, 193,154 or 81 per cent arrived between 1851 and 1900; 75,808 or 31.7 per cent were repatriated between 1843 and 1955; only 9,668 or 12.7 per cent returned after 1917, when the last batch of indentured labourers left India. Of those who went to Guyana, approximately 85 per cent originated in the same region – eastern United Provinces (contemporary Uttar Pradesh [UP]) and western Bihar. The impoverished eastern districts of UP alone contributed 70.3 per cent; while 15.3 per cent were from the contiguous, equally poor, western districts of Bihar; only 5 or 6 per cent were south Indians, Tamils from Madras Presidency (primarily contemporary Tamil Nadu). Most ‘Madrasis’ had arrived before1863, when attitudes rooted in slavery still lingered. But a majority of the ‘bound coolies’ found British Guiana a place of infinitely greater hope, in which they could own a piece of land, even thrive and become individuals released from the shackles of caste and the ‘immemorial poverty’ of this still notoriously brutal region of India. Guyana would become home for nearly 70 per cent of those who fled India.

Yet because of African repugnance to indentureship, it was difficult for Indians in the colony to erase the stubborn lore that they ‘took bread out of the mouths’ of Africans. Consequently, probably defensively, they would continually deny agency for their migration to the colony, attributing it to kidnapping, trickery, to being duped into journeying to distant lands. The blame would fall on the evil arkati, the recruiter who allegedly stole them all from their villages. They would appropriate and cultivate the notion that indentureship was a ‘new system of slavery’.

However, it is inaccurate to label indentureship ‘new slavery’, however oppressive the conditions on the plantations in the aftermath of emancipation in 1838. A definitive instrument for rejecting this common characterization was the contract, the ‘conditions of service and terms of agreement’ all indentured labourers were required
to assent to in India, before embarkation for the plantation colonies. It is arguable that those terms were often honoured more in the breach, as it took decades for the contract, in its more enlightened version, to evolve. However, implicit in the signing of a contract was the notion of Indian indentured labourers as free agents with rights. Enslaved Africans had no such concession to their humanity: they were property – deprived of the fruits of their labour and autonomy as individuals, for life, with no recourse to law or any statutory ‘protector’. This was inherited by their offspring.

The basic terms of the indentured contract were established by the 1870s. After completing five years of indentureship with a registered employer – and a total of ten years of continuous residence in the colony – and having procured a ‘certificate of exemption from labour’, Indians were entitled to a ‘free return passage’. The immigrant had to work every day except Sundays or authorised holidays: either seven hours in the field or 10 hours in the factory. Able-bodied males, 16 years and over, were paid 1/- per day; adult males not able-bodied, minors of and above 10 years of age but under 16 and female adults were paid 8 pence per day, but they were entitled to extra pay when working beyond the stipulated hours. Therefore the contract legitimised child labour. Indentured labourers also had the option of task-work, with its ostensibly higher remuneration computed on the basis of wage rates obtained by unindentured workers. This was one of the most contentious issues, as workers continually contested the basis on which earnings from task-work were calculated. The recurring grievance was that the vagaries of tasks, occasioned by unseasonal rains or differential soil types, were frequently not given due consideration. But, unlike enslaved Africans, Indians had recourse to the Immigration Agent General or his district agents, authorized to visit plantations and investigate specific grievances. Indentured labourers were, from 1876, entitled to visit the office of the ‘protector’ to register a complaint against their employer, even if the latter had refused them a pass to leave their plantation. This, however, often resulted in labourers being prosecuted for breach of contract. In fact, in comparison with the rights of employers, those of Indian labourers were breached consistently, even within the judicial system. Between 1874 and 1895, only 208 employers were prosecuted successfully; on the other hand, 65,084 indentured labourers were convicted.

Indentureship was riddled with injustices, but assertions that it was a continuation of slavery, or a new system of slavery, were fundamentally flawed. Moreover, it did not conciliate African conviction that ‘coolies’ were pampered usurpers of material benefits that were rightfully theirs: the legacy of their enslavement, the failure to compensate them at Emancipation and their prior residence in the colony of over two centuries. This, then, was the context in which, self-defensively, Indians were unremitting in emphasising their lack of agency for migrating to British Guiana, stressing their innocence in the process: victims of imperial exploitation not ‘economic migrants’, as we would say today.

Raymond Smith, the distinguished English anthropologist, states that the high caste Brahmins and Kshatriyas formed 13.6 per cent of Guyanese indentured immigrants from India; middling agricultural and artisan castes accounted for 38.8 per cent; low castes and outcastes were 31.1 per cent; Muslims 16.3 per cent. Outcaste Chamars (untouchables) constituted the largest single component, 12.9 per cent, but the assumption that only the lowest castes went to the plantation colonies is not corroborated by the evidence. Brij Lal, the eminent Indo-Fijian historian, argues in his
seminal work of 1983, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*, that by the latter half of the 19th century the impoverished districts of eastern UP and western Bihar were drawn into a culture of migration: to Assam tea plantations, to jute and textile mills and other industrial enterprises in Bengal (particularly Calcutta), even to textile mills in far Bombay. Migration to the plantation colonies was another aspect of this established culture of migration. It was a desperate quest, by a risk-taking minority, to escape perennial landlessness, indebtedness, famine, disease, the curse of early widowhood and the stultifying ascription of caste.

Land-hunger in India was chronic: the best agricultural castes, Kurmis, Koeris and Ahirs [Yadavs today], owned very little. The best land was monopolised by the high caste Brahmins and Kshattriyas. By the late 1880s they owned 79.8 per cent of the land in Basti (eastern Uttar Pradesh), the district of origin of the highest number of indentureds to Guyana; Brahmins alone owned 19.3 per cent of the cultivated area, although they were deemed ‘inferior agriculturalists because of their prejudice against handling a plough.’ The best farmers, consequently, were often irredeemably indebted to high caste landlords and moneylenders. Among the lowest castes, their indebtedness was so entrenched that some families existed in a state of virtual slavery. In Ghazipur district, in 1906, the upper castes owned 82 per cent of the land; Ahirs, considered ‘the backbone of the cultivating community’, owned just 2,283 acres although they cultivated 14.3 per cent of the land. They were also among the best farmers in neighbouring Azamgahr, but there, too, they owned very little land. The problem was magnified in the latter half of the 19th century, as manufactured goods from Britain flooded these unprotected agrarian economies. Numerous caste skills were rendered superfluous: for instance, many Chamars, traditional leather workers, were forced on to the land as landless labourers. Population density escalated in the impoverished districts of eastern UP, with 702, 790 and 816 per square mile in Fyzabad, Azamgahr and Jaunpur respectively.

Chronic debts (passed on from one generation to the next) perpetuated penury and killed ambition among large sections of a potentially enterprising people. Weakened bodies were a ready haven of recurring epidemics, such as cholera and smallpox. In Gonda, for instance, the source of many migrants to Guyana (including my maternal great-grandmother), cholera accounted for 11.5 per cent of deaths between 1872 and 1881. There were devastating outbreaks in 1873, 1876, 1877, 1878, 1881, 1886 and 1888 – 10,000 died in this last year. In 1893, 16,000 died from cholera. Smallpox visitations, too, were not uncommon in Gonda: epidemics of great intensity occurred in 1876 and 1880. Famine struck in 1874, 1877 and 1897. An early grave was taken for granted in the districts of eastern UP in the late 19th century.

Indian indentureship to Guyana lasted over 75 years, but despite the environmental difficulties and the harsh reality on the plantations, the colony was a cradle of ambition and possibilities compared to caste-ridden, impoverished eastern UP and western Bihar. Genuine social and economic reasons, therefore, impelled a minority of enterprising men and women to flee this cemetery of hope where, as V.S. Naipaul puts it, his ancestors were ‘immemorially poor’. Most were not kidnapped or tricked by the infamous recruiters, the *arkatis*, into bondage. But these were people on the edge; they must have been seduced by the blandishment of recruiters, so a pervasive strand of deception, of exaggerated promises of mobility, cannot be discounted. Young men seeking escape from the perennial yoke of acquired family debts, or the
macabre spectre of an early grave because of famine and disease, were especially vulnerable. Many, unable to keep their noses above the waterline, must have left behind wives and children whom they would never see again. Many girls and young women were in the same boat. About 82 per cent of the women taken to Guyana were between 10 and 30 years, with 30 per cent between 10 and 20 and 52.6 per cent between 20 and 30. Of the male immigrants 85.6 per cent were in the 10-30 age-group. This is entirely corroborative of what Brij Lal unearthed on Fiji; therefore, his findings with regard to the marital status of the indentureds are arguably applicable to Guyana. He found that 86.8 per cent of the adult male immigrants to Fiji were reportedly ‘single’; and, surprisingly, 63.9 per cent of the adult females were reportedly ‘single’. Moreover, of the 36.1 per cent of the women not reportedly single, only 73 per cent were accompanied by their husbands. These were people on the move, largely unencumbered by spouses, children or other relatives. They were, indeed, seeking a new beginning. They were desperate but they were probably among the most enterprising people in eastern UP and western Bihar – with nothing to lose, they were prepared to take risks. This was a great attribute in the new land.

Because 90 per cent of girls between 10 and 14 were married, according to the UP census of 1891, it is likely that most of the women indentured labourers who declared themselves ‘single’ were, in fact, widowed because of the high mortality of child-husbands in the late 19th century. Some must have been deserted by their husbands, many of whom had found employment in Assam and Bengal and never kept in touch. Some women, driven by hunger or sexual deprivation, succumbed to sexual advances by villagers; others had probably sought refuge in prostitution in provincial towns. There was no future for such women in India. Even in her parents’ village, a widowed girl was socially dead. Many women succumbed to despair. A minority did not – flight resurrected hope. These were endowed with abundant imagination, courage and drive. Men and women therefore had a lot to hide. The guilt festered. But because that recent past evoked pain and concealed much that would necessarily have jeopardized the assumption of a new persona, a reflexive collective amnesia cohered quickly – a water-tight instinct to forget. People have a remarkable capacity to unlearn. The past in India had to be forgotten and re-imagined in Guyana.

On a personal note, my Ahir [Yadav] ancestors must have fled India in despair that their substantial agricultural skills, much celebrated in contemporary accounts, counted for little because of chronic land-hunger and caste prejudice in eastern Uttar Pradesh. I gathered that many of my people were abstemious in their zeal to own land in British Guiana; jealous, too, of other people’s achievements. This was a hard, highly competitive environment; invidious comparisons were rife but served also as a spur to effort and continuity of focus. For the first time, released from ancient caste-prejudices, they could use their gifts, as rice farmers, market gardeners and cattle-rearers, in an achievement-oriented society, the initial hurdles on the plantations notwithstanding. Not many scholars would argue that they were escaping the tyranny of custom to an area of possibilities, but to do so, as Professor Brij Lal does, is not far-fetched. The indentured labourers sought wealth no less avidly than they practised Hinduism or Islam; but the discovery that they could achieve so much made them open up, become less inward looking: more flexible. My paternal great-grandmother came from a Muslim background, reputedly one of the best rice-planters in the East Canje District in Berbice, and an adept grower of vegetables. My family became large
and prospered, having acquired a knack for exploiting every niche conducive to gain, on and off the sugar plantation.

My illiterate maternal great-grandmother, Kaila (1889-1956), journeyed alone to British Guiana from Gonda in eastern UP, as an indentured labourer in 1909, aged 20. She was black, from an untouchable caste, Pasi (historically associated with toddy-making [booze] and with a penchant for crime; now called a Dalit or scheduled caste); but she married an Ahir on the plantation (Rose Hall), started to buy a few head of cattle and was soon able to acquire land, in a neighbouring village (Palmyra), the place of my birth. It took me years before I could reflect on what this would have meant to a woman who was an ‘untouchable’, probably married at ten and widowed soon thereafter (away from her village, Bhagwanpur) – therefore a virtual slave in her home country henceforth. She may even have been driven into flight by a hopeless child-marriage and oppressive in-laws. Her life must have promised nothing but eternal darkness: her black skin an inexpiable sin. I read recently that the Pasis in Uttar Pradesh (India’s most populous state) ‘still suffer the effects of the caste system leaving them despised and rejected’. They still experience considerable illiteracy, lack of medical facilities and basic amenities such as drinking water and sanitation. With what I know today, I consider it difficult not to see Kaila’s indentureship as an escape to freedom.

Kaila’s only child, my maternal grandmother, Ramdularie (born at Plantation Rose Hall, East Canje, Berbice in June 1916), would from time to time recall that she did try, over many years, to coax fragments of her past, in India, out of her mother. Yet she learnt little beyond the tired, inane tale that she was deceived into going to Demerara, to ‘sift sugar’. It was her way of handling the abrupt severing of all links with her outcaste, poverty-stricken relatives in India; of assuaging residual guilt, in her endeavour to wipe out a past of unimaginable pain. Was she married? Did she have any children? What was her mother like? What did they do for a living? Did she have a happy childhood? Did she miss those whom she would never see again? Did she dream of returning one day? Why did she leave home? Did she tell anybody that she was going away to an unknown place to work, possibly never to return? Why did she travel alone, unaccompanied by any relatives? How did she find the strength to break completely from her past and establish a foundation for people like myself to acquire ambition and self-belief? Some area of darkness! These questions, if asked at all over the years, were never answered. After a while, curiosity just dried up. Everything would be subsumed under the resilient archati thesis of deception, trickery and kidnapping, which brought closure to the imponderables. I suppose, as Naipaul says, we were all claimed by the collective amnesia: we could ‘live easily with that darkness’. Kaila’s unknowable India was interred with her on 6 December 1956.

But, as I grew older, my childhood curiosity became more defined – and gnawing. It was prompted by my liberal education and refined by my emerging historical temperament, tormented by a wider historical darkness. The comprehensive void that shrouded Kaila, whose quiet consistency of purpose must have lodged in my imagination, fed my more mature curiosity. My intellectual raison d’etre was animated by this gaping void in self-knowledge, a strangled sensibility – a fault-line in my identity. It would later endow my pursuit of Indo-Caribbean history and historiography with the aura of a mission.
The intellectual means did not exist for the exploration of Kaila’s world, including her inner promptings. We continued to wallow in the old tales of deception, kidnapping and ‘a new slavery’. They have their uses; they have become an armour of Indo-Guyanese identity – the badge of suffering to rival African enslavement – not to be profaned: virtually sacrilegious even to challenge. Yet this submerged history, Kaila’s and mine, had to be written. The problem was how. Joseph Ruhomon, Dwarka Nath and Peter Ruhomon, local Indian amateur historians, had made a bold start. However, the ‘bound coolies’, as individuals, were silent in their pioneering works – and the India of their birth invisible. Even Bechu’s fearlessly partisan writings, in the late 1890s, on behalf of his fellow ‘bound coolies’ (which I discovered in the mid-1990s), had not sought to remedy this, although there were many thousands in British Guiana. Agency was denied the indentured labourers. Amidst the supremacy of imperial institutions and definitions and the omnipotence of the colonial bureaucracy, individual lives, as well as the universe of the indentured labourers, were claimed by the yawning void.

It would be a circuitous route to comprehension of Kaila’s world. A few years ago I reflected on this passion to know: ‘My family grew rice but they had been cattle people for over a century in British Guiana. I took this for granted. It was many years later, in the 1980s, when I became deeply involved in my father’s cattle business that I began to explore this family obsession with cattle. I turned to the National Archives in Georgetown, to the Ships’ Registers of indentured labourers’. This helped me to detect the vague contours of my Indian ancestors. I quickly ascertained that much of their caste instincts had accompanied them to the Caribbean; it was a major force in shaping their new world. The Ships’ Registers did lighten the historical darkness; that elusive India was just peeping through its Himalayan clouds.

V.S. Naipaul’s Brahmin grandparents were no more forthcoming about their past in India than mine. His experience was no different from mine – it was devoid of history:

I grew up with two ideas of history, almost two ideas of time. There was history with dates. That kind of history affected people and places abroad…But Chaguanas [in Trinidad], where I was born [in 1932], in an Indian-style house my grandfather had built, had no dates. If I read in a book that Gandhi had made his first call for civil disobedience in India in 1919, that date seemed recent. But 1919, in Chaguanas, in the life of the Indian community, was almost unimaginable. It was a time beyond recall, mythical. About our family, the migration of our ancestors from India, I knew only what I knew or what I was told. Beyond (and sometimes even within) people’s memories was undated time, historical darkness. Out of that darkness (extending to place as well as to time) we had all come. The India where Gandhi and Nehru and the others operated was historical and real. The India from which we had come was impossibly remote, almost as imaginary as the land of the Ramayana, our Hindu epic. I lived easily with that darkness, that lack of knowledge. I never thought to inquire further [emphasis added].
Whether Brahmin or Ahir, Pasi or Chamar, these ‘bound coolies’ in the Caribbean had a lot they wished to forget. I was in my early thirties before I discovered that they came primarily from the most impoverished part of India, virtually lawless — feudal in its social organisation and ossified by the immutability of caste prejudice. It was a stultifying environment where thuggery was commonplace. The heavy hand of the high caste landlord/money-lender aided by his goons, as I discovered a few years ago on a visit to eastern UP, has lost none of its ancient aptitude for brutal summary enforcement. (It is noteworthy that both words, ‘thugs’ and ‘goons’, are of Hindi derivation). Even Brahmins could become impoverished, indebted to landlords and money-lenders; besides there were many personal, domestic reasons why some – both men and women – would have wanted to flee.

Naipaul came late to the fascinating tale of his paternal great-grandmother’s journey to Trinidad – a Brahmin girl venturing there as a ‘bound coolie’: ‘About 1880, in the ancient town of Ayodhya in the United Provinces [UP] in India, a young girl of the Parray clan gave birth to a son. She must have been deeply disgraced, because she was willing to go alone with her baby to a far-off island to which other people of the region were going. That was how the Parray woman came to Trinidad. She intended her son to be a pundit...’ Trinidad and British Guiana, certainly by the 1870s, offered even the most desperate some reward for merit, after the initial travail on the sugar plantations. For Brahmins, the highest caste, there was scope for acquiring both wealth and enhanced status. Lower castes Hindus and outcaste Chamars and Pasis, who could not have dreamt of the Brahmin ministering to them, in India, were now granted that most elevating privilege. Part of the reason was the comparative laxity of the new society – the atrophying of ancient sanctions – coupled with the fear, among Brahmins, that rampant Christian proselytising would steal the entire Hindu flock. To avert this, they came around to embracing a sacrilegious measure: ministering to even the lowest of the low, performing puja (religious ceremonies) in their homes or in the ranges on the plantations – and partaking of their cooked food. This would have rendered the Brahmin an outcaste in eastern UP or western Bihar. Even today he would not dare to do so.

But the Brahmin in the Caribbean was answerable to no central authority in Mother India; no body of ecclesiastical tenets challenged his iconoclastic re-conception of caste within Hinduism in the Caribbean. Besides, the elaborate rituals, the absorbing temper permeating the communal readings from the Ramayana in particular, and the carnivalesque tenor of the festivals and life-cycle functions in orthodox Hinduism (Sanatan Dharma), enthralled labourers and farmers, as it did the children. The ritual elaboration, in celebratory space — music and sumptuous feasting in the ‘yard’: outside — alleviated the monotony of plantation toil. It answered a comprehensive psychic need. It also magnified the aura around the accommodating Brahmin priest: a veritable revolutionary. Indeed, while caste notions were being dissipated, the Brahmin in the Caribbean, paradoxically, became more entrenched in his dominance of Hindu social order. Lower caste and outcaste Indians, having achieved a degree of material progress and longing for enhanced status within Hinduism, were deeply honoured by the privilege of ritual elevation by the Brahmin; they reciprocated generously: devotionally and financially. This was the context of the rise of Naipaul’s Brahmin family in Trinidad at the end of the 19th century: ‘My [maternal] grandfather had done well in Trinidad. He had bought much land — I continued to discover
“pieces” he had bought; he had bought properties in Port of Spain; he had established a very large family and in our community he had a name.

But the diminution of caste susceptibility and the enhanced stature of the Brahmin came with a price. He had to maintain a certain distance from others in spite of the egalitarian propensity within Caribbean Hinduism: ‘On the island, in our [Indian] group, we were set apart’, Naipaul recalls. The life was still circumscribed by many taboos. On the other hand, my lower caste people could lose control – drink hard, curse and fight publicly, frequent whorehouses, be seen to eat meat, including pork (some even beef), while selling their cattle to Muslim or African butchers. There were virtually no accompanying sanctions. Vidia Naipaul was born in 1932, only a dozen years after the termination of indentureship. The sanctions on him, a Brahmin, the custodian of Hindu tradition, would have been quite stern, even if he were ‘born an unbeliever’. Whether Naipaul realised it or not, it infused him a Hindu-grounded sense of hierarchy, along with its prejudice against blackness and an instinctual, negative perception of Africans.

Brahmins were superior but they did not have the freedom, the easy access to excess of the lower castes. This fused them into certain attitudes in the Caribbean. Their superiority complex transmuted their fear of contamination by dark, lower caste people onto black people, Africans. In the Brahmin’s imagination, beef-eating, black Africans were relegated beyond the pale, to the profane space formerly reserved for Chamars, Doms, Dusads, Dhobis and Bhangis – the untouchables in North Indian villages. Colonial society’s own obeisance to white or light skin reinforced this Brahminic obsession. Although most Indians in the Caribbean tended to be perceptibly darker than their Brahmin compatriots or other north Indian upper castes, the general Indian partiality for light skin has not diminished. The Brahmin’s fear of pollution by the ‘negro’ became universal, a reflex among most Indians, including Muslims and converts to Christianity. Even the broader vision engendered by a liberal colonial education hardly lessened this corroding impulse. Nothing could shift it, not even Cheddi Jagan’s Marxist endeavour of nearly 50 years – a project that was predicated on his definition of the Guyanese condition in a countervailing idiom, of class and the class struggle, against foreign and local capital and foreign rule.

In fact, it is arguable that the collective colonial experience on the plantations was at the core of the shaping of an Indo-Guyanese identity, encompassing the entire spectrum of Hindu castes as well as Muslims. This was sustained by their resilient sense of victimhood at the hands of the white ‘sugar barons’, and their continuing residence on the plantations, the soil that bred Jaganism after the Second World War. But of no less significance was that definition by all Indo-Guyanese, of Africans as ‘the other’ in a comprehensive social sense: not merely political and economic rivals towards the end of Empire, but even more fundamentally as the ‘chamar’, the ultimate outcaste. Therefore, while the Procrustean mould of ancient caste and religious prejudices was greatly undermined in colonial Guyana, African Guyanese were now not only relegated beyond the pale, but Indo-Guyanese identity itself was achieved and sustained primarily by a continual instrumental self-definition against a constant counterpoint – the perception of African Guyanese as ‘the other’, the source of potential violence and profanation. It is arguable that there is a residual caste-based foundation to it.
As the late Guyanese historian, Dale Bisnauth (1936-2013), observes: ‘[A]t the core of Indian attitudes to the Afro-Guyanese were the malign vestiges of caste thinking. The Afro-Guyanese was said to belong to the *Kale* (black) caste, and were consequently of very low (caste) ranking, or of no ranking at all [outcaste]. They were identified as Rawan, the arch-enemy of the Indian god-hero, Rama [from the great Hindu text, the *Ramayana*], and with the *Rakshasa*, a demon figure described in the *Mahabharata* as ‘fierce, tawny in hue, terrible, with adamantine teeth’. As either Rawan or Rakshasa, the Afro-Guyanese was to be feared and his company shunned’: the ultimate outcaste – a veritable untouchable.

Did the admission of former Indian pariahs (Chamars, Domns, Dusadhs, Bhangis, etc) into Brahmanic Hinduism in Guyana and the entry of Muslims, however incongruously, into the reshaped Indian identity require the African for its coherence? In his study of Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad, India, *The Colours of Violence* (1996), Sudhir Kakar observes that one of the Hindu groups, the Pardis, a former nomadic, hunting group of low ritual status, seem to need Muslims as ‘the other’ before they can arrive at ‘self-identification’ as Hindus. Moreover, he adds: ‘It seems a Hindu is born only when a Muslim enters. Hindus cannot think of themselves as such without a simultaneous awareness of the Muslim’s presence’. Kakar identifies a range of stereotypes of Muslims, fostered by Hindus, in order to aggregate a diffused religious identity and dampen the resilience of their discrete caste identities: ‘The image of Muslim animality is composed of the perceived ferocity, rampant sexuality, and demand for instant gratification of the male, and a dirtiness which is less than a matter of bodily cleanliness and more of an inner pollution as a consequence of forbidden, tabooed foods’. There is a strong element of ‘untouchability’, suggestive of a virulent component in the construction of Indo-Guyanese identity, susceptible of ready appropriation in the perception of Africans. We are poles away from comprehending the resilient Indian-African incomprehension in Guyana. It is so sensitive that it may never receive intellectual scrutiny.

Sudhir Kakar has traced the origins of the notion of untouchability that was created by the so-called high caste Aryans, people of a light complexion generally: the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, the top *varnas* (meaning colour) in the Hindu hierarchy. Believed to be descended from the foreign invaders of India in ancient times, they sought to distance themselves from the masses of dark Dravidians and the *Adivasis*, the tribals, the original people of India, very black with curly hair, perceived as more akin to Africans physically. The dark people, therefore, were relegated to menial tasks by their light or white conquerors, armed with the power to define: the so-called dark or black untouchables were generally toilet cleaners, ‘carrying buckets of night soil on their heads’: human scavengers. The fear of being absorbed by the black natives has fed a fear of contamination by them: darkness is equated with dirt; beauty is apprehensible only in those with light skin. This has been reinforced over the last millennium because all the invading rulers of India, Muslim and European, have been white or very light. The great Jawaharlal Nehru, of Kashmiri Brahmin stock, very light as to have passed for white, recalls that his own people are perennially afraid that they would lose their cherished physical distinctiveness; in other words, that they could be absorbed by the quagmire of blackness of the masses of lower caste Indians. Lightness is highly prized in the Indian tradition; even the lower caste, black Indians, have internalised this partiality for white skin. Kakar illuminates the continuing glorification of lightness in contemporary India:
The equation of dirt with dark colour is well known to any upper caste Indian child, especially a girl, who has been told by her mother to rub her skin every day with a mixture of dough and cream and who is convinced that the thin dark slivers sloughing off her face or arms are concrete proof of her skin becoming lighter. Evidence of the pan-Indian preference for fair skin and a denigration bordering on scorn for the dark-skinned is all around us…In India products that promise a whitening of the skin chalk up record profits. Television commercials…[and] the natural equation of light skin with nobility, beauty and high birth in proverbs, tales and legends; matrimonials in newspapers and on internet websites specifying ‘fair’ brides – all these are accepted in the natural order of things. ‘Black is beautiful’ is not a slogan that will catch on in India anytime in the near future. Fair skin, then, is eminently touchable, desirable, whereas dark skin is an outer manifestation of inner dirtiness and remains ‘untouchable’…A dark-skinned African…will often be an object of condescension, even ridicule…[but] many a-gora [white person] leading an anonymous, run-of-the-mill life in his own country feels like a special ‘somebody’ in India, the admiring gazes and flattering tones of voice constantly feeding his self-esteem, his narcissism [emphasis added].

My own experience of most Indo-Guyanese, including highly educated ones, is that these negative perceptions of blackness and Africans as a whole (rooted in Mother India), however submerged, need no revision when applied to them, although most Indo-Guyanese are much darker than upper caste North Indians. Because of Guyanese inability to address deep racial insecurities – the source of the political intractability over many decades – it is arguable that the country is sitting on a volcano, however dormant it may appear at the present time. The El Dorado complex which was so crucial to the colonising of an inhospitable Guyana is as vibrant as ever, now that it seems as if the country will be producing oil. This breeds envy and invidious comparisons between ethnic groups as to who will be the beneficiary of this impending wealth. The largely unknown hinterland has played a similar role historically, deepening mutual ethnic suspicions. Consequently, enhanced national wealth could well be a source not of optimism for the future, but a big bone of contention with serious implications for the political trajectory of the country. Indo-Guyanese, constituting the majority group and deemed to be monopolising political and economic power, therefore, have to be seen to be making overtures to others, in order to build a more inclusive social and political order.

The Indo-Guyanese achievement, after 175 years, here and in the wide diaspora, is an astounding one. Nothing encapsulates the scale of this than the role played by women in this narrative of progress. Therefore, I wish to draw your attention again to Professor Brij Lal’s assessment of the women’s strength of character and their capacity for hard work, self-restraint and enduring endeavour to guide their menfolk away from the excesses of plantation life. What he says of Fiji is probably even more applicable to Guyana, where Indians were soon able to acquire titles to freehold land; this was not the case in Fiji. Lal notes that a high percentage of women migrants were registered outside their home districts: 59% from Basti, 66.5% from Gonda, and the
overwhelming majority from Azamgahr and Sultanpur. He is sanguine that this was the case not because they were tricked by *arkatis*, but because many had already left home or were driven out of their homes after the death of their husbands, during recurring epidemics. Indeed, many women were already on the move, going ‘east’, to Bengal and Assam, seeking a new life: ‘Migration was not a new or unknown phenomenon for Indian women; thousands had left their homes before they met the recruiters and were shipped to Fiji and other colonies; had moved to other parts of India (Calcutta jute mills, Assam tea gardens, Bihar coalmines, Bombay textile mills) in search of employment, either *on their own* or in the company of male relatives. The journey to Fiji [and the Caribbean] was part of a larger process of migration [emphasis added].”

Although Professor Lal acknowledges that while a strand of deception permeated recruitment in India, he does not see indentured women as ‘helpless victims’, mere ‘pawns in the hands of unscrupulous recruiters’. He considers them ‘actors in their own right’; he gives agency to these women. They were mostly very young, immersed in an environment of despair; but a minority, the most enterprising and energetic, were actuated by a broader vision of new possibilities spawned by the culture of migration of the late 19th century. Exposure to a wider world and anonymity, beyond their stultifying villages, expanded their horizons and endowed these intrepid migrants with the possibility of some release from the ancient shackles on initiative, female individuality and autonomy. Lal observes that many young women were desperate, rudderless, because their husbands have migrated and had clearly abandoned them; others were young wives or young widows marooned in a pitiable existence in the homes of their in-laws. It was considered a shame to seek to return to one’s parents’ home: they were a plague on both houses. He concludes with a celebration of their character that is an imperishable tribute which I see as a testimonial to the life of Kaila, my maternal great-grandmother, in British Guiana between 1909 and 1956:

The fact that women were prepared to part with a life of drudgery and unhappiness for the largely unknown would seem to me to suggest that many of them must have been individuals of remarkable independence, enterprise and self-respect. These were certainly the values they nurtured and lived by in the colonies.

Kaila and her fellow ‘bound coolies’ shaped a solid foundation for Indo-Guyanese to build a culturally vibrant, economically viable and educationally vigorous community. But it must not be forgotten that several generations of African Guyanese school-teachers contribute immeasurably to the accelerated advancement of Indo-Guyanese in the sphere of education and the professions. Yet we are still imprisoned by a lack of mutual magnanimity. Guyana will progress only when all its peoples are engaged in the process of building a nation, all its people feel that they belong and are inspired to work towards the shaping of this elusive nation. But this is a process; it will take time, patience and mutual recognition of each other’s aspirations, shortcomings and fears. I believe that Indo-Guyanese, as I argue in my book, *Mother India’s Shadow over El Dorado* (2011), have benefited enormously from an enduring engagement with their ancestral land, however imagined their conceptualisation of that land and its legacy. African Guyanese, like those in other parts of the region, have sought continually to engage with an imagined Africa in
building self-esteem. However, that link has been less vigorous for a number of reasons, but that does not invalidate the endeavour, as I argue in my book of 2007, *Muscular Learning*. That process must be encouraged and accelerated, by the Guyanese state, because Guyana’s long-term security and prosperity is predicated on its diverse peoples building self-confidence within their groups, if they are to have the courage and resolve to collaborate in building a nation.

In August 1936 the Indo-Guyanese intellectual, J.I. Ramphal (1903-66), commented on the notion of a Guyanese identity. He did not subscribe to ‘sectarianism’ or ‘sectionalism’; he wanted ‘Guianese first, Indian after’; but he recognised that it would be idealistic to elude references to ‘racial problems…for a while yet’ in British Guiana. He was very aware that building a nation was an aspiration; it would be a protracted process with many potential pitfalls. He elaborated:

We want the Negroes of the country to have a real Negro consciousness until they find their footing. After that they will be qualified for a real Guianese consciousness…[But] we want Negro-controlled organisations to work for the benefit of British Guiana, giving expression to the peculiar contribution which that race is endowed to give to the world. We want Indians and other races to give their peculiar contribution also. In a mixed community like this…the process of country consciousness is necessarily slow, and in our opinion has to pass through the stage of section-consciousness to country-consciousness. What we can do is to minimise as much as possible the time at the sectarian stage, and proceed quickly to the greater and better stage. It is only then that British Guiana can come into its own, only then mutual respect and mutual love will follow. Then there will be a Guayanese consciousness. Until then the term Guyanese is only a wish [emphasis added].

Over seven decades since J.I. Ramphal penned those profound thoughts, Guyana, unfortunately, has not moved beyond the ‘sectarian stage’, our Marxist experiments notwithstanding, our endeavour to prioritise class over ethnicity. The term Guyanese remains ‘only a wish’. A few years ago Professor Clive Thomas spoke of ‘the importance of the promotion of our [African] culture in enhancing self-identity, group cohesiveness and non-conflictual modes of behaviour among African Guyanese and between African Guyanese and other groups’. That remains a valid goal. Therefore, the biggest challenge for Indian Guyanese, on the 175th anniversary of their arrival in Guyana and as we approach the 50th anniversary of Guyana’s independence in 2016, must be to explore and accelerate areas of cultural and political co-operation with Africans to forge mutual ethnic comprehension and security and to reduce fear and mistrust – to begin to shape the rudiments of a nation; to collaborate, in the pressing context of climate change, in a long-term programme for the conservation of a fragile ecosystem and the rehabilitation and expansion of a crucial, but delicate, hydraulic system; and to promote an anti-corruption culture that engenders respect for law and order and legitimate economic activities that open up possibilities for all-round development for all ethnic groups. With respect to the latter, it is important to recall that in October 1992 Cheddi Jagan, a man with impeccable credentials of incorruptibility, told the people of Guyana that ‘corruption is a cancer which my
Government is determined to eradicate’. On this auspicious occasion, all Guyanese could do well to ponder – and act – on these words of that great Guyanese.

It is imperative that Guyana be open to vigorous debate. It is paramount that we seek, actively, to build a nation. We are a sovereign state but are yet to create a Guyanese nation to which all our peoples feel a sense of belonging. When you live in multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-tribal societies, it is crucial that you have an on-going dialogue encompassing all groups. The time to talk is when the voice is not silenced by the sound of violence and the futility of despair. It is very important, therefore, that the dominant group is seen to be listening to those groups which see themselves as subordinate or suppressed. If you want people to live and share with you in peace, if you do wish to create a nation, you must engage others in organisations that seek to cross ethnic boundaries; and, sometimes, you do have to face things that are quite painful, even about yourself, about your history.

Suggested Readings:


Joseph Ruhomon’s India: The Progress of Her People at Home and Abroad and How those in British Guiana may Improve Themselves (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2001).

Mother India’s Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2011).

‘To Write was to Learn’: Finding Myself through History (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, forthcoming 2014)