

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Plantations and Labour in the Caribbean in the Long Nineteenth Century

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The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean. Ed. by Walton Look Lai and Tan Chee-Beng. Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2010. x, 242 pp. Ill. €32.00; \$45.00.

Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations. The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Ed. by Marcel van der Linden. [Studies in Global Social History, Vol. 7.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2011. xvii, 556 pp. €129.00; \$183.00.

BHAGWANBALI, RADJINDER. Contracten voor Suriname. Arbeidsmigratie vanuit Brits-Indië onder het indentured-labourstelsel, 1873–1916. Amrit, The Hague 1996. 263 pp. No price.

BHAGWANBALI, RADJINDER. De nieuwe avatar van slavernij. Hindoestaanse migranten onder het indentured labour systeem naar Suriname, 1873–1916. [NSHI-SIN-IISR reeks, vol. 1.] Amrit, The Hague 2010. 258 pp. €15.00

BHAGWANBALI, RADJINDER. Tetary – de koppige. Het verzet van Hindoestanen tegen het Indentured Labour System in Suriname, 1873–1916. [NSHI-SIN-IISR reeks, vol. 3.] Amrit, The Hague 2011. 143 pp. €12.50.

KANHAI MISHRE, PADMINI. The Chandrashekar Sharma Story. A Remarkable Case Study of Family in the Indian Diaspora. Amrit, The Hague 2010. 44 pp. Ill. €5.00.

Plantations did not disappear with the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean. Even though the profitability of Caribbean large-scale agriculture declined appreciably, and production transferred to other regions,

including Asia, the need for a disciplined and cheap labour force continued to exist. Many of the former enslaved did not want to continue working on the plantations, but employment alternatives depended largely on the availability of unused agricultural land. Particularly on small, densely populated islands such as Barbados, the manumitted were forced either to emigrate or to continue to work on the plantations.

Planters, often supported by their colonial governments, searched for alternative labour relations. In his introduction to *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations* Marcel van der Linden lists three ways in which workers around the world could be bound to plantations: pseudo-contracts signed by workers under duress – these were regularly used for the exploitation of native peoples in, for example, the United States and Australia; debt bondage, or peonage, often combined with sharecropping, again in the United States; and indentured labour. This last form was centuries old, but reappeared on a massive scale in the nineteenth century. In the Caribbean it generally meant that recruits from Asia (India, China, and Java) were transported to the Caribbean, where they were put to work on a plantation for a specified number of years.

The system of indenture curtailed the freedom and mobility of workers, who were unable to withdraw from the labour process as the employer could resort to the criminal law to enforce the labour contract. Refusal to work or transgressions of disciplinary codes were punishable breaches of contract. In those cases the indentured workers were subject to fines, hard labour, or incarceration. The first experiments with this system took place in the first decade of the nineteenth century with the import of Chinese workers to Trinidad. However, indentured migration really took off in the 1830s, when slavery and apprenticeship came to an end, and the British moved thousands of workers from India to their colonies in the Caribbean, including British Guiana (in total 239,000 migrants), Trinidad (144,000), and Jamaica (36,500). Later, British Indians were indentured also in the French colonies and the Dutch colony of Suriname.

*Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations* is the outcome of a conference held in 2008 on the long-term consequences of the abolition of the slave trade. It sets out to identify the global interconnection of all the various developments caused by the abolition of slavery. Its editor, Marcel van der Linden, emphasizes “that the politics of the great powers could influence labor relations the world over”.<sup>1</sup> A case in point is the migration from India to Suriname, which required close cooperation between the governments of Great Britain and the Netherlands. Because

1. Marcel van der Linden, “Introduction”, in *idem* (ed.), *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations: The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 1–45, 4.

London had prohibited the recruitment of labour by private enterprise, the intervention of the Dutch administration was necessary. In other words, the state intervened in the mobilization of labour for private enterprises. After years of negotiations, a treaty regulating the emigration of British Indians to Suriname was signed in 1872. The Hague appointed an agent, approved by Great Britain, to manage the recruitment process. The treaty also stipulated provisions regarding such issues as transport, labour contracts, and medical treatment.

In 1875, after eight transports, and following complaints by the British consul concerning the health of the migrants and the system of justice, migration to Suriname was suspended. This dependence on another power, coupled with the fact that the British Indians remained British nationals and thus could request the assistance of the British consul, led planters and the authorities in Suriname to look elsewhere to recruit labour, and they found it in the Dutch empire itself: Java. This indentured migration from the Netherlands East Indies is often forgotten, leading to the assumption that “the flow of contract laborers from Asia to the Americas ended in 1917, when the Indian government banned it”.<sup>2</sup> In fact, indentured immigration from Java to Suriname continued until the late 1920s.

The sixteen essays in this volume highlight the various interregional and transcontinental connections in the aftermath of slavery. The abolition of the slave trade and, later, of slavery had worldwide, often unexpected, economic, social, political, and cultural consequences. This volume discusses these effects in the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia. Though some essays complement each other nicely (for instance, David Eltis on the Atlantic context of the British and American abolition of the slave trade, and Dick Geary on the limited impact of this abolition in Brazil), ultimately the topic may be too broad to tie all the essays together in a meaningful way. Even within the four sections (“Politics of Memory”, “Abolitions”, “Consequences”, and “Perspectives”) the contributions diverge significantly in terms of scope and originality.

Focusing on plantation labour in the Caribbean, it is important to note that those formerly enslaved did not always leave the plantations in droves, as they were reluctant to break social and cultural ties, and perhaps they had no alternative employment. The essays by Michael Zeuske and Norbert Finzsch (comparing Cuba and Louisiana) and Claus Füllberg-Stolberg (on Jamaica) both point out that the manumitted frequently remained close to “their” plantation and that there was no mass flight.<sup>3</sup>

2. David Eltis, “Was Abolition of the American and British Slave Trade Significant in the Broader Atlantic Context?”, in Van der Linden, *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations*, pp. 117–139, 138.

3. Michael Zeuske and Norbert Finzsch, “What Came after Emancipation? A Micro-Historical Comparison between Cuba and the United States”, in Van der Linden, *Humanitarian Intervention*

What emerged was a group of smallholders who often, literally, worked in the shadow of the plantations. They were called upon when extra hands were needed, but they were not part of the permanent workforce. Indentured labour did not preclude the hiring of free workers. In my own research on Suriname, I found that the highest-paid jobs were given to experienced free workers, often those formerly enslaved.<sup>4</sup> And, as pointed out by Evelyn Hu-DeHart in *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*, in Cuba indentured labourers were imported before the abolition of slavery.<sup>5</sup> In short, there did not exist a dichotomous model of free labour on the one hand and indentured labour on the other.

This point is further elaborated by Roger Knight in his essay on indentured labour. He persuasively warns against the tendency to homogenize the experience of indenture and the notion that “indenture formed some kind of ‘half-way house’ between slavery and free labor”.<sup>6</sup> He questions whether indenture is a clearly defined, distinct, and independent category of labour that is isolated from other forms of labour. A clear-cut division between different categories of labour – “slavery”, “indenture”, and “free” – turns a blind eye to distinctions at different times and locations. “Very different sets of arrangements underpinned indenture, not least because such arrangements were heavily influenced by the prevailing political economy of the various regions in which capital operated.”<sup>7</sup>

Walton Look Lai, one of the editors of *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*, a collection of eight articles previously published in the *Journal of Chinese Overseas* (2009), has written a clear and concise overview of Asian diasporas and tropical migration in the nineteenth century that nicely dovetails with *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations* in general and Knight’s article in particular. Look Lai looks at the global movement of commodities and people, and of the capital required to accomplish this. He highlights the role of the industrial revolution in transforming “not only economic structures and social relations within the countries where the process was taking place, but also the momentum of global migration and the course of empire

and *Changing Labor Relations*, pp. 285–318; Claus Füllberg-Stolberg, “Land Policies in Jamaica, 1830–1940”, in *ibid.*, pp. 319–350.

4. Rosemarijn Hoefte, *In Place of Slavery: A Social History of British Indian and Javanese Laborers in Suriname* (Gainesville, FL, 1998).

5. Evelyn Hu-DeHart, “Indispensable Enemy or Convenient Scapegoat? A Critical Examination of Sinophobia in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1870s to 1930s”, in Walton Look Lai and Tan Chee-Beng (eds), *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Leiden, 2010), pp. 65–102.

6. Roger Knight, “Indenture, Grand Narratives and Fragmented Histories: The Dutch Indies, c.1880–1940”, in Van der Linden, *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations*, pp. 419–432, 419.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 424.

throughout the century”.<sup>8</sup> He follows Caribbean Nobel Prize winner Sir Arthur Lewis in distinguishing two enormous streams of international migration: 50 million people leaving Europe for modernizing areas in temperate climate zones and another 50 million leaving east and south Asia to toil in the tropics producing food and raw materials.

This international and racial division of labour took place within the framework of the expanding European and later American empire or within the framework of neo-colonialism, as it did with the young republics in Latin America. Not only did the migration waves themselves have distinct ethnic and racial profiles, the same was true for the migrant communities that settled in the host countries, regularly causing outbreaks of racism. The migrants were very often seen as intruders taking jobs, weakening the bargaining position of local workers and thus lowering wages. Evelyn Hu-DeHart elaborates how the Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean in general, but in Jamaica and Mexico in particular, were frequently targeted, also in the post-indenture period, because of their “ethnic distinctiveness, clannishness, foreign-ness and, simultaneously, their perceived success in limited but distinct occupations, especially in shopkeeping and local commerce”.<sup>9</sup> This racism was sometimes even enforced by law, as in Peru in the 1930s (Isabelle Lausent-Herrera).<sup>10</sup> In his contribution on Belize, Honduras, and Nicaragua, St John Robinson also notes that, particularly in times of economic crisis, the Chinese were often scapegoated, accused of taking local jobs and women.<sup>11</sup> Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were strong anti-immigration movements in Central America.

Look Lai rightly points out that despite Chinese and Indian migration “beyond their traditional orbits”,<sup>12</sup> south and south-east Asia remained the primary destination of 80 per cent of Asian labour migrants. Increasing colonial occupation and intervention had transformed regional economies, pushing people out, but also creating new places of production.<sup>13</sup> A case in point is the nineteenth-century Indian migration that was intimately tied to the expansion of the tropical regions in the British Empire.

8. Walton Look Lai, “Asian Diasporas and Tropical Migration in the Age of Empire: A Comparative Overview”, in *idem* and Chee-Beng, *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*, pp. 35–63, 35.

9. Hu-DeHart, “Indispensable Enemy or Convenient Scapegoat?”, p. 65.

10. Isabelle Lausent-Herrera, “Tusans (*Tusbeng*) and the Changing Chinese Community in Peru”, in Look Lai and Chee-Beng, *Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*, pp. 143–184.

11. St John Robinson, “The Chinese of Central America: Diverse Beginnings, Common Achievements”, in Look Lai and Chee-Beng, *Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean*, pp. 103–128.

12. Look Lai, “Asian Diasporas and Tropical Migration”, p. 38.

13. See also Ulbe Bosma, “The Discourse on Free Labor and the Forced Cultivation System: The Contradictory Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Colonial Java”, in Van der Linden, *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations*, pp. 387–418.

The importance of sugar is clear. Despite destination differences, many Chinese and Indian labour migrants were imported to work on the still expanding sugar plantations in Cuba, Peru, Hawaii, Réunion, and the French, British, and Dutch Caribbean. Look Lai estimates that 300,000 Chinese were involved in producing sugar, while most of the 1.3 million Indians who migrated to areas beyond Asia worked on sugar plantations. The overwhelming majority of these plantation labourers were put to work under some form of indenture. Van der Linden and Look Lai both affirm that it was the expanding global sugar market that revived the system of indenture, even though it was not the only sector to exploit indentured labour. In Peru, for example, Chinese indentured labourers worked in the guano industry, while in Panama and Costa Rica they helped construct the railways. Indenture, however, is indelibly linked to sugar plantations. Following Knight's essay, Look Lai mentions Hawaii and Cuba as examples of places where indenture did not follow slavery. Hawaii had never used slave labour, but it turned to indenture anyway, while in Cuba enslaved and Chinese contract labourers worked side by side.

In the historiographical debate regarding the ratio of coercion to freedom in the various labour arrangements, in other words the question of whether it approximated to slavery or free migrant labour, a complex picture emerges, despite all sorts of regulations and laws to protect the migrants. Look Lai sums up five key questions regarding recruitment, transportation, enforcement, and contractual obligations to determine the level of coercion. He notes that several kinds of arrangement were simultaneously at work, and thus he too undercuts the idea that indentured labour was a monolithic system.

The next three publications to be discussed are all by Radjinder Bhagwanbali on the contract migration and labour of British Indians, also known as Hindustani, in Suriname. (Remarkably, given his focus, in none of the three publications does the author provide a comprehensive definition of contract labour in Suriname. Also, the three titles use the phrase "indentured labour" even though there is a perfect equivalent in Dutch: *contractarbeid*.) Between 1873 and 1916 34,304 British Indians arrived in Suriname.

*Contracten voor Suriname*, Bhagwanbali's unrevised dissertation of 1996, is a straightforward account of the recruitment and transportation of Indian contract labourers. Based largely on archival research, it details the selection of migrants, the organization, rules, and regulations of recruitment, and the actual transport to Suriname. This Caribbean plantation colony serves as a case study, allowing him to analyse whether indentured labour was a blessing or a curse. More specifically, the author sets out to "depoliticize" the debate on indentured labour, without delving too deeply into the theories regarding the nature of contract labour.<sup>14</sup> In his brief sketch of this

14. Radjinder Bhagwanbali, *Contracten voor Suriname: Arbeidsmigratie vanuit Brits-Indië onder het indentured-labourstelsel, 1873-1916* (The Hague, 1996), p. 19.

debate, he does not always clarify in what time period certain arguments were put forward, making it sometimes hard to follow. In his conclusion, the author rejects the notion of indentured labour as a new form of slavery as an “emotional judgement based on contemporary values rather than a careful comparison of both recruitment systems based on available empirical evidence”.<sup>15</sup> He very cautiously decides not to take sides: “an explicit standpoint in terms of rejection or defence of the system is not defined”.<sup>16</sup>

The first part of *De nieuwe awatar van slavernij: Hindoestaanse migranten onder het indentured labour system naar Suriname, 1873–1916*, on recruitment and transportation, is based on Bhagwanbali’s dissertation. It is still descriptive, but livelier, more succinct, and less guarded than the first publication, with more examples and a few telling quotations. The second part deals with life on the plantation, discussing such issues as housing, medical care, labour conditions, resistance, and the legal system.

I have several interrelated issues with this study, which ultimately all relate to the use of sources. The most manifest problem is the lack of use of secondary sources. The author states that he could not rely on the extant literature on Suriname as “most publications give only a summary and vague picture of the indentured labour system”.<sup>17</sup> I find it hard to believe that the fifty or so publications that have appeared since 1990 on indentured labour in Suriname, thirty of which are on the Hindustani experience, contain nothing worth referring to. Of the approximately twenty-five monographs on indentured labour in the Caribbean published in the past two decades Bhagwanbali mentions less than a handful in his bibliography. Unhelpfully, he also refers to works not in the bibliography (Coombs, Snellen) and misspells authors’ names.

The author relies on archival sources, but there are frequently long sections without any references. One is left to wonder where he gleaned this information. This is particularly glaring in, for example, the section on daily life, where in fifteen pages of text, I was unable on nine occasions to locate the source of a statement. Often, the periodization is unclear as well: to give but one example, the author states that among Hindustani migrants the ratio of men to women was 3:1.<sup>18</sup> When? And was this rate fixed, or did it change over time? Equally problematic is the fact that Bhagwanbali depends on nineteenth-century sources, scarcely ever referring to records from the post-1900 period. This omission renders the subtitle misleading, as the information on the first few decades of the twentieth century is exceedingly

15. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

17. Radjinder Bhagwanbali, *De nieuwe awatar van slavernij: Hindoestaanse migranten onder het indentured labour systeem naar Suriname, 1873–1916* (The Hague, 2010), p. 27.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

meagre. More seriously, this publication tends to ignore changes across time and offers insufficient consideration of distinctions in terms of location, such as whether plantations were large or small, close to the capital, Paramaribo, or in the distant western district of Nickerie, and whether they cultivated a specific crop (sugar, coffee, bananas). Of the twenty tables given in the text and appendices, only two include data for the twentieth century. In addition, findings are presented in a vacuum. The reader might get the impression from this study that only indentured Hindustani were working on Suriname's plantations, ignoring free British Indian labourers, the Afro-Surinamese, and the Javanese indentureds who arrived after 1890.

In the epilogue, Bhagwanbali throws all caution regarding judgements displayed in his dissertation to the winds by blaming the planters, the Dutch royal house, and the Dutch state for the abuse of Hindustani workers, of whom more than 5,000 did not survive “the harsh and cruel life on the plantations. It was not only disease that caused their deaths. Many of them literally worked themselves to death on the plantations. Others died from hunger and exhaustion because they could not survive on the meagre wages that they earned on the plantations.”<sup>19</sup> He calls for non-monetary reparations: for Hindustani to be given the option of belatedly becoming citizens of the very state under accusation. A second proposal links slavery and indentured labour even more closely: rather than commemorating the day the first immigrants arrived on 5 June, Bhagwanbali calls for the victims and survivors of the “new avatar of slavery” to be commemorated on 18 March, the day the British Viceroy Lord Hardinge put an end to indentured migration to Suriname in 1916, following the tradition of commemorating the abolition of slavery.

In *Tetary*, Bhagwanbali zooms in on open, violent resistance among Hindustani contract labourers. He focuses on four rather well-known rebellions at plantations de Resolutie (1876), Zoelen (1884), Zorg en Hoop (1884), and Mariënborg (1902). These chapters are based on painstaking archival research and present an account of the causes of those protests and the clashes with the authorities. *Tetary*, named after one of the female rebels at Zorg en Hoop, gives the too often anonymous labourers a name. It sometimes reads as a source book; unfortunately, at times it is unclear when the author is citing documents in toto and when he is paraphrasing them. To give but one example, in his description of *Tetary*, Bhagwanbali writes “everyone on the plantation accepted and respected *Tetary*'s decisions”,<sup>20</sup> but no source for this claim is given.

The author's approach again raises a number of issues regarding choices and context. In his introduction the author states that in his choices “the

19. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

20. Radjinder Bhagwanbali, *Tetary – de koppige: Het verzet van Hindoestanen tegen het Indentured Labour System in Suriname, 1873–1916* (The Hague, 2011), p. 91.



quality of the reports” was of prime importance.<sup>21</sup> Bhagwanbali does not elaborate on what criteria he used to determine quality, or what sources he therefore did not employ. For example, in his description of the largest rebellion, at Mariënburg, which claimed the lives of twenty-four Hindustani and the manager, he ignores the report by the British consul. This consul served as a protector of Indian immigrants. Significantly, British Indian immigrants had the right to claim consular assistance, and communication with the consul was required to be free and without restrictions. The colonial government in Suriname was not pleased with the consul’s presence, nor with his powers. The consular reports can be important sources of information, and Bhagwanbali duly cites consuls in his accounts of other rebellions. Yet he does not do so in the case of Mariënburg, even though the consul’s reports certainly add to our understanding of the complex causes of resistance:

There appears to be no doubt that the late manager had been trying to reduce the expenditure, and among other things reduced the rate of pay for cane cutting. There appears also, to have been much ill feeling on account of interference with the cooly women by the deceased Manager, and because of favouritism shown to the relatives of some of these women [...]. I have also been told that the overseers were much underpaid, and that they occasionally borrowed money from the coolies, and drank with them, this, naturally, weakened their authority, and was in every way bad. This all helped to induce the very unsatisfactory state of feeling which must have existed among the coolies at Mariënburg.<sup>22</sup>

*Tetary*’s value would have been enhanced if the author had added more background information and analysis. Facts are too often presented without context: for example, the list of imprisonments at Mariënburg between late 1890 and early 1891<sup>23</sup> is fairly meaningless unless it is related to the total number of plantation labourers, compared with incarceration at other plantations at that time and with detentions in earlier or later periods. Other statements are not supported by the data provided by the author. For instance, death rates in the first few years of immigration were apparently exceedingly high. Bhagwanbali claims the death rate at de Resolutie was 9.1 in 1873. He then claims that “almost every day one witnessed the death of a (young) compatriot”.<sup>24</sup> Given that this estate employed some 467 Hindustani contract workers (the author gives this figure for both 1873 and 1876),<sup>25</sup> even the author’s own data cannot support the assertion of a death every day.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

22. British Consul to Foreign Office, quoted in Hoefte, *In Place of Slavery*, pp. 196–197.

23. Bhagwanbali, *Tetary – de koppige*, p. 105.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 33 and 35.

With his focus on open resistance Bhagwanbali follows the local authorities and press with their focus on spectacular events, thus overlooking acts of more covert resistance and non-cooperation such as “neglect of duty” or illegal absences. How often did the plantation managers have to rely on the courts to maintain or restore discipline? The frequency of prosecution under penal sanction may be less eye-catching, but it was probably more indicative of the frustration and discontent of the indentured workers. Moreover, the author barely touches on whether these rebellions were isolated conflicts provoked by specific incidents or a struggle to change radically the existing system of exploitation. Related to this is the question of why there were no further open rebellions after the massacre at Mariënborg. Was it the enormous power of the plantation system, the fear of the ruthless authorities, or improvements, however slight, in the indentured labourers’ position that prevented further rebellion? Did the threat of “another Mariënborg” alarm both planters and workers to such a degree that open conflicts were avoided in the remaining years of indentured labour?

In *Tetary* Bhagwanbali again eschews the secondary literature. On the basis of a bibliography of three books (all on Suriname) he boldly claims that no other country in which Indians were indentured experienced as much collective protest as Suriname.<sup>26</sup> In his conclusion, he points to the intertwining interests between planters and colonial authorities; a closer reading of his sources and the extant literature indicates that this was not always the case. The bloodbath at Mariënborg shows that the plantation management and a number of colonial authorities, the British consul, and Dutch politicians did not see eye to eye on the causes of the protest.<sup>27</sup>

In this publication too, Bhagwanbali ends on an activist note by characterizing Hindustani resistance as a “righteous struggle”,<sup>28</sup> and he calls for the erection of a statue to Tetary in The Hague, the city in the Netherlands where approximately 10 per cent of the population is of Hindustani descent.

*De nieuwe awatar van slavernij* and *Tetary* are part of a series published by the Nationale Stichting Hindostaanse Immigratie (NSHI, National Hindustani Immigration Foundation) in Suriname, the Sarnámi Instituut Nederland (SIN, Sarnámi Institute Netherlands), and the International Institute for Scientific Research (IISR) in The Hague. The series sets out to publish results of scholarly research on Hindustani history, culture, and diasporic communities. Both publications contain an introduction by the IISR’s director Sandew Hira (*nom de plume* of Dew Baboeram) explaining the mission of his institute, which was founded

26. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

27. Hoefte, *In Place of Slavery*, pp. 196–202.

28. Bhagwanbali, *Tetary – de koppige*, p. 130.

in 2010, namely to study, describe, and analyse colonialism and its legacy in the modern world. Its ultimate goal is “decolonizing the mind”.<sup>29</sup> He accuses a number of Dutch scholars, institutes, and journals of being pillars of “scholarly colonialism”.<sup>30</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that both the institute with which I am affiliated and I personally are included on this list, even though the author does not discuss my work in any way or form. Hira places Bhagwanbali’s findings in a schematic overview that compares slavery and indentured labour, identifying this as an “important topic in the international scholarly literature”.<sup>31</sup> That makes it even more surprising that Bhagwanbali barely cites this literature.

Hira lauds Bhagwanbali’s conclusion that indentured migration was not a form of free migration. Bhagwanbali is certainly not the first to reach this conclusion, not even in the case of Suriname. His three books add depth to the history of Hindustani contract labour, but his findings lack the necessary context. It seems that the author, and by extension the series, is in two minds about the approach chosen: “academic” or “activist”. And the correlation is not always smooth. It seems incongruous that the book covers include the author’s academic titles while the author himself refrains from citing the international scholarship on indentured labour.

*The Chandrashekar Sharma Story* was the first of the IISR’s publications, and it differs much from the studies by Bhagwanbali. Chandrashekar Sharma, great-grandfather of the book’s author, Padmini Kanhai Mishre, left Calcutta for British Guiana as an indentured migrant in 1893. His experiences were recorded by his daughter Lilawati. It is a fascinating but also exceptional history: “My father was 22 years old when he came to British Guyana [*sic*]. He was educated [...]. His friends did all the work for him.”<sup>32</sup> After his contract had expired, he moved to Suriname, became a full-time priest, was one of the founders of the Arya Samaj reformist movement in Suriname, and started a printing press. He twice returned to India, and moved there permanently in 1936. In several letters to his son Parmanand he describes life in his country of birth. Two years after his final migration he died at the age of sixty-seven. In short, this life story does not reflect the experience of the average Indian indentured migrant.

The lively story of Chandrashekar Sharma deserves more background than could be given in this booklet. It raises questions about the social role of religious leaders and about the upgrading and downgrading of caste, the implosion of the caste system on the plantations, and its revival

29. Sandew Hira, “Introduction”, in Bhagwanbali, *De nieuwe avatar van slavernij*, p. 6.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

32. Padmini Kanhai Mishre, *The Chandrashekar Sharma Story: A Remarkable Case Study of Family in the Indian Diaspora* (The Hague, 2010), p. 9.

in the post-indenture period. It also calls for further study on migration movements between neighbouring colonies, such as Suriname and British Guiana, of which we still know very little.

The second part of the booklet focuses on the diaspora of Chandra-shekar Sharma's family: his descendants live in India, the Netherlands, England, Canada, the United States of America, Greece, Germany, Trinidad, Austria, Guyana, Barbados, and Suriname. This rather dry account is only a first step towards a history of diaspora and a sociology of East Indian emancipation.

*Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations* and *The Chinese in Latin America and the Caribbean* are examples of studies emphasizing how levels of labour exploitation varied widely, between destinations (at the macro and the micro levels), and over time. Important factors determining the character of labour relations include the strength of the planter class, the indispensability of the workforce, and the different colonial histories. In the case of indentured labour on Caribbean plantations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, micro histories of Asian migration and labour are of vital importance if we are to understand the macro-historical processes of large-scale movements of people and commodities. These micro histories need to pay attention to changes across time and differences in space and should be embedded in the larger historical discussion about the complexities and nuances of indenture and its aftermath. To conclude with the words of Roger Knight, comparing the "Grand Narratives" of indenture and slavery, "Both Narratives once served an important purpose, to identify morally repugnant phenomena. But as tools for the present-day historian, they are of doubtful utility."<sup>33</sup>

33. Knight, "Indenture, Grand Narratives and Fragmented Histories", p. 425.