

Ruben Gowricharn

# The Girmitiya Peasants in Suriname

Agrarian and Economic Transformations  
in a Plantation Society

 Springer

# The Girmitiya Peasants in Suriname

Ruben Gowricharn

# The Giritiya Peasants in Suriname

Agrarian and Economic Transformations  
in a Plantation Society

 Springer

Ruben Gowricharn  
Humanities  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
Amsterdam, Noord-Holland, The Netherlands

ISBN 978-3-031-67960-5                      ISBN 978-3-031-67961-2 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-67961-2>

Translation from the Dutch language edition: “Miskend Verleden. Hindostaanse boeren in Suriname 1880-1980” by Ruben Gowricharn, © Publisher and Author 2020. Published by Verloren. All Rights Reserved.

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.

## List of Area Measurement Units

are:  $10 \text{ metres} \times 10 \text{ metres} = 100 \text{ square metres}$

hectare, ha:  $100 \text{ metres} \times 100 \text{ metres} = 10,000 \text{ square metres}$

field: 0.05 ha (500 square metres)

# Preface

In the collective imagination of Indo-Surinamese, who refer to themselves as Hindostanis, their ancestors were transported from British India to the Surinamese plantations after an exhausting voyage where they were treated and exploited just as in slavery. Nevertheless, they remained in Suriname to make the best of it. And they succeeded because otherwise we, the third, fourth or fifth generation of Hindostanis, would not have existed. The Hindostanis migrated to the city, became proud citizens of Suriname, integrated well and prospered through education and entrepreneurship. Striking in this narrative is the absence of peasants, a segment of the population that was so naturally present in Surinamese society for more than a century. That is my main motive for writing this book.

This book was published in Dutch in 2020 as *Miskend Verleden. Hindostaanse boeren in Suriname 1889–1980*. Hilversum: Verloren van Themaat. Because international colleagues often inquire about a book dealing with Hindostanis in Suriname, and a book about the Hindostani peasantry is lacking, I decided to publish an English version. The Dutch version has been revised and shortened for an English audience. The present book may be considered supplementary to an analysis of the cultural and political history of Hindostanis, *Multiple Homemaking. The Ethnic Condition in Indian Diaspora Societies* (London/New York: Routledge 2020), that deals with different topics concerning homemaking of the Hindostani community.

The book is based on several sources. The most important were the annual reports of the colonial administration, *Surinaamsch Verslag*, and the reports of the Ministry of Agriculture and Economic Affairs (LEZ, whose name changed a few times) and the Landbouwproefstation, a research department of the LEZ. The reports of these agencies were highly irregular. That is reflected in the discontinuity of years or the absence of a publication year. In the text, however, the sources are mentioned as precisely as possible.

The Dutch manuscript was commented upon by quite a few Dutch and Hindostani scholars. Their comments could be divided into those with which I immediately agreed, those that enforced a reformulation and those with which I did not agree at

all or for which I offered an explanation. It was striking that there were two dividing lines between the Hindostanis and the native Dutch colleagues. The Hindostanis had no need for details of the lives of individual peasants. In contrast, the native Dutch, with one exception, suggested detailing the hardship of peasants. This difference in preferences can probably be understood from the fact that the Hindostani co-readers came from the world of peasants or were still familiar with it, sometimes remotely. In that case, the desire of the native Dutch readers to specify the individual peasants' life stems from curiosity and a lack of knowledge rather than from an academic need to place the peasants' lifeworld at the centre of this work.

However, I acknowledge that this lifeworld is important in a treatise on peasant history. But although remarks on the lifeworld are scattered throughout the various chapters, I did not find enough material to describe peasant life in detail in the various time periods. Unlike the situation of indentured labourers, who had formal rights and regulators, about whom much was also written, there is little material on peasants. For these reasons, I have used photographs, supplemented by observations, statistics and conclusions from various rapporteurs, to depict peasant life, or aspects of it, in the relevant time period.

The second dividing line between the two categories of co-readers was that most native Dutchmen liked to see a comparison between Hindostani, Javanese and Creole peasants. As tempting as this suggestion is, the question is what such a comparison would yield. It would perhaps satisfy curiosity, but not advance my research goal. Worse, I think such an extension would shift my perspective because it would presuppose a different research design. For this reason, I ignored this suggestion.

In short, although I have been unable to agree with all comments and could not satisfy all my readers, I have taken them seriously by incorporating them or by explicitly explaining my position. The input of the co-readers has improved the manuscript, for which I thank them. My thanks also extend to Thys Verloren van Themaat, the publisher of the Dutch edition, for designing the register of names and subjects.

This publication was supported by a financial contribution from Professor van Winter Fonds.

Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
May 2024

Ruben Gowricharn

# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Peasants in Girmitiya Scholarship</b> .....	1
	1.1 The Structure of This Book .....	7
	References .....	9
<b>Part I From Rural Dweller to Plantation Labourer</b>		
<b>2</b>	<b>Migration and Agrarian Human Capital</b> .....	13
	2.1 Introduction .....	13
	2.2 The Migration Culture .....	15
	2.3 Agricultural Human Capital .....	19
	2.4 Recruitment .....	20
	2.5 The Crossing .....	24
	2.6 Characteristics of Immigrants .....	28
	2.7 Conclusions .....	31
	References .....	32
<b>3</b>	<b>Labourers on the Plantations</b> .....	35
	3.1 Introduction .....	35
	3.2 The Labour Process .....	37
	3.3 Health and Family Formation .....	40
	3.4 Wages .....	43
	3.5 Savings .....	49
	3.6 Own Cultivation .....	52
	3.7 Conclusions .....	54
	References .....	55
<b>4</b>	<b>An Embryonic Ethnic Community</b> .....	57
	4.1 Introduction .....	57
	4.2 The Distribution of Workers .....	59
	4.3 The Cultural Equalisers .....	61
	4.3.1 The Breakdown of the Caste System .....	61
	4.3.2 The Position of Women .....	64



4.4	Social Life . . . . .	65
4.5	Expressions of Emotion . . . . .	68
4.6	Interracial Relations . . . . .	72
4.7	Conclusions . . . . .	73
	References . . . . .	74

## **Part II From Labourer to Peasant**

<b>5</b>	<b>The Rise of the Peasantry, 1880–1920 . . . . .</b>	<b>79</b>
5.1	Introduction . . . . .	79
5.2	The Decline of Plantation Agriculture . . . . .	80
5.3	Colonisation Policy . . . . .	84
5.4	Small Farming as a Subsector . . . . .	88
5.5	Socio-economic Differentiation . . . . .	91
5.6	Agricultural Policy 1920–1930 . . . . .	96
5.7	Conclusions . . . . .	97
	References . . . . .	99
<b>6</b>	<b>Homemaking in Suriname, 1895–1930 . . . . .</b>	<b>103</b>
6.1	Introduction . . . . .	103
6.2	‘Suriname, This Country I Have Chosen’? . . . . .	105
6.3	Homemaking . . . . .	108
6.3.1	Cultural Homemaking . . . . .	109
6.3.2	Geographical Homemaking . . . . .	112
6.3.3	Economic Homemaking . . . . .	114
6.4	Agricultural Productivity . . . . .	117
6.5	Regional Differences . . . . .	122
6.6	Occupational Differentiation . . . . .	125
6.7	Conclusions . . . . .	126
	References . . . . .	128
<b>7</b>	<b>The Politics of Ruralisation, 1930–1950 . . . . .</b>	<b>131</b>
7.1	Introduction . . . . .	131
7.2	Agrarian Issues . . . . .	133
7.3	Production Factors . . . . .	136
7.3.1	Land . . . . .	137
7.3.2	Population . . . . .	137
7.3.3	Technology . . . . .	138
7.3.4	Credit . . . . .	141
7.4	Unequal Productivity . . . . .	142
7.4.1	The Production Process . . . . .	143
7.4.2	Land Productivity . . . . .	146
7.4.3	Labour Productivity . . . . .	147
7.5	Processing and Marketing . . . . .	149
7.6	Poverty . . . . .	151
7.7	Conclusions . . . . .	156
	References . . . . .	157

**Part III From Peasant to Urban Dweller**

<b>8</b>	<b>Mechanisation of Rice Farming, 1950–1960</b> . . . . .	163
8.1	Introduction . . . . .	163
8.2	Urbanisation . . . . .	165
8.3	Agrarian Reforms . . . . .	168
8.4	Family Farms . . . . .	171
8.5	Mechanisation . . . . .	175
8.6	The Rice Issue . . . . .	181
8.7	Conclusions . . . . .	183
	References . . . . .	185
<b>9</b>	<b>Ethnic and Economic Politics, 1945–1980</b> . . . . .	189
9.1	Introduction . . . . .	189
9.2	Ethnic Cohesion . . . . .	191
9.3	The Background of the VHP . . . . .	195
9.4	Reforms and Planning Policy . . . . .	198
9.5	The Agricultural Programme . . . . .	201
9.6	Urban Elite Versus Agrarian Electorate . . . . .	204
9.7	Conclusions . . . . .	207
	References . . . . .	208
<b>10</b>	<b>The Transition of Rice Peasants, 1960–1980</b> . . . . .	211
10.1	Introduction . . . . .	211
10.2	Demographic Shifts . . . . .	213
10.3	Nickerie: The Rice Barn of Suriname . . . . .	216
10.4	The Differentiation of Peasants . . . . .	221
10.5	Emigration . . . . .	225
10.6	Conclusions . . . . .	227
	References . . . . .	228
<b>11</b>	<b>Conclusions: Transformations of the Girmitya Peasantry</b> . . . . .	231
	<b>Annexes</b> . . . . .	237
	<b>Glossary</b> . . . . .	259
	<b>References</b> . . . . .	263
	<b>Name Index</b> . . . . .	275
	<b>Subject Index</b> . . . . .	281

# Abbreviations

BLO	Bureau for Land Development
CELOS	Centre for Agricultural Research in Suriname
DLS	Third Agricultural Census Suriname
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HPP	Hindostani Progressive Party
K.v.K	Chamber of Commerce
KTPI	Kaum Tani Persatuan Indonesia
LEZ	Agriculture Economic Affairs
LPS	Agricultural Testing Station
LVV	Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries
NEI	Netherlands Economic Institute
NOP	Nickerie Independent Party
NPK	National Party Combination
NPS	National Party Suriname
NVNV	National Association 'Nickerie Vooruit'
PSV	Progressive Suriname People's Party
SML	Stichting Machinale Landbouw
TJP	Ten-Year Plan
TLS	Second Agricultural Census Suriname
VHP	United Hindostani Party, since 1973 Progressive Reform Party
VSB	Suriname Business Association

# List of Annexes

Annex 2.1:	Immigrants by Year of Arrival.....	237
Annex 2.2:	Female Immigrants to Suriname, 1881–1916.....	238
Annex 2.3:	Returned Migrants 1878–1921.....	239
Annex 3.1:	Ratio of Men to Women by Ethnic Group, 1922–1970 .....	240
Annex 3.2:	Average Wages of Hindostani Migrants by Work Task, 1875–1891.....	241
Annex 3.3:	Wages Paid to Hindostani Contract Workers in Dutch Guilders.....	242
Annex 3.4:	Values Taken by Departing British Indians, 1878–1921 .....	242
Annex 4.1:	Ten Plantations with the Largest Number of Hindostani Contract Workers.....	243
Annex 4.2:	Number of Creole and Asian (British Indian and Javanese) Workers on the Plantations, 1862–1910.....	244
Annex 5.1:	Exports of Sugar, Coffee, Cotton and Cocoa, 1730–1862 (Sugar in Metric Tonnes, the Other Products in Pounds).....	245
Annex 5.2:	Five-Year Averages of the Value of Exports, 1866–1935, in Percent.....	246
Annex 5.3:	Overview of Settlements and Polders, 1862–1957, by District.....	246
Annex 6.1:	Indices of Quantities of Peasants’ Product, 1906–1935; Average for 1905–1910 = 100.....	248
Annex 6.2:	Plants and Animals Originating in British India .....	248
Annex 7.1:	Production and Export of Rice in 1000 kg and Rice Prices in Cents, 1929–1948.....	250
Annex 7.2:	Total Area and Rice Area in ha, 1931–1948.....	250
Annex 7.3:	Migrant Population (British Indians and Javanese) in Small Farming, by District, 1931–1948.....	251

Annex 7.4:	Rice Production of Smallholders by District in 1000 kg, 1929–1950.....	252
Annex 7.5:	Report Trial Cuts for the Months of September/October 1940 with Skrivimankoti Rice Crop.....	253
Annex 7.6:	Cattle Stock by District, 1931–1949 .....	254
Annex 8.1	Production and Export of Rice and Domestic and Foreign Market Prices in Cents per kg, 1948–1960.....	254
Annex 8.2:	Concentration of Labour Instruments, 1959 .....	255
Annex 9.1:	Participants in the First General Election, 1949.....	255
Annex 9.2:	Proposed centres and population in 1950 by ethnicity (%).....	256
Annex 10.1:	Ageing in Agriculture, 1959–1969, by District.....	257

# List of Maps

Map 1	The main countries to which British Indian contract workers were shipped. (Source: Lal 2019: 2).....	xxiii
Map 2.1	Map of Suriname .....	27
Map 7.1	Drawing showing some settlements. (Source: Ehrenburg and Meyer 2015: 203) .....	152
Map 7.2	Survey soil map of the coastal strip of the Nickerie district (1977). (Source: Morenc 1988, p. xiii).....	157

# List and Origin of Photos

Photo 2.1	British Indian indentured labourers on the deck of a ship at the Suriname river Paramaribo returning to British India.....	25
Photo 2.2	Arriving indentured labourers gathered at the coolie depot in Paramaribo, ca. 1885.....	29
Chart 2.1	Migrants by numbers and year of arrival, 1873–1916. (Source: Adapted from De Klerk 1953, pp. 71–73) .....	29
Chart 3.1	Sex ratio on the left (M/F x 100) by ethnic group, 1922–1970. (Source: Lamur 1973, pp. 178–179. Data were missing for the years 1961 and 1962 and have been filled in with averages for the years 1950–1970).....	42
Photo 3.1	Showing the payout of wages on a plantation. (The photo comes from SH-Dikland, SurinameHeritageGuide).....	45
Photo 3.2	British Indian woman in holiday attire. (Source: Fotostudio ‘Augusta Curiel’. NMVW-collectie (wereldculturen.nl)).....	50
Photo 4.1	Coolies shaving each other, ca. 1920 .....	67
Photo 5.1	Hut of first British Indian peasants outside settlement schemes.....	89
Photo 5.2	Two Hindustani children on a donkey cart. Transport over land became a fast-growing business, especially in and around the capital city Paramaribo.....	91
Photo 5.3	View of New Nickerie, 1905, the second-largest market in Suriname .....	93
Photo 5.4	Bridge between the Van Drimmelpolder and the Corantijnpolder, ca. 1920 .....	94
Photo 6.1	Kwattaweg around 1920, a horticultural area near Paramaribo.....	111

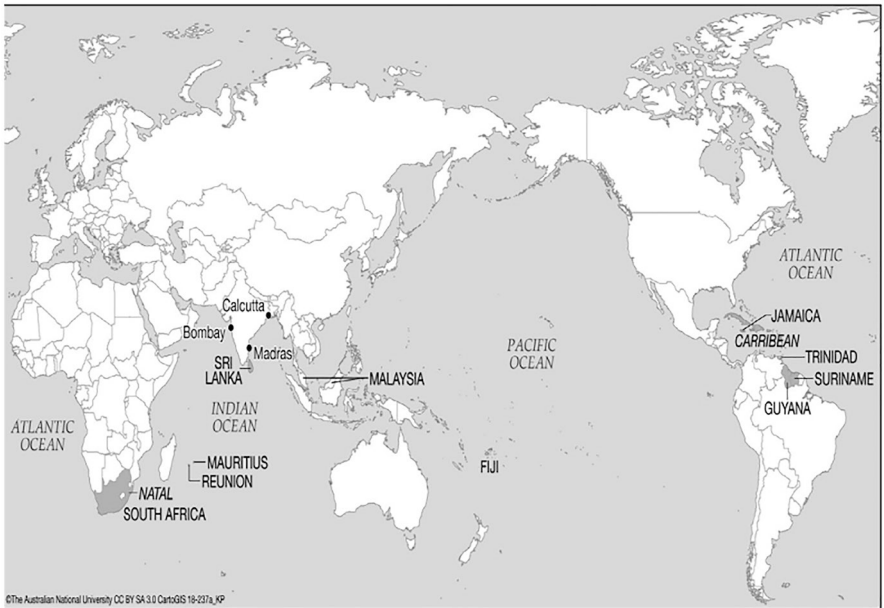
Photo 6.2	Rice fields in the district of Commewijne, 1947: part of the geographical homemaking.....	113
Photo 6.3	First stone laying of the sluice in the Corantijnpolder, 1920.....	124
Photo 7.1	Prof. J.C. Kielstra, governor of Suriname, 1942.....	134
Photo 7.2	Harrowing a paddy field with the peasant standing on a wooden structure pulled by animals, ca. 1925.....	139
Photo 7.3	Hindostani woman in Commewijne planting bibit (young rice plants) at large distances from each other, 1947.....	144
Photo 7.4	Ploughing of paddy fields with buffalos, 1947.....	145
Photo 8.1	Ploughing a rice field in the Nickeriepolder with a tractor, 1947.....	170
Photo 8.2	Ir. H.N. van Dijk, pioneer of machine agriculture in Suriname, ca. 1927.....	177
Photo 8.3	Owner of a rice paddy mill in Nickerie, 1947.....	180
Photo 9.1	Jagernath Lachmon, leader of the VHP from 1949 to 2001 and exponent of the Hindostani urban elite.....	197
Photo 10.1	Hindostani market woman in Paramaribo, 1947.....	215
Photo 10.2	The rice store in Wageningen, the centre of mechanical rice cultivation.....	217
Photo 10.3	Beginning urbanisation of the districts.....	224
Photo 10.4	Surinamese on arrival at Schiphol Airport in 1973.....	226



# List of Tables

Table 3.1	Status of arrived British Indian immigrants in Suriname 1873–1916; numbers as percentage of arrivals .....	43
Table 3.2	Number of departures and values taken by passengers of five ships, 1878–1897.....	51
Table 4.1	Number of British Indian plantation labourers under contract on the ten largest plantations, 1875–1920 .....	60
Table 5.1	Sugar production in Suriname, Java and British Guiana, in tonnes, 1826–1860 .....	82
Table 5.2	Agricultural population as percentage of total population, 1863–1910.....	88
Table 5.3	Production of smallholder agriculture, 1900–1919, in mln. kg.....	92
Table 5.4	Size of total and urban population, 1863–1923 (in brackets the percentage of urban residents).....	92
Table 6.1	Population, numbers of plots, hectares cultivated in small farming on settlement sites and outside, 1906–1930.....	119
Table 6.2	Moving three-year averages of rice production in Suriname’s rice districts, 1904–1931, in 1000 kg .....	123
Table 7.1	Increase in plough oxen in Nickerie, 1929–1933 .....	140
Table 7.2	Advances granted by Boerenleenbank, by district, 1931–1948 .....	142
Table 7.3	Labour in hours required for growing 1 hectare of rice .....	145
Table 7.4	Size and composition of peasants’ households, 1940 .....	148
Table 7.5	Number of rice paddy mills by district, 1936–1949.....	150
Table 7.6	Permit holders of rice paddy mills by ethnicity and district, 1949 .....	151
Table 7.7	Area and incomes of British Indian households during World War II; in brackets the percentage of land under cultivation .....	154

Table 8.1	Ethnic composition of Paramaribo's population, excluding Maroons and native Indians, 1938–1952, in percent.....	166
Table 8.2	Numbers of farm managers by main and secondary occupation and by size class of plots, 1959 (column percentages in brackets).....	167
Table 8.3	The number of holdings and area by size class in hectares, 1953.....	169
Table 8.4	Financial results in guilders at different rice farms, rounded down to whole guilders.....	173
Table 8.5	Tillage in ha and technology in Nickerie, 1943–1959.....	178
Table 8.6	Tillage of sawas in ha by district, 1959.....	178
Table 8.7	Production (in 1000 kg) and area under paddy, including second harvest, by rice district, 1945–1960.....	181
Table 9.1	Land reclamation projects in the 1950s and 1960s.....	204
Table 10.1	Main and secondary occupation of agricultural farm managers, 1959–1969.....	215
Table 10.2	Nickerie's share of Suriname's paddy production, 1954–1981, in tonnes.....	220
Table 10.3	Cooperatives formed between 1914 and 1983 in the agriculture, livestock and fisheries sectors.....	223



©The Australian National University CC BY SA 3.0 CartoGIS 19-2317\_xP

**Map 1** The main countries to which British Indian contract workers were shipped. (Source: Lal 2019: 2)

# Chapter 1

## Peasants in Girmitiya Scholarship



**Abstract** This chapter argues that Girmitiya scholarship suffers from three blind spots: it has ignored the period when British Indians were primarily peasants. That is remarkable because it was precisely during this phase that their ethnic community formation matured and formed the basis for their further cultural, economic and political development. Second, it has overlooked that the workers experienced three distinct transformations: from various groups directly and indirectly involved in agriculture in British India to plantation workers, from plantation workers to peasants in Suriname, and from peasants to ‘urbanites’. Third, Girmitiya scholarship has ignored the sacrifices made by the labourers and peasants. That neglect entail a distorted view of Girmitiya history. The central hypothesis outlined in this chapter is that possessing agricultural knowledge and skills to practise agriculture has determined the three transformations of the British Indians. They could survive and be successful because the agricultural knowledge and skills could be mobilised by the ethnic group.

**Keywords** Girmitiyas · Peasants · Ethnic community · Transformations · Agricultural knowledge and skills

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, British Indian indentured labourers were recruited for work on plantations and sometimes for other work such as the construction of public works in South and East Africa. A characteristic feature of this indentured labourer system was that violations of the contract provisions were punishable by law, the so-called ‘Poenal Sanction’. The countries that received the most indentured labourers were Sri Lanka, Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, Mauritius, Fiji, Reunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique and some smaller territories, and South Africa. Clarke et al. (1990, p. 9) present numbers of emigrants that amount to 1.4 million.

However, Mishra (2015, p. 372), taking into account the number of predominantly South Asian labourers who migrated to Myanmar and Malaya, stated that the number of labourers increased by 6 million. Bates (2017, p. 9) cautioned that the majority of these ‘Asian labourers’ returned home, although substantial proportions

settled in the societies they visited for work. The Caribbean societies had a reverse experience as the majority settled in the colonies (De Klerk 1953; Laurence 1994).

The fate of these labourers had been discussed by numerous authors (scholars, politicians and officials) but only became widely known with the publication of Hugh Tinker's influential book *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920* (1974). Tinker situated the indentured system in the historical context that was dominated by the abolitionist movement. Every form of bonded labour was related to, or compared with, the recent abolished slavery. It was not surprising that Tinker's central proposition was that slavery was continued with the indentured labour system, albeit in a new form.

Politically and scientifically, the indentured labour system had proponents and opponents as early as the colonial period (for discussions on this, see Eltis 2002; Munro 2014; Northrup 1995). Proponents in this debate argued that while the system of indentured labour had imperfections, the advantages of indentured labour (providing and securing labour for the plantations, thus fixing labour costs) outweighed the disadvantages. Opponents argued that contract labour was a new form of slavery. Since then, research on the emigration of British Indians has focused heavily on the plight of indentured labourers on the plantations. These studies addressed issues such as working conditions on the plantations, exploitation, remuneration, arbitrariness in the distribution of tasks, abuse of women, the health status of the workers, the application of penal provisions and the return to British India.

Some of the studies went beyond immigration and worker life on the plantations and discussed the social and political integration of the indentured into their new country. This is the case, for example, with the studies of De Klerk (1953) and Laurence (1994), by far the most thorough studies of the immigration of British Indian indentured in Suriname and in Trinidad and Guyana, respectively. Nath's (1950/1970) book promises to deal with the history of British Indians and their descendants, but predominantly discusses immigration. The focus on labour immigration hardly differs outside the Caribbean, particularly in Fiji, Mauritius and South Africa (Carter 1995; Freund 1995; Lal 1983, 1992, 2000).

The historical development of the indentured labourers in the various plantation colonies, increasingly referred to as 'Girmityas' ('Girmitya', also written 'Girmitiya', is the Bhojpuri word for people under contract; see Lal 1983, pp. 9–11), is largely similar in the countries mentioned. Nuances aside, it can be summarised as follows: the British Indian indentured labourers were brought into the plantation colonies exhausted, often misled and exploited, but nevertheless managed to survive. After their contract period, they seized the opportunity to settle as part-time or full-time peasants on land provided to them by the plantation owner or the government. Later they moved to the cities, where they received education and excelled in prestigious professions, in politics and in business. In other words, the poor indentured worker from British India had become a successful immigrant. He was celebrated as a hero, described in many volumes, often illustrated with photographs of some prominent descendants. Significant titles such as *From British Indian Emigrant*

to *Citizen of Suriname* (Azimullah et al. 1963) and *Arising from Bondage* (Ramdin 2000), referring to Trinidad and Guyana, are telling.

While scholarly attention has largely focused on the lives of indentured labourers, there has been a staggering lack of interest in the period when British Indians were primarily agriculturalists. That period lasted nearly a century and included several generations, the first of which consisted of peasants who used to be plantation labourers. The lack of attention given to British Indian peasants is remarkable because it was precisely during this phase that their ethnic community formation matured and formed the basis for their further cultural, economic and political development. This lack of scholarly attention to the British Indian peasants and their agrarian descendants may qualify as a blind spot in the historiography of Hindostani peasants.

The Girmitiya scholarship harbours a second blind spot. It has overlooked the fact that the workers experienced three distinct transformations. The first was the transformation of various groups directly and indirectly involved in agriculture in British India to plantation workers, the second was from plantation workers to peasants in Suriname, and the third was from farmers to 'urbanites'. The individuals involved in the first transformation consisted of peasants, land labourers, artisans and other occupational groups embedded in agriculture (De Klerk 1953, pp. 98–112). By far the majority of studies have addressed only the first transformation, specifically recruitment in British India and life on the plantations in the various overseas colonies. This book broadens the focus to three transformations. By connecting the three transformations, this book purports to make clear that there is an economic and sociocultural continuity between the origin of the indentured labourers, the establishment as peasants in the colonies and the transformation to urbanites.

A third blind spot consists of ignoring the sacrifices made by the indentured labourers. This 'price of progress' is not limited to the plantation workers but includes the first generation of peasants who were previously labourers. Since this generation, whose settlement was substantial, several generations have populated the agricultural sector in Suriname. Because life spans before and at the beginning of the twentieth century were short and health was poor, peasants died earlier. The price they paid consisted not only of lost lives but also their long-term suffering. Unfortunately, this price hardly comes into the picture except as juicy narration or in music, and then in a limited form, because existing research focuses mainly on progress (Choenni 2016, pp. 646–658).

This book aims to analyse the history of the Girmitiya peasants in Suriname, a former Dutch colony that harbours descendants of British Indian indentured labourers. It uses the term 'British Indian peasants' because the first generation of immigrants were largely British subjects. Even in the Surinamese literature on agriculture, they were mainly referred to as 'British Indians'. In 1927, these immigrants and their descendants received Dutch citizenship. From that period, the term 'Dutch' or 'Surinamese peasants' (because British India is a country like the Netherlands and Suriname) could be used, but they will be referred to as 'Hindostani' or 'Girmitiya peasants'. The first label is because members of the ethnic community called themselves 'Hindostanis', while the second label is current in Girmitiya scholarship.

To survive on plantations and as peasants, knowledge is required of the agricultural process. Agrarian knowledge is embodied in peasants and consists of knowledge of the soil and climate, as well as cultivation, conservation, processing, preparation and consumption of the product. The concept of human capital fits the requirement of knowledge. It refers to individuals' investment in education through which they increase labour productivity in order to earn a steady or higher income in the future (Becker 1964). As this knowledge relates to the agricultural sector, I call it 'agricultural human capital' (Gowricharn 2020).

Agricultural human capital is not an individual but a collective asset of the farming community. Human capital in its modern usage is acquired individually through education and training, while agrarian human capital is acquired through traditional transfer (a kind of 'training on the job'), habit and routine in the lived world. Therefore, agricultural human capital can also be referred to as 'collective' or 'communal' capital. Cooperation is characteristic of agricultural human capital. It takes shape through traditions and collective habits and is often decisive in sustaining itself, especially in peak periods of planting and harvesting, as has often been observed.

The Giritiya peasants became part of an ethnic community. Most definitions of ethnic groups go back to Max Weber (1978, p. 389), who defined ethnic groups as people that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent, be it a physical type, customs or both, or because of memories of colonisation and migration. The belief must be important for group formation, whereas it does not matter whether an objective blood relationship exists. Unlike professionals and sportsmen, people are born into an ethnic group, grow up in it and acquire a collective and individual cultural identity (Hale 2004). In most Caribbean countries, as well as in plural societies like Singapore, ethnicity and race coincide. Despite his opinion that ethnic groups will become dissolved in the modernisation process, Max Weber (1978) believed that an ethnic bond is something like a family because of the emotional attachment to the group. He used the term 'family resemblance'. The notion of a family resemblance was developed by Edward Shils (1957) into the term 'primordial bond' or 'ties'. Later, Geertz (1971) further developed this concept into 'primordial loyalties'. He argued that primordial loyalties were rooted in race, creed, region, language, religion and the like.

The recruited British Indians did not yet constitute an ethnic group in India. They did possess some commonalities such as appearance, country of origin and arrival and the like, but there were regional differences in terms of language, religion, rituals, morals and customs. Mayer (1966, p. 97) called such a group an 'interactive quasi-group', which he described as a collection of people that 'possesses a degree of organisation, but is nevertheless not a group'. The group is thus yet to emerge.

Ethnicity also comprises productive forces; examples include the Protestant work ethic addressed by Weber (1904), arguing that a strong work ethos combined with thrift explained the rise of capitalism. Another 'interconnectedness' between economics and culture (or ethnicity) can be found in what is referred to as 'local knowledge' (Geertz 1983, p. VIII): this is knowledge that cannot be generalised, for example because the knowledge is specific—think of weather conditions, types of

soil, agricultural practices, cultivation and the use of traditional medicine and powerful herbs. When local knowledge is embodied and peasants are bearers of that knowledge, it becomes agrarian human capital. Hence, the knowledge (including the skill to operate labour instruments) belongs to the productive forces and is part of the ethnic community. The ethnic bonding, representing a moral community, also accounts for cultural incentives to mobilise resources (Carrier 2018), including labour, seeds, instruments, draft animals and money.

The productive forces, reflecting the economic capability, were part of the culture of the peasants. These elements of culture and economy are essential to hold your own in society. What is special about this perspective is that the production capacity of the peasants was a collective force, not an individual one as is often postulated in conventional economics (Udehn 2002). So by culture here is meant not the arts and literary expressions but all the knowledge, routines and skills that make production possible. Culture is by definition a collective asset, and in this book it is relevant only when it is intertwined with the economy. This is not to say that other dimensions of culture are not relevant, but in this work they are of little significance.

The absence of scholarly attention to the peasants is reflected in the three blind spots mentioned earlier. These are: the disregard for the origins of the ethnic group and its connection to the productive capacity of the peasants; the disregard for the three transformations that British Indian peasants went through historically, so that continuity and ruptures are not adequately portrayed; and the disregard for the price that peasants and their descendants paid to give later generations a better future. This book thus emerges from a composite problem in the historiography of Hindostanis and cannot be captured in a central research question.

On the basis of the problems outlined above, I arrive at three objectives:

1. To explain how ethnic group formation was related to the economic position of British Indians and thus determined the productive capacity of the peasants.
2. To make an analysis of the three transformations to show the historical changes and thus the continuity and fractures.
3. To detail the sacrifices the Giritiyas—labourers, peasants and their descendants—made.

The working hypothesis of this book is that possession of the agricultural knowledge and skills to practise agriculture determined the three transformations of the British Indians. This economic capability could only be mobilised by an ethnic group because the productive forces were contained within it. Thus, in this perspective, ethnic group formation is the independent variable and economic performance is the dependent variable. The distinction is analytical because the productive forces were inextricably intertwined with culture. However, ethnic group formation was not a simple reproduction of the culture, as it also included the modified ethnic institutions and group culture. These are small and large adjustments that are typical of migrants when they try to build a new life as a group in a foreign country (Alexander et al. 2018; Gowricharn 2013).



What does the working hypothesis explain? First, that there is a link between group culture and the agrarian economy. The British Indians harnessed productive forces that were inherent in group culture. Therefore, these forces could only be mobilised as a group. Second, that the recruitment of the labour force for Suriname was motivated not only by the substitution of slave labour, as several authors have argued (Bhagwanbali 1996; De Klerk 1953; Snellen 1933), but also by the agricultural human capital of the workers. Third, that the three transformations were not isolated phenomena but had a continuous line of immigration, colonisation and urbanisation. The first two transformations were made possible by agrarian productive forces, while the third originated because this capital became obsolete. Thus, all three transformations had more or less the same causal forces.

Theoretically, the three transformations are approached through three different conceptual lenses. The first transformation to workers is known as ‘proletarianisation’. It is a process that Karl Marx (1867) referred to in the first part of *Capital I* as a form of ‘primitive accumulation’. In Marx’s depiction, peasants in seventeenth-century England were violently separated from their land. That generated two effects. First, the expropriation of peasants’ land led to small pieces of land being merged into larger plots and exploited by an agrarian capitalist class. The second effect was the emergence of a class of people without land, who were thus forced to work elsewhere. The job seekers—in fact, the labouring class—were absorbed into the then-expanding industrialisation. Proletarianisation does not need to be accompanied by physical violence, however. When peasants suffer misfortune because the harvest fails, life becomes more expensive; or because their land may be too small to feed all the family members, the agrarian enterprise must close and members of the peasant family are forced to work wholly or partially as wage labourers.

The second transformation, from workers to peasants, is known as ‘peasantisation’. The English-language literature distinguishes between peasants and farmers (Goodman and Redclift 1981). Generally, the former term refers to small agriculturists who produce mainly for their own consumption, but recent scholarship discloses a wide variety of peasants in disparate historical contexts (Service, year unknown). Farmers, on the other hand, are agriculturalists who produce for the market, specialise in a limited number of products and are largely incorporated into the cash economy. The distinction between farmers and peasants is typological; in practice, they are hard to find in ‘pure’ form. This is mainly because today’s economies are highly monetised, requiring every peasant to sell in order to buy other products with the money earned.

The third transformation concerns the migration of peasants to the city. This transformation has been captured by the concept of mobilities (Schiller and Salazar 2013; Sheller 2014). The concept does not refer to social rise or fall as in classical sociology, but the coherence between various changes. These include the changing relationship between mobility and immobility (i.e. the left behinds), between local and transnational connections, between being rooted in a particular area and developing a cosmopolitan orientation. Mobilities also include the various transformations as they occur in migration: the spatial mobility from one place to another, the social ascent from one environment to another, the economic change of

occupations, the political shifts, and the many large and small cultural changes. The disadvantage of this concept is that it puts very different changes under one umbrella and tries to ‘capture’ a cocktail of phenomena (Sheller 2014). The advantage, however, is that the various changes can be viewed in conjunction with each other.

A brief word on the choice of Suriname. The transformation from worker to peasant has not been completed in all plantation economies. In Jamaica, for example, where land was scarce because the planters had a claim on it or because it was not suitable for farming, British Indians were largely assimilated (Shepherd 1993). In most other countries, the land was there but access was intentionally kept restricted to force workers to work as part-timers on the plantations (Allen 1999; Gowricharn 2013; Lal 2000). Of all the countries mentioned, the transformation from labourer to farmer was most complete in Suriname. This was because the plantation sector hardly existed after the 1920s. As a result, land was abundantly available and the government was able to encourage the settlement of immigrants. Because Suriname had the most complete development of the peasantry, it is therefore the most suitable object for studying its transformations.

## 1.1 The Structure of This Book

The periodisation begins in 1880 when the first batch of Giritiyas had served their contract and were able to settle themselves as peasants. For several reasons, the peasants were marginalised and moved to the city, where they were employed in the public sector. Around 1980, the Hindostani peasant ceased to exist. Based on these considerations, I mark the period to be studied as from 1880 to 1980.

The theoretical concepts aim to capture the basic theoretical relation between ethnicity and productive forces. The importance of theoretical concepts is that data can be framed and understood, that the concepts point to specific developments and that comparisons can be made with corresponding developments elsewhere. The theoretical concepts in this book have primarily a pointing function, i.e. they are a lens, and they are not intended to produce new theoretical insights but rather point at a direction to look at as Blumer (1954) has suggested. The use of theoretical concepts also prevents the reader from being overwhelmed by a lot of data that, although interesting, do not lead anywhere.

Each chapter is historically delineated, discusses a specific topic and has a separate framework for analysing and interpreting developments. That framework is found in the chapter’s introduction and is evaluated each time in the conclusion of the same chapter. Thus, each chapter can also be read separately.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 covers the period 1873–1920 in which the supply of labourers and most of the returns took place. It is also the period when the community building emerged and workers maintained and updated their agricultural knowledge and skills. These developments are described in three chapters. The central topics in this part are the conditions under which the workers were recruited in British India, shipped to Suriname and put to work on the plantations, and how,

in this process, the first beginnings of ethnic communalisation arose (Chap. 2). The experiences on the plantations, measured by the harshness of the labour process, the earning capacity and the amount of savings, were strongly determined by physical conditions, the regime on the plantations and family formation (Chap. 3). Through various adaptations, a plantation culture emerged that would characterise the British Indian community. Out of the many ways to depict a culture, I chose the reproduction of rituals in the lived culture, the erosion of the caste system and gender inequality, expressions of emotions and interracial relations (Chap. 4). The chapters of this first part analyse the initial transformation from agriculturalists in British India to wage labourers in Suriname as a cultural and economic process. The central point in this part is that the workers began to develop an ethnic community and managed to retain their agricultural knowledge and skills. These two realities were closely intertwined from the beginning.

The second part covers the period from 1895, the beginning of the colonisation policy, to 1950 when rice production was modernised. Central topics include the emergence of the preconditions for peasant settlement, particularly the closure of plantations that set labour and land free and enabled the rise of a small peasant sector (Chap. 5). Contrary to a strong current in the Giritiya literature about plantation labourers, the experiences on the plantation were an important push factor toward settling outside. That process went hand in hand with making a home by expanding the ethnic group, rearranging the agricultural landscape and developing a rice economy. This part also explores the connection between the productive resources of the ethnic group—particularly the use of agricultural knowledge that was available in the community and cooperation among peasants—and economic performance (Chap. 6). Moreover, these developments did not prevent increasing numbers of British Indians from seeking refuge outside agriculture. This professional differentiation was observable in both districts and the cities (Chap. 7).

Part three covers the period 1950–1980. It discusses the forces that undermined the hitherto productive link between ethnic community and rice economy. These consisted mainly of persistent poverty, mechanised rice farming, Western-oriented education and migration to the city. As mechanised rice farming did not lead to financial independence for Hindostani peasants, their migration from the districts to the city continued (Chap. 8). The weakening of ethnic cohesion was hardly addressed by the *Verenigde Hindostaanse Partij* (VHP, United Hindostani Party) that represented the community. This was partly because mechanised agriculture had been conceived by the Netherlands and partly because the VHP was led by an urban-oriented elite. However, many district residents practised agriculture as a secondary activity, held white-collar jobs and developed an urban lifestyle (Chap. 9). The peasantry shrank even more rapidly on the eve of independence in 1975 when many half and whole rice producers left with their families for the Netherlands. This development did not stop until 1980 when family reunification came to an end (Chap. 10). The concluding chapter evaluates the objectives of this book by highlighting the main findings.

## References

- Alexander C, Chatterji J, Jalais A (2018) *The Bengal diaspora. Rethinking Muslim migration.* Routledge, London
- Allen R (1999) *Slaves, freedman, and indentured laborers in colonial Mauritius.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Azimullah E, Ganpat H, Lutchman W (1963) *Van Brits-Indisch Emigrant tot Burger van Suriname.* Wieringa, s-Gravenhage
- Bates C (2017) Some thoughts on the representation and misrepresentation of the colonial south Asian labour diaspora. *South Asian Stud* 33(1):7–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2017.1300372>
- Becker G (1964) *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis with special reference to education.* Chicago University Press, Chicago
- Bhagwanbali R (1996) *Contracten voor Suriname. Arbeidsmigratie vanuit Brits-Indië onder het indentured-labourstelsel, 1873–1916.* Doctoral dissertation, Radboud University (Nijmegen)
- Blumer H (1954) What is wrong with social theory? *Am Sociol Rev* 19(1):3–10
- Carrier J (2018) Moral economy. ‘What’s in a name?’ *Anthropological Theory* 18(1):18–35
- Carter M (1995) *Servants, sirdars and settlers. Indians in Mauritius 1834–1874.* Oxford University Press, Delhi
- Choenni C (2016) *Hindostaanse contractarbeiders 1873–1920. Van India naar de plantages in Suriname.* LM Publishers, Volendam
- Clarke C, Peach C, Vertovec S (eds) (1990) *South Asians overseas: Migration and ethnicity.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- De Klerk CJM (1953) *De Immigratie der Hindostanen. Urbi et Orbi,* Amsterdam
- Eltis D (ed) (2002) *Coerced and free migration. Global perspectives.* Stanford University Press, Stanford
- Freund B (1995) *Insiders and outsiders. The Indian working class of Durban 1910–1990.* Heinemann, Portsmouth NH
- Geertz C (1971) The integrative revolution: Primordial sentiments and civil politics in the new states. In: Welch C (ed) *Political modernization: A reader in comparative political change* Belmont. Duxbury Press, CA, pp 198–218
- Geertz C (1983/2000) *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretative anthropology.* Basic Books, New York
- Goodman D, Redclift M (1981) *From peasant to proletarians: Capitalist development and agrarian transitions.* Basil Blackwell, Oxford
- Gowricharn RS (2013) Ethnogenesis: The case of British Indians in the Caribbean. *Comp Stud Soc Hist* 55(2):388–418
- Gowricharn RS (2020) *Multiple homemaking. The ethnic condition in the Indian diaspora.* Routledge, London
- Hale H (2004) Explaining ethnicity. *Comp Pol Stud* 37(4):458–485
- Lal B (1983) *Girmitiyas. The origins of the Fiji Indians.* Australian National University Press, Canberra
- Lal B (1992) *Broken waves. A history of the Fijian Islands in the twentieth century.* University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu
- Lal B (2000) *Chalo Jahaji. On a journey through indenture in Fiji.* Australian National University Press, Canberra
- Laurence K (1994) *A question of labour: Indentured immigration into Trinidad and British Guiana 1875–1917.* Ian Randle Publishers, Kingston
- Marx K (1867) *Capital. A critique of political economy, vol 1.* Penguin Books, Middlesex
- Mayer A (1966) Quasi-groups in the study of complex societies. In: Banton M (ed) *The social anthropology of complex societies.* Tavistock Publications, London, pp 97–122
- Mishra AK (2015) Sardars, Kanganies and Maistries: Intermediaries in the Indian Labour Diaspora during the Colonial Period. In: Wadauer S, Buchner TH, Mejjstrik A (eds) *The History*

- of Labour Intermediation: Institutions and Finding Employment in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries. Berghahn Books, New York, Oxford, pp 368–387. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782385516-014>
- Munro D (2014) Conclusion: On resistance and accommodation. In: Lal B, Munro D (eds) Hassankhan M. Resistance and Indian experiences. Comparative perspectives, Manhor, pp 293–311
- Nath D (1950/1970) A history of Indians in Guyana. Second revised edition published by the author, London
- Northrup D (1995) Indentured labor in the age of Imperialism, 1834–1922. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Ramdin R (2000) Arising from bondage: A history of Indo-Caribbean people. Tauris Publishers, London/ New York
- Schiller N, Salazar N (2013) Regimes of mobility across the globe. *J Ethn Migr Stud* 39(2):183–200
- Sheller M (2014) The new mobility paradigm for a live sociology. *Current Sociology Review* 63(6):789–811
- Shepherd V (1993) Transients to settlers: The experience of Indians in Jamaica 1845–1950. Peepal Tree Books, Leeds
- Shils E (1957) Primordial, personal, sacred and civil ties. *Br J Sociol* 8(2):130–145
- Snellen E (1933) De Aanvoer van arbeiders voor den landbouw in Suriname. Doctoral dissertation, University of Wageningen
- Tinker H (1974) A new system of slavery: The export of Indian labour overseas 1830–1920. Oxford University Press, London/New York
- Udehn L (2002) The changing face of methodological individualism. *Annu Rev Sociol* 28:479–507
- Weber M (1904) The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Allen & Unwin, London
- Weber M (1978) In: Roth G, Wittich C (eds) Economy and society: An outline of interpretative sociology, vol 2. University of California Press, Berkeley