Beyond being *koelies* and *kantráki*
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Constructing Hindostani identities in Suriname in the era of indenture, 1873-1921

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Preface

In Suriname he had worked. All he was capable of, he did it. With what respect do people talk about it? Do they know there were ever indentured labourers? Do they know that their blood was shed in this earth? Is it known they were shot at?\[1\]

The Sarnámi poet Jit Narain wrote about ‘The indentured labourer’ in 1993. He wondered whether white Dutch citizens knew that slave labour in Suriname was replaced by indentured labour in 1873. That this was another form of bound labour. If they realised that more than 34,000 labourers were recruited in the north of India from 1873? If they were aware of the penal sanction attached to the five-year contract? If they had heard about the violence used, when resistance against the plantation regime occurred? More than twenty years after Narain, Shantie Singh published the novel Vervoering (meaning transporting or transportation, but also rapture or ecstasy). The plot centres around eighteen-year-old Ramdew, who arrived in Suriname in 1912 as an indentured labourer, and the generations who came after him. In the afterword, Singh explains that although her book is fictive, it is the result of her desire to know more about her own history. She states:

Because often I feel like a walking mystery when I hear myself explain again that my parents are from Suriname, my ancestors from India, and I myself was born and raised in the Netherlands.\[2\]

Singh feels there is a continued lack of knowledge about Hindostani history.

‘Doing history’ is something not only professional historians engage in. Novelist, poets, journalists, activists, authors, television makers, genealogists and others write histories and provide perspectives on the past as well. They question existing narratives, question which voices feature most prominently, and what counts at ‘legitimate’ history. Many of them are interested in what the past means for us today.\[3\] In the last two decades Hindostani historians, activists, authors, poets, television makers, jour-


\[2\] ‘Vaak voel ik me namelijk een wandelend mysterie als ik mezelf opnieuw hoor uitleggen dat mijn ouders uit Suriname komen, mijn voorouders uit India, en dat ikzelf geboren en getogen ben in Nederland.’ Shantie Singh, Vervoering. Vier generaties, drie continenten (Amsterdam: De Geus en Oxfam Novib, 2014).

\[3\] Mark Donnelly and Claire Norton, Doing History (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011) xiii, 155.
nalists and others in Suriname and the Netherlands have reclaimed and reshaped the history of migration and indenture. Poets and novelists highlight the experiences and perspectives of the migrants and connect these to the present. They share the idea that there is a need to explore the experiences and points of view of the first generation. Despite the expansion of the historiography over the last two decades, which I have described in more detail in the introduction, they feel there is still a lack of attention to and knowledge about this history among the general public, especially in the Netherlands.

Moreover, novelists and filmmakers are motivated to correct unfavourable and painful depictions of the first generation in historical documents. Mala Kishoendajal states that she wanted to write the novel *Kaapse goudbessen* (Cape Gooseberries or literally Golden berries of the Cape) in which she portrays the lives of Hindostani indentured labourers, because of ‘[t]he historical value of a rarely described Dutch cultural group and its rooting and uprooting’. She highlights the importance of telling a personal story, because Dutch colonial authorities reduced personal histories to the size of ‘one meagre A4 page’. She portrays members of the first generation as people with hopes and fears, with aspirations and personalities. As such, Kishoendajal is motivated to paint a more human depiction of the first generations than she has been able to uncover in historical documents. She shows how the personal lives of indentured labourers could be affected by violence and imprisonment, when a family falls apart after the husband is sentenced to six years of forced labour.

The film ‘Tetary. Over strijd, moed en opoffering’ (Tetary. About battle, courage and sacrifice), which was broadcasted on television in 2013 by Omroep Hindoe Media (or o.h.m.) portrayed the violence and exploitation that the system of indentured labour in Suriname was based on. The narrative centres around the historical figure of Janey Tetary, a Muslim female indentured labourer who participated in resistance at sugar plantation Zorg en Hoop in 1884. By making Tetary central to this retelling of the history of Hindostani indenture in Suriname, the historian Radjinder Bhagwanbali showed that women also participated in resistance. In September 2017, a bust of Tetary was revealed in Paramaribo, paid for by crowdfunding. This monument replaced the bust of the Dutch colonial official and immigration agent George H. Barnet Lyon. So, not only do these activists want to instate Tetary as a heroine, but they also aim to end the public honouring of a Dutch colonial official, even if he had been honoured by the Hindostani community as their liaison to Dutch colonial authorities.

Hindostani authors humanise Hindostani indentured labourers and visualise the violence and exploitation that many indentured labourers have experienced, but attention is also drawn to social problems with historical roots. In her MA thesis, Shari-ta Rampertap addresses violence towards women on the plantation, the change from

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6 Tetary. Over strijd, moed en opoffering (Omroep Hindoe Media: 1 and 8 June 2013).

7 See: www.tetary.org (accessed 25 October 2017). For more information about the establishment of the bust of Barnet Lyon, for which members of the Hindostani elite raised money between 1905 and 1928, see chapter five.
self-conscious women of the first generation, who sometimes had multiple partners, to the control exercised by parents over the sexuality of their (second generation) daughters, and the re-establishment of norms relating to femininity and masculinity. Rampertap shows how these renegotiations of gender roles of the first and second generation were bound up with migration and indenture.

All these different retellings of the history of Hindostani migration and indenture wish to highlight agency. By showing how Hindostani recruits, migrants, indentured labourers, and (temporary) settlers tried to maintain control over their own lives, they become actors in their own right. By way of my research I support this meaningful project that contests the colonial legacy by listening to other voices of the past.

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