

Margriet Fokken, *Beyond Being Koelies and Kantráki. Constructing Hindostani Identities in Suriname in the Era of Indenture, 1873-1921* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2018, 378 pp., ISBN 9789087047214).

This is the commercial edition of a PhD dissertation defended at the University of Groningen in 2018. In her elaborate study Margriet Fokken links up to the efforts of Hindostani scholars, activists, poets, television makers and journalists who in the past decades have reclaimed and reshaped the history of their ancestors. The latter left India between 1873 and 1921 to go to Suriname as indentured labourers, where after the expiration of their contract the majority of them decided to stay. Their descendants – particularly the third and fourth generation – started to investigate the experiences and perspectives of the Hindostani migrants themselves, and in so doing questioned and challenged the stereotyped image the Dutch colonial authorities had established of this group. Writing in the wake of the descendants' reevaluation, Fokken focuses on the personal lives of the erstwhile migrants who by the end of the 1960s became Suriname's largest population group. She zooms in on the recruitment of the indentured labourers in India, their transportation to the colony of Suriname, their settlement on the plantations replacing former enslaved people and their early emancipation as Surinamese residents.

Fokken argues that putting the individual lives of Hindostani migrants center stage allows for an analysis of their agency, creativity, self-positioning and self-identification. In her opinion these 'other voices of the past' supplement and rearticulate the current historiography by displaying how Hindostani labourers accepted, rejected and adapted identities ascribed to them – for instance by terming them coolies – and gave meaning to their everyday life. Taking inspiration from postcolonial studies, Fokken moves away from monolithic and essentialized views of Hindostani migrants and unravels the complexities of the identity-formation processes in which these labourers took part. More specifically she resorts to the theory of intersectionality and to reading textual and visual sources against and along the grain. Accordingly, Fokken has structured her book so as to foreground the social spaces that Hindostani migrants occupied. The four chronologically-ordered chapters correspond with the social spaces of the depots and the ships, the plantations, the rural districts, and the city of Paramaribo respectively.

Fokken's book is carefully crafted and well-written, and indeed presents an in-depth and multi-layered account of the Hindostani labourers as they attempted to construct personal histories that defied the categorizations and group characteristics ascribed to them by the colonial authorities.

Offering a range of examples, Fokken makes clear that the labourers managed to exercise agency from the moment they set foot on Surinamese soil and got acquainted with the prevailing labour regime. Government-backed schemes to assimilate them to Christian ideals of marriage and monogamy and to Christian religious and school education were put in place to ‘civilize’ them and turn them into ‘reliable’ settlers. On the part of the labourers these policies were opposed by successful attempts to cling to customary practices, for instance with respect to family life and religious services, but also by openly defying the plantation system. Acts of insubordination such as strikes and violent uprisings prompted the colonial authorities to intervene decisively.

A major development in the Hindostani identity-formation process was the sharp increase in landownership from 1895 onwards, reflecting a post-indenture degree of autonomy and signaling the importance that immigrants attributed to land as a source of subsistence, long-term economic security and social status. Along with the acquisition of land and their operations as small-scale farmers, Hindostani residents made their mark on the Surinamese landscape as builders of private homes, temples and mosques. The introduction of the office of *lambardar* (village head) provided Hindostani immigrants a modest share in the Dutch colonial administration. In this way metropolitan power created state-bound authorities as loyal alternatives to community leaders such as pandits and imáms. The establishment of the Surinaamsche Immigranten Vereniging (Suriname Immigrants’ Association, *siV*) in 1910, promoting the interests of its members in the broadest sense, indicated a desire among Hindostani to be considered and treated as residents of Suriname.

Transport activities and trade of agricultural products progressively provided Hindostani with additional sources of income. In the early 1920s, male and female traders and vendors had taken control of major parts of Paramaribo’s central market at the expense of their Afro-Surinamese counterparts. As shopkeepers they successfully competed with Chinese entrepreneurs who had entered Suriname as indentured labourers in the 1850s. This occupational differentiation accelerated the Hindostani drive towards acceptance as residents of Suriname. The *siV* (and its successor *Bharat Oeday*) paved the way for the introduction of Dutch citizenship for Hindostani in 1927 (terminating references to them as British Indians) and the inclusion of Hindostani representatives in the Colonial States (the Surinamese proto-parliament) from the 1930s.

When Fokken uses visual sources like maps and photographs, her reading strategies are particularly fruitful. A map of Calcutta (Kolkata), where Hindostani labourers were held in a ‘coolie depot’ until they embarked for Suriname, and a map of Paramaribo, where they lived in a ‘coolie depot’ prior to their relocation to the plantation, invite the reader to mentally walk part of the indentured worker path with the labourers and experience their concerns.

Photographs induce Fokken to aptly comment on aspects of dress, cuisine, architecture and religious practices. Her conclusions support the view that a plurality of experiences molded the life of Hindostani immigrants and shaped their agency and socio-cultural creativity.

The monograph has retained the features of a PhD dissertation. There is a lengthy introduction (36 pages), all chapters include extended introductory paragraphs and the often jargon-laden prose will appeal to academics, but less to a general audience. The interdisciplinary gaze secures a nuanced picture of the Hindostani group, but the impressive body of secondary literature notwithstanding, the author regularly faces the limitations of the primary textual sources. Particularly when it comes to the 'voices from within', Fokken had to rely on the well-known memories of Rahman Kahn and Alice Bhagwanday Singh-Sital Persad. She skillfully re-reads these fascinating personal accounts, but the insights that she extracts from them are less illuminating than the instructive subtleties distilled from the visual sources. Inevitably, in both cases the corresponding analyses are not always free from speculation.

Having said this, and despite a lack of editorial rigor on the part of the publisher, I would like to emphasize that Fokken's 'history from below' conscientiously and convincingly brings to life the indentured labour experience of the Surinamese Hindostani. *Beyond being koelies and kantráki* constitutes a valuable contribution to the fields of migration and subaltern studies and should be considered required reading for scholars specializing in Caribbean history.

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