

Ghrietje G. Choenni & Chan E.S. Choenni

Sarnami Hindostani 1920–1960: Worteling, identiteit en gemeenschapsvorming in Suriname, volume 1. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2012. 672 pp. (Cloth € 24.50)

The Lalla Rookh Diaspora Foundation published this book in order to rectify deficiencies in knowledge of the history of the Surinamese Hindustanis (East Indians). The publication of a second volume was planned for 2013, but has been postponed.

The book's introductory chapter deals with the departure of the Hindustanis from India, their life on the plantations, their numerical growth, their progress between 1920 and 1960, and the development of Sarnámi (a linguistic variation of Hindi). A chapter entitled "Settling and taking root" then relates the developments that took place after the contract period, when the Hindustanis created small villages of their own near their rice fields. The hardships of agricultural life are delineated as well as the diligence and perseverance of the settlers. The next chapter is devoted to transport, recounting how after some time many Hindustanis became active as wagoners, truck drivers, and bus drivers. The fourth chapter deals with the differentiation that took place when the children of the paddy farmers became entrepreneurs and craftsmen and later also government officials.

Chapter 5 is about housing. It paints the development from the plantation barracks to the simple dwellings in the villages and finally to the magnificent city houses of Paramaribo. It also describes the medical care the Hindustanis received. Chapter 6 discusses developments in education. Here attention is paid to the deterioration of the position of women in the third generation in Suriname. The setback was halted when later generations of women became better educated. This chapter also addresses the position of homosexual men and lesbians. The last chapter, which focuses on family life, paints the development of the joint family as well as its disappearance after the World War II and discusses Hindustani clothing, jewels, tattoos, food, and identity markers.

These seven chapters alternate with literary portrayals of seven elderly persons, a number of whom now live in the Netherlands, who reminisce about their lives in Suriname in the past.

Eighty in-depth interviews with elderly Hindustanis living both in Suriname and in the Netherlands form the main source of this book. The data they provide are subsequently checked in other (mostly written) sources. A reasonable number of Hindustanis say, for example, that the East Indians never asked for help from governmental social security, but the archives of these institutions prove that this is an exaggeration (pp. 16–17). So, the oral information is not blindly accepted, but critically evaluated. Choenni and Choenni call their

method triangulation, which means that they have tried to get a reliable image of the situation by consulting various kinds of sources. Therefore this study fits the recent trend among historians of giving attention to oral history as an important addition to the written sources composed mainly by the writing elite and by the people governing the country. One could say that oral history is the history of the oppressed, which certainly is something that pops up in the material of this book. It is full of stories about the hardships people suffered in India even before their transportation to the Caribbean, the oppression on the plantations, the poverty and lack of medical care in the first years on the plantations and in the new settlements, and the discrimination against Hindustanis by the other population groups of the country.

In spite of the book's merits, its sloppy writing style causes many inaccuracies. For example, the authors write that Columbus discovered Suriname (p. 37), which is untrue. Or again, there are many spelling errors or strangely written Dutch words, such as *Hinduïsme* instead of *hindoeïsme*. Other errors could have been prevented if the necessary academic literature had been consulted; people with the title *maharaj* are said to be *chattri's* (p. 645), while in reality they are Brahmans (Clarke 1967:178–80). And a description of the development of the Hindu literary tradition (p. 434) is colored by the views of some Hindu religious experts, but deviates from the findings of authoritative research on the subject. These errors reflect a failure to engage academic fields outside of the social sciences.

The book is a valuable source of information about how Hindustanis experienced important periods in their history rather than a thoroughly documented study. But there is no doubt that it provides much information about the experiences of the Sarnami Hindostani. I hope that the second volume will be based on more wide-ranging evidence. The postponement of its publication offers an opportunity to work this out.

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Reference

- Clarke, Colin, 1967. Caste among Hindus in a Town in Trinidad: San Fernando. In Barton M. Schwartz (ed.), *Caste in Overseas Indian Communities*. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, pp. 165–99.