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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN INDIAN INDENTURED LABOURER

British-Indians rowing in Surinam, ca 1920. KITLV



2005. *Autobiography of an Indian Indentured Labourer: Munshi Rahman Khan (1874-1972)*, Jeevan Prakash. Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff, Ellen Bal and Alok Deo Singh, translators. Delhi: Shipra Publications, lii-271 pages, ISBN 81-7541-243-7

Victor van Bijlert

In the late 80s I regularly visited the Calcutta harbour area, looking for the place from which the Surinamese Hindustanis had been shipped to Surinam. Local Calcutta taxi-drivers were at a loss when I mentioned the place I was looking for. One of them mentioned ‘Surinam quarters’. Some local residents had heard of it, but no one knew what Surinam meant. Finally, I located the spot owned by the Calcutta Electricity Supply Company and received official permission to see for myself what was left of the ‘Surinam quarters’ – a few old barracks, obviously built in the mid-19th century, and jetties protruding into the Hooghly river. Otherwise, the word Surinam was consigned to oblivion.

I quote this anecdote to illustrate the lack of historical awareness in India about the Indians who went abroad as indentured labourers into such faraway places as South America. After the abolition of slavery in Surinam in 1863, the Dutch government was searching for labour to work on the sugar and cacao plantations. In 1870 the Dutch and the British reached an agreement on the migration of an indentured labour force from British India to Dutch Surinam. As a result, a regular migration flow from India commenced in 1873. Until 1916 when the system of indentured labour was abolished, approximately 34,000 British-Indians were transported by sea to Surinam.¹ It is widely thought that they left no written memoirs.

For this reason the English translation of Munshi Rahman Khan’s autobiography *Jeevan Prakash* is an important milestone. Rahman Khan was himself an indentured labourer who went to Surinam. Able to read and write well, he preserved his memories for posterity in a literary and historical document written in a mixture of languages and styles: Avadhi and Braj for poetry and Hindustani for prose.

Rahman Khan was born in 1874 in Hamirpur in the United Provinces in North India. His father, Mohammed Khan was an assistant to a local *zamindar* (landlord). The Khans claim descent from Afghani Pathan horsemen who came to the Indian plains in the 14th century. Rahman Khan was educated to become a school-teacher (*munshi*), but while visiting Kanpur, he was approached by two middle-

men who promised to make him supervisor of labourers in the sugar business. Without being aware of it, he was recruited for indentured labour in Surinam. Rahman was shipped to Surinam via Calcutta harbour in 1898. He worked as an indentured labourer for five years, then, in 1943, settled permanently in Surinam and began writing his autobiography. He never returned to India.

The book takes the reader from a brief history of ancient and medieval India to Rahman Khan’s childhood, education, marriage and migration to Surinam. He gives a detailed account of his life in India and Surinam. He was born into a Muslim family and a practising Muslim, but local Hindus regarded him as an expert on Hinduism since he knew Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas extremely well. Rahman Khan writes with a sense of sadness about the Indian missionaries of the Arya Samaj and the Sanatan Dharm who visited Surinam in the 1920s and 1930s, some of whose visits and preaching stirred up serious communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. In 1934 there was a complete boycott by the Sanatan Dharm Hindus in Surinam of dealing with Muslims (pp.216, 236). The boycott, which ended only in 1943, included avoiding business dealings with Muslims, not inviting Muslims to Hindu social gatherings or even greeting them, and not taking water from the same well (p.217).

The book is a unique and extremely rich eyewitness account of rural life in the late 19th century in North India and the beginning of the 20th century in Surinam. To date, Rahman Khan’s *Jeevan Prakash* is the only source of personal history written by an indentured labourer. I would not hesitate to compare Rahman Khan’s book with the Hindi writings of Swami Sahajananda Saraswati (1889-1950), an important peasant leader in Bihar during the 1930s.² In both cases we have accounts in an Indian vernacular by a participating observer. In the true sense of the word, Rahman Khan’s book represents the view-point of a subaltern.

The English publication of Rahman Khan’s text is the result of intense international teamwork. Ellen Bal, Kathinka Sinha and Alok Deo Singh shaped the preliminary translation by Harjeet Singh and Kenneth Soymurun; the latter have also prepared an electronic version in Devanagari script of the

original manuscript now in the possession of Albert Khan, Rahman Khan’s grandson (pp. ix-x). The Surinamese writer and historian Sandew Hira edited the Dutch version of Singh and Soymurun’s translation published in 2003.³ Ellen Bal, Kathinka Sinha and Alok Deo Singh wrote a lengthy scholarly introduction to the present English edition, which places Rahman Khan in the wider context of colonialism and labour migration.

A few points of criticism of an otherwise fine book: the colour photographs, in themselves informative, are poor reproductions. The book has a glossary of Hindi, Surinamese and Dutch words, but unfortunately there is no general index. The curious philologist is thus eagerly awaiting a complete printed edition of the original multilingual and multi-layered text. This would be a real tribute to the literary accomplishments of Rahman Khan, who is credited with being the first author in the so-called Sarami language, the Indian contact language spoken by the Surinamese Indians. The book is recommended reading for subaltern studies historians, social scientists with a special interest in Indian diaspora studies, students of South Asian Islam and Hinduism, and historians of Surinam. <

Notes

1. See the earliest and still useful study on the immigration of Indians into Surinam: de Klerk, C.J.M. 1953. *De Immigratie der Hindostanen in Suriname*. Amsterdam: Urbi et Orbi. For the practice of Hinduism in Surinam see also: de Klerk, C.J.M. 1951. *Cultus en Ritueel van het Orthodoxe Hindoeïsme in Suriname*. Amsterdam: Urbi et orbi. Information on the origins of Hindustani names can be found on the website of the Dutch national archives: www.nationaalarchief.nl/suriname/
2. Sahajananda’s Hindi writings have been edited and translated: 1995. *Swami Sahajananda and the Peasants of Jharkhand: A View from 1941*. Hauser, Walter, trans., ed. (incl. intro., endnotes and glossary). New Delhi: Manohar; 1994. *Sahajananda on Agricultural Labour and the Rural Poor: An Edited Translation of ‘Khet Mazdoor’ with the Original Hindi Text*. Hauser, W., ed. (incl. intro., endnotes and glossary). New Delhi: Manohar.
3. Hira, Sandew, ed. 2003. *Het Dagboek van Munshi Rahman Khan*. Den Haag: Amrit/NSHI.

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