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Reseña de “The Elusive El Dorado: Essays on the Indian Experience in Guyana” de Basdeo Mangru
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
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This collection contains, with one exception, previously published pieces about Indian migrants in Guyana. This can be justified because they often appeared in journals of very limited circulation or have been expanded. It also has some useful appendixes: a history of emigrant ships from Calcutta (Kolkata) and Madras (Chennai), statistics of emigration, a reprinting of an emigration pass, the conditions of service offered by recruiters, and Bechu’s letters to the press (Bechu was an Indian who was critical of the conditions of labor of indentured workers in the nineteenth century (see Seecharan 1999). The essays fall into three groups: on emigration itself, on violence and socio-cultural issues and on individuals critical of the system.

The first group consists of articles on the failure of private emigration from the Bombay Presidency, the reasons for the differences in scale between Calcutta and Madras as ports of departure, and the entitlement of time-expired emigrants to return passages.

Bombay (Mumbai) along with Calcutta and Madras was one of the great Indian seaports. Yet Bombay never featured as an exporter of Indian migrants to British Guiana. Mangru explains that this was not because of planters’ ignorance of it as other writers have argued. On the contrary, when problems began to crop up with emigration from Calcutta and Madras, there was a detailed proposal in 1856 to obtain emigrants from the Bombay Presidency. This proposal failed due to the opposition of the Government of Bombay which “seemed” as Mangru notes, “to be opposed to emigration of any kind … despite its declared preference for a government-regulated scheme” (p. 6). Even though the Government of India supported the scheme opposition from Bombay effectively killed the scheme. Later emigration from Bombay to Natal was financed by individuals and their families.

The second essay deals with the large Calcutta and smaller Madras emigrations. Survival rates for the Madras voyages were better but the Calcutta migrants adjusted better to plantation conditions so that by 1863 emigration via Madras practically stopped. The return passage entitlement was considered a burden by the planters but the Government of
India remained firmly opposed to its abolition despite the precedent of abolition by Mauritius. Land settlement schemes, seen by the planters as a replacement became an alternative: as Mangru points out, in an odd reversal after the end of indentureship in the 1930s, the planters supported return passages and India opposed it.

It is good to have these essays in book form. They might have been grouped slightly better: the one on the return passage entitlement appears after the essays on hook-swinging and wife murder rather than with the first two essays. Some might have been expanded without increasing the size of the book by cutting out introductions that become redundant when they are reprinted together. Given Mangru’s skill and scholarship one hopes that his next book will deal with the subject in a more comparative fashion or explore further his interest in cultural survival and adaptation.

Reference


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In his latest contribution to The University of North Carolina Press’s Envisioning Cuba series, University of Pittsburgh professor Alejandro de la Fuente moves backward in time from his study of race in the twentieth century (de la Fuente 2001) to address Havana during the sixteenth century. He details how Havana changed from a small town in 1550 to “an impregnable port city and one of the most important shipping and trading entrepôts of the Spanish Atlantic...” by 1610 (p. 6). De la Fuente examines this transformation, and argues that