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The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora. By Lomarsh Roopnarine 2018, The University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 163 pages; 11 photographs, Index included, 65 USD, Hardcover.

By Radica Mahase¹

The topic of Caribbean Indian migration has dominated historiography of Caribbean history, culture and society since the 1930s. An older generation of historians including Brinsley Samaroo, K.O. Laurence, and Walton Lok Lai, among others, have written on many aspects of the indentureship scheme. However, there are still some spaces to fill in the historiography, both in terms of themes, and topics. Lomarsh Roopnarine has managed to fill quite a few of these with his book *The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora*.

In this book Roopnarine gives a comprehensive discussion of Caribbean Indian migration in all its complexities. *The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora* starts with an account of the immigration of Indian indentured labourers into the Caribbean and ends with contemporary migration of the descendents of these indentured labourers within and outside of the Caribbean. As arguably the only existing publication which examines migration of Indians and their descendents from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, *The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora* is a valid and far-reaching contribution to the existing historiography.

Roopnarine starts his book with a discussion of the factors which stimulated the entire migration process for Indians. He establishes that we need to look beyond push and pull factors as explanations for migration, highlighting that these categories give a narrow perspective of the reasons why labourers migrated under the indentureship system. Roopnarine examines the reasons from both the Indian and Caribbean perspectives, addressing what happened when these labourers arrived in the Caribbean. The colonialization of writings on indentureship has unfortunately produced literature which shows the labourers as submissive and lacking power in a colonial context. However, Roopnarine gives agency to the labourers and shows that they were actively engaged in all aspects of plantation life and often defied colonial dictates.

Roopnarine examines the movements which occurred during the indentureship period, within plantations and from rural to urban areas as well as the intra-Caribbean migration of Indians and their descendents. Labourers understood the society to which they had migrated; the segregation which existed was fuelled by race and ethnicity, concepts of domination and control, colour and social status. Another key focus of this book is the return migrants—those who repatriated to India upon completion of their contracts on Caribbean plantations and their circumstances upon return. Some became destitute in India, others chose to re-indenture and return to a plantation environment with which they were already familiar.

Additionally, Roopnarine focuses on the Indians in the Caribbean who emigrated from their initial host countries to other Caribbean colonies such as Trinidad and Guyana in a constant quest to create a better life for their families. He then looks at the decedents of these Indian immigrants—from the second generation onwards—and the continuation of that attempt to make

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a better life for themselves, which was evidenced by their parents, grandparents, great grandparents before them. The underlying themes are that of mobility and agency as Indians and their descendents created a new home in the Caribbean, North America and Europe. They were certainly not a static group.

As Roopnarine explains in the introduction, there have been numerous issues with writing the history of migration of Indian indentured labourers and their decedents starting with the heavy reliance on colonial sources; a focus on history and culture; writings on specific territories namely the ones with high concentrations of Indians; the fact that this migration of Indians was not seen as sufficiently important to make headlines in the history books; and the rather insular approach which exists. However, in his contribution, Roopnarine has sought to eradicate some of these issues in various ways.

The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora differs from the existing historiography in its comparative approach. Roopnarine has successfully weaved a narrative of a variety of Caribbean territories including those which do not feature prominently in the existing historiography such as the French West Indies, the US Virgin Island and the smaller islands of the British West Indies. Up until now the usual narrative has focused on the larger territories such as Trinidad, Guyana (British Guiana) and Jamaica and the Dutch colony of Suriname, to which numerically larger groups of Indian indentured labourers migrated. It is refreshing therefore, to have a narrative where comparisons on all aspects of indentureship and its aftermath, are made across the Caribbean regardless of population size or impact of indentureship. What is also notable is that this comparison extends beyond the Caribbean to North America and Europe as the Roopnarine discusses the migration of descendents of indentured labourers outside of the Caribbean and their settlement in countries outside of the Caribbean.

Further, the discussion on intricacies of inter-Caribbean Indian migration is a solid contribution to the existing historiography. Roopnarine notes that the labourers were always moving, not just within their territories from rural to urban areas but also from one Caribbean territory to another. Mobility was a key aspect of the Indian experience in the Caribbean and it was often influenced by desires to create a more viable economic life. The topic of inter-Caribbean migration of Indians and their descendants has only been dealt with sporadically in the existing historiography and has resulted in a few articles, most of them written by Roopnarine. Within the context of his book, the Roopnarine has been able to successfully situate this aspect of Indian Caribbean migration within the much more comprehensive account of movements which occurred for generations, thereby giving a complete picture of the movement of Indians in this part of the world.

Using various concepts of identity formation and ‘coolieology’ the reader is shown the complexities of Indo-Caribbean settlements both within and outside of the Caribbean. Indian migration into the Caribbean led to the establishment of very complex societies, many attributes of which were then transported outside of the Caribbean. The establishment of permanent settlements in the Caribbean led to the construction of various types of relationships within the predominantly Creole society. These presented a range of issues pertaining to identity formation and the construction of identities as well as interactions and relationships with sometimes hostile ethnic groups. Roopnarine noted that the discourse on Indian identity so far has revolved around cultural retention, assimilation, creolization, coolitude and douglarization. While these have helped us to understand the construction of Indian Caribbean identities, they have not done so in totality. As such, it is important that we continue to ask questions and to search for explanations

regarding the identities that Indian communities have developed, both within and outside of the Caribbean especially in the age of globalization.

Within these societies Indians developed multiple identities and adapted to their environment. Identities changed throughout the centuries – from indentureship and post-indentureship periods to more contemporary societies. Concepts of ethno-national identity, trans-Caribbean identity and ethno-Indian universal identity all show the complexities of identity formation from indentureship to present. The construction of identities was influenced by situationality, interaction with other ethnic groups, feelings of belonging and cultural influences. In many cases Indians and their descendents resisted acculturation and assimilation and retained the cultural legacy that was transported to the Caribbean during indentureship and then to North America and Europe from the Caribbean in the post-indentureship period.

Roopnarine's discussion of the more contemporary migration of Indians, the non-resident Indians, who migrated to the Caribbean after 1945, is also a significant contribution. The inclusion of this group takes the entire discussion on migration of Indians into a full circle; from nineteenth century until the twenty-first century and from the migration of Indians labourers to the migration of Indian professionals. This more contemporary migration of Indians into the Caribbean has influenced newer issues with identity formation as the NRIs interact with Indo-Caribbean people: a Bollywood cultural form is introduced and as tradition meets modernity. The nature of the interaction differs according to the territory – in Trinidad where there is a large population of persons of Indian origin, where identities are solidly constructed and cultural forms are firmly established, the NRIs have blended in with the society; working as professionals and marrying into other ethnic groups.

Roopnarine relies on a variety of sources addition to the value of this book. So much of the writings on indentureship have been influenced by colonial documentation, and while these are needed to reconstruct history of the indentured labourers, post-indentureship society, culture, settlement, political and economic contribution can be reconstructed with a more prominent voice from Indians rather than a colonial narrative. Roopnarine has successfully brought out the voice of Indians in the Caribbean; this voice is even more distinct when the author examines themes such as identity formation, interaction with other ethnic groups and migration outside of the Caribbean.

The Indian Caribbean: Migration and Identity in the Diaspora is a valuable addition to the existing historiography not only because of the variety of themes it covers; or the fact that it is a study of entire period of Indian migration in the Caribbean, from the arrival of indentured labourers until contemporary times; or even the fact that it offers a comparative discussion of Indian migration. It is a book that can be used in many academic disciplines from history and migration studies, to culture and society. It has potential value for a broad range of audiences from high school students to postgraduate researchers. A sense of continuity is evident throughout the period of study as well as the themes studied.