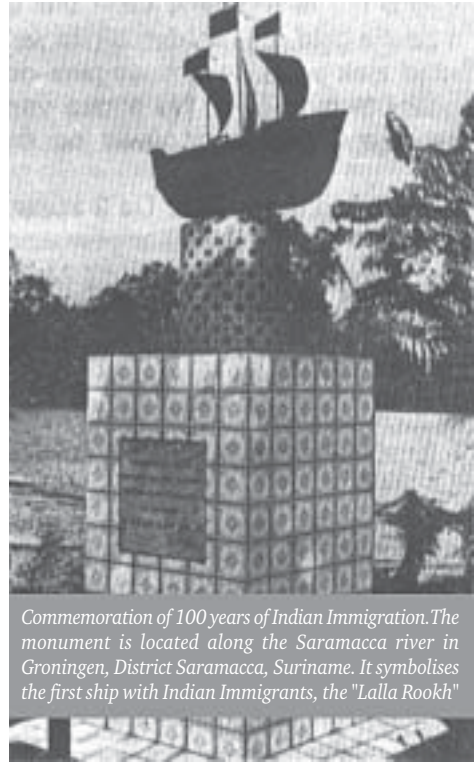


Suriname



Commemoration of 100 years of Indian Immigration. The monument is located along the Saramacca river in Groningen, District Saramacca, Suriname. It symbolises the first ship with Indian Immigrants, the "Lalla Rookh"



Hindustani Surinamese working in sugar plantations



Huts of Indian plantation workers in earlier times



H.E. Late Mr. J. Lachmon, former Speaker of the National Assembly, Republic of Suriname



*H.E. Mr. Jules Rattankoemar Ajodhia,
Vice President of Suriname*

Genesis of Suriname as a Dutch Colony

Suriname had been 'discovered' in 1499 by a Spaniard, Alonso de Ojeda. Spain integrated it into its empire only in 1533. It then became a bone of contention between several rival European powers – France, the Netherlands and Britain until 1866, in which year the British magnanimously traded it with the Dutch in lieu of New Amsterdam, which was later to become New York.

- 18.2. Unlike its two neighbours, the former British and French Guineas, Suriname is rich in flora and fauna. Sugarcane, bananas and citrus fruits grow luxuriously in it, while its coastal areas provide plentiful stocks of fish. Its thrillingly beautiful landscapes had impressed V.S.Naipaul so much that he is reported to have once described it as 'a tulip-less Holland'. Nature has also been bountiful to it in its gifts of bauxite and alumina, as well as Latin America's largest gold reserves and also some amount of crude oil. This far-off country, separated from India by two oceans and the endless landmass of Africa, is today the home of over a hundred and fifty thousand PIOs out of a total multiracial population of only around 438,000 persons, thus constituting the single largest ethnic group in the country.
- 18.3. The induction of Indians into Suriname as indentured labour, their gradual transformation, initially into independent farmers and kitchen gardeners, progressively into traders, academics and professionals of every kind, and finally also into active politicians, forms another fascinating chapter in the history of the Indian diaspora.

The Indenture Period

- 18.4. Unlike Britain and France, the Netherlands abolished slavery only as late as 1863. The Dutch planters in Suriname were soon confronted with large-scale desertion of their former slaves and as many as 90 plantations faced closure. After protracted negotiations, an unwilling Britain finally agreed in 1870 to the recruitment of Indians to work in Dutch Guinea as indentured labour. Even before the conclusion of that agreement, the Dutch colonists had managed to attract some of the Indian workers who had completed their contractual period to cross over from British Guinea into Dutch Guinea. On 5 June 1873, the sailing ship *Lala Rookh* finally arrived in Paramaribo after a voyage of over three months from Calcutta with a cargo of 452 labourers, most of whom

had been recruited from the eastern part of UP and from Bihar. At least some of them seem to have been misled into believing that they were being taken to a place of pilgrimage called 'Sri Ram' which turned out to be Suriname! This was the first of 64 sailing vessels and steam ships that took as many as 34,304 workers to this Dutch colony between 1873 and 1916, when the Netherlands government finally discontinued the system of indentured labour. According to official statistics, only 11,512 of the Indian workers exercised their contractual option of a free passage back to India after completing five years of labour in the plantations.

The Evolution of the Diaspora After the Indenture Period

- 18.5. In 1885, to discourage the former indentured labourers from returning to India, the Dutch government tried to persuade them to settle down permanently in the colony. It offered free settlement rights on a state-run plantation, plus a bonus of a hundred Dutch guilders to any one who abandoned his right to a return passage. Taking advantage of this offer, around 23,000 'Hindustanis' – this was the generic term that was being applied to them – stayed back in the colony. After some years, on realising that a purely agriculture-based subsistence economy was no longer worth pursuing, many of them began to explore other and more profitable areas of work. Some of them did not give up the rice cultivation that had been their main occupation during indenture days. After acquiring small plots of land with their savings and their bonus money, they continued to grow rice on their own, especially in the western district of Nickerie, as it fetched them handsome returns. Even today, many of the Hindustanis own extensive and bountiful rice farms in Suriname.
- 18.6. From the early years of the 20th century, more and more of the Indian settlers decided to involve themselves in other sectors like trade and transport. Meanwhile, the proselytising activities of Christian missionaries had given them the first taste of education. They began to appreciate the importance of acquiring additional skills through Western education which, they realised, was an essential passport to upward social mobility. Their children were sent to school and, in course of time, their next generation became eligible for jobs in the colony's civil services. This had been facilitated by the fact that, according to Dutch regulations, all persons born in this colony, as well as the children of Dutch parents, were automatically entitled to Dutch citizenship. Between the two World Wars, there were still only a few dozen teachers, policemen and relatively junior-level government functionaries among the PIOs.
- 18.7. The Indian community's first physicians and its graduates in various other disciplines began to return home from Dutch universities after the Second World War. Some of them soon became increasingly visible in various professions like medical and legal practice, the judiciary, administration and banking, the diplomatic service and eventually even in the political field.

The Indian Community's Entry into Politics

- 18.8. Meanwhile, the winds of political change had begun to blow over the various colonies in the

Caribbean, as in other parts of the world. In 1946, the PIOs and their counterparts from Indonesia, who were locally called Javanese, organised a group called the *'Hindostans-Javanese Centrale Raad'* which demanded a more sympathetic attitude towards Islam and Hinduism in the local schools. The forming of this group marked the political baptism of Jaggernath Lachmon. Other PIOs had formed various Hindu or Muslim political parties. But the reform-minded Lachmon had the sagacity to invest his political future in the *'Hindostans-Javanese Politieke Partij'* (HJPP) as he was convinced that religion was too narrow a base for a political movement in a country whose population adhered a wide spectrum of faiths. The HJPP soon became the *Verenigde Hindostaanse Partij'* (the United Hindustani Party) by allying itself with the Muslim and Hindu parties, in time to face the first elections which were held in the colony in 1949 on the basis of universal suffrage. The new coalition party's successes included, *inter alia*, the legitimisation of Hindu and Muslim marriage and burial rights, the declaration of Id and Holi as national holidays, and keeping the community in a state of active mobilisation.

- 18.9. It was unfortunate that the political developments leading to the partition of India in 1947 had their unavoidable reflection in Suriname. The newly apparent mutual antagonism between the two major components of the PIO community was accompanied by the alienation of both of them from the Afro-Surinamese who resented their prosperity and political activism. According to contemporary observers, they and the Creoles had begun to view the Indians 'very much in the same way as the old European conception of Jews: a miserly, acquisitive lot, less than loyal and unwilling to assimilate'.
- 18.10. The last half-century has witnessed many developments in the politics of Suriname, which need not be described here in detail. Note may be taken, however, of the Dutch government's decision to grant internal self-rule to the colony in 1954, followed by the grant of independence to it on 25 November 1975. Désiré ('Desi') Bouterse staged a military coup five years later. Civilian rule was restored in 1987. It did not last long for there was further political turbulence in the form of Bouterse's 'telephone coup' of 1990. Angry international reaction to the coup, including the cancellation of a generous Dutch grant for the economic development of its former colony, led to the restoration of democratic rule. After the elections of August last year, Runaldo Ronald Venetiaan has again been elected as President after a gap of four years. Another Hindustani, Jules Rattankoemar Ajodhia has become the country's Vice President. Late Jagernath Lachmon, the former Speaker of the National Assembly was generally regarded as the octogenarian leader of the Indian community in the country.

Cultural Life of the Indo-Surinamese

- 18.11. By 1975, the year in which the Netherlands government granted Suriname its independence, the younger generations of Hindustanis numbered almost as many as 300,000 persons. Availing of the liberal Dutch citizenship laws and the continuing inter-racial tensions in the former colony, as many as 50% of the Hindustanis opted to migrate to the Netherlands.

- 18.12. Those that chose to remain in Suriname have retained the essential traits of their Indian culture and traditions, in the same manner as those that migrated to the Netherlands have done. As many as 80% of the community in Suriname are Hindus of various sects, while the Muslims number no more than 17.5%. They have both succeeded in keeping their respective religions alive; and also, to some extent, the home languages of their ancestors. Both the Muslims and the Hindus have established foundations to run schools for their children. Since the 1930s, they have also formed various socio-religious organisations like the *Sanatan Dharam Maha Sabha*, the *Arya Dewakar* and the *Islamitische Vereniging* (Islamic Club). In earlier years, the two communities normally used Hindi and Urdu at their social and religious meetings. These languages were also the normal mode in which PIO radio and TV. programmes were produced. Recently, however, ‘*Sarnami*’ has replaced both of them as many intellectuals and the younger PIOs are not very familiar with either Hindi or Urdu, while *Sarnami* is understood by almost all the Hindustanis. Soon after the commencement of Indian immigration, the Bhojpuri language had been spoken by most of the indentured labour. It had begun to be called ‘Hindustani’ and had become the most popular language among all the immigrants. Modern day *Sarnami* (or ‘*Surinami Hindi*’) is a mixture of Bhojpuri and Awadi, with the addition of a few Dutch, English and Creole words.
- 18.13. On the whole, it would be right to say that the Hindustanis have carved their own distinctive niche in this country and even in its government. They have integrated themselves well into Surinamese society. Their influence in the ethnic lifestyle of the general population is very visible. They have also made significant contributions to the country’s economy, its trade and commerce, as well as to its transport and other sectors. Its share in the country’s GDP is quite significant.

Demands and Expectations of the Diaspora

- 18.14. The following are the Demands and Expectations of the Diaspora in Suriname from India:
- (a) Start an Indo-Suriname Brotherhood Society;
 - (b) Establish a Hindi Chair at the University of Suriname;
 - (c) Institute a mechanism to trace the Indian roots of the PIOs;
 - (d) Introduce the Indian Neem tree in Suriname;
 - (e) Encourage Indians to cultivate land in this country;
 - (f) Promote the establishment of Indo-Surinamese joint ventures; and
 - (g) Establish in Suriname Institutes for Infotech and for Small Enterprises Development through bilateral co-operation between private sectors, Chambers of Commerce and the Governments of the two countries.

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