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The official flag designed for the "150 years of Indian immigration in Suriname" celebrations. All images of the article by ©Sinah Kloß 2023

ALL MONEY SPENT – CELEBRATING "150 YEARS OF INDIAN IMMIGRATION" IN SURINAME

by Sinah Kloß

"Everything has become so expensive since Corona. It's no longer enough for me to do my job at the food factory, so now I also drive taxi. But this is my private car. I work at the company from 10pm to 6am, then I go straight on. I drive some children to school and I have a few errands to run, but otherwise I wait for rides from the taxi office, like now," Sanjeet explains. We are standing in front of a red light on the still surprisingly empty streets of Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, on this Monday morning in June 2023. It is not early in the morning and the shops in the center should open soon, we think. We set off timely to attend the celebrations commemorating "150 Years of Indian Immigration," which had been highly publicized for weeks, especially on social media.



The monument commemorating Indian indentured laborers in Paramaribo.

One hundred and fifty years ago, on 5 June 1873, the first Indian indentured laborers arrived in Suriname, then still a Dutch colony sometimes referred to as Dutch Guiana. They were supposed to work on the plantations for a five-year period under conditions that their descendants usually describe as "another form" or a "new kind" of slavery. Between 1873 and 1916, more than 34,000 indentured laborers were distributed to various plantations in Suriname, following a treaty between the Dutch colonial government and the British, who had already implemented the System of Indentureship in many British colonies since 1838. In total, about half a million Indian indentured laborers arrived in the Caribbean in this way. They were to fill the supposed lack of labor on the colonial plantations after the emancipation of enslaved Africans and the end of the apprenticeship system; or, more precisely, to minimize the cost of labor.

The ship that brought the first Indian indentured laborers to Suriname was called the *Lalla Rookh*, a well-known fact among the local Hindustani population. Even the museum that currently showcases Indo-Surinamese culture is called the Lalla Rookh Museum. The ship's name is also used with regard to other institutions such as the Surinamese National Foundation of Indian Immigration, which played a prominent role in preparing a program for the "150 Years of Indian Immigration" celebrations.

Driving by, it is not yet necessarily obvious that the big celebrations will take place on this day. Occasionally, you can see billboards along the road advertising cultural shows and performances at an event center not far from the city. Slowly arriving in the city center, on the other hand, the preparations are already visible: some streets are decorated with Surinamese and Indian flags and an archway has been erected at the indentured laborer monument, framed with a Surinamese flag as a kind of curtain. Fresh *malas* – flower garlands – adorn the memorial, although this is the norm and not a special preparation on this occasion, to be frank.

Later in the evening, a large parade will take place, featuring a diverse array of associations and organizations. They have spent several weeks preparing floats that thematically highlight various aspects of what is currently understood as part of Indian culture in Suriname. Most of the floats have been created by religious organizations, so it is not surprising that many of the scenes center around themes from the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. However, there are also overarching theme floats: one that stands out is a performer dressed in *khadi*, the hand-spun cloth promoted during Indian nationalist struggles for independence, staging a hip-swinging and very rhythmically agile Mahatma Gandhi to loud Indian music.



An exhibition honoring the culture of Hindustanis in Nickerie.





Impressions of the parade in the city center of Paramaribo.

The parade will take place in rainy weather due to the persistent rainy season at this time of year. As a result, it is unlikely that it will live up to the full spectacle we had anticipated for such an event. Colorful umbrellas will mingle with Caribbean music, including *chutney* – a Caribbean style of music that draws on traditional Indian songs or Bollywood film music, overlaid with a fast, danceable soca or calypso beat. Snacks and drinks will be sold, people will sing and dance cheerfully. However, the limited crowd may not only be a result of the rainy season, but also reflect the divided opinion of the Surinamese population about the celebrations: the vast majority of those present will see themselves as part of the descendants of Indian indentured laborers and therefore as belonging to the group of "Hindustanis." The diversity of the Surinamese population – people who identify as Creole, Maroon, Javanese, Indigenous and Chinese, for example – will hardly be seen among the audience on the streets on this day.

Neither, of course, does the Indian community represent a unified group, nor has it ever done so at any point in Surinamese history. The existence of different event locations for the 150th anniversary celebrations may reveal competing interests within the community. Each planned series of events has been facing criticism in advance from the various Hindustani perspectives and groups: one celebration is predicted to be "pure money-making," as each *roti* – a particular bread filled with split peas central to Hindustani food and identity in Suriname – has usually "cost a fortune there" during earlier events of the same organizers, says a Hindustani woman on Facebook; "it is impossible to visit with a family." Another "150 Years" event in the rural area of Nickerie is considered to be a purely political event, being held at the local party headquarters of the current ruling VHP, which most Surinamese commonly identify as "Hindustani." "People who vote differently are not welcome there," we hear several times.

"I will have to work," Sanjeet tells us when we enquire where best to go, "to pay for the always-increasing electricity prices and the horrendous food costs." He

simply cannot afford to take a day off, even if it is an official holiday in the country. Another taxi driver had told us the same: he could choose to do without a "little luxury like his fridge" and catch up on some sleep, or work. High inflation and everyday things, which have become unaffordable to many Surinamese especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, dominate our small talk and conversations during this research trip.

The urgency of the strenuous situation for the majority of the population was evident already shortly before we left for Suriname: in February 2023, there were violent protests about the increasing costs of living, and the National Assembly in Paramaribo was stormed. The demonstrators accused the government of President Chan Santokhi, who took office in 2020, of corruption and demanded its resignation.

Sanjeet turns into a narrow street of the old town, where a Christian church built in colonial times still dominates the scene, not far from the presidential palace. Here is one of the few ATM machines where we usually withdraw cash. For the last few weeks, however, the ATM in the rural area has been consistently declining to dispense cash with any of our credit or debit cards. We try this point of usual cash flow, this safe haven that has served us well in previous years. Again, today, this machine only offers us a receipt with the statement that the "Transaction cannot be processed." We realize we have roughly 150 Euros for the remainder of our stay, seven days, including all travel expenses, even to the airport, an hour's drive away, and including the locally disproportionately expensive items such as diapers for our toddler. 6,000 Suriname Dollars. This is roughly the minimum amount that another taxi driver, Michael, calculated as the necessary to cover living expenses for a month.

"He just flies around, and never is in Suriname," Michael had told us. That was a few days earlier, when we had still been in Nickerie, in the border region of Guyana and Suriname. "How is Santokhi ever going to change anything here? He flies around neatly, carelessly, around

the world, Netherlands, USA, inviting everyone he likes." But who would ultimately pay for this jet-setting, he asked.

Even the President of India has come to celebrate the 150 Years Celebrations in Paramaribo. She is to give a speech on the aforementioned 5 June. Posters and flags announce her visit, which was not only critically but often proudly announced to us by Hindustanis, even those in Nickerie who would not have a chance to see her except on TV.

Leaving the ATM booth somewhat perplexed, we are back in the taxi with Sanjeet. As it is a national holiday, there is no contact person at the bank to enquire about the reason for our continuous problem, which, as we are to find out later, also affected several other international visitors. I briefly tell Sanjeet about our

problems, highlighting that it has never been an issue on any of my previous research stays in Suriname.

Sanjeet taps his fingers on the steering wheel while we think about what to do next. The big celebrations do not start before late afternoon. The shops in town are closed, and apart from that, we would have no money to buy anything in the first place.

"They spent all the money on '150 Years,'" Sanjeet laughs. He disguises his voice as he pronounces 150 years. "No more money in the banks. All gone. Spent all of Suriname's money." We all laugh, but it is not a hearty laugh. We head back to the flat, in a taxi we can still afford, to wait a little for the "big celebrations" and enjoy the small luxury of our fridge, which is not boasting with food but still stocked at this point.



A performer stages a dancing Mahatma Gandhi during the parade.



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