

## **THE OCTOBER 1896 NON PAREIL UPRISING – THE UNKNOWN STORY**

Rampersaud Tiwari

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The objective of this story is to tell of certain hitherto unknown features of the 1896 Non Pareil uprising that were told to me by some immigrants. My interest in wanting to tell the stories is based on the fact that what the immigrants would have liked to say was 'uncherished' in their space and span of time. The memories continue to haunt me since they have now assumed an even greater importance for pride of place in the history of the Indian diaspora. When archival information is unavailable, people resort to story telling. In this way ancestral history is kept alive; and since people are more dispersed now than ever, the role of story tellers is to pass on information that is crucial not only to history but also to the politics of survival.

What was told to me by the immigrants seemed 'embargoed' at the time by government and plantation officials who did not want it to be publicly known that there was an uprising on the estate to protest violation of human and personal rights of workers on the estate. For this reason, they used their resources and influence to declare the uprising as industrial with 'riotous' conduct in order that the 'Riot Act' could be read to empower the militia to use firearms to disperse the assembled workers.

One of the true causes of the uprising was the conduct of the Deputy Manager of the estate who was habitually violating the dignity of Indian female laborers and the attitude of the Manager who dismissed the complaint of workers. The deputy manager was accused of 'raping' Jamni, the wife of Jangli, a leading militant among the workers. The deputy manager claimed that Jamni was living with him of her own free will. Jamni and the workers denied his claim. The workers were returning from a meeting with an immigration agent when the militia was called upon to arrest the leaders. Disorder ensued and the militia squad under Capt De Rinzy was ordered to open fire. Jangli and another worker were shot and killed on the spot. Three other workers died soon after and fifty nine were injured in the hail of police buck shot fire. Some of the killed and wounded were ex-sepoys of the Indian Army.

### **Introduction**

Discovering and reclaiming ancestral heritage and honoring the ancestors in rituals and in print and memory must become to their descendants as natural as the air they breathe. This leads me to the larger question of how we reclaim and preserve our archives and heritage, not only in official papers but in our memories as well. As Erna Brodber, a distinguished Jamaican writer, says, we need to enter the minds and hearts of the ancestors through the children and grandchildren and so extend the boundaries of the search for resources to include oral accounts (Brodber 1983).

I am very grateful to the organizers of this Conference for an opportunity to present a micro family history of my immigrant elders and to share my memories of certain experiences generally of Indian immigrants who were indentured to

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*Address for communication:* **Rampersaud Tiwari**, Retired Guyana Public Servant, 15 Brimorton Drive, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, *E-mail:* [ramtiwari@excite.com](mailto:ramtiwari@excite.com)

work on sugar plantations/estates in British Guiana. They are in solemn tribute to my elders and other elders for their indomitable courage, their militancy and their struggles and sacrifices in blood, sweat and tears as they gave of their yesterday for our today. Their historic human efforts defined their love for liberty, freedom, human dignity and a culture of hard work and militancy. These were the values that led their descendants in British Guiana, (now) Guyana, from plantation poverty to political power in less than a hundred years, an example of which was Mr. Joseph Alexander Luckhoo Sr. a first generation local born Indian Barrister-at-Law who was elected a Financial Representative to the Combined Court of the colony in 1916 (Ramharack, 2005).

There comes a time when individuals with long suppressed memories must make a choice of revealing them for posterity or keeping them stored in their minds and taking them away when they die. I have made the choice of sharing oral information that I received from time to time from the elders. For me this is an exercise in exploring a lifetime of the experiences of large numbers of human beings who were taken from India to Guyana as bonded laborers. I am eternally indebted to my aja and many other Indian, African and other elders for stories of the 1896 Non Pariel uprising which they shared with me long before they died.

The indentured immigrants destroyed many of the dehumanizing derogatory descriptions of mendicancy, truancy, hunger and disease that were attached to them by their oppressors and proved themselves to be men and women of sterling stock and heritage. As stated in (Khan, 2008), the truth was “A high percentage of them were educated people and many also had a great deal of oral learning.” I knew some immigrants who received higher learning in India, Persia (Iran) and Afghanistan. Many were also gifted with artistic, commercial, mercantile and technical skills. The large number of sepoy (soldiers) among them, “Unlike their white comrades-in-arms, were not drawn from the dregs of society, taking the Queen’s shilling as a last resort. Whether they were Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, they regarded their calling as warriors as inseparable from their religious faith” (Ferguson, 2003).

The stories the elders shared with me have since been corroborated many years later during my tenure in certain senior administrative and executive level offices of the Guyana Civil/Public Service.

### **History Institutionally Suppressed and Selectively Revealed**

This conference has opened a window of opportunity for me to tell of what I was privileged to see in certain classified documents in official records and in the National Archives in Guyana. That was in 1961, fifty years ago, when I was an Administrative Cadet (ADC) in the Guyana Public Service and when I was assigned to research information for a booklet titled *Patterns of Progress* and for regular media releases and a documentary film on *How and Why to Vote* in general elections.

These two exercises were undertaken by the Press and Publicity and Films Divisions of the Government Information Services (GIS). The objectives of both exercises were to publicize the achievements of the Government from 1957 to 1961 and to explain the principles and practices of democracy in the country. Much emphasis was placed in both exercises on good government and governance, the rule of law and socio-political progress to internal self-government, independence and freedom for the colony.

In the course of my work, I saw documents that were previously classified for the reason that the contents were not meant for open public discussion or debate. As a result, I became aware that many Indians who were indentured to sugar estates in the colony had been Sepoys (soldiers) of the British Indian Army or of the private armies of Princely States in India. Several were also men of learning in the languages of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. A few of them were literate in Latin, Religious Studies, Astrology, Astronomy, Mathematics and Commerce. Long before he died on 26 April 2007, Mr. Chandr Pal Persaud (Paul O'Hara) shared his memories of an unreported conversation he once had with Lord Louis Mountbatten who had visited Guyana in March 1962 (Ramharack 2005). Paul O'Hara, an uncle of mine, was the Guyana correspondent for Reuters News Service of London, England. He told me that he and Lord Louis spoke of certain internal security issues in the country with special reference to conditions on the sugar estates. They also spoke of the freedom movements in India and in Guyana when Lord Louis mentioned about the 1857 Mutiny in India and the 1896 Non Pariel uprising in Guyana. Lord Louis told him that Sepoys were classified by their heritage origins as Brahmins, Rajpoots, Jats, Sikhs, Garhwalees, Dogras, Mussulmans, Pathans and Madrassis and that large numbers of these brave men had served with commendable courage and distinction in 1944 when he was their Supreme Commander in South East Asia – Brett-James (1951). Paul O'Hara said that he mentioned about the Jalianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, Punjab, on 13 April 1919, and told Lord Louis that his father's only brother was among the unarmed civilians who were killed when troops under the command of Brigadier General Reginald Dyer fired relentlessly into an assembled crowd of unarmed civilians in an enclosed area. However, Lord Louis seemed to fear very much for the future of British interests in sugar which he believed could be disrupted by planned insurgencies like the one at Non Pariel in 1896. He said that he was advised that ex-Sepoy who were indentured to Non Pariel had planned to kill the white people on the estate just as rebellious native troops had done in Lucknow in the 1857 Indian Mutiny.

Many ex-sepoys were suspected of subversive, treasonable and other criminal activities in India. John Edward Jenkins was commissioned by Lord Granville, Secretary of State for the Colonies, to inquire into the coolie system in British Guiana. Jenkins had seen some immigrants at work digging canals and trenches at

Windsor Forest when he visited the estate in June 1871. Of the men he saw at Windsor Forest, he wrote that “the coolies were magnificent men. Their tall figures, deep broad chests, and molded limbs, showed that they, at all events, could show a good fight. Several had been Sepoys in India” (Jenkins, 1871).

Soon after the 1857 mutiny was suppressed there were British army and civil reprisal campaigns against mutineers and other people who supported or were suspected to have supported the mutiny. My aja’s ancestral properties and those of the Thakurs of Bara Banki in Uttar Pradesh were demolished and thousands of farmers and their families were brutally killed and their homes and livestock destroyed. Those who survived the slaughter and destruction painfully trekked to re-locate in certain northern communities in the Himalayan districts or escaped through the system of indenture to Guyana. In his review of Amaresh Misra’s book, *War of Civilisations: India AD 1857*, Ramesh (2007) writes that the story of the reprisals is recorded as an “untold holocaust” in which “millions disappeared” and Britain, the world’s super power at the time “came perilously close to losing its most prized possession: India”. The inhuman brutalities obviously led hundreds of Indians to indenture under assumed identities to sugar estates in Guyana. I was very curious whenever I saw how my aja was greeted as ‘Chota Fauji Dar Sahib’ (small VCO – Viceroy’s Commissioned Officer) by friends of his father whenever they visited my aja and ajie in Buxton. Ramdyhan Singh a Chauhan Rajput and Saryudeen Maraj a Shukla Brahmin were also often greeted as ‘Rissaldar Sahib’ (Lieutenant) and ‘Havildar Sahib’ (Sergeant) by their friends - these Indian Army ranks are described in Mollo (1981). Like My aja, both of these immigrants lived in Buxton.

Another source of curiosity for me was ‘Shew Paltan’, my aja’s name on his Emigration Pass and ‘Seepaltan’ by which he was generally known. As a student of higher education, I read the history of the British Empire with special reference to India; and in discussions with Uncle Paul (O’Hara) I became aware that Seepaltan was not a name that was ordinarily given to a person as ‘paltan’ translated into English was a platoon or brigade of military or paramilitary personnel. Was my aja a 9 year old Hindu boy, a member of a Shiva Platoon or Brigade? I asked my aja several times what was his Hindu birth name. Since his father’s name was Ram Nath, was he named Shiv Nath? In response, all I received from him was a benevolent smile, no answer and a gentle touch on my shoulder. Was he sworn to secrecy not to tell of his true identity? After my aja died in 1964 I was left with the belief that he was a member of a paramilitary Shiva platoon/brigade a ‘Shiv Paltan’ of boys of prominent families of Bara Banki.

The main objective of my efforts in this paper is to narrate information that was given to me from time to time by my aja and other elders. For me, their memories have assumed greater importance for pride of place in their history and in the history of their descendants.

### **My Paternal Ancestry**

My paternal grandfather, Shew Paltan (aja), Immigrant No. 73418, his father Ram Nath (per aja), Immigrant No. 73315 and his mother Shewraja (per ajie), Immigrant No. 73409 arrived in Demerara in 1895 on the ship *Jura*. They were indentured to Plantation Non Pariel. My father's mother Mankia (ajie), Immigrant No. 93437, arrived in Demerara in 1902 on the ship *Arno* with her husband Woodut, Immigrant No. 93702. Mankia and Woodut were also indentured to Non Pariel estate. My ajie separated from Woodut for reasons that were never told to me or to other relatives. She and my aja were married some time in 1906. Copies of Emigration Passes for all the named immigrants in this paragraph were secured from the National Archives in Georgetown, Guyana.

After I was designated Secretary to a committee that the Government had appointed in late 1964 to consider the matter of the Indian Immigration Fund, I took the opportunity to speak with Mr. James Isaac Ramphal M.B.E, a former Commissioner of Labor, Immigration Agent General and Chairman of the Sugar Industry Labor Welfare Fund (SILWF) Committee. An acclaimed authority on the system of indenture and industrial relations, Mr. Ramphal told me that as a rule Brahmins and Kshatriyas were often excluded from recruitment as indentured immigrants for the reason that they were considered unsuitable for hard work on the sugar estates. The former were of the scholarly and priestly community and the latter were of the high spirited military community. Hundreds of these people were also soldiers in India and many of them were disbanded after the 1857 Indian mutiny.

As our conversation continued, Mr. Ramphal told me that disbanded Brahmin and Kshatriya soldiers would often rebel on board ships on which they were travelling as indentured immigrants. He knew of one ship on which there was a rebellion of soldiers. As a result, the ship had to change its course and return to India where the soldiers were promptly arrested and sent to prison on the Andamans in *Kala Pani* of the Bay of Bengal. Recently I read of an uprising by ex-Indian soldiers who were on board the *Classmerden* in 1863 (Carter and Bates, 2010). The ship was sailing to Georgetown but it was forced to change its course because of "disorder by ex-Sepoy on board."

I had heard from many elders that my per aja and my aja were handsome and cultured men and my per ajie was a beautiful and graceful lady. My aja was also a truly handsome person, as this was how he was spoken of by Eusi Kwayana at the funeral of my uncle (Cha Cha) Dudhnath who died on 10 February 1984: "The older members of the community will remember Shree Seepaltan who came to Guyana as a child from India during the indenture system. He was very conscious of his traditions and bore himself very nobly and with dignity in the village (Buxton) where he was once the Ranger. He left his own mark on the older heads."

My aja was nearly six feet tall and dignified in his gait and bearing. Also, according to Mr. Kwayana, “Seepaltan, passionate about education, also ensured that his children and grandchildren, girls in particular, took to education wherever it was available”.

The Ranger was de facto, Overseer of the farms and cattle pastures in the backlands of Buxton. Mr. Kwayana (formerly Sydney King), is a highly respected African Guyanese elder of Buxton, a social activist and parliamentarian now in retirement. Kwayana and my Cha Cha Dudhnath were very good friends from their early boyhood years. They worked in many political campaigns for progressive social changes in the country and helped in many significant ways to get Dr. Cheddi Jagan elected to the Legislative Council in 1947.

I believe my aja had a good life in India as he was seen as a healthy young boy who was literate in Hindi and simple arithmetic. His age was stated as 9 years on his Emigration Pass, but in my view his intelligence was of a 14 year old. Probably for this reason, he was sent to the Anglican Primary School on the estate there to be taught English and other subjects. My aja told me that he lived with his parents in places in India where there were many soldiers. This confirmed my belief that his father was a military man who lived in army family quarters in places like Meerut, Lucknow and Kanpur where his regiment was stationed. He also left me with much of his memories of elders of his family who were combatants in battles of the 1857 uprising in Meerut, Lucknow and Kanpur.

My aja often spoke of *Dhowrara* in the United Provinces (UP) as a village from which their journey from India began. One day, in his home at Buxton Front, he wept as he sadly recounted to me and my sister how he “walked away with a bowl of milk and rice with cream and sugar” which he was having for supper when his parents began their journey from the village. He later said that he travelled with his parents for several days from village to village in the night on foot, horseback, elephant howdah, bullock cart and train and hiding with his parents in the day under the protection of villagers along the routes they travelled. The villagers gave them food, water, changes of clothing and medicine. When they reached Kanpur they met a Recruiter who was expecting them. His father told him and his mother that the recruiter said that being a Brahmin and a Sepoy he would not be accepted as an immigrant for Demerara; and for this reason, he would have to say that he worked in caring for horses and other farm animals as the immigration people were at the time recruiting men with such skills.

From my grandfather’s story, I concluded that his father was a Lancer in a regiment of cavalry as his father had a scar on his face. I confirmed this from his father’s Emigration Pass. I surmised that his father might have received the scar in combat or in training or in some other unfavorable circumstances. His father was trained in how to care for horses and for this reason, was the Officer in Charge (VCO) of the horses in his regiment of cavalry. Perhaps, it was also for this reason

his caste was stated as “Kachee” on his Emigration Pass. A Kachee, I am told, was a person who was clerical supervisory or managerial functionary. I also concluded that the recruiter was a friendly and influential official who knew why my grandfather and his parents had to leave India. My aja’s father was probably a dissident in the army and members of his immediate and extended family were very active in civil campaigns for the British to leave India. I also suspected that the person who helped them to leave India was Dussodeen Shukla Maraj who was the husband of Hubrajie my aja’s only sister. Dusodeen Shukla was a High Court official in Allahabad who probably knew how to secure their departure from India. Shukla would also have had the money to pay the expenses for their travel from Dhowrara to Kanpur and to reward villagers for the kindness and protection they extended to my aja and his parents. Dussodeen and Hubrajie did not leave India.

Many years later when an Indian Government Minister, was on an official visit to Guyana and I was serving in the Public Service Ministry or in the Ministry of Education in the 1970s I met with him socially at a Reception on the lawns of the President’s Residence. During our conversation he observed that we were of the same heritage. He told me that he was of a large family of Thakurs of Bara Banki. I told him that I was a second generation descendant of Indian indentured immigrants and that my aja and his parents were also of a very large family of Bara Banki. They left India in 1895 and my ajie who was from Benares left India in 1902. Then the Minister told me that if members of my family were to go to India to look for relatives, they would have to go to places in Dehra Dun, Haryana, Himachal or Garhwal to find descendants of elders who had survived the 1857 mutiny and the holocaust that followed.

When my aja and his parents arrived in Non Pariel estate they were put to live in a *lojje* in a row of range housing with about 6 or 7 adjoining *lojjes*. The *lojje* they were given was large enough for a bedroom with a double bed (a *khatiya*) of knitted cords in triangular shapes, two blankets, two thick/rough cotton bed sheets, three pillows and a few jute bags one of which was used by my aja to sleep on the floor of the living room. There was also a ground floor kitchen. The bedroom and the living room were on a raised floor of the range of *lojjes* which was on stilts of about 2 or 3 feet from the ground. The kitchen floor described as a ‘mud floor’ was of hardened earth covered and daubed with a mixture of cow dung and water. My aja felt very uncomfortable and would often complain to his parents that the *lojje* was not like their house and the houses of relatives who lived nearby when they were in Bara Banki. The food was also not like the food they had at home in India. Food items that were available were usually of very poor quality. He also said that he often told his parents of the comfort he enjoyed with his older sister Hubrajie and her husband in Allahabad. These feelings often made him very sad.

It was therefore very clear to me from what I heard from many immigrants that they were not all from the needy or disadvantaged of society in India. Every

immigrant man, woman or child, had to be certified by a British Surgeon General as healthy and able bodied for agricultural work on the sugar plantations in British Guiana. Perceived evils of a caste driven society, landlessness, hunger and discrimination in India were exaggerated and exploited to cover evils of the British military and civil powers on dissidents and militants who were suspected of being hostile to British rule in India.

The lojies in all the ranges were unkempt shacks where African slaves had previously lived up to emancipation in 1834. The emancipated Africans gradually left the estate after a period of apprenticeship for villages like Buxton and Friendship that emancipated Africans had bought with money they had earned and saved as apprentices. The lojies in which the indentured workers lived offered little or no privacy. Women and girls were very often abducted by overseers and managers or procured for them by individuals in the immigrant community for reward in cash or kind. Very few immigrant women or girls went of their own free will to give of themselves for the pleasure of management officials or headmen and headwomen of their own ethnic or cultural group.

Ram Nath (my aja) was put to work as an assistant to William Grosvenor who was the head Farrier of Non Pariel estate. My aja was sent to the school on the estate where he became very friendly with Mr. Grosvenor's only son, Willy). My per aja and the senior Grosvenor worked in Non Pariel estate and with Cornelius Krynehoff, the Overseer of Friendship the sister village to Buxton. This arrangement was sanctioned by the management of Non Pariel estate and the immigration authorities. Cornelius Krynehoff was a former Field Manager of Non Pariel estate who had settled in Friendship where he cultivated sugar cane and had a small sugar factory in a section of Buxton that still bears the name *Krynehoff Empolder*. Memories of my per aja's contribution to farming in Buxton and Friendship live in an earthen dam that bears the name *Maraj Cross*, and which crosses the village backlands from Friendship on the east through Buxton and into Annandale on the west.

My ajie Manakia also recounted to me about her happy days in Gorain, her village in District Mizamurad in Benares (Varanasi) with her parents and her only brother working and singing and dancing in the paddy fields, tending their cows and vegetable gardens and going to the bazaars in fine clothes and items of jewelry. She also went to community performances where with other girls her age she would sing folk songs and dance to tunes of music from village musicians. The performances, songs, music and dances were of the pastoral Yadav Ahir community of cattle herders. She would often sing a few of the songs to me and my sister when she was either sad or happy.

In her sorrowful moods my ajie often wept bitterly as she sang asking the question 'what sins had she committed' that she had to leave her home in India and travel to Damra Tapu (Demerara) and live and work in Naphraile (Non Pariel) and Baxin (Buxton) with her young family of which I was her first grand child. In her

songs she would also pray Lord Krishna to send his invincible 'Narayane Army' to deal with the people who were always very harsh on workers and often molested women and girls. She also prayed to Lord Krishna to send his army to deal with the Bhus Naygas (Bush Negroes) who harassed workers in the sugar cane fields of the estate and in farms and pastures in the village backlands. Ironically, she would call out to the Bhus Nayga to come and get me whenever she felt that I had misbehaved. My ajie was unable to speak clearly in English. She was however, very proficient in her native Awadhi and Bhojpuri Hindi. She was 61 years of age when she died of natural causes on 08 July 1943 and was buried in the village cemetery at Buxton Front.

### **My Maternal Ancestry**

Sukan (Singh) my maternal grandfather (Nana) and Lakhpatiya my maternal grandmother (Nanee) were born in British Guiana to indentured Indian parents. My Nana's father Bandhan (Singh) (Per Nana), Immigrant No.47 and his mother Jugdaye (Per Nanee), Immigrant No. 194 were from the Princely State of Bharatpur in Rajasthan and Fyzabad in Uttar Pradesh, respectively. Bandhan was taken to Demerara in the Ship Golden Empire in 1865 and Jugdaye was taken in the Ship Syria in 1872. Their son Sukan was born at Beterverwagting on the east coast of Demerara on 14 May 1884. My *Nanee* Lakhpatiya's father Rampersaud (Per Nana) was from Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh and her mother Iatan (Inayat) (Per Nanee) was from the Nizam Shahi Princely State of Hyderabad in central India.

Matbor Sing, Immigrant No. 73809, an older brother to my Nana Sukan was taken to Demerara in the ship *Elms* which sailed from Calcutta on 27 July 1895. He told me that the ship arrived in Georgetown sometime in October 1895. He was indentured to Non Pariel estate.

Matbor Sing shared with me many stories that were told to him by his elders of the Battle of Buxar of 22 October 1764 when a small army of the British East India Company defeated the combined armies of the Nawab of Awadh (Oudh), the Nawab of Bengal and the Mughal Emperor. In fact Matbor Sing had a Sword that he had taken with him from India. The Sword, he claimed, belonged to one of his elders who had served as a Fauji Dar (a Senior Officer) of the army of the Nawab of Oudh in the Battle of Buxar. Later in his life, Matbor Sing left Non Pariel estate and re-located in Unity village where he was a leading voice in village and community affairs in pre-independent Guyana. My aja also left Non Pariel estate and lived in Buxton where he became a leading voice in the "Grow More Food" campaign and community affairs in the village. Their civic activities often caused them as necessary, to meet with the Governor or the Officer Administering the Government, the District Commissioner for local government, the Commissioner of Police or the Divisional Superintendent of Police, Village Chairmen or community leaders of other villages.

**“The Sepoys are Arrived”**

“The Sepoys are arrived” was the talk of the day in West Demerara when the *Bucephalus* sailed into Port Georgetown in 1858 and a contingent of Sepoys that was on board disembarked the ship. An elderly African Magistrate told me in the 1960s what was generally known of the Sepoys in Leonora estate and in other estates in West Demerara. I was the Clerk of the Courts in which the Magistrate presided in the East Demerara Judicial District. The Magistrate was a descendant of emancipated Africans of Vergenoegen estate about 6 miles west of Leonora estate. The Manager of Leonora estate had asked the immigration agents in India to send him a batch of Rajpoot Sepoys to protect his workers from invading hostile groups from neighboring villages. The Sepoys were put to live in a strategic section of Leonora estate which they named ‘Rajpoorwa’ – the abode of the Rajpoots.

The invaders often spread terror among workers in the sugar cane fields and rob them of their earnings and other valuables in the residential sections of the estate. They were quickly subdued by the Sepoys. There are other local communities in Guyana that would suggest the presence or influence of Rajpoot Sepoys in the early years of the indenture system. There are Rampours in Blairmont in western Berbice and in Skeldon in eastern Berbice. There is Bengal also in eastern Berbice, and Burma and Calcutta at the eastern end of Demerara where many Rajpoots were indentured. Perhaps, these communities reflected the Leonora experiences.

**Make up of Plantation Society**

Emancipation of African slaves in 1834 and then abolition of slavery a few years later and emergence of the system of Indian indenture in 1838 promoted certain social and structural changes in human relations and relationships on the sugar estates in the colony. Africans were removed from the lojies in which they were housed to make room for Indian indentured immigrants who began to arrive in the colony in May 1838. Africans were relocated in sections of the estates that were generally described as “Niggah Yards” (Nigger Yards) or Congo Quarters and Indian immigrants were housed in the vacated lojies some distance away from the Niggah Yards in sections that were described as “Bound Yards” or Coolie Quarters.

They were also put to work in separate sugar cane fields. These conditions lasted until they were gradually minimized by the departure of Africans for villages like Victoria and Buxton which Emancipated Africans had bought in the early nineteenth century. While they lived and worked on the sugar estates there were visible inequalities in employment of Africans and Indians in manual field work and low level services and trades work. Indians were in keeping with the main terms of their indenture, employed largely in agrarian and pastoral work on the estates. Africans on the other hand were seen as a minority in field work and a majority in jobs in sugar factories, estate offices, hospitals and dispensaries and in

the homes of Christian missionaries and European managerial and supervisory staff.

Inequalities in employment and cultural differences led to suspicion, distrust, fear and insecurity. Africans feared that by providing cheap labor, Indians were eroding the Africans' ability to secure better wages and conditions of service. In the earlier years Indian women supported by their men folk were reluctant to receive treatment from male African hospital workers. Immigrant men often demanded that in sickness their wives and daughters, be cared for by Dai and Chamain paramedic nurse aides and Brahmin Ojha compounders and dispensers of the immigrant community. However, these fears, distinctions and differences dissipated many years ago and would not hold true today.

### **Other Uprisings**

There were about eight to ten annual uprisings of indentured immigrant workers on the sugar estates in Guyana - the uprisings were often led by Hindu and Muslim ex-soldiers of the Indian Army who were indentured on the sugar plantations. Uprisings were also often plotted, planned and executed by Hindu and Muslim women workers in the weeding gangs of the estates. Rodney (1981) mentions Salamea, a veteran woman in the Friends Estate Strike of 1903 and Walker-Kilkenny (1992) writes of Sumintra in the Leonora Estate Strike of 1939.

Salamea was a Pathan woman who urged her female workmates in the weeding gang of Friends estate, East Bank, Berbice to fight for their rights in 1922. Sumintra was a Rajpoot woman who was the leader of the weeding gang of Leonora estate. She was killed by Police under the command of Superintendent Weber as she led her comrades at the Leonora uprising in 1939. Jamni a Brahmin woman was Jangli's wife and leader of the women in the weeding gang of Non Pariel estate. She was also a child minder (*an Ayah*) in the Creche of the estate. She was the heroine of the 1896 Non Pariel Uprising.

### **The Non Pariel Uprising**

As recounted to me by my aja, Matbor Sing and other elders, the uprising occurred after years of injustices by management of Non Pariel estate. When Ram Nath my aja's father and Matbor Sing were indentured on the estate, the time seemed to have arrived for an uprising against human rights abuses and violation of women and girls on the estate. The uprising began when Jamni the wife of Jangli was abducted and allegedly raped by Gerad Van Nooten, the Deputy Manager of the estate. Jangli was one the leaders of the uprising. As a result, an insurgency that was in the making in the lojje of Gooljar was completed. Gooljar was also a ringleader of the uprising. As a first step, Harry Garnett, the Manager of the estate, was approached to discipline Gerad Van Nooten and others who were habitual violators of immigrant women and girls on the estate. This approach failed as Mr.

Garnett accepted Van Nooten's story that he was keeping Jamni of her own free will. Van Nooten's claim was denied by Jamni who said that when he attempted to rape her, she struck him in his face with the heavy steel *berwas or karas* (bangles) she was wearing on her wrists. Van Nooten released her and she ran towards her Lojies where a group of armed men including her husband Jangli confronted Van Nooten while he was pursuing her.

Van Nooten explained to Mr. Garnett that he was on security patrol of the Lojies when a group of men armed with spears and cutlasses appeared before him. He was afraid that the men would kill him and as he fled from the men he fell and hit his face on the hard ground. Mr. Garnett accepted Van Nooten's story. The workers then told Mr. Garnett that they would go to seek redress from the immigration agent for the estate. Led by Gooljar and Jangli the leaders of the workers then proceeded to meet with Immigration Agent Gladwin who was responsible for the welfare of immigrants on Non Pariel estate. The leaders of the workers told Mr. Gladwin of Van Nooten's assault on Jamni. They also told him of violation of the dignity of women and girls by overseers. They also stated that their complaints against these abusers were often rejected by Mr. Garnett. In respect of the present uprising, the Manager claimed that the workers had demanded unreasonably higher than usual wages for work in various tasks in the sugar cane fields.

Immigration Agent Gladwin accepted the Manager's story; and rejected the allegations of the workers. Mr. Gladwin then proceeded to identify workers he claimed were deserters of the British Army in India and accused them of treason. He threatened to arrest and to deport them to India for trial by Court Martial since he had received information that they intended to kill all the white people on the estate just like the mutineers in India had killed white officers and civilians in the 1857 Mutiny. In these circumstances, the claims by the Manager were fearfully supported under duress by Gooljar one of the ring leaders. This change of heart by Gooljar led the other leaders to concede the uprising as an industrial one; and as a reward for their coerced agreement, they agreed to accept certain very small increases and to return peacefully to work. The workers saw the results of their meeting with Immigration Agent Gladwin as a betrayal as the matter of Jamni's alleged abduction was side tracked by the Immigration Agent who claimed that he knew that coolie women were living freely with overseers.

However, as the leaders of the workers were returning to report to the assembled workers in the estate, Captain De Rinzy commander of the Militia on 13 October 1896 was ordered to arrest them. Captain De Rinzy in proceeding to arrest the leaders is reported to have read the 'Riot Act' that would empower him to order his troops to open fire on the assembled workers if they appeared to resort to violence. In a short delay that appeared to have occurred, the aggrieved workers and supporters appeared with bamboo lances and cutlasses. Pandemonium ensued

when Captain de Rinzy proceeded to make his arrests and when “he called Gooljar and told him amidst the crowd of coolies to go away” Seecharan (1999).

Jangli, one of the leaders indentified as a disbanded and exiled VCO of the Indian Army was shot by Captain De Rinzy as he was poised to hurl his lance at the Captain who was seated astride his cavalry horse. Jangli made a desperate last effort to hurl his lance when he fell to the ground. Concurrently four other leaders Kandhai and Mahabir (Hindus), Chinahoo, (a Madrassi) and Rogy (a Pathan Mussulman) were shot in the police action. They died soon after from the injuries they received. Fifty nine of the assembled workers were also wounded. The action by the militia ended efforts of the workers who might have wanted to take their grievances to the Immigration Agent General in Georgetown. Two Inquests and a Commission of Enquiry were held to enquire into the uprising as the political and industrial significance of the uprising generated much public interest in England, India and Guyana due to the efforts of Bechu, an indentured immigrant. Bechu a highly literate individual regularly articulated the interests of his countrymen in the press and to officials who were concerned with Indian immigration affairs and the welfare of indentured workers. Bechu submitted a memorandum to the Commission of Enquiry in which he is reported to have claimed inter alia that it was “an open secret that coolie women were in the keeping of overseers” and “gross immorality exists on most estates” (Seecharan, 1999). However, in view of his courage and competence in articulating the English language, Bechu’s true identity was constantly under much scrutiny by officials.

### **Who was Bechu?**

An Indian national who was publicized as a ‘tourist’ arrived in Guyana from Suriname in 1956. A formal reception was held on 16 December 1956 for him under the patronage of leading elders of both communities in the old Lusignan Community Centre where I saw him. He asked me if I knew anything of Subhas Chandr Bose and an Indian immigrant by the name of Bechu. He seemed to know that my aja was a friend of Bechu. When I replied that I read a lot of Subhas Bose and that I had heard of Bechu from my aja and other elders, he told me that Bechu was a Bengali Kulin Brahmin from Calcutta who was related to Sarojini Naidu and his real name could have been Bhoshunath Chattopadhyay.

In my search many years later, I would ask searching questions about Bechu from individuals who knew the history and culture of Bengal; and from a few of them I heard that Bechu was probably a very well educated person with a liberal outlook on philosophy and religion. As such he would have been able to relate very well with Christians and people of other faith groups. An Indian Christian Pastor felt that liberal British Christians in India and in Guyana were easy with educated and cultured Indians and they would employ people like Bechu to live and work as housekeepers (*butlers*) or child minders (*ayahs*) in their homes. I also

discussed about Bechu with certain Bengali professionals who were employed in Guyana. Two of them were specialist doctors who told me that if Bechu was a Kulin Brahmin and he was related to Sarojini Naidu on her father's side, his family name would have been Chattopadhyay and he would have been a very educated person. One of them went on to tell me that Bechu might have lived either in Pargana North or in Pargana South in Bhawanipur, Calcutta. Many Bengali academics, journalists, writers and lawyers lived in these parganas and many of them were dissidents in India. Bechu was probably one of these people. If Bechu was related to Sarojini Naidu's father whose name was Aghoranath Chattopadhyay, then Bechu's family name would have been Chattopadhyay. Recently, I secured an Emigration Pass for a man named Bechu who was taken to British Guiana on the ship "Sheila" in 1894 as Immigrant No. 68157 and indentured to Enmore estate about 4 miles east of Non Pariel estate.

I spoke with my aja a long time after the Indian tourist had asked me in December 1956 about Bechu. My aja told me that Bechu visited him several times. Each time he would visit with a Pandit who was my aja's guru or preceptor. My aja told me also that Bechu had once confided in him that he was under severe pressure to leave the colony and that he wanted to go to England but he needed a passport. My aja also told me that after he had not seen Bechu for nearly a year he suspected that Bechu might have died somewhere on the west coast of Demerara as he was a very sick person. The next time my aja saw the pandit he asked him about Bechu. Like my aja, the pandit hadn't seen Bechu for some time and knew nothing of his whereabouts. The pandit returned to India and joined the Indian National Congress (INC) in Lucknow. Was Bechu really Bhoshunath Chattopadhyay; and if so, was he on a special mission in Guyana? Hopefully my concerns will be addressed; and in time an answer may be forthcoming. Until then Seecharan's (1999) "bound coolie radical" will remain my primary source for information on Bechu.

### **Conclusion**

My family history is unique to me only in respect of certain personally important features. However my story reflects a story in one way or another of all Indians under bonds of indenture in Guyana and their descendants irrespective of heritage, occupational or vocational status. Caste considerations were used to select and recruit immigrants largely from pastoral, agrarian and artisan communities in India. For this reason there was the requirement for caste to be stated in emigration passes for men, women, and children. However, Mr. J. I. Ramphal (former Immigration Agent General) agreed with me that emigration passes were not enough to tell of the true heritage, cultural qualities and family histories of immigrants. Oral stories were necessary requirements in any exercise on the history of the indenture system and family histories of immigrants.

The Non Pareil Uprising is known only by what had been selectively released from plantation and government records. The immigrants believed they were victims of a plot by management of the estate and government officials. They also felt betrayed by certain of their erstwhile comrades in the uprising. Many of them took their pain and grief with them when they died. This regretful loss of valuable history to people of Indian origin in Guyana reminds me *that a society wrenched away from its past and its roots may be a society without a future – Edmund Burke*. I am hopeful that my reflections will generate much interest in others to record their memories to enrich legacies in the making as I believe the history of indenture and slavery should not be driven only by considerations of bonding and enslavement but by serious studies of the rich cultural values of Indians and Africans.

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