Clem Seecharan

*Mother India’s Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s–1930s.* Kingston: Ian Randle, 2011. xii + 524 pp. (Paper US$45.00)

Clem Seecharan’s *Mother India’s Shadow Over El Dorado* is an ambitious compendium of his earlier work and ongoing research on Indo-Guyanese history, including over 500 pages of text comprised of 32 chapters divided among seven parts and a conclusion. While the abundance of (short) chapters allows Seecharan to look closely and chronologically at selected Indo-Guyanese activists’ writing and speeches, it also engenders repetitiveness and a book of unnecessarily unwieldy dimensions. This is unfortunate, because it is a trove of fascinating information on the lively cultures of political self-fashioning and stakes-claiming in colonial Guyana. To assemble this, he mined official documents (which reflected metropolitan perspectives as well as those of resident or absentee white proprietors), but also predominantly urban Indo- and Afro-Guyanese community organizations’ newspapers and their spokesmen’s editorials, letters to editors, and other writings.

Seecharan frames his study of the persistent and increasingly polarized and racially-charged conflict between the two numerically largest ethnic groups in independent Guyana in terms of two distinct but overlapping clusters of ambition. The first is the lure of El Dorado, the durable colonial conviction that the region’s abundance of natural resources promised incalculable wealth—if only there were labor enough to exploit them. This conviction precipitated the transportation of enslaved Africans and subsequently (with British abolition of slavery in its empire) of indentured Indians. Further, Seecharan notes, it continued to shape British colonial policy. Finally, he argues, intersecting with and crucially shaping these dynamics was (and is) the second formative myth: the invocation of “Mother India” by members of British Guiana’s small but growing coterie of educated Indian-descended men. They animated contemporary Indology with their own ambitions and experiences (as first- or second-generation immigrants) to claim precedence over African-descended and European communities as stewards of El Dorado. In pursuing their vision—which included a proposal that the British Government of India rather than that in London be given responsibility for governing British Guiana and developing its inland resources—they alienated their African-descended counterparts, who understood, resented, and resisted their subordination in these schemes, to enduring effect through the twentieth century. This, then, is the shadow of “Mother India” over “El Dorado.”

In tracking the crystallization of a distinctively Indo-Guyanese political imaginary between 1890 and 1930, Seecharan’s discussion of spokesmen for
“Mother India” in the colony offers a thought-provoking glimpse into the circulation and deployments of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century orientalist scholarship. The strain that inspired Indo-Guyanese like Joseph Ruhomon (of the British Guiana East Indian Association, founded in 1894) posited a “Golden Age” of ancient Indic civilization engendered by central Asian conquerors about a thousand years BCE, recuperated through their “Aryans’” texts. Study of these further suggested to comparative philologists and other scholars not only a linguistic kinship between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin “mother” lodes of many South Asian and European languages, but also the former’s chronological priority. Seecharan demonstrates how Ruhomon and others built on popularizations of such scholarship to argue that the sons of “Mother India” (both in the “homeland” and in the Caribbean) were best suited to develop the rich promise of “El Dorado.”

Studies by anthropologists John Kelly and Martha Kaplan (working in Fiji) and Peter van der Veer and Steven Vertovec (working in the Caribbean) have generatively analyzed the influence of Hindu reformist missionaries associated with Swami Dayananda’s Arya Samaj (founded in the 1870s) on communities formed by migrants from India. Aisha Khan has done similarly nuanced work on Indo-Trinidadian Muslim identities. But these are nowhere to be found in Mother India’s Shadow. Seecharan’s discussion of his turn-of-the-twentieth-century Indo-Guyanese activists would have benefited from these scholars’ complex analyses of the different imperial contexts of production and reception in which these reformist discourses and emigrant identities developed.

Further, while Seecharan does not deny either the highly hierarchical racial assumptions implicit in such arguments or their polarizing effects in British Guiana, problematic assumptions in his own account of dynamics in India from the 1890s to 1930s cast a shadow over his analysis in this book, in which Islam, its influences and hundreds of millions of adherents are notable for their absence. Ossification of religion as the bedrock category for apportioning political representation in British India was proceeding in this very period. In this context, “Mother India” was (and indeed, judging from twenty-first-century Hindu nationalist rhetoric, still is) a loaded, highly partisan and distinctively Hindu emblem. Seecharan’s bibliography does not include scholarship on these or other political aspects of colonial or independent Indian history, leaving readers with a highly partial view of the complex genealogies of national identities in the subcontinent, in which—as scholars have convincingly demonstrated—the idea of India has never been either singular or stable. Careful perusal of Mother India’s Shadow over El Dorado demonstrates that Seecharan neither denies the effects, nor endorses the rhetoric of...
exceptionalism evident in his selected (Indian and Indo-Guyanese) activists’ and historians’ speeches and writings. Given the book’s heft and repetitiveness, however, Indian exceptionalism may well be what most readers take away from it.

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References


