Margriet Fokken, *Beyond Being koelies and kantráki: Constructing Hindostani Identities in Suriname in the Era of Indenture, 1873–1921*. Hilversum: Verloren, 2018.iii + 378 pp. (Paper €39.00)

The structure of *Beyond Being koelies and kantráki* echoes that of several of the most prolific works existing on Indian indenture: recruitment, depot, and journey; arrival and life on the plantations; postindenture settlements and community reconstruction; and foray into the city of Paramaribo. At each stage of this well-researched, well-written, cohesive study, Margriet Fokken provides substantial details of the various facets of the experience of the Indian indentured laborers in Suriname, drawing from a variety of sources to provide insight into the lives of Indians in Suriname during the 48-year period. Her objective is to analyze “the ways in which Hindostani immigrants themselves responded to and transformed the identities ascribed to them” (p. 26). It is this duality that, for a great portion of the work, sees her struggling to retain the Indians as the subjects, as opposed to objects, of the narrative.

While there is extensive use of secondary sources, the book depends heavily on colonial sources. And although Fokken is careful about always highlighting the fact that the Indians are presented through a colonial lens in these documents, the rather scant use of sources echoing the “Indian voice” subverts her core objective. Thus, despite her best efforts, the colonial voice and constructs of Indian identity overshadow those of the Indians. One source written from an Indian perspective—the autobiography of a man named Rahman Khan—dominates the basis for this proposed construction of a Hindostani identity, further problematizing the analysis and conclusions in several ways. Fokken seems to fall into the unfortunate yet common trap of not recognizing the inherent differences between Hindu and Indian, constantly using the narrative of Khan, a Muslim, to extrapolate to the Hindu community, even in matters pertaining to religion. For example, the book’s section on “cultural and religious positioning” deals only with Khan, giving no attention to the fact that Khan’s experience was that of a Muslim, not the Hindu majority. Khan’s faulty and biased interpretations of caste, Hindu rituals, and beliefs are accepted unquestioningly by Fokken. Examination of the few Indian publications would have lent further academic rigor to the book’s objective of giving voice to the Indians.

Fokken’s failure to recognize and interpret distinctive Indian markers and nuances also detracts from her efforts at establishing a true reflection of a “Hindostani identity.” This is especially evident in her interpretation of several of the photographs in the book. For example, on page 140 she concludes that any Indian with a beard must be a Muslim and makes no comment on the one man in the back who wears a turban. Both point to the possibility of Sikh pres-

ence among the immigrants. And she concludes that their mode of dress set them apart from the larger Surinamese society. Thus, by constantly using the larger Surinamese society as a point of reference, she seems to subvert her own efforts at constructing a “Hindostani identity.” Although in the introduction she sets out to “read along and against the grain,” what often occurs as the study progresses is an imbalance wherein reading along the grain overrides the reading against the grain, largely due to the narrative being dominated by colonial sources. Thus, especially in Chapters 2 and 3, the colonial view of the Indian predominates, sometimes with just a few sentences of interpretation through the Indian lens. The final three chapters adopt a more balanced approach to the task of identity construction. But it is only in Chapter 5 that Indians can be firmly identified as the nucleus around which the narrative is spun.

The most striking inconsistency may be found in the title of the book. One wonders why one would refer to Indian indentured laborers as “koelies” in a book that has as its core objective the construction of “Hindostani” identity through the self-positioning of the Indians. What is even more puzzling is that Fokken herself defines the term “koelie” as one with very negative qualities and bearing the much debated “colonial burden.” That the Indians never referred to themselves as “koelies” and their displeasure at being referred to by this term should have been deterrent enough in a work that claims to give voice to the Indians.

While the aim of this study to construct a Hindostani identity is flawed by an overuse of the colonial lens, the book itself is a valuable addition to the existing body of work on migration, diaspora, labor, and social history.

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