

[How the Hindus Came to Suriname](#)

Category : [October 1993](#)

Published by Anonymous on Oct. 02, 1993

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Suriname is a small country on the Atlantic side of South America, just above Brazil. One-third of its 386,000 citizens are Hindus, descendants of indentured servants who came in the 19th century. Dr. Bennett, a dermatologist by profession, filed this historical report on Suriname and its little-known Hindu population.

by Ralph Bennett, M.D, California

Of all the outposts of the colonial Dutch empire, few are more obscure in the public's mind than Suriname. The country, originally called Dutch Guiana, is located on the northeast coast of South America. Although it was first a British colony and then a Dutch colony, and although thousands of Black Africans were imported as slave labor, today a third of the Surinamese population is Hindu. How did it happen that so many people from India came to settle in this exotic and remote land in South America of all places?

Suriname was originally settled by the British. It became a Dutch colony in 1667. The Dutch traded their colony of New Amsterdam to England, which became the more famous British colony of New York. In return, they received Suriname. The Dutch thought they got the better of the deal.

Sure enough, the plantation-based economy of Suriname, with its riches of sugar cane, coffee and chocolate, turned out to be the leading community of the America's by 1730, far surpassing the wealth of such better known places as Philadelphia, Boston and New York. Prosperity ended when a banking crisis in Holland in 1773 touched off a recession from which Suriname never recovered. By the 1800's, the Europeans discovered they could grow beet sugar in Europe

cheaper than importing cane sugar from the New World, and the economy slid even further downward. After 1850, Suriname remained a quiet colonial backwater. The country achieved independence from Holland in 1975.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, there were never more than 6,000 people of European descent in the country at any one time. The plantations which fueled the economy were worked by 70,000 slaves from Africa. The momentum in favor of the abolition of slavery had been on the rise in European colonies of the West Indies throughout the 19th century. Slaves were finally freed in Suriname in 1863. The Dutch government worried that, as in other places, the slaves would refuse to work once given the choice, which did indeed happen. The government began looking for new sources of labor and ended up importing vast numbers of Hindus from India as contract laborers to provide the working class that the country needed. Today, Suriname has a population of 386,372, 121,606 are Hindustani--descendants of those laborers imported from India after 1863--nearly all are Hindus.

There were a number of good reasons why laborers were imported from as far away as India. First, Suriname was by no means the first colony to free slaves. Colonies such as Trinidad and Jamaica had already begun replacing black slaves with imported "British Indians," as they were then called (India was a British colony) to take the place of black slaves. These "British Indians" had a reputation for being good farmers and hard workers. Second, even in those times India was a large, densely populated country, and there was a large labor pool with little available farmland. In addition, India was becoming industrialized, and many traditional jobs were being eliminated. Many Indians were eager to emigrate because the caste system in India put limitations on their activities. Immigrants were mainly from the United Provinces of India (Uttar Pradesh), West Bihar and the Ganges Plains of North India. They embarked primarily from Calcutta, and are still sometimes referred to in Suriname today as "Kalkattias."

While slavery was officially abolished in 1863, the law called for the slaves to actually remain under supervision until 1873. With this provision, the Dutch government had hoped to give itself time to start the replacement of labor before the slaves were officially free to withhold their labor. They set up stations in India where applicants could be interviewed, have a health screening, sign documentation that they were leaving of their own free will, and then wait to be transported. Due to animosity between the powers of Europe, ships passed around the Cape of Good Hope, rather than using the shorter route through the Suez Canal. All ships had a doctor on board, and to make sure the emigrants looked their best upon arrival, these doctors required that all passengers be massaged and rubbed

with mustard oil. The first shipload of new immigrants arrived just weeks before the deadline and were met with much fanfare at the harbor in Paramaribo, Suriname's capital city.

These immigrants were to serve the plantation owners for five years. Initially, plantation owners were required to pay the passage for any contract laborers they requested, plus pay return fare if the applicant did not work out. Eventually, the government stepped in to regulate the fees and set up guidelines for events such as the death of a worker, the cost of non-productive family members brought with the worker (i.e. young children or elderly parents), and for disputes over work.

In all, about 34,000 Indian contract laborers arrived in Suriname between 1873 and 1916. The majority were Hindu, but there were Muslims as well. About one-third returned to India when their five-year indenture was completed. Those choosing to remain were given land, a bonus from the government, and special loans to help them get started as farmers in their own right. In 1927, they became eligible for Dutch citizenship.