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## **Shamshu Deen's *Solving East Indian Roots in Trinidad: A Critical Appraisal***

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### **Abstract**

This paper appraises Shamshu Deen's account of his and his wife's family in Trinidad who left their 'homeland' India in 1845. It accounts the 'pull and push' factors of sociological, historical, economic and other reasons of the indentures. It highlights author's description of community feeling among his family. We can find the presence of "imagined communities" (Benedict Anderson, 1982) like community formation among Muslims and non-Muslims there. This article appreciates writer's strenuous toil to compose the book through different researches - oral researches, telecommunication research, discursive research and other researches.

**Keywords**

Indenture; Family-tree; Community Feeling; Shamsu Deen; *Solving East Indian Roots in Trinidad*.

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Shamsu Deen's book *Solving East Indian Roots in Trinidad* (1994) endeavours a genealogical study which helps to reconstruct family trees in the places not only of Indian indentured labours' origins, but also of their settlements in Trinidad. The author argues that Indians started to come to Trinidad in 1845. He starts the first chapter with the argument that after the Great Indian Mutiny in 1857, famine, epidemics and other natural calamities had destroyed all agricultural and commercial activities in British India, and hence, Indians accepted the indenture and reached Trinidad.

The second chapter describes Mohammed Mooktee, an important man in author's roots and his wife Modea's descendants. It describes not only the seven daughters of this couple, but also of a boy named Baseer and a girl named Nooreejhan from Mooktee's second wife Matheran Amma. After that, the author depicts Mooktee's daughter and his great grandmother Sokeejhan and her husband Abdool Munradin's descendants-a son and the rest all daughters. The author opines that Abdool and Sokeejhan "were very supportive of the growing Muslim community in Gasparillo" (66). The next couple depicted by the author is Neykhee, the daughter of Sokeejhan and Willie Munradin, the son of Abdool who bears two children - Moenee (boy) and Makhan (girl). The community feeling is strengthened when the cousins of Sokeejhan and Neykhee get married to each other. Finally, it also charts the descendants of Lutchmeejhan and Moulvi Mohammed John.

In the third chapter, the author traces the ancestors of his grandparents - Saphiran and Joom Allaudeen. Tursoo and Soogeah, who were the grandparents of author's grandparents, left India in 1872 as indentured labours to Trinidad's sugarcane fields due to the outbreak of a terrible plague

in their village. The fourth chapter mirrors the ancestors, siblings and descendants of author's great maternal grandmother Faheema / Paheema.

In his *Imagined Communities* (1982), Benedict Anderson argues that 'nation' is "an imagined political community" (6). According to him, it is imagined because "the members of even smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). It is imagined as a community because, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). Such tendency can be observed among them as they attempt to make their political / national identity.

In foreign countries diasporas realise deep, horizontal comradeship among themselves. Such ethnic community organisations are quite similar to Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities". They revive their 'home' culture and thus indirectly show and make national awareness among themselves in foreign countries, because, according to Anderson, "nationality...nationness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts" (4). The best and easy way to revive ones' culture is to practise ones' religious beliefs. Diasporas keep their native cultures alive in foreign countries through their native religious practices.

This book also documents such community feeling. The fifth chapter traces author's mother's maternal ancestry in Trinidad who went there in 1869. This couple - Emamally and Najeebun - was very religious and decided to go on a pilgrimage Mecca. They were devout Muslims; they respected even all non-Muslims too. Thus, one can find the presence of "Imagined Communities" like community formation among Muslims and non-Muslims there. The author says:

They would go around their communities, inviting the Muslims to come to Masjid regularly and particularly to send out their children

to Maktab classes. They were respected by the Muslims and non-Muslims due to their intense devotion. (176)

They, as author says, served as a role model to the Muslim community; perhaps author's account concludes that this couple at first created a community feeling among indentured Muslims through religious practices in Trinidad. Author's *nanee* (grandmother) Baseeram married to Abdul Karim, a wealthy land owner. According to author, his mother Macsooman was a bright student, singer and an actor who also learnt Ghazals (Urdu poems), and his father Zool Deen was a nervous man. Their family members were scattered different places. The sixth chapter charts his wife Moonera's ancestry.

As Kingsley Davis (1968) puts it in the Indian context, "...pressure to emigrate has always been great enough to provide a stream of emigrants much larger than the actual given opportunities" (99). And Tinker (1977) puts it, "there is a combination of push and pull: the push of inadequate opportunity in South Asia and the pull of the better prospects" (10). Thus, the most important chapter is the seventh chapter which mirrors the odyssey of immigrants' lives – 'a combination of pull and push' factors of their social situations for accepting indenture, their voyage in ships, treatment and problems they underwent during voyages, their allotments in different estates in Trinidad, their livelihood after settlement in sugar plantations, reunion of early immigrants and late ones via different social gatherings are depicted in the chapter. Why did they take the indenture? Did they take it voluntarily or were they forced? Were they trapped with tricks of the then British colonial agents? Was it allurements or something else? Answers for the questions are divulged by twelve surviving indentured labourers. The twelve surviving indentured labourers' accounts not only give objectivity to author's research, but also generate the credibility of author's accounts.

The eighth chapter accounts the different documents on which the author depends for his genealogical survey. These documents are the Ship

Certificate or Immigration Pass, the General Registers of Indian Immigrants, the Estate Registers, lists of Ships' names and other published newspapers in Trinidad, most important being the *Trinidad Royal Gazette*. The ninth chapter follows almost the same. In epilogue, the author opines to his fellow immigrants to re-establish ties with their distant relatives in India.

A prominent feature of the book is its authentic documentation. Generally, one comes across many novelists, poets and other creative writers who depict the experience of diasporas' lives in foreign countries. Their description is different from actual life-experience of diasporas as given by Shamshu Deen. Generally one can find superficial description in creative writing-novelists or poets busy themselves with the themes of identity crisis, nostalgia for diasporas' 'homeland', question of assimilation with host societies, love etc. They consciously and intentionally focus on these themes in their writings. They also gratify the host countries and portray their native countries negatively for marketing strategies. This book's prominent themes are the reason for diasporas' taking indenture to Trinidad, sustaining their lives with kith and kin at 'diaspora space' (Avtar Brah, 1996), the community feeling and reviving their ethnic cultural practices among their communities etc. Unlike creative writers like novelists or poets, the author gives little space to the themes of love and romance in his book.

Apparently, it seems that the main appeal of Samshu Deen's book is only for the East Indian Community. His path-breaking research provides the basis not only to others to trace their ancestry, but also for historical, sociological and cultural studies at the grassroots level.

After reading two or three chapters, a reader may get puzzled of so much efforts, toil and patience from writer. How can a researcher attempt to trace his almost 12,000 blood relatives? He not only scrutinised different documents like the General Registers of Immigrants, the National Achieves of Trinidad and other different magazines, but also included the accounts of twelve immigrant

survivors in his research. It would strengthen the credibility of author's point of views among readers and help the future researchers as well from sociology, history and Indian diaspora. The author as a researcher included everything whatever a good, unbiased, holistic researcher should follow in his/her attempts. His adding of withered, faded authentic documents related to Indian immigrants also proves his accounts' authenticity and his strenuous efforts and unbelievable patience.

A 21st century cosmopolitan reader of the globalised world may not know about the hard and strenuous experiences of indentured labour. The addition of immigrant families' photographs by the author authenticates the familial life-story of immigrants in Trinidad.

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