

PREFACE

People all over the world emigrate for various reasons: – to seek work; escape political oppression and torture; elude capture; expectations of a better life; by kidnapping or being sold into slavery for monetary gains of a few; or to rejoin family members who had emigrated previously. Resulting from these migratory motives, it is now possible to find, in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T), the descendants of people who originally came to the Caribbean from Africa, India, China, Britain, Spain, France, Syria and Lebanon. They arrived with diverse religions, cultures, customs and languages but today, in the ethnic medley of Trinidad, the majority of its population are descendents of African slaves and Indian Indentured Labourers.

Some emigrants came voluntarily while others were forcibly brought – the circumstances were disparate. While living in their alien environment, most were deprived of contact with loved ones in their homelands. Today, in the early part of the 21st Century, most of the East Indian descendants of these initial emigrants have no knowledge of their ancestral languages or histories; they only understand and speak the English language and acknowledge T&T as their motherland. Nevertheless, many retain sentimental and cultural attachments to the ancestral Indian lifestyles. This lifestyle is firmly rooted in the family unit, has deeply ingrained moral and social values of an earlier society and practises collective celebrations reflected in various religious festivals, songs, *kheisas* and dances driven by musical instruments familiar to their forefathers. A pervasive and profound spiritual consciousness of Hinduism manifests itself in an emotional cord which links individuals to the family, the family to the neighbouring community, and the community to the wider society.

Most Indian descendants in Trinidad and Tobago and, indeed, the rest of the West Indies secretly cherish the desire to visit the land of their ancestors; to acquaint themselves with their heritage; become familiar with unknown relatives in distant places; and spend time getting to know them in their rural environments across India. It would be nostalgic for many of these descendants to visit the remnants of ancestral homes where their forefathers lived; walk in the fields they cultivated; stroll through the markets in which they sold their produce; and absorb the physical environment in which they lived, before, being influenced by economic desperation and unbridled hope, they left to find work and a perceived better life in distant lands. Those of us who have been fortunate to re-connect with our relatives in India, treasure the memories.

Our Indian ancestors began arriving in the West Indies more than 165 years ago, but the present generations know very little about their origins. They lack the appropriate historical documentation that would allow tracing their early relatives because most immigrants did not readily speak of their past. Instead, they toiled in sugar cane plantations and banana fields for very many long and difficult years; lived in barracks under unhealthy conditions; and earned meagre wages. Despite this, they sought to build a foundation, which will enable their children to be educated or to start businesses and ease out of plantation life. They inculcated the importance of education, religion, social and moral values; the critical necessity for extended family support and sharing; and the unbridled practice of individual sacrifice for family development and growth. Today, their descendants occupy prominent positions in political, professional, social and business circles in Trinidad and Tobago,

Guyana, Suriname, Jamaica, Martinique, Guadeloupe and other West Indian islands in which they settled.

This book follows three generations of an agricultural family, which originated from the remote farming community of Karaundi Goan near the town of Faizabad in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. In 1905 and 1909, two brothers and their wives left their village to work as Indentured Labourers in the sugar cane fields of Trinidad with the intention of accumulating wealth and returning after five years to their beloved village, family and friends. The older brother, Jagesar, and his wife, Maharaji had been led to believe that they were going to Trinidad and a life of less hardship than they were accustomed to. Instead, they were taken to Jamaica in 1905. Four years later, the second brother, Munesar, his wife Katwari and son Ramharakh left for Trinidad expecting to find Jagesar and Maharaji there. Nobody in Trinidad had ever heard of them.

After many years of silence, the emigrant brothers communicated with their last sibling, Ramesar, who had remained in the village as custodian of the family property. They learned of each other's whereabouts and started communication by mail. Following ten years of Indentureship in Jamaica, Jagesar and his family sailed to Trinidad to meet Munesar. The brothers lived close to each other and worked at the Orange Grove sugar cane fields, but, in 1920, Munesar returned to India with his family, rejoining Ramesar and his family and continuing his earlier activities on the family lands. Both raised families in their ancestral village of Karaundi Goan while Jagesar stayed in Trinidad with his family. I am the grandson of Jagesar and Maharaji and I grew up and continue to live in Trinidad.

Key figures of our family line have died and many others were born into and remain in a life of agriculture, on opposite sides of the world. The relatives who opted to return to India continued to struggle with cultivating the ancestral lands while those who remained in the West Indies gradually improved their economic status over three generations. Both branches of the family had lost contact with each other until this was retrieved through persistent letters from my father, Ramcharan, and was further strengthened in 1972 by his visit to the ancestral home of his parents, Jagesar and Maharaji in Karaundi Goan. Communication between both branches of the family continues to this day via numerous letters and photographs that keep them in touch with each other's activities.

My wife and I visited my relatives in Karaundi Goan in 1999, 2003 and 2010. On each occasion, we stayed at the family's ancestral home, met with and learned about members of our extended family and friends of my grandparents, and became familiar with their daily lives. Even today, the lifestyle in Karaundi Goan and neighbouring villages is very much like my grandmother had described when she left there in 1905. There seemed to be little physical transformation as the people were still community and caste-based and their respect, moral and cultural values occupy very prominent places in their lives. Mothers, fathers and children labour intensively in the fields, raise large families from an early age and children generally do not pursue education beyond the age of 12. Poverty is prevalent everywhere - almost identical to what my grandparents had abandoned over 100 years ago.

I was profoundly touched by what I witnessed in Karaundi Goan in 1999 and, compared to the educational, social and economic status of my family here in Trinidad, deeply appreciated the opportunities that my grandparents had unknowingly provided for us. It became a consuming passion for me to record and unravel that part of our family history that

was not shared with us by my grandparents, Jagesar and Maharaji; to verify what my grandmother had related to my siblings and me all through her life: and to connect it to our present. I have attempted to identify and understand the factors that drove my grandparents to leave their homeland; the conditions under which they lived in the West Indies; and how Trinidad became the land of my generation.

The history of my grandparents, their descendants, their relatives in India and their *jahaibhai* and *dipubhai* had been scattered for decades in India, Jamaica and Trinidad - like carelessly strewn pieces of a large jigsaw puzzle. Fitting the pieces together to provide missing portions of the picture and create the whole tapestry of decades of lives in different parts of the world, required determination; a strong sense of curiosity; and a passion to experience family history first-hand. Whenever we visited the ancestral home, my family and I lived among our relatives and their friends, observing and being a part of their lives and discovering and documenting new and missing links of our family history.

This book is not a fictionalised story of long-departed, old people from forgotten times. It is a factual re-creation of the historical events and adventures of my ancestors, which provides the critical reconnection to their heritage, their culture and moral values; to their lives and experiences through the recounting of oral history by family members and friends; and has allowed me and my family to be a part of a bigger, but previously unknown other world picture. Tracing their travels and activities has provided opportunities for assessing the courage and determination of my grandparents; their perseverance under difficult conditions as they existed in isolation from relatives, friends and familiar places among strangers of different cultures and norms. With adult eyes and recognition, I now appreciate the quiet discernment of unacceptable social changes experienced by my grandmother with regard to the self-elevation of low caste emigrants to higher castes; her deep attachment to her familiar past and her insistence of it being a part of our present; her dedication to family despite difficult circumstances; the daring vision and entrepreneurial spirit of my grandfather; their pain over the loss of loved ones; and her strength of purpose to raise her children as a widow, alone in a foreign land. Spending time in Karaundi Goan and its environs has brought me a greater sense of appreciation of my origins and my relatives who dared to hope and have faith in the unknown.

While this is my story, the message is symbolic of the diaspora, of which we are all a part. The tale resonates for everyone whose ancestors followed similar routes for almost identical reasons. The history is as real today as it was when our ancestors, in economic desperation and with unbridled hope, left familiar places and families to seek their fortunes in unknown places, based on the words and promises of strangers. Tracing their backgrounds and origins, learning of their character and past relationships, are especially relevant to those of us who wish to re-connect with families in distant lands. Relationships that were fragmented and disconnected are once more linked as relatives find each other after decades of separation and living totally different lives. Despite the passage of time, the collapsing of distance and differences in experiences, the common links of family, culture, religion and history bridge the gap between those who did not previously know each other. This story will also educate younger generations by bringing history into their lives and allowing them to be more appreciative of the sacrifices made by our unassuming and uneducated ancestors.

The piecing together and recounting of this historical journey is my homage to the ancestors of my family. They made extremely difficult choices in desperate economic times and presented us with improved circumstances in our adopted land, a world away from where the first steps of their journey began.

I have made every effort to faithfully reproduce official records, truthfully represent my memories and express my feelings; to evoke the emotions experienced on meeting people and places about which I had only heard; and to describe to you the sights observed as I made my way along the paths taken by my ancestors. It has been a long, winding and often bumpy road to this point and a rather difficult task to translate all these activities into words but ... my ultimate wish is to take you along the route with me, have you share my experiences and make you a part of this Journey.

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