

Where are the unclaimed remittances of the indentured Indians In Guyana?

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In tune and tandem with the recent upsurge in interest on Indian indentureship in Guyana, I would like to ask the Indian High Commissioner in Guyana, and possibly the British High Commissioner, to answer the following question. Whatever happened to the unclaimed remittances of indentured Indians during indenture? To recall, when an estimated 240,000 Indians left India for the sugar plantations in British Guiana they were told that communications between British Guiana and India would be established and facilities were in place to remit savings and movable properties to their relatives should they die in British Guiana.

This agreement was breached and it was not until 1882 that the Immigration Department began to assist the Colonial Receiver-General on unclaimed balances of deceased indentured on various estates. For example, Mr. Mitchell, the Immigration Agent-General for British Guiana, claimed that 266 Indians died in British Guiana between 1862 and 1879 leaving £3,336 to be remitted to India. In 1883, another £1,037 unclaimed funds were added to the list (Comins 1893: 38). These were only a couple cases where funds were left unremitted. The actual unremitted funds were substantially higher around 2 million pounds in modern times. This was rather unsettling to indentured Indians and to contemporary Indians since one main objective of indentureship was to remit savings back to India regardless if they were dead or alive. They expected their families to be the recipients of their savings, not the colonial government.

The colonial officials claimed that the reasons for the indentured mishap were as follows: the names of payees in India as well as in British Guiana were often misspelled; heirs in India were not found to receive remittances from their relatives in British Guiana due to death or migration. Whatever might have been the problems associated with remitting the deceased's savings to their families, the point remains that the unclaimed remittances belonged to the indentured servants, not the colonial government. Again, where are the unclaimed remittances and what happened to them? If they can be found they should be handed over to the descendants of indentured Indians in the Caribbean, especially in the impoverished communities. Or, the unclaimed remittances can be used to set up an indenture fund for emerging students and scholars in the field. However, no one has even brought up these ideas, and the challenge to reclaim the unclaimed remittances remains.