

Politics & Society Forum



Marble, Grass and Glass: A journey from India to Guyana and on to the United States

Guyana Chronicle June 26,2022

SHAM Moteelall, an overseas-based Guyanese in Minnesota, has authored a fascinating book titled, 'Marble, Grass, and Glass'.

The book documents Moteelall's family's journey from India to Guyana and then on to the United States. Specifically, the book delves into the lives of various East Indian servants bound to British sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

People came under a process of servitude that resulted in a system that replaced, redefined, and reinvented slavery. Some died while still bound to the estates, leaving orphans behind, while many endured, survived and prospered. This book is their collective stories.

Lomarsh Roopnarine (LR): Perhaps readers might be confused by the title of your book. Please share some thoughts on why you chose the title of the book.



Author of Marble, Grass and Glass, Sham Moteelall

Sham Moteelall (SM): The title covers three geographical areas. Some of the people had wealthy origins in India and lived in MARBLE mansions. When they left the plantations in Guyana, they lived in GRASS huts. My generation, many of us dwell and work in GLASS offices. When my orphaned father had difficult times as a child, he had dreams of his deceased parents returning and pampering him in a MARBLE mansion.

LR: What were some challenges you encountered in India in the process of researching and writing your book?

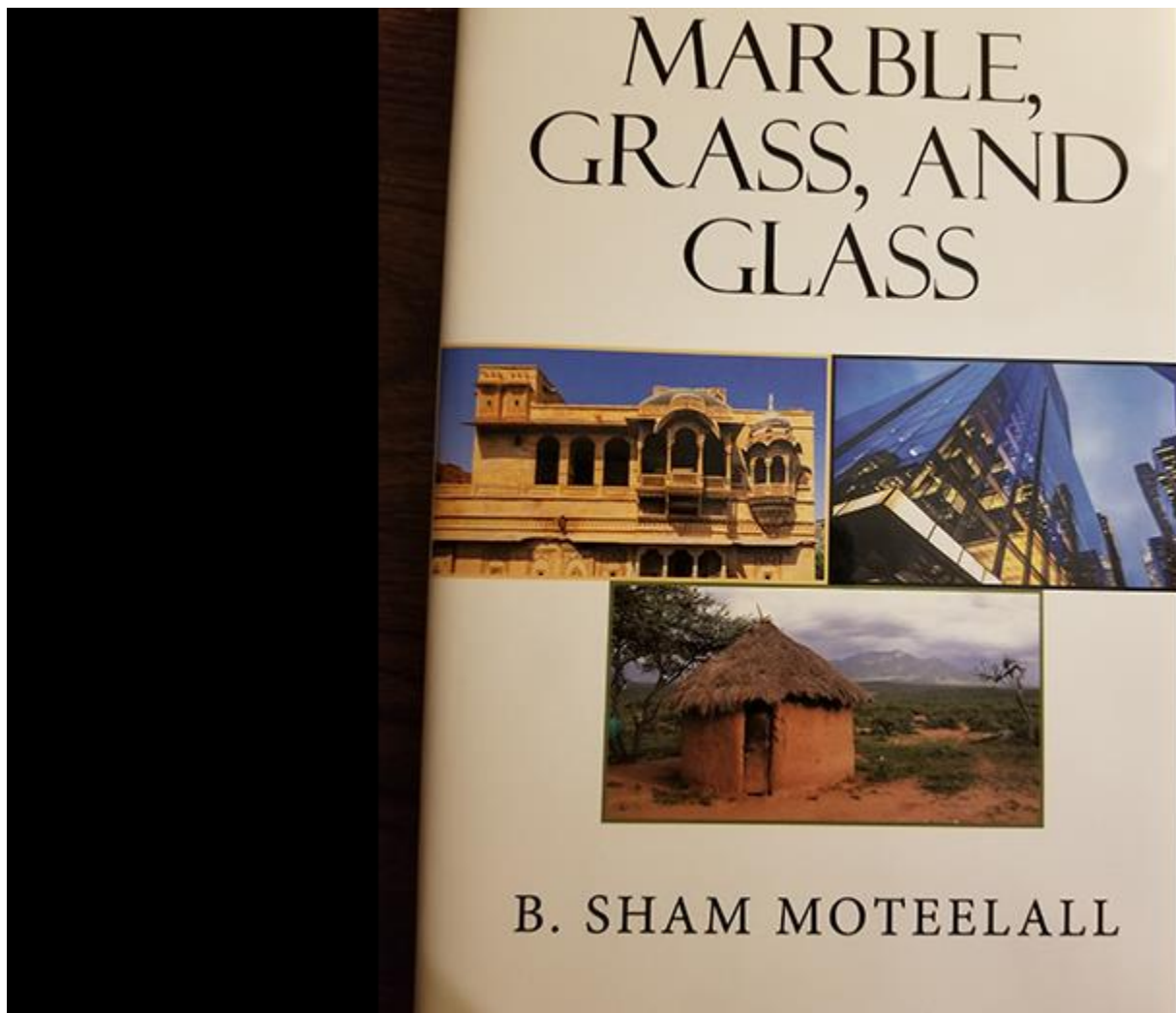
SM: The biggest challenge was the lack of information. The immigration office in Calcutta was supposed to be at eight Garden Reach. Today, there are numerous ship-building operations and other commercial undertakings there. The security was strict and did not allow me to enter the compound. It was difficult to find adequate lodging in some of the remote rural areas. Some of the hotels were scary with zero security and the door latches were inadequate. But I stayed there any way. To be fair, I stayed at some very nice hotels in the larger cities like New Delhi and Calcutta.

LR: What about your experience in Guyana?

SM: The Guyana archives were sketchy and not very well preserved.

LR: Your book has revealed a remarkable journey of your family from indenture to independence. What motivated you to embark on this journey?

SM: I tried finding a book that detailed a historical overview of the indentured process. Nothing seemed suitable, so I decided to recreate the five generational stories and filled in the blanks with some research and speculations. Also, one day, about 40 [years] ago, I saw a hologram-like cloud that reminded me of my grandfather who died in the 1918 pandemic. It appeared to be an invitation to tell his tragic stories. So, I told many stories about my ancestors starting about 1800 to about 1970.



LR: This is a rather interesting story insofar as encouraging you to probe deeper into the lives of your ancestors. May I ask if there were any stories that still linger on your mind?

SM: Yes. First of all, I still want to find Desai's relatives in India. Second, I would like to see the mansions where Lady and Vishnu/Pyroo grew up. I hope to accomplish these on my next visit to India.

LR: The narration of your family's life has shown an enormous pattern of persistence and perseverance in a plantation-oriented environment to "make it." Why do you think that this happened in Guyana, and not in India?

SM: They all tried in India. But circumstances hindered their efforts in some cases. In

addition, some members were kidnapped to fill the mandated 40 per cent female passengers. Some had political issues, some had legal issues, some had desperation issues, and some got pushed out because of high tax issues. They were resilient and hardworking people that were victimized by the existing systems, and some went in search of a better life.

LR: You are right in that there was a gender disparity in the Indian immigrant population at least up to 1940. There was a shortage of women, and yes, women were abused. But they used their shortage to bargain for better “things” that were not possible in India. I noticed also in your book how you discussed, very often, marriages based on match associations, which, interestingly held families together for generations. This was the heart of Indian customs transferred from India to Guyana. What do you think have kept your family tradition alive from India to Guyana to the United States?

SM: Spirituality, dedication, and beliefs. Our family, like many of our ancestors inherited very strong values and good work ethics. These are the survivors. They survived plantation life. Therefore, family traditions have followed us in our various paths of life.

LR: What would you like readers to know about your book that I have not asked?

SM: To understand that atrocious things happened to our ancestors, and I am happy to have secured enough information to tell their stories. It was a 40-year journey, but it was worth the effort.

LR: Thank you