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Aspects of Life and Living of Indentured Indians in Trinidad

Jerome Teelucksingh

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Abstract

This essay examines life of Indians in Trinidad during and after Indenture. The essay begins by tracing the conditions that led to the commencement of indentrue system, conditions of work and life in Trinidad for the indentured workers, education, amd religion and culture of the Indentured workers and those who chose to remain in Trinidad.

Indian Indentureship

After almost a decade of unsuccessful labor experiments, in 1844, the British government agreed to allow the immigration of 2,500 workers from India to Trinidad. This was a continuation of India's contribution to the modern world economy (Washbrook (2007; Owen, 2006)). The immigrants originated from two ports in India - Calcutta and Madras. The first batch of 225 Indians arrived in Trinidad on 30 May 1845. Likewise, during 1838-1917, a total of 239,149 Indians were imported into British Guiana. This colony received the most indentured labourers in the British West Indies. During 1845-1920, a total of 143,939 Indians were imported into Trinidad and 37,000 in Jamaica.

These indentured labourers were not only on the sugar estates but also employed on the cocoa, coconut and coffee estates.[1] Other smaller colonies which received Indians to supplement their labor were Grenada, St. Vincent and St. Lucia. By the time Indian immigration was abolished, the French West Indian colonies had a considerable number of Indians. Approximately 41,800 Indians had been introduced in Guadeloupe and 25,500 in Martinique. By 1920, the indentureship system had ended and Indians were no longer imported from India as laborers for overseas colonies. This search for reliable labor created a network among the Caribbean and three continents.

The planters again faced a labor shortage and made another request to the colonial authorities who turned to India. Thousands of Indians from small towns and villages from Bihar, Central Provinces, Orissa and Oudh were encouraged, tricked and forced by the arkatias (recruitment agents) to make the trip to a land of wealth and ease. The arkatias were hired by recruiters to assist in recruiting persons from the various villages. Their trip to the depot in India was the first leg of the cursed indentureship scheme. Men, women and children were the targets. Evidence of this is in 1910 in a report from a Sub-Divisional Magistrate. The document stated that teenaged girls and boys, who had been recruited, were at the depot of Malaya, at Negapatam. These minors were transported there without permission from their parents (Tinker: 1993: 128).

The main areas of recruiting women in India included bazaars, railway stations, markets, temples and religious festivals. A significant percentage of women were widows and abandoned wives. The females were included as part of adding a 'moral' dimension to the immigration system (Tikasingh, 2012: 222). Unfortunately, many of these women were sexually abused in the recruitment process; these incidents were unreported and thus absent from most the historical records.

[1] For more information on the global coffee production and disease, see McCook (2006).

The three ports of India - Madras, Bombay and Calcutta - were the final destinations for emigrants heading for the British colonies. During 1845 and 1920, approximately 147,592 Indians were brought into Trinidad under the indentureship system (Tikasingh 2012: 172). This was relatively small when compared to the larger territories. More than a million of these indentured Indians were forced to labor in horrible conditions throughout the British Empire's colonies. These included Natal, Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Jamaica, Grenada, St. Lucia, British Honduras (Belize) and British Guiana (Guyana). Additionally, Indian labor was being regularly exported to Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Malaysia and Ceylon (today known as Sri Lanka). They worked on the sugar, cotton and tea plantations.

It cannot be denied that capitalism in England received a tremendous boost from the enormous profits of indentureship (Bhattacharya, 2021: 24-53). Trade and exploitation by the Governor and Company of Merchants of London Trading into the East Indies (later known as the East India Company), in East and Southeast Asia and India since the 1600s to the 19th century, contributed to the economic foundations of the Industrial Revolution in Britain (Harvey, 2020).

A few scholars fervently argue that African slavery was responsible for this Industrial Revolution. Whilst this is partly true, there were other profitable territories as India that were exploited by Britain. Mercantilism prevailed. Its periphery was inextricably linked to the metropole. In May 2015, Tharoor spoke of the deindustrialization of India, arguing that during colonial rule, wealth was transferred enmasse from India to Britan. Indentureship contributed indirectly to the development of the rest of Europe. It was part of the curse of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism.

Indentureship was an incredible journey across the kala pani (or dark waters). Whilst on the trip, an overwhelming majority of the female passengers endured sexual assaults and verbal abuse. Caste restrictions were ignored. Among the many castes were Kshatriya, jat, bagdi, lohar, kandu, rajput, takur, chamar and gwala. It was a long trip filled with tears, blood, sweat, near despair and hopelessness but these brave men, women and their children would be able to achieve remarkable successes and accomplishments. On the depot, these Indians were from different backgrounds and spoke a mixture of languages and dialects such as Bhojpuri, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil and Malayalam. They had their unique dressing and physical appearance.

From 1866 the Indians entering Trinidad were not immediately sent to plantations. They were processed and registered on Nelson Island. The extremely sick ones were sent to the Colonial Hospital in Port-of Spain, while others with lower forms of illnesses remained on Nelson Island. The rest, comprising the majority, were transported on small boats to Port-of-Spain and sent to the plantations.

They were treated with contempt and handled very by officials who were unable to correctly spell their names on the ships' registers. The illiterate and semi-literate Indians were forced to sign contracts in which their names were misspelled. This was a continuation of their exploitation and suffering. Many would remain traumatized, forming fragmented identities.

Some of these immigrants had a jahaji bundle. And, in the bundles these humble persons brought from India- seeds of mangoes, guavas, tamarinds, ochro, seime, ginger, and various spices such as methi, clove, nutmeg, lychees and cinnamon. They also brought marijuana which men and women usually smoked for recreation.

Conditions of Work and Life

These despised working class Indians struggled in their insanitary habitat. They possessed the ability to survive the darkest of challenges. They lived in dirty overcrowded barracks or mud huts. Government officials, however, described the conditions in glowing terms. D. Comins, the Surgeon-Major, for example, described the barracks in Woodbrook Estate near Port-of-Spain in Trinidad during the 1890s as follows:

> Of these there are several ranges, all of which are a of most comfortable kind, well raised and roofed, and with a small enclosed verandah, part of which is used as a cook-house. Behind the barracks is shed for the calves of the coolies' cows, of which there are 50, which are allowed to graze free on the pasture land of the estate. The immigrants also have many fowls, and appear to be very prosperous. Their houses are full of furniture, have many fowls and appear to be very prosperous (Comins, 1893: 3).

Amidst the insanitary surroundings, there were no proper medical facilities. As a result many of them often fell ill with malaria, hookworm and other ailments. The bleak scenario included mosquito infestation, a lack of clean drinking water, and diseases like cholera, yaws, leprosy and typhoid. Most suffered from malnutrition, diabetes and hypertension but these were ignored. These were the conditions faced by these indentured Indians in other British colonies.

There was no electricity; at night the workers used flambeaux for light. At the end of a hard day's work they prayed, recounted stories and sang religious songs whilst the women prepared meals. During the day, some of the women washed clothes by the river and dried them on the grass and rocks. For the

Woodbrook Estate, Comins wrote mischievously 'I noticed a large number of women who had not gone to work. It seems free women are not obliged to work, and as their husbands and children make plenty of money, they stay at home and look after the house' (1893: 2).

Indians in Trinidad comprised the new labor force on sugar estates at McBean, Woodford Lodge, Perseverance, Mt. Pleasant, Cedar Hill, Williamsville and Les Efforts. Men, women and children worked on coffee, cocoa and coconut estates and rice fields. By 1861, approximately 74% of the Indians in Trinidad worked on the estates (Tikasingh, 2012: 267).

These deplorable working and living conditions, coupled with low wages were the major reasons for acts of resistance on the plantations. There were regular reports of desertions (Comins, 1893: 2; Mahase, 2008). Protests, including riots, setting fire to plantations, and working slow, contributed to the decline in indenture profitability. Resistance among the fearless working class Indians included the Hosay Massacre of 1884 and building of a temple in the sea by Sewdass Sadhu in Trinidad (Teelucksingh, 2020). This bold defiance by unarmed Indians were not isolated incidents. Their actions, coupled with petitions and the movement by anti-indenture activists such as Madam Mohan Malivaya and Mohandas Gandhi in India, undermined colonialism and imperialism.

By 1881, Indian population in Trinidad grew to 48,820. At the end of their contracts, time-expired immigrants were offered a return passage to India or a parcel of land. The distribution of land was achieved through the commutation scheme. Tikasingh noted that despite setbacks the commutation system was able 'to transform Indians from being immigrant labourers into small landowning proprietors' (2012: 268). During 1921-1931, there were approximately 8,000 repatriates which was less than 6% of the Indian population in the colony (Ramesar, 1976: 53). A majority of Indians accepted the land though these were generally located in inhospitable areas, whilst a few Indians decided to take their hard-earned savings and return to India. Also, some Indians decided to re-indenture themselves and continue working on the plantations.

By 1901, there were 86,373 Indians in the colony. After indentureship ceased in 1920, the Indians in the British West Indian colonies survived with simple frugal lifestyles. They became farmers, fishermen, shoemakers, craftsmen, and tended poultry and reared cows. Some had kitchen gardens in which they grew paddy, bhaji, and other vegetables. These semi-literate and illiterate Indians knew the value of education. Some assisted in the building of primary schools for their children. Others would later use savings to educate sons and daughters to ensure they are sent to universities abroad and would return to bring dignity to the Caribbean. Some invested in pieces of land whilst others constructed homes for their families.

Education

One of the characteristics of colonialism was the rigid racial and class structures inflicted upon the inhabitants of the British West Indies. The elite, exclusively Europeans, comprised the colony's upper class and were landowners, colonial officials and planters. The middle class consisted of black persons who were educated and some of who became property owners. Included among the middle class were civil servants, teachers, lawyers and journalists. Among the lower class, at the base of the social pyramid, were working class Indians and Africans from the rural and urban poor areas.

The Presbyterian missionaries from Nova Scotia (Canada) who arrived in Trinidad from 1868, played a crucial role in the assimilation process and social mobility of many citizens. The missionaries had a notable presence in Guyana, Grenada, St. Lucia and Jamaica. The Canadian missionaries had originally intended to spread the 'Good News' of Christianity but their mission took a different path resulting in a resounding success with its schools and institutions (Teelucksingh, 2020). Their primary schools, known as Canadian Mission Indian schools, and later Canadian Mission Schools, were built among the sugar-estate villages and rural areas. These educational institutions played a crucial role as the classes were filled with children of the indentured laborers and nearby villagers. Furthermore, many missionaries and Bible Women paid regular visits to estates armed with medicine, advice and Christianity.

From 1890 to 1905 the female missionaries built three homes – Tunapuna Girls' Training Home, Couva home for Girls and the Iere Home for Girls. It can be argued that these homes westernized these girls and separated them from their religion and culture. The average age of girls being admitted was 12 to 15 years. Occupants of the homes included orphans and daughters of Christian parents who wanted western training for their girls

In early 20th century, the Indo-Trinidadians who were exposed to education in a CM school became dentists, solicitors, merchants, school inspectors, accountants and doctors. Some provided leadership roles in religion such as Pundit Lakshmi Sharma a ricemill proprietor and canefarmer. He was born in 1908 and attended Debe CM School. He would later establish the Krishna Mandir and Sanatan Dharam Swayam Savak.

Another illustration of others who persevered was Haji Sukoor Rahamut, (born 1894). He was a merchant who attended San Fernando CM School and later made a trip to Mecca and toured India. Also attending San Fernando CM was Sheik Jaleel Mohammed (born 1895). His local fame was being an aerated water manufacturer and bottler of 'Wonder' drinks'. Mohammed was the organiser of the Southern East Indian Debating Association and member of the

Anjuman Sunnat-ul-Jamaat Clubs. Rosie Sheik (born 1923) a medical student was a graduate of Naparima Girls' High School and studied medicine at McGill University in Canada. She was a member of Susamachar Young Peoples Society in south Trinidad.

Despite the influence of the missionaries in building schools, illiteracy remained high. By 1931, among the illiterates in the colony approximately 60% were Indians. This was relatively high because Indians comprised 33% of the population (Ramesar, 1976: 59).

Religion and Culture

Indians received a hostile reception in the new host society. The prejudice endured by the Indians in the Caribbean began with the arrival of the first group, as indentured laborers, in 1838 in British Guiana (later known as Guyana). A group-consciousness and self-awareness among Africans and East Indians contributed to the polarization of both races. One of the repercussions of immigration was the mutual distrust and tension between Africans and East Indians. Africans, burdened by heavy taxes and decreased wages, resented the Indians because they worked for lower wages.

Different cultural, religious and social traits were also factors which reinforced hostility and created a mutual distrust between the region's two major races. It was obvious that since the inception of Indian immigration, nothing was done for their socio-cultural adaptation, so the Indians were treated as pariahs in the colony. Publications such as *The Settlement of Indians in Guyana 1890-1930* and *From Caste to Class: The Social Mobility of the Indo-Trinidadian Community 1870-1917*, *Contributions Towards the Resolution of Conflict in Guyana,* reveal that the Indians were treated as strangers and unwelcome guests in the Caribbean (Bisnauth, 2000; Seesaran, 2002; Seecoomar, 2002). Likewise, in Jamaica the Indians encountered difficulties in adjusting to their new environment and were treated with some distrust by the Blacks (Shepherd, 1985; 1986, 1988).

A few Indians brought copies of their holy books - the Ramayana, Koran and Bhagvad Gita. There was some reconstituting of their culture and religion. For instance, the Muslims fasted during Ramadan and the Hindus celebrated Divali, making and lighting crude, earthen oil lamps (deeyas). Mahase noted that cultural practices of Indians endured 'benign neglect' during colonialism (217: 123). Songs and music were part of the Indian identity. There were songs associated with festivals and life events such as Sohar (songs related to childbirth), chaitee (songs and celebrations six days after birth), ghazals (poetry found in Urdu and Persian literature), chowtals, biraha, and qawali (sings of North India). There are also Indian classical songs such as the khimta, thumri,

drupad, tilana, and hori. The qaseedas were the Muslim songs of praise to Allah, and these were sung in Urdu. Muslims played an important role.

The Trinidad Muslim League had mosques in St. Joseph, Libertville in Rio Claro, Prince Albert Street in San Fernando and Arima. Men as Haji Gokul Meah built a maktab and mosque in St. James. At these institutions young children would be taught Urdu and Arabic. There were indicators of harmony among the various religious groups. In 1928, at Palladium Theatre in Tunapuna (in north Trinidad), leaders from the Hindu and Muslim communities attended a meeting to raise funds for a school for Indians (Ramesar, 1976: 61). The *Trinidad Guardian* reported in August 1949 that Hindus and Muslims in Trinidad celebrated the 2nd anniversary of Indian and Pakistan Independence. Despite minor agreements since indentureship, the Hindus, Muslims and Christians in the Caribbean have tended to live in harmony. This high level of tolerance is a remarkable feature of the region that must be acknowledged.

There were pioneers of Indian classical music such as Isaac Yankaran and Mungal Patasar but there are others who are often forgotten - Ustaad Ramcharan on the tabla, Doolay Khan on harmonium, Narsaloo Ramaya on violin, Ravi Shukla on sitar, and Doon Ramsundar on the bansoori (flute). Among dancers we know Champa Devi, others were trained in specialized dance forms such as Susan Masoom, who performed kathak and Sandra Sookdeo who was trained in Orisssi dances.

In the post-World War II era, an educated Indian class was emerging. The needs of the estate residents served as the catalyst for social and economic improvement. Undoubtedly, Indians were not willing to be estate servants for too long. Those who left the estates decided to open small businesses and sold dry goods as the needs of the community grew.

In the late 20th century, Indo-Trinidadians were successful in managing small and medium business enterprises. They had also become competent in commerce, local government, village councils, and voluntary and religious organizations. They contributed to independent, rational, logical and progressive thinking which led to peaceful co-existence and harmony in Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of the world. The Indian diaspora reflect a large-scale migratory pattern which includes a blending of cultures. The Caribbean is home for many Indians and their ancestral home- India will never be forgotten.

Conclusion

During indentureship, Indians in Trinidad faced considerable challenges in their work and life. However, their resilience and persistence allowed them to overcome the deplorable conditions and discrimination. Many achieved limited social mobility partially due to the availability of education offered by

missionaries. In the post-indentureship era, Indians continued to create an environment for the next generation to live better lives.

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Author:

Jerome Teelucksingh, is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History at The University of the West Indies, in Trinidad & Tobago. He has written articles and chapters on migration, Presbyterian Church, trade unionism, politics and Indo-Trinidadian personalities. He has also produced documentaries on Ramleela and indentureship. His recent work is *Emergence of the Caribbean Empire: Politics and Labour in Trinidad and Tobago, 1918–1976*. Email: j_teelucksingh@yahoo.com