



INDIAN ARRIVAL IN THE CARIBBEAN

(Part Two)

Indians arrival in the Caribbean evolved from the time Christopher Columbus 'discovered' the Americas in October 1492. Within twenty years 80% of the native people Arawaks and Caribs were annihilated by slaughter and disease by the Spanish invaders. Slaves from Africa were brought in, in 1516 and after over 300 years slavery was abolished in 1834.



The life of an indentured labourer cutting sugar on Uitvlugt Plantation, British Guiana

To satisfy the greedy appetite of the European nations for cheap labour indentureship 'another system of slavery' was introduced in 1838.

PART TWO of **Indian Arrival in the Caribbean** will continue from the 'docile coolies' arrival in the Caribbean and how they fared over the eighty years of Indentureship.

After the arrival of the first batch of indentured labourers on the SS Hesperus and SS Whitby on 5 May 1838 in British Guiana the 'coolie trade' ceased for seven years until the Fatal Rozack landed in Trinidad on 30 May 1845.

This cessation of migration came about because the authorities in India and London were concerned that the indentured labourers were being treated as harshly as the slaves they were replacing and that the death toll enroute was too high. In spite of this concern, emigration of cheap labour from India continued unabated for the next eighty years to the Caribbean and other parts of the world.

Queen Victoria accession to the throne on 20 June 1837 was only months away from the beginning of indentured labourers to the Caribbean on 5 May 1838, she ruled for sixty four years until 22 January 1901, becoming the Empress of India in 1876. It was during her reign that Britain became 'great' shipping the cheap labour of Indians to several of her colonies and at the same time taking advantage of the great wealth of India accumulated during the reign of the Mughals to fuel the expansion of the British Empire. Major acquisitions were made during this period which includes interest in the Suez Canal. When the

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Native Americans, Jews and Africans rightly talked about reparations someone should stand up and shout what about 'the coolies'.

The number of deaths during the long three to six months voyage continued to be at a high level and never during the entire period of eighty years was acceptable. Deceit and false promises of a better life when recruiting in India, was another area that never improved.

The Indians on arrival were living in conditions no better than that of the African slaves they were replacing, their health if they survived the long voyages deteriorated daily, many died on the roadside, women with babies often had to take them to work leaving the infants all day in nearby fields in the hot sun so as to complete their task, many young children perished in this way.

It is worth recording for the benefit of all concerned that after slavery was abolished and the former slaves refused to work on the plantation it was the indentured labourers who worked the sugar estates under a new system of slavery.

The Caribbean would have deteriorated into poverty like so many other areas during this harsh self-centred European colonisation. It was the coolies sometimes 100% work force on the plantations whose sweat, blood, tears and lives saved what we today call the Caribbean. We are all waiting for the Afro centric writers and calypsoians who think it was only the Africans that developed the Caribbean, to replace their misinformed sentiments with facts. 'Those Indian hands...' if they were not there would have had a Caribbean with the same high level of starvation we today see in so many countries.

Protest

India between the end of the Napoleonic war in 1814 and the beginning of the First World War in 1914 furnished a supply of cheap disposable labour that energise the British Empire, they were the 'coolies' who began their long saga of dumb, patient endurance, but by frugal habits and persevering industry and against all odds – from black and whites – they were raising their heads.

Within twenty years of their arrival the once 'docile coolie' started to protest. The common denomination in the conflicts were long working hours low wages and continued breach of promises including reduction from 32 cents per 'task' to 24 cents. Disturbances occurred at Plantation Leonara West Coast Demerara when the workers pay was withheld, because they could not complete a job on water-logged soil. The indentured labourers became violent when other labourers were paid to

complete the task. They physically assaulted the deputy manager and confronted the police who were armed with Enfield Rifles, the workers weapon was a five foot long knotty stick called 'hackia stick'. The leaders of this incident were arrested and sent to prison at Mazaruni penal settlement.

Workers unrest was becoming more regular occurring at Plantations Hague, Mon Repos and Success in quick succession. Workers were rebelling against poor housing and continued abuse of their women by overseers and poor wages which were after twenty years of indentureship in 1860's 20 to 24 cents as against 32 cents per 'task' as was agreed. Sometimes workers were expected to stay on the job for up to twenty three hours without a shift change or extra pay. Workers were becoming bolder in their demand for better conditions and wages.

Plantation Devonshire Castle on the Essequibo Coast saw one of the worst riots when five Indians died in confrontation with the police. Over fifty women came out to support their men folk saying 'they would die with their husbands'. In a letter to *The Times* one reader stressed that under such an oppressive system revolts were inevitable even



Reaping Rice "Coolie Labour enabled the Europeans to save the decline of their plantations..."

among people so willing and contented as the Indian immigrant.

‘There is no doubt that the coolies feel their power, or rather, I should say, have an exaggerated idea of that power.... generally he does not behave as well as he used to’ According to Sir Henry Norman an English commissioner sent to investigate the **Hosea** riots in Trinidad.

By the 1880s the East Indian increasingly saw themselves as an integral part of the social and political landscape. The **Hosea** riots of 1884 in Trinidad which resulted in the death of sixteen labourers and injury to no less than a hundred more, announced the movement of Indian labourers away from an existence on the fringes of society to a more

Mortality on ships to the West Indies, 1856-7

	Passengers			Total	Number of deaths	Mortality, as percentage of total
	Men	Women	Children			
Wellesley	254	84	44	382	22	5.75
Bucephalus	252	84	44	380	45	11.84
Sir Robert Seppings	197	59	35	291	61	20.96
Roman Emperor	207	68	38	313	88	28.11
Adelaide	213	62	29	304	25	8.22
Sir George Seymour	238	75	41	354	36	10.17
Eveline	231	96	60	387	72	18.60
Maidstone	268	68	39	375	92	24.53
Merchaunton	239	96	50	385	120	31.17
Granville	154	100	55	309	37	11.97
Burmah	230	58	38	326	49	15.03
Scindian	156	81	51	288	60	20.83
Total	2,639	1,931	524	4,094	707	17.27

Deaths on ships was always too high

integral and full relationship.

Indians were permitted to exchange their right for return passages after ten years in the colonies into land-grant, as well as the right to purchase additional land at £1.00 an acre. Many went into paddy cultivation and so introducing several of the staple diets into the region like rice and mangoes the national fruit of India, not forgetting the curries and all its variations that the coolies introduced which today has become the most popular dish in the Caribbean. Less than one in four Indians returned to India, while the mortality level on ships and working conditions on the plantation came in for criticism throughout the indentured period.

“...those Indian hands-whether in British Guiana or Trinidad-have fed all of us. They are, perhaps, our only jewels of a true native thrift and industry. They have taught us by example the value of money; for they respect money as only people with a high sense of communal responsibility can.”

George Lamming, *‘The West Indian People’* (New World Quarterly, Vol.2, No. 1, 1966, p. 69

Exploitation and shortage of Women

Demand for sugar increased in Europe as the quality of life improved in the nineteenth century. The plantation owners were demanding more profits to maintain their exorbitant lifestyle, which meant the managers and overseers on the plantations were pushing their labourers in the cane fields and sugar factories of which any job that can be done by a labourer was exempted from mule or machine assistance. Out of every 1000 indentured labourer introduced in the Caribbean only 527 survived the harsh conditions. The coolie remained the all-purpose work animal.

The wage rate stagnated for over one hundred years. Work on the sugar estates was hardest of all, harder than that of the coffee estates, tea gardens or rubber plantations. The sugar industry which provided nothing for the workers by way of incentives, succeeded in keeping them hard at work by a system of penalties and punishments. The role of the task masters was grim and their capacity to exploit the coolies continually included exploitation of their women.

The watch-dogs – the Protectors and the magistrates identified with the planters not with the workers. Survival depended largely on their own powers of resilience, sometimes recreating some semblance of the lost India in festivals and feasts. Too often their attempt to forget the cane fields ended up in jealous fighting over the women, (sometimes one woman to ten men) and drunken oblivion.

Although the indentured coolie could be held in legal bondage only for a period of years, the plantation held most of them for life. The only escape was to return to India worn out and impoverish in most cases. For almost a century after slavery the plantation imposed a total way of existence upon generations of bonded Indians. An Immigration Agent-General drew a sad picture.

‘It is when the rainy season sets in that the Indian’s heaviest trial commence, when he makes his first essay in weeding, perhaps in high cane and heavy grass.... The work is hard, monotonous, and in high canes may almost be called solitary; he loses heart makes a task in double the time in which an experienced hand would make a whole one, returns at a late hour, cold, wet and fatigued, to renew the struggle on the morrow with decreased vitality till at the end of his first year it is found that his work has not paid for his ration....An immigrant embarks on the second year of apprenticeship saddled with a considerable debt from his first year’s ration’.

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Over 20% of the Indians were fined or imprisoned for absent from work or refusal to work causing more financial hardship and extension of their bondage.

In Grenada it was reported that the majority of 2000 coolies imported some years before had been “kicked off the estates directly they became ill, they were allowed to die of yaws and other diseases on the roads”. The same treatment was given to sick Indians in Jamaica, according to the editor of the **County Union** newspaper in Montego Bay, which on 22 December 1863 carried the headline: ‘THE ILL-USED COOLIES’. The editor Levine stated: *“Our office is at all hours the scene of their piteous begging for food... One must see.... these wretched, hungry, houseless and outcast spectres picking up in the streets a chance bone or any putrid offal.... To realise the sufferings they hourly undergo....lazer-like...the greatest poverty takes much killing. And so crippled, nude, skeletoned before their death, they live on, no parish authority taking them in”*.

One observer of the Indians in Jamaica wrote: *‘The Hill Coolies, both men and women, work in the fields, many of them in a state of nudity, and hardly any of them decently clothed. Many of them are suffering from severe sickness, and are covered with sores, so as to be unable to work...’*.

Many of the Indians turned to rum drinking which was cheap, plentiful and potent, from shops run by Creole Negro, or the Portuguese or Chinaman, for rum did not enliven, it merely took the coolie into a twilight world of forgetfulness. □

We will conclude Indian Arrival in the Caribbean in our next issue. Giving an indication of where the descendants of the ‘indentured’ are and their contribution to the Caribbean, one hundred and sixty five years after their arrival.

Do You Know.....?

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CHUTNEY MUSIC

Chutney was the name given to the pop/folk music of the East Indians that lived in the Caribbean region. Chutney music came with the arrival of East Indian indentured labourers to the Caribbean. The majority of the indentured labourers came from the Indian states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and the South Indian areas around Madras.

EARLY EAST INDIAN LIFE

Although life was hard, many of the immigrants chose to remain in the Caribbean, slowly re-creating segments of the culture they had left behind in India. One of the basic foundations of this culture was the East Indian music itself. In its original form, it included the use of traditional Indian instruments such as the Harmonium, Sitar, Tabla, Dholak & Dhantahl.



Dantahl

It would later go on to include the Tassa drums with their fast, exciting and deafeningly loud sounds. The lyrics were almost always in Hindi. East Indian music in its early stages were mostly Bhajans, or devotional songs. It would later go on to include renditions of songs from the Indian films of Bombay, which attracted huge audiences. The music also evolved into folk songs, also called Tan singing and wedding songs.

With the arrival of the early 1900s, indentureship came to an end, and many East Indians moved off the plantations and onto their own plots of land, mostly as rice farmers and small share croppers. Although this move signified a stratification in society for the East Indians, their music and culture as a whole was still relegated to the rural areas, and the villages, of the East Indian sugar belts of Guyana, Trinidad & Suriname. Even as late as 1940, there were still no recorded East Indian artists, as the music remained confined to the temples, wedding houses and cane fields.

PRELUDE TO CHUTNEY

In 1958, East Indian music finally made its debut on the recording industry with the release of an album of devotional songs by **Ramdeo Chaitoe** of Suriname, called *King of Surinam*. It made him a household name with East Indians not just in Suriname, but throughout the Caribbean. His songs were religious in nature and used the strong beats of the dhantal and dholak. In fact, one song, *Raat Ke Sapna*, would go on to become a huge dance hit in the decades to follow.

It was not until the 1960s that another Surinamese would catapult East Indian music onto the scene once again. In 1968, a woman by the name of **Dropati** debuted with an album of traditional wedding songs, titled, *Lets Sing & Dance*. Once again, although religious in nature, Dropati's songs, much like those of Ramdeo Chaitoe, went on to become huge pop hits within the East Indian community. Dropati's epic songs such as *Gowri Pooja* and *Lawa* became such big hits that they firmly secured her name in history as one of the pillars of Indo-Caribbean music. Not only did it prove East Indian music as a legitimate art form, but it also united the East Indians of the Caribbean.



Dholak

CHUTNEY MAKES ITS DEBUT

The year 1970 would mark perhaps the biggest turning point in East Indian music, a young man out of Barrackpore, Trinidad by the name of **Sundar Popo** leapt to fame with the song *Nana & Nani*. Sundar soon became known as the King of Chutney. Sundar's humble lyrics revolved around basic Indo-Caribbean life, and often echoed the major issues of political repression, relationships and emigration.

By the late 1970s, **Nisha Benjamin** of Guyana were making number one hits such as, *Na Manu Na Manu* and *O'Maniga* where she describes the hardships of a woman working and living on a sugar estate. Chutney music sensation remained confined to just a few artists in Guyana. Trinidad

on the other hand had quite a flourishing East Indian music industry. This was mainly because of television shows as **Mastana Bahar** and radio programs such as **Chutney Train**, both of which were instrumental in discovering many of the Chutney artists of today.

EVOLUTION OF CHUTNEY

Chutney music had gradually diminished by the 1980s, it seemed as if Chutney was about to be lost in history. The music within the Caribbean itself was changing. The traditional West Indian Calypso was being merged into a new form of music called Soca, which was basically a blend of Calypso and American Rhythm and Blues. Chutney music was caught up in this change, which would later evolve it into a new style called Indian Soca.

This new style of music included the Indian instruments of the tassa, dholak & sitar. It also incorporated the more Calypso flavour of the steel pan and synthesizer and even the electric guitar. What was significant is the fact that Indian Soca and East Indian music as a whole was now being given a wider audience.

RACE AND GENDER

Drupatee emerged onto the Indian Soca scene in 1987 with the release of the single *Pepper Pepper*, a song in which she describes the hardship of being an East Indian housewife. In the summer of 1988, she leapt onto the charts once again with a new song entitled *Mr. Bissessar*. By mid July 1988, just two weeks after its release, the song had hit number one in every country in the English speaking Caribbean. Drupatee had made history as not only the first East Indian woman, but the first East Indian to successfully cross over onto the Soca charts and to have a number one hit.

CHUTNEY GOES GLOBAL

By the end of the 1980s, no less than 20 new Indo-Caribbean artists had emerged into the new Indian Soca scene. Among these were **Babla & Kanchan**, a veteran husband and wife team out of India who had risen to fame after a successful career in providing music for the Indian movie industry. They emerged onto the Caribbean scene in 1984, when they released two albums doing mostly Indian Soca covers for some of Sundar Popo's older songs. In 1986, they did another cover of **Arrow's Hot Hot Hot** and **Baron's Buss Up Shot**. Babla and Kanchan have

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continued to produce songs well into the 1990s releasing no less than 15 albums, including, Na Manu Na Manu in 1995 they did covers of Nisha Benjamin's title hit and of Dropati's Lawa. Another new artist on the scene was **Atiya** out of Holland. She was discovered on the Mastana Bahar television program while doing a cover of the Guyanese folk song, *Ke Ghunguru Doot Gaye*. After releasing this song in 1989, Atiya shot to fame and went on to do a cover of **Mighty Trini's**, *Curry Tabanca* in 1990.

EMIGRATION TO NORTH AMERICA & EUROPE

The Indian Soca trend would continue well into the 1990s. Its popularity was greatly advanced with the help of the growing number of Indo Caribbean communities in the United States, Canada and UK especially in New York and Toronto and London. Many of these immigrants were now able to establish their own record companies. By the time **Sharlene Boodhram's** *Calcutta Woman* debuted on the charts in 1996, Chutney had already gained recognition as one of the leading music forms within the West Indies. Chutney was more than just music for Indo Caribbeans it was part of their life, it was their culture. For a people removed from their native land, Chutney was their connection to the traditions they might have otherwise never known. There is a saying about Chutney, 'you can hear it with your ears, but you can also feel it with your heart and soul.'

We are grateful for information on **Chutney music** to the Guyana based website www.guyanaundersiege.com

Letters

May I again express my profound thanks for your newsletters and your interest, input, and initiative in bringing Caribbean and other events to our notice. God bless you abundantly

Ralph M Bharath, Archway, London

Regarding the article, 'Coolie Immigrants' I am really astonished by the way Indo Caribbeans insist in cherishing an inferiority complex about themselves. The impression I got from reading this article is that the writer seems to feel that he or she was born a fool and would like to die a fool. Could't the writer check the English dictionary and see what the word coolie means?

The reason why Indians were called coolies when they arrived in Guyana was because they came to work as labourers. The Hindi word for labourer, in India is coolie. Nothing is wrong about that. Indians who are not labourers in India are not coolies. And not all the Indians who immigrated to the Caribbean were labourers. I heard a white Englishman said he was a coolie in India. The word coolie does not mean Indo Caribbeans in general. Afro Caribbeans refer to all Asians as coolies. They use the word coolie upon us for derogatory reasons. But we should not allow them to influence us according to the way they think. But if they read articles like the one in your newsletter that would make them feel they are right. The word coolie means occupation not Indo Caribbeans in general. Indo Caribbeans have a very poor image in the world. African descendants and Europeans see us as weak, coward and stupid. I heard negroes said 'beat the coolie they are weak'. I also heard Europeans said, 'Indians are just a walkover'. I am trying my best to change that image and I will need your support.

D Beggs, Surbiton, Surrey

Whilst in London I came across your May issue. I found it useful and trust that you would continue to provide information to the community in London.

Kulraj Kamta, Carapichaima, Trinidad

COMMENT

We Fail To Understand The Suicide Bombers

“Roll up, roll up, read the same old story all over again! The occupation of Palestine has murderously enraged a gang of its victims, and a group of zealots has taken matters into its own hands. They have committed a series of suicide killings: more deaths, more weeping mothers, no progress. You might have missed this particular story though; their weapons were daggers (they slit their own throats after killing scores of their occupiers), and the perpetrators were Jews resisting Roman occupation in the first century AD.

As suicide bombs incinerate victims from Chechnya to Jerusalem to Casablanca, our understanding of suicide bombing is still cluttered with myths and half-truths. The biggest falsehood is that suicide bombing is an exclusively Muslim phenomenon. Two-thirds of the suicide killings committed in the past two decades were not committed by Muslims. The pioneers and masters of contemporary suicide bombing are the Tamil Tigers. They have murdered a Sri Lankan president and an Indian prime minister – and they are Hindu nationalists seeking independence from Sri Lanka. Half of the suicide bombings in Lebanon since 1983 were carried out by secular Communists opposing Israeli occupation. And British men have been murdered by non-Muslim suicide killers in living memory: kamikaze pilots were a key part of the Japanese war effort from 1943 onwards. They were followers of Shintoism.

Once we have dismissed the notion that Islam is inherently fanatical and murderous, we must look for other causes. Many Israeli and American writers claim that a sick Arab culture that venerates death is responsible. Suicide bombers, they say, are simply nihilists. One US columnist offers a typical view: ‘These people have no political agenda beyond

the desire to bring death for its own sake. We are witnessing an outbreak of political insanity. It has no more cause than a guy who goes mad slowly and has to be taken to the nut house.’ This belief is comforting but untrue.

Like a battered wife who kills her husband, suicide bombers are reacting in an illegitimate way to legitimate grievances. The Versailles Treaty and the injustices it imposed upon the German people were a necessary ingredient in the rise of Nazism: the current miseries of the Arab world are giving rise to a strain of Islamofascism.

This obviously does not excuse either. I hate jihadists as much as anyone. Indeed, I might hate them even more because – given that I am gay and I have Jewish relatives – the al-Qa’ida thugs who killed innocent people last week believe that I too should be murdered: not just once but twice over. But we must be honest about this phenomenon. The suicide bombers we confront today are reacting to real problems, albeit horribly, and denying this fact obscures the situation we are all in....”

Part of an EDITORIAL and OPINION published in The Independent newspaper Wednesday 21 May 2003 - by Johann Hari

‘If you do away with your traditional way of living and give up your good customs you had better first make certain, that you have something of value to replace them’.

Quotes:

- “Non-cooperation with evil is a sacred duty” - *Mahatma Gandhi*
- “Blowing out someone’s candle will not make your own shine brighter”
- “Indian people do not come as conquerors. They come and they contribute - economically, politically and socially – and every time to the benefit and gain of the countries and peoples with whom they intersect”

INDO CARIBBEAN

News Views and Information



June 2003

Issue 4

Recommended reading on Indians in the Caribbean

A New System of Slavery - Hugh Tinker
Benevolent Neutrality - Indian Government Policy and Labour Migration to British Guyana – Basdeo Mangru
Coolie Odyssey (Poems) - David Dabydeen
Forbidden Freedom – The story of British Guiana - Cheddi Jagan
India - A Wealth of Diversity - Ed. Arif Ali
India in the Caribbean - Ed. Brinsley Samaroo and David Dabydeen
Indo-Westindian Cricket - Frank Birbalsingh and Clem Shiwcharan
Inseparable Humanity - An Anthology of Reflection of Shridath Ramphal - Ed. Ron Sanders
The Other Middle Passage: Journal of a voyage from Calcutta to Trinidad - Ed. Ron Ramdin
The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusion in V S Niapaul's Fiction - John Thieme
The West on Trial - My fight for Guyana's freedom - Cheddi Jagan

All the above titles are available from Hansib Publications websites

www.hansib-books.com
www.booksofcolour.co.uk

Hansib's Coolie Odyssey Series was launched in 1988 to mark the 150th Anniversary of Indians arrival in the Caribbean 1838-1988

Articles, events and comments are welcome for future issues.

Useful Information

Caribbean Indian Social & Cultural Association (CISCA)

Contact: Mr Tajj Ramnarace 020 8442 0977

Trinidad and Guyana Music Connection Tel / Fax 020 8671 6806

The Dharma Centre

Mrs Rita Singh Tel : 020 8292 9909

Caribbean Hindu Society (CHS)

Tel : 020 8674 0755

London Islamic Cultural Society Mosque & Cultural Centre.

389 Wightman Road Hornsey N8 ONA

Tel : 020 8348 0353

United Islamic Association

JUMMA every Friday 12 : 45pm

31 Crawley Road, Wood Green, N22 6AG

Tel : 020 8372 3023

Al Muzzamil Mosque and Community Centre of Tooting

8 Gatton Road, Tooting London, SW17 0EX

Tel : 020 7767 7477

Next Issue.....

- Part three of Indian Arrival in the Caribbean will explain Mahatma Gandhi's influence in the cessation of Indentureship and how the 'docile, quiet and orderly coolie survived the abuse of both whites and blacks and their struggle and achievements.
- The Great Sonny Ramadhin

Promote your culture, introduce *Indo Caribbean* to your family and friends

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