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*The Impact of Indian Immigrants on the British Caribbean Colonial Societies, 1838–1917.*

*Tomasz Knothe*

Between the 1830 and the opening decades of the 20th century, the history of the European colonial possessions in the Caribbean islands and three Guianas was above all a record of the fall of a system of slavery followed by economic and social reconstruction. Britain freed its slaves in 1833, Sweden did the same in St. Bartholomew in 1847. France and Denmark followed suit next year, the Netherlands waited until 1863 and Spain declared slavery illegal in Puerto Rico in 1873 (effective in 1876) and Cuba in 1880 (effective in 1886). In this long-haul effort the European states put, paid to a system which had from the onset of colonization held sway over the entire Caribbean region save for Saint Dominique where it showed its first cracks at the close of the eighteenth century under the impact of a successful Negro revolt.

The abolition of slavery in the British overseas possessions set in train the second phase of elimination of that system of production which was essentially anachronistic in view of the predominance of free labour in the most advanced capitalist mother countries (England, Netherlands, France).

The 1833 Slavery Abolition Act provided for the emancipation of all slaves within a year's time. The slaves working on the plantations were to remain there up till 1840 as indentured labour while domestic servants and journeymen were to carry on in this semi-dependence a bit shorter than that, until 1838 to be exact. The apprenticeship period was meant to prepare the freedmen for a new

life and to help their former owners to switch their economies from slave over to free labour. The parliament further awarded the planters a total of 20 million pounds sterling as a compensation for the losses sustained.<sup>1</sup>

The apprenticeship period did not pass the test of time. Antigua's authorities ignored it altogether. The Bermudas and Monserrat had earlier given it up after a spell as it had failed to satisfy the parties concerned and touched off a spate involving the planters and their erstwhile slaves. In England it triggered off a wave of vigorous protests by abolitionists.<sup>2</sup> In 1838 it was renounced by the remaining colonies, whereupon the former slaves were free to shape their own respective destinies as they pleased.

The genesis, conditions and the driving forces of the aforesaid developments which wrought a meaningful change on the social and economic patterns of the British West Indies and, subsequently, of the remaining Caribbean colonies of the European states, have been the subject of heated scholarly debates and discussions to this very day, as library catalogues amply prove. Without going to the heart of these interesting controversies, it is worth pointing out that the processes unfolding in the mother state which were of negligible, if any, consequence for the situation in the colonies,<sup>3</sup> in fact turned a new page in their history. The Slavery Abolition Act was the direct outcome of the 1832 reform of the electoral system in England which reflected the political aspirations of the bourgeoisie. It was at once proof of a new approach to things economic being displayed by the English political élites of the day which was more adequate – so it seemed – to England's new position as the “workshop of the world”.

These changes proceeded amidst the growing political isolation of the once politically influential planters of the West Indies whose desperate clinging to mercantilism and stubborn defence of the

1. For the text of the Act see K. N. Bell, W. P. Morrell (eds): *Select Documents on British Colonial Policy, 1830–1860*, London 1928.

2. For a review of the situation in the apprenticeship period see W. L. Mathieson: *British Slave Emancipation, 1838–1849*, London 1932; W. L. Burn: *Emancipation and Apprenticeship in the British West Indies*, London 1937; D. Hall: *The Apprenticeship Period in Jamaica, 1834–1838*, “Caribbean Quarterly,” 1953, No. 3.

3. We are far from neglecting the importance of slave risings. During the nineteenth century several took place specifically under circumstances in which the blacks thought the local authorities were suppressing news of their emancipation (in 1823 in British Guyana and in 1831 in Jamaica are the best known examples).

privileges resulting therefrom had become embarrassingly old-fashioned not only for the swelling ranks of converts to *laissez-faire* and free trade but also for the planters' once-devoted friends, the English landowners, who were now adapting to the new situation.

Representatives of the English ruling classes may not have shared the moral outrage which slavery elicited from hardcore abolitionists who hailed from the very influential Evangelical and Nonconformist quarters, but they were very receptive to the economic argument of free labour's higher productivity. There was a fairly widespread belief among the abolitionists in England that once emancipated, the Africans would not only stay put in the plantations but that they would work much harder and more productively to boot. Joseph Sturge, a well known Quaker advocate of the abolition of slavery had this to say on the matter: "In a state of freedom it may be expected that the conditions and resources of an agricultural labourer working for regulated wages will be, as they are in England, superior to those of a paltry agriculturist, cultivating his little plot of land with his own hands; and it is evident therefore that the negroes will generally prefer working on the estates. Their strong attachment, to the place of their birth, to their houses and gardens, to the graves of their parents and kindred, exceeding what has been recorded of any other people, is another circumstance which favours their constitution as labourers on the estates to which they are now respectively attached."<sup>4</sup>

The above and many similar arguments had reduced the estate owners' resistance to mere irrationality prompted by morally reproachable superstitions, sinful habits and, above all, their civilizational backwardness. The advocates of abolition were confident that the relevant act of parliament would in one clean sweep eliminate moral evil and lay the groundwork for an economic improvement of the colonies. However, the West Indian reality was different and what seemed so rational and so obvious in England was fiction rather than fact in the colonies. Sensing an imminent disaster to their interests or, to say the least, an aggravation of their difficulties

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4. Quote taken from S. Oliver: *Jamaica. The Blessed Island*, London 1936, p. 109.

coming in the wake of abolition, they proved to be more accurate prognosticators than London-based experts<sup>5</sup> in this field.

True, the consequences of the abolition of slavery differed from colony to colony as they reflected the economic conditions prevailing therein. For instance, emancipation never caused economic turmoil in Antigua, Barbados and some other small islands. The former slaves had no choice but to carry on earning their livelihood by toiling on the plantations simply because there was no free land for them to take over. But most of the colonies have become the scenes of a massive exodus of the former slaves from the sugar cane plantations. Assisted by the easy availability of land, these people set up subsistence farms on plots of land which they either purchased for the money earned during their apprenticeship, or leased, or simply seized. That was true of not only such places as Trinidad or Jamaica but also of some smaller island possessions. The so-called "mountain gardens" set up by former slaves in Grenada's interior, for instance, were the consequence of the plentiful supply of land that was up for sale or grabbing. Those who had difficulties in acquiring land migrated to nearby Trinidad. In consequence, by 1844 many plantations had either been abandoned or were only partly cultivated.<sup>6</sup>

Low prices of sugar in those years accelerated the process of economic emancipation of the Africans because the abandoned plantations meant more land easily available to all. In Jamaica, Methodist and Baptist mission churches purchased wholesale the ruined estates to set up villages for former slaves there. In 1838–1844 some 19 thousand new freedmen left the plantations with their families, bought land and settled down in free villages. That added up to a total of about a hundred thousand people which was roughly 50 per cent of the entire pre-abolition slave population.<sup>7</sup>

In British Guiana, several-score-strong groups of former slaves, sometimes assisted by missionaries, pooled their resources to pur-

5. For more details on the mentality of this group and its changing status in England in connection with the abolition of slavery, see L. J. RAY: *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763–1833*, New York 1928; F. V. Gouveia: *Slave Society in the British Leeward Islands at the End of the Eighteenth Century*, New Haven 1965; H. O. Patterson: *The Sociology of Slavery*, London 1967.

6. See F. Henriquez, J. Manjón: *Ethnic Group Relations in Barbados and Grenada*, in: *Race and Class in Post-colonial Society*, UNESCO Paris 1977.

7. S. W. Mintz: *Caribbean Transformations*, Chicago 1974, pp. 159–179.



chase abandoned estates in order to set up their own villages there. By joint effort they then drained and/or irrigated the land which they subsequently shared out among themselves. Their crops included manioc, bananas and other fruits as well as vegetables both for domestic consumption and for the market. However, in Guiana the villagers remained in partial dependence on the plantations where they sold their produce and sought extra job opportunities. This situation was responsible for the emergence of a sizeable group of Negro peasants in the British West Indies only years after emancipation.<sup>8</sup>

The newly freed Africans were conspicuously reluctant to stay on the estates. However, the sharp manpower deficit the planters experienced after 1838 was also the result of their own quite low wage offer. Right at the outset, their predicament prompted an idea of importation of cheap labour as the only remedy imaginable. It is difficult to state with all certainty that there was no other way of averting a collapse of the plantation economy. In any case, the planters resorted to a tested method dating back virtually to the dawn of slavery and practiced all the way to its twilight, namely, the method of indentured labour. The London authorities lent their support to the planters' endeavours and backed up the organization of the emigration of labourers to the Caribbean colonies—a venture which turned out to be bristling with difficulties.

In the initial period success eluded the men involved in attracting indentured labour to the area. The 164 Maltese workers brought over to Granada were found to be inadequate for plantation work and their contracts were terminated two years later. Whereupon most of the group migrated to Trinidad while the remaining few melted into the local community without trace.<sup>9</sup> The 208 Maltese labourers shipped at the same time to British Guiana were similarly circumstanced. The more sweeping recruitment of Portuguese from the Azores, Madeira and the Cape Verde conducted between the eighteen thirties and eighties likewise proved to be a failure. Of a total of over 36 thousand of these migrants, 31,628 went to

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8. M. Moohr, *The Economic Impact of Slave Emancipation in British Guiana, 1832–1852*, "Economic History Review," November 1972, No. 4; For the whole region see also W. K. Marshall: *Peasant Development in the West Indies since 1838*, "Social and Economic Studies," Vol. 17, 1968.

9. F. Henriquez, J. Manjón: *op. cit.*, p. 91.

British Guiana, more than 2 thousand—to Antigua, almost 900—to Trinidad and about a hundred—to Jamaica. They, too, were found wanting and after the expiry of their contracts—and sometimes ever earlier—they left their plantations and moved over to towns attracted by more promising job prospects in trade where they displayed considerable talents. They managed to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity and their descendants are still recognizable among Caribbean people today.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, attempts were also made to import contract labour from Britain as well. In 1834–1850 a total of 2,763 Irish, Scots and English people were brought over, overwhelmingly to Jamaica in 1841 (1,333). In most cases, however, these arrived in small groups. Their recruitment was frowned upon in England, with the abolitionists claiming, not without reason, that the prospective emigrants were being deceived with generally rosy pictures of working conditions awaiting them in their destinations. As a result, most of the British contract labourers demanded to be sent back home as soon as possible. Many of them were mowed down by diseases, some sought consolation in drink or made attempts—most of them abortive—to run away from the plantations hoping for a place on board a Europe-bound ship. German workers, all 1067 of them, had to wrestle with similar adversity.<sup>11</sup>

The years 1841–1865 saw new Africans arriving at the West Indies as indentured labour. Most of them had been taken by British naval patrols off slave ships bound for Cuba and Brazil. Once free, these people were offered a choice of either settling in Sierra Leone, proceeding therefrom on their own to their native places, or going to America. All told, 36 thousand Africans availed themselves of the latter opportunity. More than 13 thousand of them found their way to British Guiana, Jamaica and Trinidad, with many directed to other colonies (in 1849–1850 a total of 1,055 of them arrived in Grenada). They held one-year contracts and, by and large, did not extend their stay in the estates. They subsequently joined their

10. A. Burns: *History of the British West Indies*, London 1954, p. 662, R. T. Smith: *British Guiana*, Oxford University Press 1962, pp. 44–45. Unfortunately, there are no publications spotlighting this group.

11. For the figures this author relied on G. R. Mellor: *British Imperial Trusteeship, 1783–1850*, London 1951, Appendix 6; W. L. Mathieson: *op. cit.*, p. 118; H. Temperley: *British Anti-slavery 1833–1870*, London 1972, pp. 128–129.

fellow-Africans in setting up peasant farms. In the eighteen forties a limited recruitment action was under way at the coast of what is Liberia today among members of the Kru tribe. These were sent mostly to British Guiana. Some of them found their way to Trinidad and Jamaica (the figures pertaining to this group vary between 400 and 1200). Almost all of them returned home after their contracts had expired. There were ample opportunities for such recruitment in the West coast of Africa but the London authorities preferred to play it safe fearing malpractices but, above all, not to provoke an outcry at home that they were allowing slavery to continue under a new guise.<sup>12</sup>

The importation of Asian labour also provoked angry protests in England. However, it did not immediately bring to people's minds images projected by the institution of slavery which explains why the West Indian estate owners began to pin their biggest hopes on it. In the eighteen forties China and India became the main suppliers of contract labour. All told, upwards of 135 thousand Chinese labourers had arrived in the Caribbean region by the outbreak of the First World War. The largest numbers of them were delivered to the British colonies in the fifties and the early 'sixties. By 1879 more than 15 thousand Chinese had found employment in British Guiana, by 1893 some five thousand in Jamaica and by 1872 more than 2,600 in Trinidad.<sup>13</sup> In 1866 representatives of Great Britain and China concluded a new emigration convention making the planters duty-bound to cover the expenses of their workers' return trip after the termination of their contracts. The planters viewed the setup as unfavourable which explains why the organized round trips of Chinese labour ground to an almost complete halt in the early eighth decade. The planters could afford taking this position because in the meantime a regular immigration of Indian labourers had got well under way. By 1917 about half a million of them had arrived in the region. The appearance of so numerous a group was fraught with lasting

12. For more information on this emigration see G. W. Roberts: *Immigration of the Africans into British Caribbean*, "Population Studies," 1954, Vol. 7; D. Wood: *Kru Migration to the West Indies*, "Journal of Caribbean Studies," Autumn - Winter 1981, Vol. 2, No. 2-3.

13. A. Burns: *op. cit.*, p. 663. No overall survey of the fortunes of the Chinese community in the Caribbean has been published so far. The Chinese community in British Guiana is the topic of M. H. Fried's *The Chinese in British Guiana*, "Social and Economic Studies," 1956, Vol. V.



socio-economic and political consequences. In Trinidad and British Guiana it changed beyond recognition the face of their societies. The beginnings of Indian emigration to the British Caribbean colonies held little promise of success. As early as 1836, John Gladstone, a wealthy planter in the West Indies and father of the famous English Liberal leader, encouraged by the example set by Mauritius estate owners who had been importing Indian workers from 1834, began to explore the feasibility of doing the same. Having established the absence of legal obstacles to recruitment of willing candidates who were promised a free passage home upon the termination of their five-year indentures, Gladstone and a group of fellow-planters hired a Liverpool-based merchant firm to deliver two shiploads of workers to British Guiana. The first 396-strong group of Indians arrived there on May 3, 1838 after a sea voyage which lasted almost four months.<sup>14</sup> However, the entire venture was shrouded in an atmosphere of scandal because a correspondent of an abolitionist newspaper had watched both ships embark the men in Calcutta and had not failed to take note of the outrageous travelling conditions they offered. Furthermore, an investigation ordered by the Governor of British Guiana brought to light numerous examples of actual maltreatment of the newly arrived immigrants. A similar investigation carried out at that time in Mauritius likewise uncovered frequent breaches of law. Under the circumstances, in May 1839 the authorities in India banned the emigration of contract labour altogether.<sup>15</sup>

However, the London authorities rushed to the planters' defence. Lord Stanley, Secretary for War and Colonies ordered a drafting of a set of instructions for organizers of emigration from India which were then put on the statute book by Parliament. Initially, the emigration permit covered Mauritius alone. It was subsequently extended by the government of India to Jamaica, Trinidad and British Guiana on the strength of the November 16, 1844 Act XXI. The consecutive years saw the passing of many more such acts

14. See E. L. Erickson: *The Introduction of East Indian Coolies into British West Indies*, "Journal of Modern History," 1934, Vol. VI, No. 2.

15. Many details concerning the situation of immigrants in the period under discussion are inherent in a publication by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society—*Hill Coolies: a Brief Exposure of the Deplorable Conditions of the Hill Coolies in British Guiana and Mauritius*, London 1840. The report was based on the findings of the investigations in question and on information furnished by the Society's own correspondents.

regulating the emigration from India to the British colonies in the West Indies. The last one was adopted in 1883.

The aforesaid acts provided for voluntary and unprompted departures with prospective emigrants made fully aware of the nature of their destinations, terms of their contracts and the character of their future work. Proper medical examinations made prior to embarkation were to eliminate all sick and physically weak candidates. The ships themselves were to be inspected for travelling conditions and cleared for departure by administration officials. The indentures were to be entered into for one year with the immigrants given the option to extend them for another four years, which entitled them to a free return trip. They were obviously free to leave the colony after a year but then had to pay their own fare home.

The recruitment was to proceed under the direct supervision of a specially-appointed emigration officer. While in harbour awaiting transportation, the recruited emigrants were to be under the care of a warden. His duties further included checking whether the men had been hired in full observance of law, issuing proper travel documents and organizing medical examinations. A ship was forbidden to set sail for her destination if her cargo of emigrants included under 20 per cent of women. In 1871 that figure was raised to 40 per cent. Each and every such ship was furthermore required to have a physician on board. The maximum annual emigration quota was fixed on the basis of written requests submitted by individual colonies.<sup>16</sup>

In the initial period, however, practice had it that the laws were frequently dead letters. Immigration agents in charge of labour recruitment did not attend to the whole process personally but delegated their duties to numerous assistants who, in turn, hired their own assistants. And so, one such agent operating in 1844–1845 was found to have given orders to as many as six hundred of them. Each hired worker netted an agent's assistant between 45 and 100 rupees which he subsequently shared with his own assistants. All that discoloured the reputation of the recruiting staff who were not held in great respect as a consequence.<sup>17</sup>

16. For a detailed review of said laws see C. Kondap: *Indians Overseas, 1838–1949*, Bombay 1951.

17. D. North: *A History of Indians in British Guiana*, London 1950, p. 82; E. L. Erickson: *op. cit.*, p. 138.

The assistants knew precious little—if anything at all—about the colonial destinations of and working conditions awaiting people they went out of their way to recruit. They sometimes said that “sowing sugar” was all that was involved. They described in glowing terms both the living conditions out in the colonies and the prospective wages. They also turned a blind eye to the actual physical condition of the volunteers,<sup>18</sup> most of whom were illiterate and therefore utterly ignorant of the wording of the contracts they were signing.<sup>19</sup> Meeting the annual recruitment quota was the yardstick of the operation’s success and since finding the right number of candidates was not always easy—loopholes in the rules and regulations were readily exploited.

Perfunctory medical examinations were just one example. These initially helped to push the death rate on board the overcrowded ships to between 22 per cent and 50 per cent of their human cargoes. In time, the situation improved a little bit—the fact welcomed above all by the planters themselves who offered special bonuses to the shippers for each and every emigrant delivered safe and sound if they managed to keep the mortality rate of their cargoes to under 2 per cent of the total. In the eighteen seventies the Indian authorities stiffened their transit regulations and enforced greater care in the performance of the inaugural medical examinations.<sup>20</sup>

The first ships carrying Indian emigrants reached Jamaica, Trinidad and British Guiana in 1845. The whole emigration operation had hardly got under way when it was halted again for several years in the late ’forties. The abrogation in 1846 by the London parliament of the preferential Caribbean sugar customs duties touched off a profound crisis in the plantation economy. Unable to meet the competition of other Caribbean islands (Cuba, Puerto Rico) and Brazil where slavery was still a fact of life, and of beet sugar which had begun to establish its presence on the market, planters sold their

18. Ample information on the recruitment and other aspects of this question is contained in this extensive report by a parliamentary committee dealing with emigration from India: *Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates. Report of the Committee on Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies and Protectorates. Presented to Both Houses of Parliament*, June 1910, Parts I–III, London 1910.

19. Data concerning the levels of literacy among Indian emigrants are only of the late 19th century vintage. At that time not more than 4–5 per cent of them were able to read and write in Hindi or Urdu. M. K. Jass: *East Indians in Trinidad. A Study of Cultural Persistence*, New York 1961, p. 12.

20. See J. M. Cumpston: *Indians Overseas in British Territories, 1834–1854*, London 1955, p. 116. D. Wood: *Trinidad in Transition. The Years after Slavery*, Oxford University Press 1968, pp. 117–118, 149.

land in droves.<sup>21</sup> The consequences of the 1846 act made themselves felt first in Jamaica where authorities gave up importing new Indian labour next year and were so consistent in their decision that no such imports were recorded after 1848. In 1849 the recruitment of workers for Trinidad and British Guiana was discontinued. In these countries, a vigorous concentration of land ownership was a paramount result of the crisis. Gone were the small and medium-sized plantations and big landed estates came into being. These could produce more sugar and were more resistant to periodic fluctuations of its prices.

When things began to look up in business, those planters who had survived the crisis and viewed cheap labour as the panacea for all ills resumed their strivings for new Indian workers. In 1851 the break was over and Guiana and Trinidad received the first ships from India. Emigration to Jamaica was resumed not sooner than in 1858. Indian contract labour then continued emigrating to the aforesaid areas on the on-going basis until 1917 when the Indian authorities scrapped the emigration laws and agreements.

By that time British Guiana had received a bulk of Indian labour, 239 thousand to be exact. Very many Indians had also found their way to Trinidad. In the eighteen forties, a total of 5,329 landed there. That figure kept climbing to 12,036 in the fifties and 20,261 in the sixties respectively. In the early eighteen seventies the Indian community in there was about 40 thousand strong as a result.<sup>22</sup> Its growth is best illustrated by Table 1.

*Table 1. The Indian community in Trinidad from the eighteen fifties<sup>23</sup>*

Year	Number of immigrants	Average annual growth rate (%)
1851	3,993	no figures available
1861	13,488	12.94
1872	24,425	7.35
1881	48,820	5.94
1891	70,218	3.70
1901	86,383	2.10
1911	110,120	2.46
1921	121,420	0.98

21. For an analysis of the economic situation in the late eighteen forties see D. Wood: *op. cit.*, pp. 122–127; D. Hall: *Free Jamaica 1838–1865. An Economic History*, New Haven 1959, p. 274 *et al.*

22. D. Wood: *op. cit.*, pp. 130–131.

23. *Ibid*

Other island possessions attracted much smaller immigration. In Jamaica it shaped up as follows from Table 2.

*Table 2. The Indian community in Jamaica from the eighteen sixties<sup>24</sup>*

Year	Number of immigrants	Average annual growth rate (%)
1861	2,261	no data available
1871	7,793	13.70
1881	11,016	3.52
1891	10,805	0.19
1901	no data	no data
1911	17,380	2.41
1921	18,610	0.68

In the mid-fifties, Indian emigration started to other British colonies in the Antilles. It was negligible in terms of the number of people involved and it reached its peak in the eighteen sixties. By 1917, some three thousand contract labourers had been brought over to Grenada, some 4 thousand to St. Lucia, about 2,700 to St. Vincent and about 300 to St. Kitts. In the eighteen sixties to French and the Danish dependencies in the Antilles began to attract Indian labour and the Dutch colonies followed suit in 1870.<sup>25</sup>

The main embarkation point for the West Indies was Calcutta. According to M. Klass's painstaking research findings, of all of Trinidad's 93,569 Indian arrivals in the years 1845-1892, as many as 88,304, or more than 94 per cent of the total had boarded their ships in Calcutta. Madras was the embarkation point for the rest. Only in 1847 did the emigrants from Madras outnumber those from Calcutta. The aforesaid author maintains that in 1871 emigrant ships stopped plying the high seas between Madras and Port-of-Spain altogether.<sup>26</sup> However, there are other data indicative of casual labour shipments there from that Southern Indian port later in the century.<sup>27</sup>

Calcutta was also the main embarkation port for labourers heading for other colonies, with Madras responsible for a markedly higher percentage of emigrants departing for the French colonies.

24. G. Roberts: *The Population of Jamaica*, Cambridge 1957, pp. 334-335.

25. E. L. Erickson: *op. cit.*, pp. 144-145.

26. M. Klass: *op. cit.*, p. 10.

27. *Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies*, pt. II, p. 293; See D. Wood: *op. cit.*, p. 140.



The role of the said ports is highlighted here with the aim of tracing the Indian emigrants' ethnic backgrounds. Predominant among them were inhabitants of Bihar and North-Western Provinces (later known as United Provinces, today's Uttar Pradesh). According to certain statistical data, 41.7 per cent of the Indians living in Trinidad in the early eighteen seventies had been born in West-Central India, 29.3 per cent—in Bihar, 21.9 per cent—in West Bengal and 3.6 per cent—in Central Bengal.<sup>28</sup> Research carried out much later in British Guiana proved that most of its Indian labourers, some 70 per cent in fact, hailed from the Northern regions of India (Uttar Pradesh), 15.3 per cent from Bihar, 1.4 per cent from Bengal, 3.1 per cent from Rajasthan and 4.4 per cent from Southern India. The latter were mostly Tamils.<sup>29</sup>

Generally speaking, Indian authorities and Caribbean planters preferred labourers from the lower reaches of the caste system. Being aware of that, prospective emigrants belonging to the higher castes not infrequently concealed their true social status to become eligible for recruitment. At the same time, many emigrants secretly "upgraded" their status by withholding from the authorities the truth of their humbler social origins. Hence a lot of guesswork attaches to all attempts to pinpoint the caste membership of emigrants. Nevertheless, one is struck by the latter's caste differentiation, notably by a relatively high proportion of upper-caste emigrants. And so, for instance, according to 1877–1878 official Indian reports, the groups of emigrants going from Calcutta to the West Indies totalled 18,488 people and included 2,250 Moslems and seven persons representing the Christian denominations. Among the remaining 17,441 Indians, there were 8,807 (some 48 per cent) lower-caste members and 2,223 (12 per cent) representatives of the upper castes.<sup>30</sup>

According to the data spanning the 1876–1885 period, there were 17,441 Indians among the emigrants who left Calcutta for Trinidad, 41.5 per cent and 18 per cent of whom represented the lower and

28. M. K. Lass: *op. cit.*, p. 12; other figures relative to different periods have also been compiled but the percentage is roughly the same. For instance, see N. Deerr: *Indian Labour in the Sugar Industry*, "International Sugar Journal," 1938, Vol. 40, No. 47; D. Wood: *op. cit.*, pp. 144–145.

29. R. T. Smith: *Caste and Social Status among the Indians of Guiana*, in: *Caste in Overseas Indian Communities*, San Francisco 1967, p. 49.

30. D. Wood: *op. cit.*, p. 146.

upper castes respectively.<sup>31</sup> In British Guiana, the castes of land-tillers and livestock-breeders were best represented (36 per cent), while the lowest castes accounted for 23 per cent of the total. There were about 11 per cent upper-caste emigrants and under 2 per cent of brahmins.<sup>32</sup>

The presence in the fold of the Indian emigrant community of relatively sizeable groups of representatives of different castes is still awaiting exhaustive explanation. Some researchers believe that it was—to put it in the most general terms—the result of modernization processes stirred up by colonial rule, with the Indians leaving their homeland being the first casualties of a decomposition of India's traditional caste system.<sup>33</sup>

Other scholars point out that, in addition to economic reasons including recurrent hunger which was the principal scourge of India, the collapse of the 1857 Indian Mutiny was of great importance. Significantly, the largest stream of emigrants in the late fifties and the early sixties of the past century took its rise in the regions which had been engulfed by the uprising.<sup>34</sup> An 1877 report of the Indian authorities in fact suggested that there was a correspondence between the rising and the wave of emigration.<sup>35</sup>

It is interesting to note that when the rising was still in progress, the London-based West Indian Committee came forward with an idea of forced deportation of rebels to Trinidad for life as a punishment. The Indian colonial administration weighed the idea without failing to take into account the costs of the operation and anticipating the difficulties it might have run into. In the event, the policy of “appeasement” gained the upper hand in India and the project was shelved.<sup>36</sup>

We shall return further in this paper to the influence of the Indian Mutiny upon the fortunes of the Indian community in the Caribbean. The interdependence in question, so it seems, remains

31. *Ibid.*; see M. Klass: *op. cit.*, p. 12.

32. R. T. Smith: *op. cit.*, p. 49.

33. *Ibid.*

34. See J. C. Iha: *The Indian Mutiny-cum-Revolt of 1857 and the Trinidad (West Indies)*, “Indian Studies, Past and Present,” July–September 1972, Vol. XIII, No. 4; A. D. Dridzo: *Из истории индийцев Тринидада (60–80-е годы XIX в.)*, in: *Problemy istorii i etnografii Ameriki*, Moskva 1979.

35. *Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies*, pt. I, p. 8.

36. See J. C. Iha: *op. cit.*, pp. 3–10.

a mere hypothesis which requires further study, for the caste differences became apparent right at the outset of the emigration action, in other words, before the outbreak of the rising. Most of the labourers going to foreign parts never thought of staying there for good. They usually hoped to make money abroad and return richer to India. And, last but not least, the groups emigrating immediately after the end of the rising included precious few former insurgents.

Each English colony which received Indian labourers had its own local legislation which regulated the conditions of their stay, spelling out both their rights and duties *vis-à-vis* the estate owners. The observance of the relevant laws was policed by the Immigration Agent General and his staff. Provisions governing adherence to the terms of the contract represented the bulk of these laws. The 1847 Trinidad law, for instance, made reference to the immigrants under its jurisdiction using the term "economically useful stay" which was often interpreted by courts to the detriment of Indian workers. The law in question further fined the workers for each off-job day. The years that followed saw a mushrooming of new laws. Their first codification in 1854 yielded a sizeable crop of diverse regulations which, among other things, expressly forbade indentured labourers to leave their plantations on working days without special passes, thereby imposing restrictions on their freedom of movement. Only did the 1899 law provide for the maximum daily working time of nine hours and fix the minimum wage. The absence of such rules in the past had furnished the planters with ample opportunities for dishonest practices.<sup>37</sup>

Court records in both Trinidad and British Guiana bear witness to a significant number of cases of the breach by indentured workers of the terms of their contracts. The report of a special commission investigating the working conditions in British Guiana in 1870 says almost one fourth of them had been sued by planters for one misdemeanour or another.<sup>38</sup> In most cases, the court pronouncements had been unfavourable to the workers who were mostly fined. In some cases of violation of labour regulations courts could

37. For more details on the subject see I. M. Cumpston: *op. cit.*, pp. 150–159; D. Wood: *op. cit.*, pp. 120–132.

38. V. N. Sofinski: *Britanskaya Gviana*, in: *Gviana*, Moskva 1969, p. 31.

sentence those found guilty to prison terms. Only did the 1916 law abrogate the latter form of punishment.<sup>39</sup>

Upon disembarkation, groups of emigrants were divided among plantation owners. In line with existing regulations, families were not broken up. Indian labourers usually worked on the estates in 25-strong gangs led by a headman. Groups of fifty people had their "sirdars" appointed primarily on the merit of their proficiency in English. A sirdar was both a representative of his group and mediator in its relations with the estate owner and the colonial authorities as well.

The sirdars not infrequently used their position for self-aggrandizement becoming in the process something more of representatives of the planters than of their fellow-labourers.<sup>40</sup> Research publications are unanimous in their assessment of the working conditions in the colonies which, they say, were very harsh indeed, with the planters' treatment of their hands reminiscent of the period of slavery. In fact, the labourers were billeted in the same sheds where the slaves had lived. This explains why initially many of them availed themselves of their right of a free return ticket to India, enshrined in their contracts and confirmed by local legislation. For instance, of the 2,112 Indian labourers brought over to Trinidad in the years 1845 and 1846 more than 50 per cent returned home upon the expiry of their contracts. That percentage declined in the years that followed and in the eighteen fifties it amounted to 22.5 per cent for Trinidad and 30 per cent for Jamaica and British Guiana respectively. All told, of the 239.5 thousand contract workers shipped to British Guiana, more than 75 thousand had chosen to return to India by 1917.<sup>41</sup>

But then, the returns proved to be unhappy for some which prompted decisions for re-emigration to the Caribbean colonies. These were quite frequent, especially from the late 19th century onwards when the graph of the labourers trying their luck again climbed up to 30 per cent of the total figure of new emigrants.<sup>42</sup> A drop in the

39. For more details see E. Williams: *History of the Peoples of Trinidad*, Port-of-Spain 1962, pp. 105–108.

40. See A. D. Dridzo: *Etno-kulturniye protsessy v Vest-Indii. Na materiale maloi etnicheskoi gruppy*, Leningrad 1978, p. 64.

41. J. M. Cumpston: *op. cit.*, pp. 145, 155, 178; R. T. Smith: *op. cit.*, p. 54; G. W. Roberts: *op. cit.*, pp. 334–335.

42. D. Wood: *op. cit.*, pp. 115, 227.



number of returnees was closely related to the policies pursued by individual colonial governments. For instance, the aforesaid 1847 Trinidad Act provided for grants of 10-acre plots of land to all who made up their minds to stay in Trinidad after the expiry of their contracts. From 1854 onwards, the plots of land were also granted to all who had renounced their free return tickets after 10 years in the island on labour contracts. Optional money equivalent was made available for these people, too. In British Guiana loans and subsidies were available to all indentured labourers who wished to lease or purchase small plots of land (usually between 5 and 10 acres) and build their own homes. Sugar plantations were grouped in one region both in British Guiana and Trinidad. After their contracts had expired, Indian labourers usually settled down in the vicinity of the estates and most of them carried on as hired hands.<sup>43</sup> The situation of the Indian immigrants improved substantially in British Guiana after they had started growing rice: they quickly progressed as market farmers, fully independent of the plantations for their livelihood.

The extension of the areas under rice brought in its wake labour migration within the colony, the percentage of the Indian population living outside the sugar plantations having grown from mere 30 per cent in 1890 to upwards of 50 per cent in 1911.<sup>44</sup> The Indian farmers succeeded where their black opposite numbers had failed, namely, in making their land holdings the basic source of their livelihood. The Indian peasant economy, in fact, developed at the expense of the black peasantry who were selling their land to the newcomers from India at knock-down prices. The eighteen nineties thus witnessed the onset of "Hinduisation" of British Guiana's agriculture.

Relatively few representatives of the Indian immigrant community chose to live in the urban areas of British Guiana and Trinidad. In 1891 barely 5,238 Indians lived in the towns of British Guiana (Georgetown and New Amsterdam); that figure had grown to 7,300 by 1911.<sup>45</sup> That was an insignificant number and their economic and social impact had remained negligible until World War II when the situation changed to their advantage.

43. C. Jayawardena: *Conflict and Solidarity in a Guianese Plantation*, London 1963.

44. R. T. Smith: *British Guiana*, p. 49; V. N. Sofinski, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

45. R. T. Smith: *British Guiana*, p. 49.



And so, the Indian community operated primarily in the rural areas: working around the plantations or, as in the case of British Guiana, growing rice or setting up dairy farms elsewhere, the Indian immigrants in Trinidad and British Guiana coalesced into tight, populous communities which enabled them to preserve their cultural and ethnic identity.

Things looked different in Jamaica<sup>46</sup> where the Indian immigrant community lived in small groups scattered all over the island. That was the outcome of the natural conditions prevailing there. In Jamaica, sugar plantations were not concentrated in one area like in Trinidad and British Guiana, but existed in different parts of the island, far apart. That sealed the destiny of the arriving labourers. For instance, one shipload of immigrants delivered to the island in 1875 was subsequently shared out among eighteen planters in groups of between seven and forty-nine persons in what had become a predominant practice there. In consequence, in the early 20th century Jamaica's twenty thousand immigrants lived in 16–18 regions of the island. No British Guiana or Trinidad-style autonomous Indian villages came into being in Jamaica. After the expiry of their contracts, the workers' fortunes likewise differed. The 1879 Act 23 providing for parcelling out 10-acre plots for individual workers ten years after the termination of their contracts was never applied in practice. Few if any Indians benefited from that law which was scrapped in 1897. And so, living in small isolated groups which only sporadically absorbed new immigrants, their contracts effectively holding them to their outlying plantations, the Jamaican Indians never succeeded in creating and maintaining an independent, culturally identifiable community.<sup>47</sup> With the progressing bankruptcy of very many sugar plantations in Jamaica, some Indian workers changed their status by switching over to other crops which they grew on the basis of new contracts with the planters. Still others became successful dairy farmers and a sizeable group went into trade.<sup>48</sup>

46. On this subject see the interesting comparative analysis by A. D. Dridzo: *Indiytsy Yamaiki (K probleme malikh etnicheskikh grupp v Karaibskom regionie)*, "Rassi i naroddi," 1975, No. 5. This author is indebted primarily to the aforesaid publication for information further in this paper.

47. See A. S. Erlich: *History, Ecology and Demography in the British Caribbean: An Analysis of East Indian Ethnicity*, "Southwestern Journal of Anthropology," 1971, Vol. 27, No. 2, p. 178.

48. C. Kondapi: *op. cit.*, p. 359.

The Indian and black communities had a much better record of coexistence than their opposite numbers elsewhere in the Caribbean and the turn of the century saw some mixed marriages as well.<sup>49</sup> The different situation on the island was explained by the fact that unlike in Trinidad and British Guiana, the Jamaican Indians readily succumbed to the assimilation process which has been continuing to this very day.<sup>50</sup>

Initially, when almost all the Indians living in the colonies were contract labourers, the planters sang the praises of their "Indian coolies" regarding them as little short of ideal workers. They were considered withdrawing, hard-working, easy-to-please, calm and disciplined, even if not quite bright people. The Indian Mutiny helped blur that picture. The first tidings of the revolt caused panic among the estate owners—especially in Trinidad and British Guiana—who feared above all a cessation of emigration from India. The Trinidad Planters' Association, dismayed by the prospect pointed out to the authorities that the economic progress of the colony if not its very existence hinged upon the continued importation of Indian labour. The administration could not agree more and it granted the planters' request to step up cash subsidies to the indentured workers to induce them to stay on in the island. In the end, their anguish proved to be unfounded and after the Indian Mutiny had been crushed, the emigration of the Indians largely exceeded the previous levels.<sup>51</sup>

The developments in India had also other, more lasting consequences. The colonial authorities and the planters themselves reappraised their attitudes *vis-à-vis* the Indian newcomers and began to regard them with a hefty dose of suspicion. The local press carried fearful

49. Since the nineteen forties, the descendants of such marriages have been referred to in Jamaican censuses as East Indian Coloureds. Back in those days they accounted for 23.5 per cent of the islands' Indian community. J. and A. Niehoff: *East Indians in the West Indies*, Milwaukee 1960, p. 69; W. Bryce: *Reference Book of Jamaica*, Kingston 1947.

50. See A. D. Dridzo: *op. cit.*, pp. 267–268; A. S. Erlich: *op. cit.*, p. 167. The assimilation process involving Indian immigrants in the French colonies of Martinique and Guadelupe apparently went further than that. There were 25 thousand of them there in 1900. The descendants of mixed marriages accounted for as many as 50 per cent in the nineteen forties. In these colonies, the immigrants hailed mostly from Southern India and spoke Tamil which was then losing ground to the local Creole. Most of the immigrants converted to Catholicism. See G. Lasserre: *Les "Indiens" de la Guadeloupe*, "Les Cashiers d'Outre Mer," 1953, No. 22; M. M. Horowitz, M. Klass: *The Martiniquan East Indian Cult of Maldivian*, "Social and Economic Studies," March 1961, No. 1; Singaravelou: *Les Indiens de la Guadeloupe. Etude de géographie humaine*, Bordeaux 1975.

51. J. C. Tha: *op. cit.*, p. 13.

statements which mirrored the planters' worries by playing up the dangers stemming from the presence there of the Indian community. The Indians were now being suspected of a propensity to uncontrollable violence.<sup>52</sup> The point was driven home by the evidence of street brawls, rioting and sometimes clashes with the police which rounded off annual Indian festivals. Some researchers like to believe that their stormy progress represented a *sui generis* protest of the Indian workers, their psychological reaction to their plight which helped release their pent-up resentments. Furthermore, the researchers are confident that the colonial authorities had abstained for too long from efforts to integrate the immigrant communities because they regarded the festivals, complete with rioting, as a *sui generis* lightning rod helping to defuse tension and keep tabs on the Indian labourers.<sup>53</sup>

However, the consecutive crises of the sugar industry in the eighteen eighties and pay cuts suffered by workers which sharpened the differences between the latter and the planters induced the administration to take a harder look at the festivals. In 1881, after yet another turbulent "Indian carnival" which had attracted thousands, the Legislative Council laid down a special regulation for Indian festivals which had the force of law. Several years later the police in San Fernando opened fire on a festive parade of Indian workers who invaded the town in utter defiance of a ban on such occasions. Twelve workers were killed and about a hundred sustained injuries during the riots that followed.<sup>54</sup>

The incident caused quite a stir throughout the British West Indies. However, the factor most responsible for the shift in the attitude to the Indian community was the progressing economic emancipation of a growing segment thereof. Contract labourers now accounted for a falling proportion of that community. In late 1870 only 64 per cent of the Indians worked the plantations in Trinidad.<sup>55</sup> By the time organized emigration was brought to a halt in 1917, more than one fifth of Trinidad's land had found itself

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

53. D. Wood: *op. cit.*, p. 152; A. D. Dridzo: *Iz istorii Indiysev Trinidadu*, p. 158.

54. *Emigration from India to the Crown Colonies*, pt. III, pp. 126–128; for an analysis of these developments see E. Williams: *op. cit.*, pp. 187–189.

55. E. H. Carter, G. W. Digby, R. N. Murray: *History of West Indian Peoples*, London 1953, pt. IV, p. 130.

securely in the Indian hands, with vast areas additionally cultivated by Indian leaseholders. The Indians represented no less than three fifths of all those earning their living in agriculture.<sup>56</sup> In 1897 some wealthy and active members of the community pooled their forces and resources to set up Trinidad's first Indian political organization, the East Indian National Association, patterned on the Indian National Congress operating in India.<sup>57</sup>

If the Indians accounted for some 35 per cent of Trinidad's population in 1911, in British Guiana which had attracted their largest numbers, they constituted 40 per cent of the total that same year. Here, too, the changing attitude to the Indians was a resultant of their growing independence of the plantation economy. The expansion of rice growing gave rise to a wealthy Indian peasantry. The emergence within the Indian communities of Trinidad and British Guiana of a group of tradesfolk was of considerable consequence. Initially, the Indian tradesmen operated within their own community. In time, the richest of them fanned out beyond its confines and were the first to move over to towns.

However, people boasting European-style education and professionals were few and far between within the Indian communities of the two colonies under discussion, and the situation persisted for quite some time. That was the consequence of the Indians' reluctance to send their children to schools run by Christian missionaries where they feared they would become targets for proselytization. It was due only to the missionary work of John Morton who had taken note of the Indians' fears and worries that first bilingual schools were set up at the close of the 19th century in Trinidad with instruction in both Hindi and English. In the course of time the barriers of animosity were gradually dismantled and Indian professionals had emerged in both Trinidad and British Guiana.<sup>58</sup>

Although they had belonged to different ethnic communities back home, the Indian immigrants—very much like the Africans in the past—were relatively quick to take on and project a new ethnic

56. M. Ramesar: *The Impact of the Indian Immigrants on Colonial Trinidad Society*, "Caribbean Quarterly," 1976, Vol. 22, No. 1.

57. For more about this organization see I. C. Iha: *East Indian Pressure Groups in Trinidad*, in: *The 5th Conference on Caribbean Historians*, St. Augustine 1973.

58. D. Wood: *op. cit.*, pp. 230–231; A. D. Dridzo: *Etnokulturniye protsesy*, pp. 135–140.



image whose key factor was their common Indian background. But then, had it not been for the family, the number one stabilizer of ethnic cohesion and the principal carrier of traditional cultural values, that factor would have in the course of time responded to the aforesaid differentiation processes within the Indian community and lost some of its integrating pull. Reluctance to marry across the ethnic lines can be acknowledged as one of the more pronounced features of the Indian community both in Trinidad and British Guiana.<sup>59</sup>

Another of its important distinguishing marks was its very composition which was in a state of constant flux due to the arrivals of new immigrants to replace those who had returned to India. Then, the mere awareness of their right to return at will created for those who declined to use that right a psychological situation which was unlike that of other ethnic groups. Initially, a sense of transition was its strongest manifestation. Then the hypothetical return option embedded in their minds must have certainly enhanced their desire to keep apart ethnically irrespectively of the social status attained. In consequence, the numerous Indian communities of Trinidad and British Guiana have stood conspicuously apart to this very day which constitutes a problem of paramount importance straddling all of these countries' social and political areas.

From its very inception, emigration from India to the British Caribbean colonies had elicited consonant views both in England and the West Indies to the effect that it largely helped save the sugar cane plantations after the abolition of slavery and in the face of mounting foreign competition. What is more, the Indian immigrants had largely helped that particular sector to maintain its dominant position in the economies of the individual colonies. One might argue that due to the importation of cheap labour the changes in their structure ushered in by the emancipation of slaves could not proceed all the way to an economic transformation of some British Caribbean colonies. These have remained "sugar" colonies to this

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59. And that despite the persisting disproportion between the male and female parts of the community. The number of women had climbed up to around 40 per cent of the total only in 1909. For more information see J. and A. Niehoff: *op. cit.*, p. 100; for more on the subject of the Indian family in the Caribbean colonies see, among others, R. T. Smith, C. Jayawardena: *Marriage and Family amongst East Indians in British Guiana*, "Social and Economic Studies," 1959, Vol. VIII, No. 4; B. M. Schwartz: *Patterns of East Indian Family Organization in Trinidad*, "Caribbean Studies," 1965, Vol. V, No. 1.



day with all the economic consequences, the influx of cheap labour having arguably delayed transformations within the sugar production system. The presence of the Indian labourers had spared the planters for years the discomfort of hunting for new methods of sugar cane cultivation and processing. And even though one must dismiss as misplaced the equation mark drawn between the system based on slave labour and that resting on the toil of Indian indentured labourers, one must accept that the transition from one system to the other was not a very difficult proposition. At the same time, the existing resources of cheap manpower made possible the emergence in the eighteen eighties of powerful companies in both British Guiana and Trinidad (in partnership with the capital of the mother country) which married the cultivation of sugar cane with its refinement, bringing about the further strengthening of this particular sector of the economy of the region and making it even more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of external economic factors.

