

**INDIAN DIASPORA IN GUYANA:  
QUESTIONS IN CULTURAL IDENTITY**

by

Allison Solowsky

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in International Relations with Distinction.

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Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Ramnarayan Rawat, Ph. D.  
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Patricia Sloane-White, Ph. D.  
Committee member from the Department of Anthropology

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Eric Rise, Ph. D.  
Committee member from the Board of Senior Thesis Readers

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Michelle Provost-Craig, Ph.D.  
Chair of the University Committee on Student and Faculty Honors

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project seeks to investigate the social implications of Indian laborers migration from northern India to Guyana orchestrated by the British government to fulfill labor demands during the late colonial period, between 1870s and 1910s. Because of these migrations, the East Indians laborers' lives changed drastically in a course of a journey across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans; they were uprooted from their cultural context and thrust into a new world of which they knew very little. In this new land, Guyana, they were forced to create a new life, but also had to reinvent an identity for themselves. What was their lifestyle during their indentured servitude on the plantations? How did their lives change once the terms of service changed? Hence, my project will identify the continuity and changes in the East Indians religious and cultural practices Guyana. In particular, this project seeks to understand the ways in which a prevailing sense of 'Indian-ness' amongst the Indian community in Guyana was transformed as they assimilated into a new cultural context. Based on nearly three months of field work and archival research in the metropolitan and rural regions of both Guyana and India, this thesis argues that there is indeed a sense of unity and "Indian-ness" that prevails in Guyana today.



## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis argues that the East Indian indentured laborers that were brought to Guyana were enabled and forced to create their own unique Indo-Guyanese identity due to the oppression and degradation that began with the onset of the indenture period and continued on post-indenture. These East Indians were brought to Guyana from the period starting in 1838 through 1917, originating predominately from the northern regions of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, as well as the southern regions of Tamil and Telugu speaking areas. They arrived in the Caribbean through the indentured labor system, destined to work on the sugar estates of the occupying British. The East Indians that were brought to work on these estates were stereotyped as the ‘coolie’ and were prized by estate owners for their docile and tractable nature and despised by former African slaves for these same qualities.<sup>1</sup> The Indo-Guyanese developed their own sense of identity, an identity that consequently formulated a distinct sense of Indian-ness’ in their new home of Guyana

This idea of Indian-ness is a mythical, conceptualized idea of India that the Indo-Guyanese fashioned in order to create a link for themselves back to their

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<sup>1</sup> Cross, Malcolm. *The East Indians of Guyana and Trinidad*. London: Minority Rights Group, 1972. Print.

ancestral roots and Motherland of India. The Indo-Guyanese were brought to Guyana under the pretense of having a better life in a new land of more opportunity, but were soon faced with adversity and segregation from society in Guyana, as well as separation from their homeland. Once in Guyana, all connection to their Motherland of India was severed, they gradually lost their language, were gradually stripped of their culture, and had little to no contact with India. Losing their ties to India meant a loss of their identity, something to connect and identify with; due to their distinct separation from India, the Indo-Guyanese had an illusory sense of India, a mythical construction that was based upon the lore of the epic *The Ramayana*, the story of exile with which they could identify with. Based upon this lore and mythical distant India, the Indo-Guyanese created this sense of Indian-ness that was their own construct of what India was to them.

My thesis asks two questions. First, it examines the motivations and policies through which indentured regime was created transport Indian labor to Guyana to work in the plantations. Second, using historical and my ethnographic research, it explores the transition of indentured labors into residents and citizens of Guyana. Using historical sources and my own travel experiences in Guyana and India, the thesis argues that the East Indian “coolie” labor created a unique Indo-Guyanese identity in the later of the twentieth century. The thesis will demonstrate that in creating this identity, the Indo-Guyanese rely substantially on their Indian religious, cultural, social, culinary, dress and other inheritances. It will also demonstrate the unique changes in creating this identity by borrowing from local practices. For

example in addition to wearing Indian bridal dress, the bride also for one day wears the Christian wedding attire. Building on the local, my thesis will argue that the racial rural (East Indians) and urban (Afro-Guyanese) divide, noticed by Mohammad Rauf in 1974, continue to impact the Indo-Guyanese identity.

Chapter two examines the background of the Indian Diaspora; the process by which the British brought the East Indian laborers to Guyana and what contracts and conditions of plantation life that the migrants had to abide by and endure.

Concurrently, I will investigate the different tactics the British utilized to maintain order and keep the East Indian laborers on their plantations rather than allowing them to move off the plantation, or back to their homelands. The indentured labor system officially ended in 1917, yet many East Indians remained on the plantations. It will also focus what society was like during the indenture period; highlighting the racial and territorial divide between the African population and the East Indian population. This racial divide did not cease to exist post-indenture; contrarily it picked up speed and evolved into a political and social hierarchical divide that continues to cripple present-day Guyana. My research seeks to answer why the Indian laborers decided to stay and work for their previous plantation employers. I also explain the motivations of those Indians who decided to leave Guyana and return to India.

Chapter three examines the strategies through which the East Indian population managed to create a uniformity and cultural unity amongst their community. This thesis seeks to argue that the oppression, degradation, and stereotyping that began in their early history when they moved to Guyana, including the racial prejudices levied

by plantation owners and the African population, has continued, into the present which enabled of forced the East Indian population to hold onto their cultural practices and traditions of India very dearly. Through exploring the East Indian population's lifestyle now in Guyana, answering the question of "what cultural traditions do the East Indians still practice today in Guyana?", and seeking to understand if the East Indians have assimilated into their new country, we will come to the conclusion that there is indeed a sense of 'Indian-ness' that prevails in Guyana today. They have preserved their cultural identity and created an immense sense of 'Indian-ness' throughout their East Indian community by holding onto their heritage and continuing to practice the same cultural traditions and practices they did in India, even more closely than in India itself. In the face of the adversity they encountered in their new home of Guyana, the East Indian population created an identity for themselves; a sense of pride, nationalism, and unity for their community.

My research on the Indian migration to Guyana and the study of the East Indians living there today, as well as India, has furthered my study in my field of International Relations. The study of International relations benefits from crossing disciplinary boundaries and fields of study. Being aware of different societies' cultural practices and traditions better helps us understand interactions and relations that occur between nations and furthers more beneficial and peaceful diplomacy. By completing this research on the Indian Diaspora to the Caribbean, Guyana in particular, I have furthered my understanding of relations and interactions between India and Guyana, both in the past, during the indentured period, as well as in the

present, in which there is very little direct interaction between the two countries.

Learning about their cultural practices and traditions will allow me to better understand the people of both countries, as well as better understand how East Indians living in Guyana relate to their home country and how East Indians living in Guyana relate to their relatives and counter-parts living in Guyana.

### **Methodology**

The origins of this thesis originate in my own personal quest to learn more about myself, my heritage, and my biological family's history in the diaspora of the East Indian people to Guyana. A program known as the Plastino Scholars Award allowed me to travel to Guyana and India to answer the many questions that I had about the Indian Diaspora to Guyana and how the Indo-Guyanese live in Guyanese society today. To understand the meaning and nature of the process behind the indenture system and the creation of the distinct Indo-Guyanese identity that was formed in Guyana, I traveled to Guyana to undertake extensive research into the topic. My travels led to me to archival research where I viewed primary documents such as original emigration passes, letters, and official British documents that detailed the treatment of the East Indian laborers, as well as review of secondary literature at libraries and universities. I also conducted interview-based research in which I spoke with professors and experts on the topic of the Indian Diaspora and the creation of an Indo-Guyanese identity.

The most important aspect of my research was the observation-based portion in which I traveled to the rural villages of Guyana in order to learn how to identify a distinctly Indo-Guyanese community. I was able to witness firsthand how the Indo-

Guyanese live in Guyana today and was able to conduct both formal and informal interviews with members of the community in order to learn more about the cultural traditions and practices that are an essential part in the creation of a sense of Indian-ness and Indo-Guyanese identity in Guyana today. In addition, I traveled to India in order to learn more about the areas from which the Indo-Guyanese derived as well as satisfy my own personal curiosity about India and Indian culture overall.

## **BACKGROUND**

### Introduction

In the following section I will discuss the history behind the colonization of Guyana as well as the history of the indenture period that took place between 1838 and 1917. I will outline the initial economic motivations behind finding a new labor source that led to the initial importation and utilization of East Indians as indentured laborers in the Caribbean, which was spurred by a man named John Gladstone. Additionally, I will discuss the characteristics of the East Indians that were brought to Guyana and the distinct qualities that the British found favorable that made them an ideal labor source. The descriptions of the East Indians that were brought to Guyana, such as their tractable nature that the British found favorable but created displeasure amongst the African population, their religious affiliations and regions of origin, as well as their castes, helps to support my arguments that the oppression that started in

this indenture period, levied by both the Africans and the British, enabled the formation of an Indo-Guyanese identity. Additionally, characteristics such as their regions of origin, their caste, religious affiliations support my later assertions regarding the formation of their Indo-Guyanese identity that was based upon lore that derived from their religious and regional origins.

Colonization in the present-day country of Guyana began in 1499 by the Spanish who arrived at the Essequibo River, becoming the first Europeans to discover Guyana. The Spanish, however, did not settle the territory; the Dutch were the first to settle the land that is now present-day Guyana. The first Dutch settlement was established in 1616 on the mouth of the Essequibo River that spills into the Atlantic Ocean. Further settlements followed, with the Dutch's initial aim of trade with the indigenous peoples of the land; however with the movement of other European powers into the Caribbean, the Dutch soon shifted their aim to the acquisition of more territory. The Dutch established trading posts, one created a monopoly over the Essequibo territory that would last for more than 170 years, and the second colony on the Berbice River was established in 1627.<sup>2</sup> In 1648, Dutch sovereignty over the territory was officially recognized with the Treaty of Munster. The colony of Demerara, situated in between Essequibo and Berbice, was settled in 1741 and emerged as an entirely separate colony in 1773 under the direct rule of the Dutch West India Company.

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<sup>2</sup> Daly, Vere T. *The Making of Guyana*. London: Macmillan, 1974. Page 183.

The growing importance of agriculture to the emerging society spurred agricultural productivity to increase and thus a labor shortage emerged. The territory under Dutch rule quickly became major producers of cash crops such as tobacco, in which production of the crop in the Essequibo region of Guyana, accounted for a significant portion of the Dutch's exports back to Europe, and consequently made having a reliable work force a necessity. The indigenous population proved to be intolerant to the diseases introduced by the Europeans, and therefore were not a reliable source of labor. The Dutch West India Company turned to the importation of African slaves to fulfill their labor needs. Eager to attract more settlers, in 1746 the Dutch opened the area near the Demerara River to British immigrants; the influx of immigrants was so great that by 1760 the British constituted a majority of the population in the Demerara colony.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, by 1786 the internal affairs of this Dutch colony were effectively under British rule.

The catalyst for the formal takeover by the British was the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars. In 1795, the French had control over the Netherlands, but when the British declared war on France and launched an expeditionary force from Barbados to occupy the Dutch colonies in 1796, this ended Dutch occupation. Both Berbice and the colony of Demerara and Essequibo were under British control from 1796 until 1802, however, by way of the Treaty of Amiens,

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<sup>3</sup> Daly, Vere T. *The Making of Guyana*. London: Macmillan, 1974. Page 102.



both colonies were returned to the Dutch.<sup>4</sup> War ensued between the British and French a year later and the colony of Demerara and Essequibo, as well as Berbice, was seized again by British troops. The London Convention of 1814 restored all colonies in the East Indies and all other Dutch colonies captured since 1803 back to the Netherlands, except the Guyana settlements of Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice, which became colonies formally of Britain.<sup>5</sup> In 1831, Berbice and the United Colony of Demerara and Essequibo were unified as Guyana and would remain under British rule until independence in 1966. Illustrated below is a map of Guyana showing all of the various territorial divisions that have survived through history to present-day, including the regions of Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice.

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<sup>4</sup> Rodway, James. *History of Guyana, from the Year 1668 to the Present Time, Volume 2*. Vol. 2. Georgetown, Demerara: J. Thomson, 1893. Page 157.

<sup>5</sup> Dodwell, H. H. *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*. Vol. 4. Cambridge: University, 1929. Page 211.



Figure 1 Map of Guyana<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Guyana Political Map." *MapsOpenSource*. N.p., 2010. Web.

### The Introduction of New Labor

In the previous section I outlined the history of colonization in Guyana leading up to the secured rule of Guyana by the British. The onset of British control coincides with the onset of the indenture system. In this section I will lay out the motivations the British had behind the importation of East Indians that began in 1838. The importation of new laborers to Guyana began following the abolition of the African slave trade in 1807 and the discontent and refusal by the African population to work on the sugar plantations that followed. Most of the freed slaves fled from the plantation areas and began to form villages and permanent residence in the urban centers of the colony.<sup>7</sup> Upon abolition of the slave trade and the dispersion of the African population from the plantation and into the urban areas, the British soon found themselves without a labor force for their lucrative sugar plantations. Like the Dutch, the British saw the country not as an area of settlements, but one of exploitation where they could make a tremendous profit off the land and return to Europe laden with wealth after a few years.<sup>8</sup> The British were faced with the question of formulating a new source of a permanent labor supply that would resolve their economic dilemma. The need to bring in a permanent labor supply was resolved by Sir John Gladstone, who looked at India, a British colonial territory in which many British elite, who like him, owned lucrative plantations in the Caribbean.

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<sup>7</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adapataion and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Pg. 29. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 3. Print.

The export of East Indian indentured labor to the West Indies was initially spurred by Gladstone, a wealthy merchant and ship owner from Liverpool. In Demerara, Gladstone had acquired the largest plantations of Vreed-en-Hoop and Vriedestein, Success, Wales, Waller's Delight, Covenden, and Hampton Court.<sup>9</sup> Prior to the abolishment of the African slave trade, Gladstone had utilized African slaves on his plantations; however, after the abolishment of slavery, he sought a new source of labor. Sighting the fact that East Indian migrants had already started to be utilized successfully as labor in the colony of Mauritius, Gladstone posed the idea of utilizing East Indians in Guyana as well. Known as the Gladstone Experiment, Gladstone sent a letter on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1836 to Calcutta, expressing his keen interest in obtaining approximately one hundred Bengalese laborers from India to work on the cane fields, mills, and distilleries in Guyana. In this letter he espoused false promises of comfortable housing, light work, schooling for the children of the laborers, as well as religious instruction, in order to attract prospective East Indian laborers and to The full extent of the letter can be seen in the image below.

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<sup>9</sup> Hollett, D. Passage from India to El Dorado: Guyana and the Great Migration. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1999. Pg 48.

Copy of letter from *John Gladstone, Esq.*  
to Messrs. *Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co.*

Dear Sirs,    Liverpool, 4 January 1836

I met with an accident here about three weeks ago, which confined me to the house, from which I am now recovering, and hope in a few days to be able to return to Edinburgh; this will account to you for using my son's pen for writing in place of my own.

I observe by a letter which he received a few days ago from Mr. Arbuthnot, that he was sending a considerable number of a certain class of Bengalees, to be employed as labourers, to the Mauritius.

You will probably be aware that we are very particularly situated with our Negro apprentices in the West Indies, and that it is a matter of doubt and uncertainty how far they may be induced to continue their services on the plantations after their apprenticeship expires in 1840. This to us is a subject of great moment and deep interest in the colonies of Demerara and Jamaica. We are therefore most desirous to obtain and introduce labourers from other quarters, and particularly from climates something similar in their nature. Our plantation labour in the field is very light; much of it, particularly in Demerara, is done by task-work, which for the day is usually completed by two o'clock in the afternoon, giving to the people all the rest of the day to themselves. They are furnished with comfortable dwellings and abundance of food; plantations, the produce of the colony, being the most common, and preferred generally by them; but they have also occasionally rice, Indian corn, meal, ship's biscuits, and a regular supply of salt cod-fish, as well as the power of fishing for themselves in the trenches. They have likewise an annual allowance of clothing sufficient and suitable for the climate; there are schools on each estate for the education of the children, and the instruction of their parents in the knowledge of religious duties. Their houses are comfortable, and it may be fairly said they pass their time agreeably and happily. Marriages are encouraged, and when improper conduct on the part of the people takes place, there are public stipendiary magistrates who take cognizance of such, and judge between them and their employers. They have regular medical attendance whenever they are indisposed, at the expense of their employers. I have been particular in describing the present situation and occupation of our people, to which I ought to add, that their employment in the field is clearing the land with the hoe, and, where required, planting fresh canes. In the works a portion are occupied in making sugar, and in the distilleries, in which they relieve each other, which makes their labour light. It is of great importance to us to endeavour to provide a portion of other labourers, whom we might use as a set-off, and, when the time for it comes, make us, as far as it is possible, independent of our negro population; and it has occurred to us that a moderate number of Bengalees, such as you were sending to the

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Isle of France, might be very suitable for our purpose; and on this subject I am now desirous to obtain all the information you can possibly give me. The number I should think of taking and sending by one vessel direct from Calcutta to Demerara would be about 100; they ought to be young, active, able-bodied people. It would be desirable that a portion of them, at least one-half, should be married, and their wives disposed to work in the field as well as they themselves. We should require to bind them for a period not less than five years or more than seven years. They would be provided with comfortable dwellings, food, and medical assistance; they would also, if required, be provided with clothing, or wages to provide themselves, which, for the able-bodied, would not exceed four dollars per month, and in that proportion for females and their children as they grow up; a free passage would be given to them to Demerara, where they would be divided, and 20 to 30 placed on one plantation. I do not know whether the class referred to are likely to be of a particular caste, and under the influence of certain religious feelings, and also restricted to any particular kind of food; if so, we must endeavor to provide for them accordingly. You will particularly oblige me by giving me, on receipt, all the information you possibly can on this interesting subject; for, should it be of an encouraging character, I should immediately engage for one of our ships to go to Calcutta, and take a limited number to Demerara, and from thence return here. On all other subjects I refer you to letters from the house; and always am,

Dear Sirs, yours truly,  
*John Gladstone.*

SOURCE: Parliamentary Papers, LII No. 180, 1837-38. MF41.413-414.

Figure 2      The Gladstone Letter<sup>10</sup>

Prior to the importation of East Indians, the European planters had conducted several experiments with the sources of labor. The table below lists some of the trials

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<sup>10</sup> "Letter 4 January 1836." *Indiana University*. Indiana University, n.d. Web.

carried out by the British to supplement the labor force post-abolition of the slave trade but prior to the importation of the East Indians. After the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, most of the African population, comprising the entire workforce of the colonial powers, moved off of the plantations and formed their own distinct villages and became small landowners. Due to this movement of the former labor source away from the plantations, estates soon became abandoned, productivity declined, and the British became desperate in their search for a new source of labor, as is made evident by their trials that took place between 1834 and 1838.

Table 1      Statistics by Year: Indentured Labor Imports Prior to the East Indians<sup>11</sup>

1834	Planters introduced 40 immigrants from Madeira
1835	Planters experimented with German laborers
1835	First attempt at mass migration: 429 Madeira immigrants introduced
1838-1865	Immigration of indentured Africans began and ended: 13, 969 total
1838-1917	238,979 total East Indians were brought to Guyana during this time
1839	experiment with 264 Maltese
1841-1849	15,604 Portuguese brought to the colony
1852-1877	Experimentation with Chinese indentured laborers began: 13,534 immigrants total
1885	Portuguese immigration ended with total 30,645 immigrants brought to the colony
1930	42,343 West Indians total brought to the colony

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<sup>11</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Pages 11-12. Print.

### Physiology of the East Indian 'Coolie'

Following the period of labor experimentation, illustrated in the table above, that took place from 1834-1838, the Indian diaspora commenced with the influx of laborers from India that would last until 1917. The majority of the East Indians that were recruited as labor were single males between the ages of twenty to thirty years old; only twenty-five percent of recruits were female.<sup>12</sup> These laborers departed their home country from the northeastern port of Calcutta and consequently, the majority of the East Indian laborers derived from the northeastern provinces of present-day Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal. Bihar and the eastern Uttar Pradesh regions supplied roughly 86% of the East Indian laborers to Guyana, with the district of Basti in Uttar Pradesh contributing the largest percentage, 87% of the 86% that were from the northeastern provinces.<sup>13</sup> The remaining percentage of East Indians originated from the southern provinces of modern-day Teluga and Tamil Nadu. A map detailing the various regions of India discussed here, as well as a more intricately detailed map of the northern regions of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh can be seen below.

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<sup>12</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "East Indian Indentured Emigration: Beyond the Push and Pull Model." *Caribbean Studies* 31.2 (2003): Page 106.

<sup>13</sup> Mangru, Basdeo. *Indians in Guyana: A Concise History from Their Arrival to the Present*. Chicago: Adams, 1999. Pg. 14.





Figure 3 Map of the Provincial Divisions of India<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "Map of Indian States and Union Territories Enlarged View." *Maps of India*. N.p., 2012. Web.

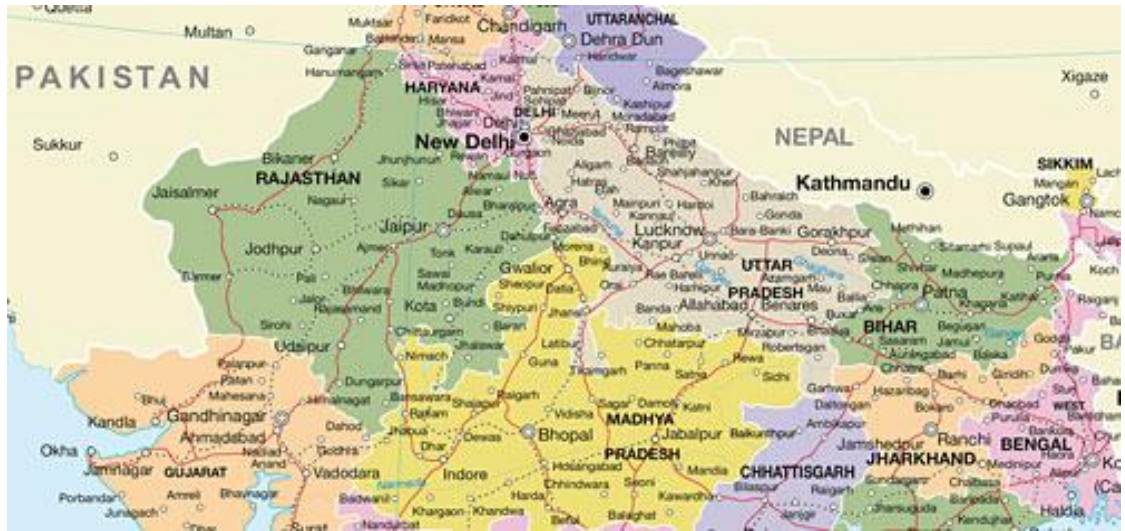


Figure 4 Map of the Northern Regions of India: Bihar and Uttar Pradesh<sup>15</sup>

The religious composition of the East Indian immigrants matched the religious composition of the areas from which they originated. The majority of the East Indians from the Uttar Pradesh region was Hindu, who brought the Hindu sect of “Sanatan Dharma” with them. Similarly the caste distribution of the immigrants matched the caste makeup of the areas from which they originated. The immigrants were recruited from the countryside and rural regions; consequently, this meant that many more of the immigrants were from the lower agricultural based castes than the high castes. The distribution of East Indians by religion and caste can be seen below.

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<sup>15</sup> "Health Videos - Projects Implemented - Maharashtra, West Bengal in India - HealthPhone™ - Health, Education, Instructional, Tutorials, Training, Medical Videos." *Health Videos - Projects Implemented - Maharashtra, West Bengal in India - HealthPhone™ - Health, Education, Instructional, Tutorials, Training, Medical Videos*. N.p., n.d. Web.

Table 2      Distribution of Religion Amongst Migrant East Indians<sup>16</sup>

Hindu	37%
Christian	46%
Muslim	8%
Others	9%

Table 3      Distribution of Caste Affiliations Amongst Migrant East Indians<sup>17</sup>

Brahmins	Approx. 13.6%
Agricultural Castes	Approx. 30.1%
Artisan Castes	Approx. 8.7%
Low castes/ outcastes	Approx. 31.1%

These East Indian laborers were brought to Guyana, as well as elsewhere in the Caribbean, destined to work on the sugar plantations of the occupying British. These migrants were known as ‘coolies’ and were prized by estate owners for their docile and tractable nature. These qualities that made them prize possessions to their plantation owners, allowed them to become despised by former African slaves for these same qualities. The East Indians’ ability to serve as able farmers and farm estate laborers alienated them from their African counterparts.<sup>18</sup> The term ‘coolie’ derives from the Hindi word *kuli* or the Turkish word for slave, *qul*, whose origins are unclear, but may have been originally used by the Portuguese as a derogatory term or racial

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<sup>16</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adaptation and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Pg. 67.

<sup>17</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adaptation and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Pg. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Cross, Malcolm. *The East Indians of Guyana and Trinidad*. London: Minority Rights Group, 1972. Print.

slur, first used during this indenture period and carries the meaning of a “person of low social status”.<sup>19</sup> Generally, this term is usually only applied to workers originating from Asia, predominately India and China, working abroad in the Americas and Caribbean.

Guyana is a land of very little arable land; consequently the plantations that were cultivated by the East Indian laborers stretched along the coastline from Corentyne in the southeast to the border of present-day Venezuela in the northwest. This stretch of land is where the great majority of the population of Guyana settled and where 90% of Guyana’s present-day population resides.<sup>20</sup> The Africans who had previously worked on these plantations came to despise the new laborers who were now replacing them and occupying what little land was available. At this point, some individuals of the African population still held plantation jobs, but soon started leaving and established African villages along the coast of Buxton and migrated towards the two major urban towns of New Amsterdam and Georgetown.

#### Reasons for East Indian Migration

In the procurement of labor that took place during this period, there were a number of reasons why East Indians decided to leave their homeland behind to make the long journey to work in the Caribbean. East Indians decided to leave India either voluntarily, were recruited under practices of coercion, or in some cases were even

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<sup>19</sup> "coolie, n.". OED Online. December 2012. Oxford University Press. 5 January 2013 <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40991>>.

<sup>20</sup> Cross, Malcolm. *The East Indians of Guyana and Trinidad*. London: Minority Rights Group, 1972. Print.

kidnapped and brought forcibly to the plantations. In cases of kidnapping, indentured servants were kidnapped and deceived into signing labor contracts that they did not understand, and in some cases could not even read due to illiteracy.<sup>21</sup> Cases of kidnapping were the minority amongst the circumstances and manner by which immigrants were procured as labor.

Adverse conditions in India and the prospect for a better life in a new land enabled many East Indians to make the decision to contract themselves overseas. For the majority of East Indians, especially in the northern regions from which many originated, life was exceedingly hard as many led lives as sharecroppers and landless laborers. During this time under colonial rule of the British, these “peripheral regions in India were radically transformed and peasants were squeezed out of business and forced off their land”.<sup>22</sup> These people often had to pay high rents to landlords and were at the mercy of the market system; in result many poor Indians, in lieu of obtaining loan advances, sold their services to landlords in order to survive.<sup>23</sup> Leading this life of destitution and slavery to their landlords, made migration a viable solution that offered them the chance to improve their lives and garner better opportunities than what was being offered at home. These conditions made the promises espoused by recruiters of receiving land and grant money to set up settlement and businesses after the completion of their indenture, an added incentive.

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21 Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "East Indian Indentured Emigration: Beyond the Push and Pull Model." *Caribbean Studies* 31.2 (2003): Page 107.

22 Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "East Indian Indentured Emigration: Beyond the Push and Pull Model." *Caribbean Studies* 31.2 (2003): Page 110.

23 Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "East Indian Indentured Emigration: Beyond the Push and Pull Model." *Caribbean Studies* 31.2 (2003): Page 110.

During the early stages of migration many East Indians, due to their plight and the desire to go to a new land of opportunity, began to cultivate a romanticized and distorted view of the Caribbean. The effects of uneven development took their toll on the laborers, cultivating this sense of western superiority, wealth, prosperity; everything they wanted and hoped to have. While many East Indians developed their own glorified perception of the West, the British colonial powers and emigration firms also helped to nurture this perception as well through false depictions of the Caribbean. For instance, many East Indians were told they would be going to a place called “Sri-Ram” instead of Dutch Guiana, or present-day Suriname.<sup>24</sup> ‘Ram’ in India refers to a religious place, the birthplace of Lord Rama, the most important god among Hindus and also sounds very similar to the Ramayana, a Hindu religious text that exemplifies “the triumph of good over evil, duty over self-indulgence, and generosity over selfishness”.<sup>25</sup> To the unknowing East Indian migrants, this place now seemed more appealing than it did previously. Additionally, many other East Indian recruits were told they would be going to a place known as ‘Chinidad’ instead of present-day Trinidad.<sup>26</sup> When hearing this name, it was perceived that they would be headed somewhere near the neighboring country of China, highly misrepresenting the much longer journey to the Caribbean. The consequences of this delivery of

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<sup>24</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "East Indian Indentured Emigration: Beyond the Push and Pull Model." *Caribbean Studies* 31.2 (2003): Page 105.

<sup>25</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "East Indian Indentured Emigration: Beyond the Push and Pull Model." *Caribbean Studies* 31.2 (2003): Page 105.

<sup>26</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "East Indian Indentured Emigration: Beyond the Push and Pull Model." *Caribbean Studies* 31.2 (2003): Page 105.

deceiving misinformation had a soothing and reassuring affect on these highly impressionable East Indians who sought a better life.

In addition to the voluntary migration that took place due to adverse conditions and the desire to flee to a new country of opportunity, there were also many internal factors within India that spurred migration to the Caribbean colonies. During this time period, India experienced great disproportional development because of British colonialism. British rule in India was established in 1763 and consequently a transformation of the traditional patterns of agricultural practices and the handicraft industry took place. The new policies that were implemented by the British were initiated in order to make India a productive colonial territory, developing a capitalist agricultural scheme in order to facilitate the growth and prosperity of the new imperialist economy. "New traders, moneylenders, rent rackets, and tax collectors exacted an enormous toll on the natives, who were not only ignorant of these new developments but were drawn in and became indebted in the process".<sup>27</sup> In direct result of this process, many of the East Indians sought to relieve themselves of their newfound debt, hardships, and the imperial system, and began to search elsewhere for employment.

The political weakness of India under British colonial rule made the country exceedingly attractive to foreign labor recruiters. These peripheral areas of India in the countryside where East Indian agriculturalists were losing their land remained in a state of destitution under the British. Colonial rule failed to fix the problem and relieve many Indians from their relentless state of socioeconomic oppression. East

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<sup>27</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "East Indian Indentured Emigration: Beyond the Push and Pull Model." *Caribbean Studies* 31.2 (2003): Page 109.

Indians became tied to their debtors and landlords due to the lack of development in agriculture, real capital accumulation, and as severe lack of new opportunities for employment. Colonial institutions in India worked more in accordance with the needs of the British colonial powers rather than the needs of the countryside and its people.

For emigration firms, these unemployed East Indians were ideal potential recruits for labor in the Caribbean colonies because they were so willing to leave their troubled lives in India for work that seemed much lighter than that at home. The British government, now faced with this labor surplus in India, began to channel the labor to the Caribbean in an attempt to resolve the new found labor shortage on the plantations in the Caribbean, after the abolishment of the slave trade.

Free labor was, for capitalists, mobile labor. Empire made labor accessible to suitably situated employers - legally through reformist interventions eliminating populations' customary or juridical ties to masters or land, and financially through subsidies and loans to cover the costs of transferring laborers located in one of the world to enterprises located in another, secured through technologies of imperial rule ranging from promises of profit and uplift, to specters of social unrest and imperial decline, to taxes, laws, and armies.<sup>28</sup>

Foreign infiltration and the introduction of imperialism completely disintegrated the traditional social, political, and economic structure and traditions of the countryside, leading to the massive amounts of disgruntled East Indians who were now available for recruitment. This movement of East Indians to the Caribbean resulted in the reduction of population pressure and unemployment in India that was caused by the new practices of the imperial power.

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<sup>28</sup> Kale, M. 1998. *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor Migration in the British Caribbean*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Page 5-6.



This section outlined the history behind the colonization of Guyana that led to the assumption of complete British control and the onset of the indenture system. I also outlined the physiology of the East Indian laborers and the reasons behind their decision to agree to migrate to Guyana, an unknown land of new opportunity. In the following section I will speak about the initial progress of the indenture system, describing the first period of the indenture system, from 1838 through 1870, a period of initial experimentation, under which the East Indian laborers were highly oppressed with little freedom or ability to move off of the plantations.

### **1838- Commission of Enquiry in 1870: The First Period in the History of the East Indian Indenture System**

#### **Timeline of Voyages to Guyana**

The history of the East Indian Diaspora and the indenture system formally began upon the passing of an agreement that was signed on July 12, 1837 that allowed indentured immigrants to travel to Guyana for a term of five years, after which they were allowed to return to homeland and were entitled to free return passage.<sup>29</sup> On January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1838, the first ship the M.V. Whitby departed from the port of Calcutta in India with 248 immigrants and arrived in Guyana on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1838. The culmination of the East Indian Indenture System was on April 18, 1917 when the S.S. Ganges docked in Georgetown, comprising the last voyage of the Diaspora.<sup>30</sup> During

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<sup>29</sup> Sukhu, Parmanand. *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 15. Print

<sup>30</sup>Sukhu, Parmanand. *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 15. Print

this 79 year period of history, 238,979 laborers were brought to Guyana on 224 ships over 534 voyages.<sup>31</sup> A timeline of these voyages can be seen in the table below:

Table 4 Timeline of Voyages from India to Guyana: 1838-1917<sup>32</sup>

January 13, 1838	M.V. Whitby left India with 248 immigrants and arrived in Guyana on May 25 <sup>th</sup> , 1838 ( 112 day journey)
January 29, 1838	M.V. Hesperus left Calcutta with 165 immigrants and arrived on May 5 <sup>th</sup> , 1838
	Two ships = 18 immigrants died including two who fell overboard
January 26, 1845	Lord Hunter left Calcutta with 162 passengers and arrived on May 4 <sup>th</sup> = ten passengers died
December 26, 1845	Nester arrived in Guyana with 233 passengers and 500 bags of rice
February 2, 1846	Voyages of the Manchester, Thetis, Tamerlane, the Marten Luther, and Troy, John Wickliffe, Aurora, Lady Makennaway, Larona, York, Victor Emmanuel, Plantagenet, Ellen Borough, Simla Bann, Foyle, British Peer, The Bruce, SS Utley, SS Indus, Sheila
April 18, 1917	SS Ganges docked in Georgetown = last voyage of the Diaspora

#### First Period of Indenture: 1838-1870

This history of indentured laborers in Guyana can be broken down into two distinct periods; the first lasting from 1838 until 1870, and the second lasting from 1871 until the end of the indenture system in 1917. The first period, lasting from 1838

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<sup>31</sup> Sukhu, Parmanand. *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 15. Print

<sup>32</sup> Sukhu, Parmanand. *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 15. Print

through 1870, was distinguished by preliminary experimentation with the policies that the British would use to control the indentured laborers. This period of initial experimentation was followed by the period lasting from 1871 until the end of the indenture system, and was marked “by the gradual perfection of a rigid system of circular labour exchange, with one five-year indenture period being succeeded by another”.<sup>33</sup> Following this cycle of a total of ten years of indenture on the plantations, the East Indian laborers were given the choice of either returning to their homes in India or remaining in the system of indentured servitude. Although the East Indians were given this choice, very few of the indentured laborers decided to leave Guyana, with most remaining on the estates in order to keep working as indentured laborers.

These first three decades of indentureship were very difficult for the East Indian laborer who found themselves bound to plantation life without any means to extricate themselves from the cycle of indenture. British colonial policy, especially between 1850 and 1873, was incredibly rigid and served as the main obstacle standing in the way of East Indian freedom from the indenture cycle. The first point of policy was the Labour Contract that all East Indian migrants were required to sign; it required every immigrant to reside and work for only one employer on the same plantation for at minimum five years. This contract allowed for very little movement; some ‘freed’ East Indians were allowed to move from estate to estate, as well as return to their home country once their contract was over.<sup>34</sup> Conversely, the vast majority of

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<sup>33</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Pg.71. Print.

<sup>34</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001):Pg.3. Print.

laborers were held captive by the labor laws that were built into their contracts that ultimately placed them back into the indenture system for an additional five years. Additionally, the Labor Contracts were not only strict regarding the term of indentured servitude, but were also highly regulated in terms of their actions on and off the plantation. These terms are exemplified in description of the Labor Contract:

“Breach of indenture contract, which included refusal to work, unsatisfactory work, absence from work, insubordination, and even breach of hospital regulations entailed criminal prosecution and imprisonment for the laborer”.<sup>35</sup>

Problems and abuses of power in the indentured system soon became apparent to both the laborers and the plantation owners. The East Indian workers admonished their owners and the British policy system for their lack of control within the labor system, arguing that they, the East Indian immigrants, were becoming predisposed to desert plantation life as soon as their contracts were finished.<sup>36</sup> The harsh treatment that the East Indians were being subjected to ultimately did not hasten them to continue their residence and work for the British, but only pushed them back towards their home country.

Following these arguments from the laborers, in 1850 Governor Henry Barkley passed Ordinance 21. This ordinance stated that “Indian immigrants could claim return passage after completing five years of indentured service and five years of

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<sup>35</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Pg.3. Print.

<sup>36</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Pg.4. Print.

industrial residence”.<sup>37</sup> Under this ordinance each indentured servant was required to pay a tax of fifty-cents a month towards the fee for return passage to India. This policy remained in effect until 1853 when, under pressure from the Anti-Slavery and the Court of Directors of the East India Company, the Court of Policy replaced Ordinance 21 with Ordinance 3. This Ordinance stipulated that “Indian laborers entering Guyana would have to sign contracts for five years and contribute forty-five dollars towards their passage”.<sup>38</sup> Within this Ordinance, upon completion of their five year contract, the laborers were free to leave the estates or remain within the indenture system for an additional five years and receive a bounty of fifty dollars. If the East Indian laborer decided to re-indenture themselves for an additional five years, then for some reason decided to cancel their re-indenture, they were then required to “pay the sum of money equal to the unexpired fraction of their contract”.<sup>39</sup> This Ordinance was soon seen as so highly restrictive and unjust, that the Colonial Office rejected it and proposed the drafting of new terms.

These new terms were drafted in 1854 by the Duke of Newcastle and dictated that the Indian migrants were required to sign a three-year contract instead of the previous five-year contract. This three- year term of servitude would then be followed by additional one or two years of service with the same employer and plantation, but

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<sup>37</sup> Roopnarine, Lommarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Pg.4. Print.

<sup>38</sup> Roopnarine, Lommarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Pg. 4. Print.

<sup>39</sup> Roopnarine, Lommarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Pg.4. Print.

with the alternate option of commuting it through the payment of a stipulated sum.<sup>40</sup> In order to garner free passage back to their homeland, the East Indian laborer was required to serve for a period of ten years under contract or contribute a tax of thirty-five dollars towards its cost. This new set of terms' livelihood was short lived; however, when in 1862 the Court of Policy decided to abolish the right to commute and re-established the five-year contract. This change in terms effectively ended the ability for free movement of the laborers, revoked any power the laborers had previously accrued, and ultimately placed all power back into the hands of the planter again.

With the implementation of these new laws, the plantation owners used their newly acquired powers to ensure that the labour laws were strictly enforced in order to thwart any type of rebellion or mass exodus of their servants back to their homeland or off the plantations. Labor laws such as the Pass Law were especially restrictive to the laborers and were designed to anchor them to the plantations. The Pass Laws mandated that it was a criminal offence to move more than two miles away from the estate during working hours without a pass.<sup>41</sup> Labor laws allowed the plantation owners to impose heavy fines and prison sentences if the laborers failed to complete their tasks or refused to work. If the laborer was thrown in jail for misconduct of any kind, their labor contracts could be extended for any period while they were in jail.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Roopnarine, Lommarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Pg.5. Print.

<sup>41</sup> Roopnarine, Lommarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Pg.3. Print.

<sup>42</sup> "Tota Mangar's Arrival Day Speech." *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 17. Print

In addition to the implementation of laws to keep the laborers on the estates, plantation owners would also implement their own devices, such as holding back the laborers' pay for months or even years, to restrict their movement.<sup>43</sup> Planters also invoked common stereotypes, such as the general perception that East Indians were agriculturalists; therefore they were expected to remain within the plantation system, while other ethnic groups were free to move to the urban areas of the colony. The utilization of these laws and powers to try and quell their own fears that the laborers would begin to leave the plantations turned out to be completely unwarranted. The vast majority of East Indian laborers remained on or around the estates long after their contracts expired. The East Indians relied on the estates and their owners for dependable housing and medical facilities, social services that they would not be able to feasibly find elsewhere.

### Frustration and Rebellion

Up until the year of 1856, following the implementation of the highly oppressive and restrictive Ordinance 3, the East Indian laborers were seen as being a highly dependable and loyal people, by the planters and colonial administrators in British Guyana. Despite being seen as a content and dependable class of laborers, the East Indians were not happy with their treatment and the restrictive laws that were being placed upon them. The view that "the coolie should be either at work, in the hospital, or in prison"<sup>44</sup> caused great feelings of resentment and spurred ideas of

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<sup>43</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 5.

<sup>44</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 20.

resistance amongst the laborers. Between the years of 1866 and 1870 there was a documented 65,084 cases involving breach of ordinances in the colony.<sup>45</sup> This change in demeanor and actions of the East Indians shifted perceptions from that of the dependable coolie to that of the “artful coolie” or the “coolie problem”.<sup>46</sup> The resentment and resistance that emerged led to a series of rebellions during this period, including the September 1872 rebellion at Devonshire Castle, Essequibo Coast that resulted in the police shooting down five East Indians and wounding six, and culminated in the deadly 1872 Enmore Riot/Massacre. Numerous other rebellions took place after the end of the Indian Diaspora and indenture system and will be discussed in a later section.

#### 1870 Commission of Enquiry

Following the passing and implementation of these new policies that comprised the years after the 1862 Court of Policy decision, in 1870 the Commission of Enquiry recommended in its 1870 report that re-indenture be for only one year. Even though this idea was initially opposed due to fear of losing plantation labor and productivity, re-indenture came to a complete halt in 1873. It was only after this development that the East Indian laborer could really be considered ‘free’ in the colony; the laborers were required to complete their five years of labor on the estate that they were placed on and then were required to stay an additional five years in

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45 Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 20.

46 Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 21.



Guyana in order to attain free passage back to India.<sup>47</sup> These additional five years in Guyana need not be in indentured servitude, but could be off the plantation, settled on their own not under any type of ownership of the planters. Additionally, "East Indians were nominally free to move only after 1873 when the British government offered Indians parcels of Crown Lands in lieu of return passages".<sup>48</sup> This Commission of Enquiry decision marks the first time that the East Indian labor population was truly allowed to make decisions, regarding the path for the rest of their lives, as well as the end of the first period in the history of indentured servitude in Guyana. The following document illustrates the strategies and policy system the British employed during the first period of the indenture system, from its onset until 1873, and the changes the British made, which created the more rigid system that was utilized from 1873 until the culmination of the indenture system in Guyana.

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<sup>47</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Pg.71.

<sup>48</sup> Roopnarine, Lommarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 2-3.

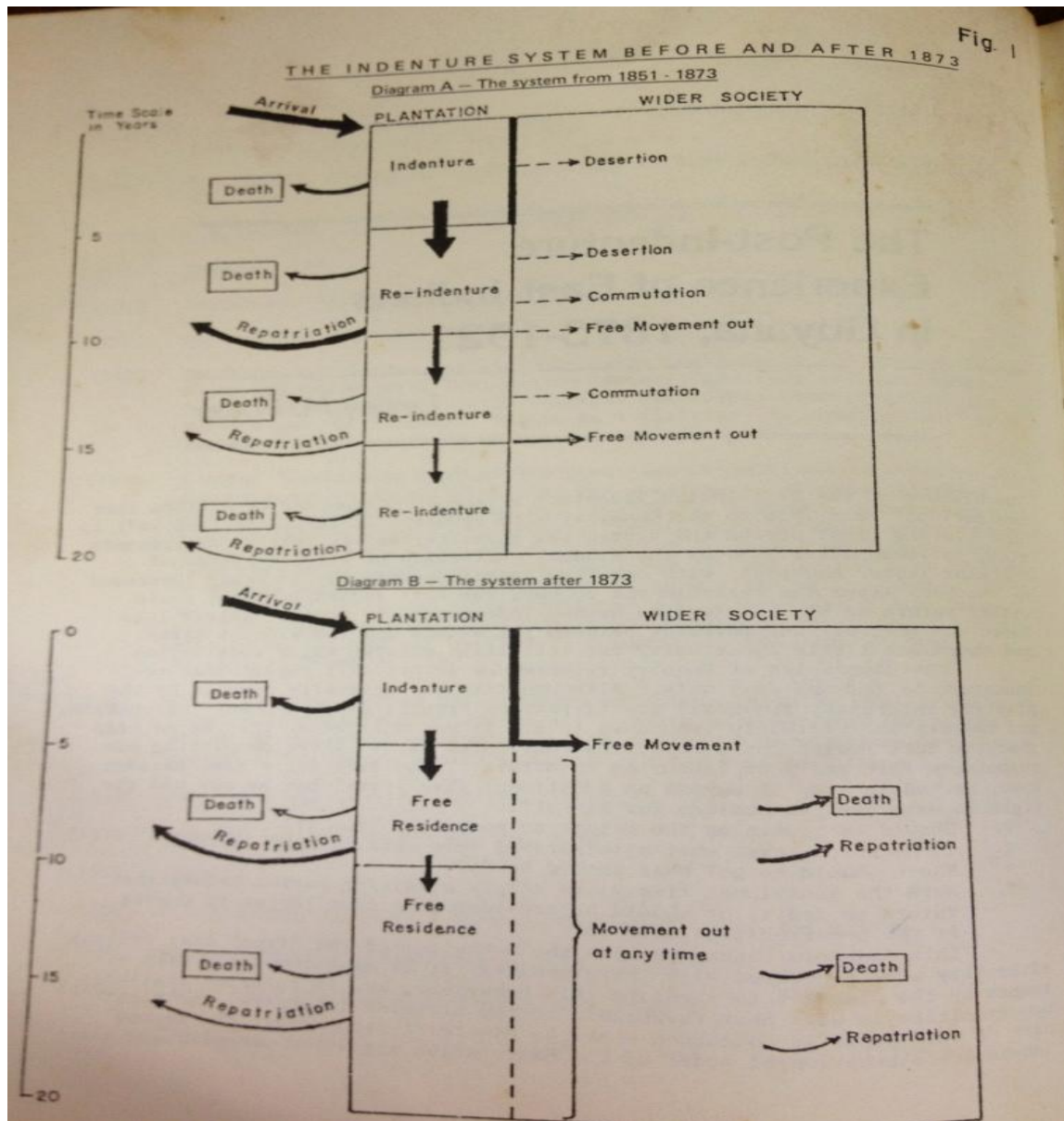


Figure 5 Indenture System Before and After 1873<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Pg.71.

### 1871 – 1917: The Second Period in the History of the East Indian Indenture System

In the previous section, the first period of the indenture system was described. The first period was one of initial experimentation with the policies and implementation of those policies throughout the colony and the period in which the East Indian laborers had little freedom on the plantations and whose movements away from the estates were incredibly limited. In the following section, I will describe the second period of the indenture system that took place between 1871 and 1917, a period in which the East Indian population starts to acquire control of economic resources and begins to make their presence known in the political sphere. During this period, the largest numbers of East Indians arrived on the plantations in Guyana; the indenture system became stricter and the immigration policy had been deemed successful. Guyana's sugar exports during this time, peaked at 116,550 tons; this was 80 percent higher than what was averaged during the 1830's.<sup>50</sup> Since arrival in the colony of Guyana, the East Indian laborers had been anchored to the plantations on which they lived and worked, however, following the Commission of Enquiry in 1870, perceptible movement from the plantation to newly settled villages began.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "large-scale Indo-Guyanese migration from villages to urban areas in Guyana, principally to Georgetown and New Amsterdam, also occurred"<sup>51</sup>, encompassing the beginning of the end of the indenture system and the British hold on their laborers. This section outlines the steps the East Indians took

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<sup>50</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 12.

<sup>51</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 2.

in changing their status as indentured laborers to residents of Guyana who began to build roots in this new land by moving away from the plantations and acquiring their own lands, thereby making independent lives for themselves. This section outlines this transformation that ultimately leads to the building of an Indo-Guyanese identity.

### Strategies of Behavioral Regulation

During this secondary period of the indentured system, from 1871 – 1917, a more rigid system of administration was implemented in the colony. The British administrators and estate owners devised four strategies to regulate the East Indians' behavior and movements from the plantations. The first strategy was to try and persuade a majority of the free laborers to remain on the estates after the culmination of their contracts. The second strategy was to persuade those that did decide to leave the estates after their contracts expired, to remain in the area and settle close by. This strategy was devised so the planters would have access to labor close by, if they so need it. The third strategy was to persuade all laborers to remain permanently in Guyana, "in order to reduce the expenses of both repatriation and new importation".<sup>52</sup> This strategy was most effectively utilized when used in combination with the first two strategies of persuasion. The fourth and final strategy was to try and reduce mortality rates in order to provide a more efficient use of the available remaining labor force, as well as improve levels of population increase, thereby creating a pool of new prospective labor.

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<sup>52</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Pg.73.

Working alongside these four approaches to maintaining labor presence, was the strategy of non-development. This strategy originated from the Colonial Office in London and received complete support from the absentee interests represented on the West Indian Committee and local planters that controlled the colonial legislature. The strategy asserted that “capital expenditures by the government would not be authorized unless rapid repayment of the cost was likely”.<sup>53</sup> In Guyana, the sugar industry was the most lucrative business and the only one that produced enough revenue that could afford to repay such costs, therefore maintaining this industry with a substantial labor force was essential. The two figures that are included below, illustrate the strategies the British employed on their indentured laborers as well as the views that the British had of their laborers and the conditions in which they lived and worked.

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<sup>53</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Pg.73.

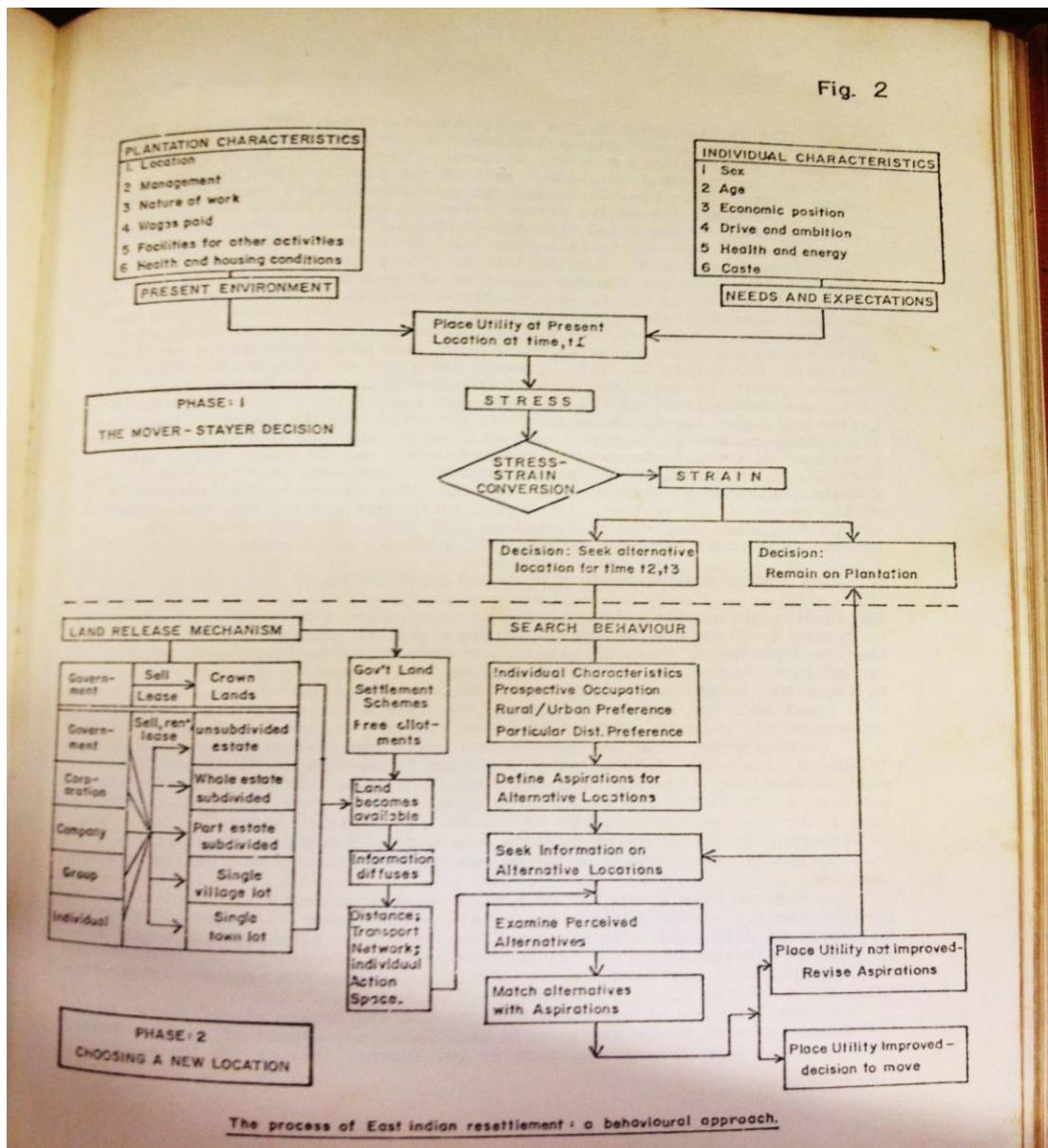


Figure 6 The Process of East Indian Resettlement: A Behavioral Approach<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Pg.71.



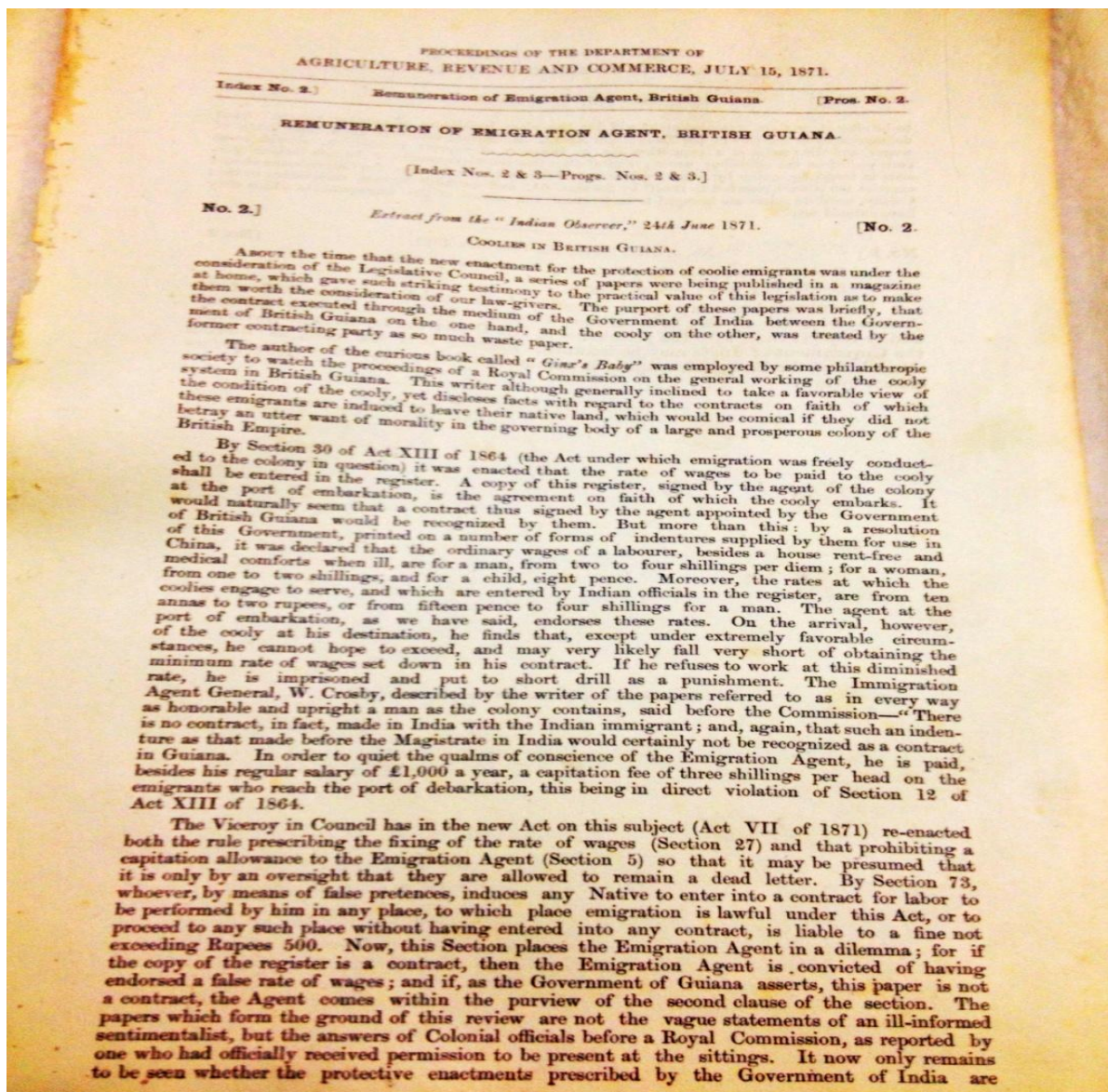


Figure 7 Statement from British Department of Agriculture, Revenue, and Commerce 1871 on the treatment and situation of East Indian migrants<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Statement from British Department of Agriculture, Revenue, and Commerce 1871 on the Treatment and Situation of East Indian Migrants. 15 July 1871. Raw data. Indian National Archives, New Delhi.

Furthermore, provisions were made by the British colonial authorities that allowed East Indians to maintain their culture on the estates, which gave them added incentive to remain on the plantations. East Indians were allowed to erect temples on the estates and practice their traditional religions and customs that they used to abide by in their home country. For instance, although the traditional caste system of India was not at work on the estates, it was still being taught in the temples on the plantations, and is still being taught till this day.

#### Repatriation

Between the years of 1838 and 1949, an estimated 75,000 East Indians returned to India after the expiration of their contracts, as part of the repatriation arrangement that was built into the contracts that they signed at the outset.<sup>56</sup> Although the indenture system ended in 1917, repatriation continued far after, up until 1949. Despite the fact that many of the East Indian labors decided to return to their familiar homeland, over 70% (or 240,000) of the East Indians decided to remain in the colony.<sup>57</sup> Villages began to emerge within a fifteen-mile radius of the sugar estates and many of the East Indians returned to the estates as casual workers. Many decided to do this out of mere desperation; they remained highly dependent on the planters for income, medical facilities, as well as other material benefits.

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<sup>56</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 6.

<sup>57</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 6.



From 1872 through 1881, there were an estimated 15,000 East Indians living off of the plantations and by the end of 1881, there were an estimated total of 25,000 living away from the estates.<sup>58</sup> This increase in the number of East Indians living off the estates was due to government incentives for East Indians to settle within the colony rather than migrate back to India, as well as natural increases in population growth. Additionally, the indenture system had previously been thwarted with a vast shortage in women, averaging only three men to every one woman; however, during this period the problem quickly ratified itself.

“Indian women retreated from the plantations once their contracts were over and assumed duties in the private sphere, where it was noticed that women’s reproductive role became more important than their productive role”

In 1911, the number of East Indians living off the estates grew to 65,810 with 7,310 of that number living in the urban areas of Guyana.<sup>59</sup> Reasons for movement to the urban areas were liberalization of granting crown lands, reforms of Crown Lands regulations in 1898, and the depression of the sugar industry in the 1880’s.

Between 1891 and 1903, the sugar depression was at its peak. During this time the amount of labor supply available to the estates was often in excess to demand, however, importations did continue. The sugar depression led many East Indians to the urban areas in search of more reliable forms of employment. Numerous estates were forced to close and their work force became the general labor supply in Guyana. Consequently, the sugar depression period made it imperative to create alternatives for

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<sup>58</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 8.

<sup>59</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 8.

employment outside of the sugar industry in order to curb the amount of laborers taking return passage to India. This led the government of Guyana to initiate the development of the rice industry as an alternative to the production of sugar and the creation of more opportunities for land acquisition away from the estates to persuade the East Indians to remain in the colony.<sup>60</sup> The development of the rice industry provided another reason for the East Indians to move away from the sugar estates and form their own independently owned rice settlements as an alternative means of income on the newly acquired land.

The period between 1904 and 1917, and even up to 1921, was characterized by the recovery and mechanization of the sugar industry and the expansion of the rice industry as an alternative for employment and the development of small farmer crop cultivation. This period also marked the decline in the number of new East Indian migrants and a marked increase in competition for labor between the rice and sugar industries. More government lands were made available for settlement, in small acreages and close to the estates. The rice industry had become completely commercialized by 1911, with an advanced network of millers in the rural districts of Guyana and agents in the urban areas, who handled the retailing and exportation of the milled product.<sup>61</sup> The rapid development of the rice industry led to predominant moves to villages and settlements rather than towns and urban areas, which was a

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<sup>60</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Page 78.

<sup>61</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Page 81.

direct result of the increase in purchasable, cultivatable land within the colony. The following table illustrates the previous points made regarding the distribution of the East Indians over the land of Guyana, especially showcasing the drastic movement of East Indians from the estates to smaller villages and settlements that took place between 1891 and 1921.

**TABLE 2**  
Overall distribution of East Indian population, 1871-1921 \*

Year	Estates	Villages & Settlements	Towns	Total E.I. Population	% non-estate
1871 †	50,420	3,215	1,466	55,101	8.4
1881 †	64,326	17,441	3,396	85,163	24.4
1891	71,813	28,477	5,238	105,528	32.0
1911	60,707	58,500	7,310	126,517	51.9
1921	54,088	63,139	7,712	124,939	56.5

\* Includes children born in the colony of East Indian parents (and Chinese in 1871 and 1881)  
† In 1871 and 1881, East Indians and Chinese are not distinguished, but are classified together as "Immigrants from Asia."  
Source: Censuses for years specified. No census was taken in 1901.

Figure 8 Overall Distribution of East Indian Population 1871-1921<sup>62</sup>

### The End of the Indenture System

In 1917, the Government of India abolished the indenture system and East Indian labour was no longer allowed to enter Guyana. Prior to the official end of the indenture system and the entrance of East Indian labor into Guyana, in 1912 members

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<sup>62</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Page 78.

of the Indian legislature, the Imperial Council of India, increased their demand for an end to the system and East Indian emigration.<sup>63</sup> After consultation with the British Government, the Council sent two of its members to Guyana with the task of examining the working and living conditions of the East Indians on the plantations. Their report was made in 1915 and described the conditions of the East Indians to be favorable. This report and its conclusions encouraged a member of the Guyana Court of Policy, A.P. Sherlock, to suggest the establishment of a committee to examine how immigration of East Indians to Guyana could be expanded further. The proposed committee was established, however, before it could begin its work, the British Government announced that emigration from India to Guyana would come to a close in September of 1917.

During the last two years of the indenture system, from 1916 to 1917, approximately 824 indentured East Indians arrived in Guyana. In despite of the official ending of the system and emigration from India in 1917, approximately 400 East Indians continued to arrive between 1921 and 1922 under contracts of service and numerous others continued to arrive as settlers.<sup>64</sup> With the end of East Indian migration to Guyana and the subsequent rapid phasing out of the indenture system, owners of the sugar plantations acquired a genuine fear that there would be a severe shortage of labour. Consequently, plantation owners urged the colonial government of Guyana to make efforts to restart the immigration process from India, and Africa as

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<sup>63</sup> Nath, Dwarka. *A History of Indians in Guyana*; . London, NY: Nelson, 1950. Page 173.

<sup>64</sup> Nath, Dwarka. *A History of Indians in Guyana*; . London, NY: Nelson, 1950. Page 219.

well. An influenza epidemic that occurred in 1918, killing over 12,000 East Indians in Guyana only acted as a catalyst for the resurrection of the immigration system.<sup>65</sup>

Due to the labor concern, Attorney General, Sir Joseph Nunan, departed in June 1919 to London to hold meetings with the Colonial Office in London about this issue. Nunan and his team planned on later traveling to India and some British colonies in Africa to discuss possible migration proposals with their Governments. In London, the delegation was met by Thomas Greenwood of the West India Committee, the committee of which represented the interests of the sugar plantations, and made it clear to the Colonial Office that the planters only wanted immigrants from India, not Africa, as was initially proposed.<sup>66</sup> Following these meetings and a subsequent meeting of the Indian Imperial Council, the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, stated that if the British colonies offered the East Indians more prosperity, then they should not be prevented from migrating there. To this end, the Guyana delegation made proposals that included first, a grant of five acres of land for each emigrant family serving a period of three years of indenture and second, the provision of free passage from India for those who wanted to cultivate land as independent farmers.<sup>67</sup> On the recommendation of the Committee, the Indian Legislative Council passed a motion that took a favorable view of the Guyanese proposals, however, views against further

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<sup>65</sup> Nath, Dwarka. *A History of Indians in Guyana*; London, NY: Nelson, 1950. Page 229.

<sup>66</sup> Nath, Dwarka. *A History of Indians in Guyana*; London, NY: Nelson, 1950. Page 165.

<sup>67</sup> Nath, Dwarka. *A History of Indians in Guyana*; London, NY: Nelson, 1950. Page 179.

emigration from India were exceedingly strong and no official agreement to restart migration could be reached.

A radical change in the location of the East Indian population within the colony took place between 1891 and 1921, following the end of the indenture system and the migration of East Indians to Guyana in 1917. This time period included both the tumultuous sugar depression of the 1890's and the tremendous increase in the availability of purchasable land. The sugar depression forced many people off the estates and numerous properties and estates were abandoned, creating a need for an alternative to the sugar industry and a dramatic increase in lands that were once part of the estates and sugar industry. Drastic moves off of the plantations and away from urban centers to rural villages and settlements took place as a direct effect of these changes. Exemplifying this change is the fact that in 1891 the total area under rice cultivation was 4,000 acres and only twenty years later in 1911, the total area under rice cultivation rose to 40,000 acres.<sup>68</sup> Movement away from the estates to create their own independent settlements and livelihood spurred East Indian resettlement to the rural areas and the purchase of cultivatable land.

Between 1911 and 1921 increased departures from the estates were spurred by the further expansion of the rice industry under the stimulus of World War I, when exports of rice to neighboring Caribbean territories grew in demand. Only 54,000 East Indians remained on the estates in 1921 out of the approximately 238,979 East Indians

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<sup>68</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Page 81.

that were brought to the colony, after all indentures had been canceled.<sup>69</sup> Despite the lure of occupations outside of the estates, many East Indians decided to remain and take advantage of the safety of employment, housing, and full medical care that was offered on the estates. The following table depicts the drastic movement of East Indians from the estates to smaller village settlements beginning in the late 1800's when the indenture system began its decline and the rice industry began to take form.

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<sup>69</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Page 83.

TABLE 1 (a) East Indians on Estates by District\*  
Deaths as a Proportion of Births. D/B X 100

DISTRICT	1871-80	1881-90	1891-1910	1911-20
Essequibo Coast	170.8	127.0	133.1	131.3
Leguan	95.8	166.4	104.5	105.6
Wakenaam	113.9	100.8	104.5	105.6
West Coast Demerara	106.5	95.8	88.3	81.0
West Bank Demerara	132.2	137.6	109.9	123.1
East Bank Demerara	103.0	108.2	89.3	88.7
East Coast Demerara	79.6	65.8	82.0	84.4
Mahaica—Abary	115.2	87.9	121.0	93.7
West Coast Berbice	84.5	75.5	56.5	70.2
East Bank Berbice River	275.0	217.0	134.8	165.6
Canje	123.9	103.4	81.2	81.5
Lower Corentyne	45.4	45.5	47.5	61.1
Upper Corentyne	106.3	115.6	47.5	61.1

\* After 1891 includes villages as well as estates.

TABLE 1 (b) Rates of Outmigration from Estates by Districts, 1871-1920

DISTRICT	1871-80	1881-90	1891-1910	1911-20
Essequibo Coast	33.1	27.6	48.5	16.9
Leguan	33.4	15.0	No estates	—
Wakenaam	25.1	35.5	43.0	14.4
West Coast Demerara	23.9	13.0	NA	NA
West Bank Demerara	27.9	39.4	NA	NA
East Bank Demerara	24.6	24.8	NA	NA
East Coast Demerara	12.7	17.2	NA	NA
Mahaica—Abary	7.6	24.5	NA	NA
West Coast Berbice	23.2	21.0	36.0	0
East Bank Berbice River	37.4	41.0	42.0	40.3
Canje	31.7	27.4	46.0	0
Lower Corentyne	6.5	18.3	22.5	13.2
Upper Corentyne	53.6	30.0	59.5	0

Figure 9 Distribution of East Indian Movement from Estates 1871 -1920<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Potter, Lesley M. "The Post-Indenture Experience of East Indians in Guyana 1873-1921." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Page 83.



This chapter outlined the history behind the colonization of Guyana that led to British acquisition and complete control of the colonial territory. The onset of British control also marks the onset of the importation of East Indian labor to Guyana and the start of the indenture system that was sparked by Sir John Gladstone. The following sections in this chapter outlined the characteristics of the East Indians and the reasons they had for migrating to Guyana. In addition, I outlined both phases of the indenture system; the first of initial experimentation with the policies that framed the indenture system and were meant to control the East Indian laborers and restrict their movements in and around the plantations, followed by the second phase of the indenture system that was marked by the gradual acquisition of more independence and freedom for the East Indian laborers. This second phase saw the East Indians begin to make movements away from the estates and start to acquire economic control for themselves in the rice industry. The East Indian laborers soon began to make a transition from laborer to resident of Guyana, a transition that enabled them to start to create a distinct sense of identity for themselves, the identity of the Indo-Guyanese. The following chapter explores the building of this Indo-Guyanese identity and the sense of Indian-ness that began to take shape in the Indo-Guyanese communities.

## Chapter 2

### CREATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

#### Introduction

After the abolition of the East Indian migration to Guyana in 1917 and the end of the indenture system in December of 1919, there still remained a residual interest in the recruitment of labor from India. However, there was concern that the conditions and welfare of the East Indian within these colonies was inadequate and not being looked after. There was a total absence of effective communication between the West Indies and India. A demand soon emerged that would request that the government of India place an official representative in the West Indies, like those in Ceylon, Malaya, and South Africa, who would look after the interests of the resident Indian community.<sup>71</sup> Since importation, East Indians have remained residually apart from the rest of the society, remaining in the rural areas around their former places of employment, the estates. In these settlements, with their newfound sense of independence, East Indian self-confidence began to increase and the creation of a concrete cultural identity, the identity of the Indo-Guyanese, began to take shape. The following section will discuss the creation of the illusory sense of their Motherland of India, a mythical construct based upon their little knowledge and non-tangible link to their ancestry that was caused by their migration through the indenture system.

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<sup>71</sup> Tinker, Hugh. "British Policy Towards Indian Identity." *East Indians in the Caribbean: Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity*. By V.S. Naipaul. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1982. Page 39.

### Preservation of a Mythical Homeland

The rise in Indian self-confidence began in the 1920's and was ignited by positive images of their homeland, a sense of national identity, that began to develop and spread during the 1890's. In an unfamiliar land living under colonial powers who tried to strip the East Indians of their cultural identity and replace it with the mere identity of being a laborer, the East Indians began to create an almost mythical conception of their homeland, holding on dearly to any and all elements of their former culture that they could garner. Unlike their East Indian counterparts in the rest of the Caribbean, the Indo-Guyanese had little to no contact with India. For instance Indians in Fiji had a direct link to India; they were able to sustain their language and beliefs through frequent trips back to India after indentureship.<sup>72</sup> Due to this frequent travel to India, for the Fijian Indians, India was real for them, which was not the case for the Indo-Guyanese. The Indo-Guyanese decided to stay in Guyana and were susceptible to correct, manipulated, and incorrect assumptions and interpretations of their culture and homeland.

The retention of their religions of Hinduism and Islam, in an alien environment rampant with Christian missionaries trying to convert them, was a solid affirmation of India and her ancient values. "This inviolable, surreal India was a potent, malleable, instrument of self-preservation, of racial dignity, in a society where few, if any, dared to challenge European definitions of the human condition"<sup>73</sup> This newfound

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<sup>72</sup> Singh, Chevron. "Misir Compares Guyanese with Fijians Indentured from India." *Guyana Chronicle* 19 May 2010: 8. Print.

<sup>73</sup> Seecharan, Clem. *India and the Shaping of the Indo-Guyanese Imagination, 1890s-1920s*. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1993. Page 10.

connection and mythical lore of India was especially prominent amongst the illiterate and non-highly educated men and women who had no other means of connecting to their homeland.

Central to this cultural preservation was the creation of strong identity with the heartland of Hinduism, the land of the Hindu epic The Ramayana. As previously stated in a previous section, over 85% of the indentured laborers in Guyana were from the northeast provinces of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar that were predominately Hindu and continue to practice Hinduism with unabashed vigor in Guyana, in both colonial times and in present day. The Christian British knew little to nothing about the East Indian culture, traditions, and Hinduism, and did little to try and understand their practices. Contrarily, the Christians did nothing but deprecate and demean Hinduism, which in turn, strengthened the resolve of the East Indians. They began to adhere wholeheartedly to their rich religious heritage and practice the rites and rituals of their homeland. Pictured below are two images that illustrate the strict adherence to Hindu faith amongst the Indo-Guyanese, who were allowed to erect temples on the estates during their indenture and continued to erect temples in their villages that were traditionally identical to their counterparts in India.



Figure 10 Hindu Temple Erected in a Village Settlement in Skeldon, Guyana<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ramnarain, Nadira. *Hindu Temple*. 2012. Photograph. Crabwood Creek, Guyana.



Figure 11 Alter inside the Hindu Temple in Skeldon, Guyana<sup>75</sup>

### The Lore of the *Ramayana*

The Indo-Guyanese people felt as though they had a significant absence of history, their conception of the past and their homeland as a mythical and timeless past. This notion only exacerbated the elusive nature of their ancestry and not so distant past in India. An aspect of their homeland with which they grasped tightly to, was the epic of the *Ramayana*, a Hindu epic with which they drew their sense of pride and national identity from.

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<sup>75</sup> Ramnarain, Nadira. *Inside the Hindu Temple*. 2012. Photograph. Crabwood Creek, Guyana.

The *Ramayana* originated in the northeastern region of India, the Hindu heartland from which the majority of the Indo-Guyanese derived from. The *Ramayana* is the story of Lord Rama, who was born in Ayodha in the eastern United Provinces.<sup>76</sup> The main story-line of this classic is the exile of Lord Rama in the Dandak forest and his triumphant return to his kingdom of Ayodhya that ushers in a period of enlightenment, plentiful harvests, prosperity, and happiness amongst the population. This story of Lord Rama's exile resonated with the Indo-Guyanese; his exile and glorious return exemplified their newfound sense of hope and renewal in Guyana, and although highly illusive, their own timely triumphant return to their homeland. Many of the indentured laborers felt an extreme sense of remorse for leaving their home, family, and numerous obligations for an unfamiliar land. Therefore, this story of successful exit and return from home was healing to their sense of guilt and loss for leaving their homeland.

Rama is one of the most admired deities worshipped in the Hindu religion; each year numerous devout pilgrims trace his journey through India and Nepal, stopping at the each of the holy sites along the way. This epic is not seen merely as a literary work, but more importantly serves as an integral part of Hinduism. It is a story held in remarkable reverence, speaking of the importance of human morals and values and the concept of dharma. According to Hindu tradition, Rama is the reincarnation of the God Vishnu, demonstrating the significance of following the righteous path, dharma, for all living creatures on Earth.

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<sup>76</sup> Seecharan, Clem. *Mother India's Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s*. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2011. Print.

The intense importance of this story can be seen in its frequent reenactment on the plantations in Guyana. This reenactment called the *Ram Lila*, is one of the most central tools utilized by the Indo-Guyanese to reproduce Hindu culture in the foreign land of Guyana. This idea is exemplified by this statement by J.L. Brockington:

“The whole thing is as much a religious ceremony as a dramatic performance, as well as having a significant role in the transmission of faith in Rama among the illiterate masses...(Moreover,) the vision of Rama’s righteous rule as a goal may well have helped to keep alive Hindu political aspirations...”<sup>77</sup>

Clearly, this story was much more important than being merely an important literary work; It became an implement of power in a land where the Indo-Guyanese were constantly fighting the powers and impedance of the Christian missionaries.

This story of the Kosalas of Oudh in Uttar Pradesh and the Videhas of northern Bihar, is the closest most Hindu Indo-Guyanese can come to a sense of their past. This great classic of Hinduism was the story they chose to remember, absorb, and pass along to the next generation as the story of their past, their ancestors, and their homeland.

“Images of the real India, from the 1890’s onward, would reach Guyana, but these, too, would be heroic ones engendered by Indian nationalism and congruent with the tenor of the great epic tale of exile and triumphal return marking the dawn of a Golden Age.”<sup>78</sup>

This classic answered their need for a past to identify with and call their own; something from which they could garner a sense of pride in a world where they were

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<sup>77</sup> Seecharan, Clem. *Mother India's Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s*. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2011. Page 21.

<sup>78</sup> Seecharan, Clem. *Mother India's Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s*. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2011. Page 21.



seen as just a 'coolie'. It allowed them to create a new sense of self under these oppressive conditions and this sense of myth served as the basis for the construction of the Indo-Guyanese identity.

### Ridicule and Resurgence

Throughout the time of the indenture system, the emergence of the Indian Diaspora, and continuing after Guyanese independence in May of 1966, the British continued to lump the East Indians, regardless of their social status as laborer, farmer, or doctor, into the category of 'Coolie'. This derogatory tone is captured in the comments of by Rev. H.V. P. Bronkhurst, a Methodist missionary to the Indians in Guyana:

“...their religious exercise a prodigious influence over the people. Blind adherence is paid to this cursed system. The Coolies deem it as perilous to forsake their religion as for a locomotive to quit the line. Whatever may be thought by others of the absurdity of the thing, they nevertheless sincerely believe in the divinity of a dumb idol. The evidence of their senses goes for nothing in the face of time honored and hoary tradition.”<sup>79</sup>

This jarring portrayal and unharnessed intolerance towards the East Indians in Guyana, or Indo-Guyanese as they are now termed, perpetuated the pain, shame, and suffering that they have been enduring since indenture. This prolonged and exacerbated shame was especially felt amongst the educated Indo-Guyanese, who despite their achievements could never quite rid themselves of the 'coolie' stereotypes of the indenture period.

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<sup>79</sup> Seecharan, Clem. *India and the Shaping of the Indo-Guyanese Imagination, 1890s-1920s*. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1993. Page 11.

The first Indo-Guyanese intellectual who tried to eradicate the dark image of the coolie in Guyana was a man named Joseph Ruhomon. Born in 1873 on the Plantation Albion in Corentyne, he was the son of John Ruhomon, a chemist and druggist who worked on several plantations and was brought to Guyana in 1859 at the age of 11 with his two brothers. Prior to Joseph Ruhomon, there was no other Indo-Guyanese who had tried to critically assess the conditions of the East Indians both at home in India and abroad. Ruhomon was the author of the first pamphlet by an East Indian to ever be published in the Caribbean in 1894 and was titled *India: The Progress of Her People at Home and Abroad, and How Those in Guyana May Improve Themselves*. At the heart of his teachings and assertions was the idea of an elusive, alluring, and infinitely malleable 'Motherland' or 'Mother India'.<sup>80</sup> This idea was essential to the creation of an Indo-Guyanese identity.

Ruhomon had a great deal of pride in ancient India's diverse intellectual achievements and its rich cultural history and traditions. Simultaneously, he was deeply saddened by the high percentage of illiteracy and educational backwardness of the Indo-Guyanese and urged them, through his literary work, to take pride in their ancient homeland and work to achieve some of the same sorts of progressive achievement that India has accomplished. In order to counter the 'coolie' stigma, he felt it was necessary for the Indo-Guyanese to develop the mind and show that they were more than mere laborers, but had the aptitude for excellence as well. Ruhomon summarized his ideas in the following address:

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<sup>80</sup> Seecharan, Clem. *Mother India's Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s*. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2011. Print.

“Its great objective was to arouse local Indians from their lethargy or indifference in respect of their intellectual and social interests and to stimulate them to action, after first comparing them with their more progressive brethren in the Motherland...I also pointed to the achievements of black and coloured people in the realms of education, of intellectual, cultural, and social movements, of professional practice, of politics, and of village administration; and on the other hand, I pointed to the fallow-fields of Indian soil in those same realms awaiting still the ploughshare of intelligent husbandry to make them rich and fertile...”<sup>81</sup>

Ruhomon’s ideas of a Mother India that was showing a renewed sense of vitality under British rule, gave the Indo-Guyanese a sense of pride and confidence from which they drew strength to create a new identity for themselves.

### Economics and Politics

The previous section outlined the creation of a distinct Indo-Guyanese identity that involves the construction of a mythical conception of their homeland of India. The Role of *The Ramayana* and the appropriation of Hinduism were essential tools in the construction of this Indo-Guyanese identity; tangible aspects of their ancestry by which they could hold onto, call their own, and garner a sense of pride and strength from. The following sections discuss the Indo-Guyanese participation in the economy and political sphere of Guyana. This section illustrates the East Indian values, values have become important aspects of Indian-ness in Guyana, which accentuate success, monetary, and business gain. The Indo-Guyanese were becoming essential aspects of the economy in their own right, creating their own farms and building up the lucrative rice industry of Guyana. In addition this section also speaks on the ethnic tensions

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<sup>81</sup> Ruhomon, Joseph. ‘The B.G. East Indian Association, or 1894-1937, and the Years Between’, *Indian Opinion*. (Christmas Number, 1937):23.

that began with the indenture system and have continued on to present day. The Indo-Guyanese connection to the land and the ethnic tensions that are a constant thread in Guyanese society are both aspects that helped the Indo-Guyanese to create a distinct sense of Indo-Guyanese identity and a sense of Indian-ness in Guyana.

### The Makings of a Livelihood

In East Indian society, hard work and individual accomplishment is highly rewarded; therefore, it is not surprising to witness the high regard with which the Indo-Guyanese hold success and their increasing education-conscious mentality. Their societal emphasis on monetary and business gain has led them to dominate the professional sphere of Guyana. In the periods towards the end of the indenture system, the Indo-Guyanese were predominately workers on the plantations and later became peasant farmers and shopkeepers. They were generally not interested in employment in the public sphere, such as police services, due to the fact that the disciplined services were much more poorly paid in contrast to the sugar industry where the Indo-Guyanese were predominant.<sup>82</sup> The Indo-Guyanese were locked into their agricultural based environment and made the best of the situation by turning to the farming and the rice industry to improve their economic well-being.

Due to their dominant presence in the agricultural sphere, the Indo-Guyanese own the majority of the agricultural lands in Guyana, much of which was previously the lands on which they, or their ancestors, were once active upon as indentured laborers. All of these rural dwellers derive their income directly from the land; the

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<sup>82</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 47.

rice and sugar industry account for 42% of the value of exports from Guyana.<sup>83</sup> The land, in and of itself, is a huge part of the Indo-Guyanese's identity; they have become culturally attached to the land due to their ancestral history in Guyana, and have been passing down the land from generation to generation ever since. This tradition of passing down land is held in the highest esteem, with the land holding an almost sacred quality, a rural existence as 'people of the land':

“the distribution of the land is not only of importance in an agricultural based society, but more importantly, ownership of land means wealth, and concurrently pride in oneself and one's family.”<sup>84</sup>

Owners of the land are not allowed to sell the land once it has been passed down to you. The one who inherits the land must hold onto it, acquire more during your lifetime, and then pass it on to your children.

This attachment to the land and their dominance of the agricultural industries of Guyana helps to explain the highly absent nature of the Indo-Guyanese from urban areas. For instance in 1911, of the 126, 517 East Indians living in Guyana, only 5.7% lived in the urban areas.<sup>85</sup> This number rose minimally by 1946, where the East Indian population rose to 163,434 and their representation in the urban areas rose to 9.9%.<sup>86</sup> The remainder of the Indo-Guyanese population remained in the country-

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<sup>83</sup> Cross, Malcolm. *The East Indians of Guyana and Trinidad*. London: Minority Rights Group, 1972. Print

<sup>84</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 46.

<sup>85</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 9.

<sup>86</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 9.

side, deciding to maintain their agricultural based lifestyle for a number of reasons. First, many Indo-Guyanese were still highly dependent on the material benefits offered by their former employers and consequently remained anchored to the areas surrounding the estates. Second, the Portuguese held a monopoly on all forms of business in urban areas, effectively blocking any economic opportunity for the Indo-Guyanese. For instance, in 1851, the Portuguese owned 173 of the 296 licensed shops in Georgetown and 28 of 52 in New Amsterdam.<sup>87</sup> Third, the majority of the Indo-Guyanese population was highly uneducated and largely illiterate, especially the women and children, which prevented them from partaking in the professional and public sphere of employment. Lastly, the Indo-Guyanese had created a community of cultural and familial ties amongst themselves in which they were comfortable. Therefore, when confronted with the idea of moving away from the rural agricultural-based with which they had grown accustomed and comfortable with, they decided to remain rather than move to the urban areas.

Even though the Indo-Guyanese formulate the largest proportion of the population, they are highly underrepresented in the occupational fields of public life. In 1891, 0.2% of the East Indian population was employed in the public sphere in urban areas; in 1946 this percentage rose to 1% of the East Indian population.<sup>88</sup> In addition, East Indians represent 43.5% of the population, but only 17.5% hold high

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<sup>87</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 10.

<sup>88</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 9.

status jobs.<sup>89</sup> This poor representation is the result of mostly historical and social factors. For instance, the police force of Guyana is dominated by the Afro-Guyanese population due to their high density in the cities and the Indo-Guyanese tendency to remain in the rural regions, as well as their historical view that the public services are much more poorly paid than the agricultural industry, as was previously discussed. In later periods, a political aspect would factor into the low percentage of Indo-Guyanese representation in the public sphere work force.

### Nature of Ethnic Politics

The nature of ethnic politics that exists today in Guyana began in the 1950's, but its origins can be found as far back as the beginning of the indenture period. This ethnic tension is marked by a significant divergence between the Indo-Guyanese population and the Afro-Guyanese population. In 1950 an attempt was made to thwart the rising tensions between the Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese communities and create a sense of unity, through the formation of the People's Progressive Party (P.P.P.). The party was formed by Cheddi Jagan, the recognized leader of the Indo-Guyanese population, and Forbes Burnham, the official leader of the Afro-Guyanese community. This attempt at creating a sense of unity, however, was short lived as in 1957 Jagan and Burnham split over ideological and ethnic differences. In direct concurrence with this split, Burnham formed the People's National Congress (P.N.C.).

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<sup>89</sup> Roopnarine, Lomarsh. "Indo-guyanese Migration: From Plantation to Metropolis." *Immigrants & Minorities* 20.2 (2001): Page 9.

## **Forbes Burnham**

Forbes Burnham was born on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1923 in Kitty, a suburb of Georgetown. He attended Queen's College in Georgetown and in 1942 won the Guyana scholarship as the country's top student. He went on to study law and received his degree from the University of London in 1948. Burnham, as the P.P.P.'s Chairman, became the president of the party's affiliated trade union, the British Guyana Labour Union in 1952 and in 1953 the P.P.P. won 18 of 24 seats in the first election permitted by the British Colonial Government, with Burnham serving as Minister of Education. In 1957 Burnham departed from the P.P.P. due to a difference in opinion and beliefs with Jagan; Burnham went on to form the P.N.C. in 1958 and entered its first election in 1961.

Following this split, national elections took place in which the P.P.P. won the general elections of 1957 and 1961 with Jagan becoming the Chief Minister of British Guyana. Afro-Guyanese disenchantment with Jagan and the P.P.P. became clearly evident at the polls in the 1964 national election; in this election Burnham and the P.N.C. won, making Burnham the new Chief Minister from 1964 until 1966. On May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1966 Guyana established independence from Britain, and Burnham became the first Prime Minister of free Guyana from 1966 until 1980, and finally President of Guyana from 1980-1985.

Burnham's ascent to office created great disturbances for the Indo-Guyanese population. In 1970, Burnham declared Guyana a cooperative republic and exercised his Marxist and Leninist inspired doctrines which "contrasted sharply with the culturally prescribed property owning values of the East Indians".<sup>90</sup> This

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<sup>90</sup> Gosine, Mahin. Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adapatation and Group Experience. New York: Windsor, 1990. Page 35.



implementation of new ideals in Guyana also meant a dramatic shift from a democratic state to an authoritarian state, which was also in direct contrast with East Indian ideals. A clash of ideals led to mass Indo-Guyanese emigration from Guyana to the US and Canada, nearly 62% of the Indo-Guyanese population migrated from Guyana.<sup>91</sup> The majority of Indo-Guyanese who migrated from Guyana left during the period of 1965- 1980 when Burnham was in a position of direct power in Guyana.

Dissatisfaction amongst the Indo-Guyanese with Burnham, as well as his successor Desmond Hoyt, was most evident in the realms of culture, education, employment, and formulation of national policies. The unifying feature of this discontent was the popular belief that Burnham and the government were more concerned with Afro-Guyanese interests rather than those of the Indo-Guyanese. Culturally, the Indo-Guyanese believe that due to Guyana's colonial history, Christian standards are given greater priority and are seen as holding greater importance in comparison with the beliefs of Hinduism and Islam. To exemplify this point, it should be noted that it was not until the mid 1960's that Hindu and Muslim religions were officially recognized in Guyana and the validity of legal holidays was granted to these religious groups and even further, not until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century were Islamic and Hindu marriages regarded as legal institutions.<sup>92</sup> The fact that the Indo-Guyanese populations were still being regarded in this way, being demeaned due to their religious affiliations, only enraged them further.

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<sup>91</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adaptation and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Page 7.

<sup>92</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adaptation and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Page 36.

In addition, in both education and employment there were significant ethnic imbalances. Educationally these imbalances were most evident in the awarding of academic scholarships. From 1966 to 1970, eighty-four academic awards were granted; of those eighty-four awards, sixty-eight were awarded to the Afro-Guyanese, fourteen were awarded to the Indo-Guyanese, and one each was awarded to the Chinese and Portuguese.<sup>93</sup> Language and religion were taught in all of the schools; however, it was always oriented to Christian standards, rather than the standards of any of the other significant religious or ethnic groups of Guyana. In the realm of employment, there was, and still is, serious underrepresentation and discrimination against particular ethnic groups. For instance, the East Indians comprise nearly half of the population of Guyana, yet in the police service they only hold 17% representation while those of African descent hold nearly 76% of the total and are especially well represented amongst the upper ranks.<sup>94</sup> Jagan and the P.P.P. were active in government as activists of labor and the leading opposition party to Burnham and the P.N.C. for twenty eight years before finally winning the October 5, 1992 election with 54% of the vote, making Jagan President of Guyana.

### **Cheddi Jagan**

Cheddi Jagan was born in Guyana on March 22, 1918, the son of two ethnically East Indian sugar plantation workers. Jagan's parents were brought to

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<sup>93</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adapation and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Page 38.

<sup>94</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adapation and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Page 40.

Guyana as infants, his father was two years old and his mother was one, with their parents who came to Guyana in 1905 destined to become indentured laborers on the plantation known as Port Mourant.<sup>95</sup> The emigration passes of both of his parents can be seen in the following images, which detail the ship name, the dates of arrival, their parents' names, and their region of origin in India, amongst other details. Jagan studied at Queen's College in Georgetown, traveled to attend Howard University Dental School in Washington, D.C. and Northwestern University in Chicago before returning back to Guyana after his graduation from Northwestern in 1942. His political career began in November 1947 when he was elected to the colonial legislative body, the Legislative Council, as an independent candidate from the Central Demerara constituency. On January 1, 1950 Jagan formed the P.P.P. with Burnham as its Chairman, and Jagan's American wife Janet Rosenberg as the Secretary.

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<sup>95</sup> Dass, Premchand. "Dr. Cheddi Jagan - The Tireless Fighter." *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 1-2. Page 1.

**BOY'S**  
**EMIGRATION PASS.**

HEALTH CLASS.

DEPÔT No. 4019  
For Ship Elbe PROCEEDING TO BRITISH GUIANA.  
No. 78  
882+72

British Guiana Government Emigration Agency,  
CALCUTTA, the 18. 10. 1900.

PARTICU- Place,.....  
LARS OF Date,.....  
REGIS- Register No....  
TRATION. Name,.....  
Father's Name,.....  
Age,.....  
Caste,.....  
Name of next-of-kin,.....  
District,.....  
Thana,.....  
Village or Town & Mahalla,.....  
Bodily Marks,.....

CERTIFIED that we have examined and passed the above named boy as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.

Surgeon Superintendent.      Depôt Surgeon.

Government Emigration Agent for BRITISH GUIANA.

PERMITTED to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to BRITISH GUIANA.

Protector of Emigrants.

Figure 12 Cheddi Jagan's Father's Emigration Pass<sup>96</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Boy's Emigration Pass. 18 October 1900. Raw data. Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, Georgetown, Guyana.

**INFANT GIRL'S  
EMIGRATION PASS.**

HEALTH CLASS.

DEPOT No. 13756  
For Ship Eller  
No. 32 PROCEEDING TO BRITISH GUIANA.

British Guiana Government Emigration Agency,  
CALCUTTA, the 18 10 1900

88316

PARTICULARS OF REGISTRATION: { Place, 47 Babar  
Date, 10-9-00  
Register No. 7

Name, Bachani Bachani  
Father's Name, Rambhadr  
Age, 1 1/2  
Caste, Hurum  
Name of next-of-kin, Maharaj  
District, Wasti  
Thana, W  
Village or Town & Mahalla, Maharaj  
Bodily Marks, None

Ment

CERTIFIED that we have examined and passed the above named Infant Girl as fit to emigrate; that she is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that she has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate.

Surgeon Superintendent. Lee Deputy Surgeon.

Government Emigration Agent for British Guiana. Alu

PERMITTED to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to BRITISH GUIANA.

Protector of Emigrants. CJ

P. S. D'Souza & Co., Printers, Calcutta. - 109-2-82

Figure 13 Cheddi Jagan's Mother's Emigration Pass<sup>97</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Girl's Emigration Pass. 18 October 1900. Raw data. Cheddi Jagan Research Centre, Georgetown, Guyana.

Jagan's early life, like that of the majority of East Indians living in Guyana, was shaped by the sugar plantation and their history of indenture. "The uniquely isolated, atomizing condition of the Indian worker on the sugar estate was calculated to exclude him from all power and influence, and indeed from the most basic human rights".<sup>98</sup> This condition, under which the Indo-Guyanese population lived, did not see much change from when Jagan was born, at the end of the indenture period in 1918, or even upon his return from the United States in 1943. When Jagan did return, he was met by a society still fragmented by the ethnic tensions between the East Indians and the Africans, tensions that had begun at the outset of the indenture period when the East Indians replaced the Africans as the prominent source of labor. After this replacement and the subsequent lowering of their wages, increasing pressures were placed on the Afro-Guyanese population to make a living on their own; this point is one of the most important factors in the history of ethnic tensions between these two groups. The situation that Jagan returned to was one of the Indo-Guyanese population being ridiculed for their aggressive self-assertiveness<sup>99</sup>; an assertive nature that was necessary for the Indo-Guyanese to have in their demands for recognition as equals in a society that has been ridiculing, oppressing, and discriminating against them ever since their arrival in 1838.

This situation was the one that Jagan created the P.P.P. in direct response to; he saw the importance of mobilizing the working class who had been effectively

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<sup>98</sup> Persaud-Edwards, Parvati. "Sugar the Pulse of the Nation's Economy." *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 19-20. Print.

<sup>99</sup> Birbalsingh, Frank. *Indenture & Exile: The Indo-Caribbean Experience*. Toronto: TSAR, 1989. Page 260.

powerless, as well as the importance of uniting the people of Guyana, who have been deeply divided by race, into a united and independent nation. This was the precedent under which the P.P.P. was formed, however with Burnham's split from the party, his subsequent creation of the P.N.C, and his rule of Guyana from 1966 to 1985, left Jagan's dream of a racially united Guyana in ruins.

“Burnham, who allowed the colonizers to rupture its togetherness and ushered in racial distrust, and the divide and rule scheme of the British to delay independence, continue its rule, and find time and excuse to get Cheddi Jagan out of their way...”<sup>100</sup>

Nevertheless, Jagan led the opposition party against Burnham's oppressive rule and pushed forth with his dream of forming a nation of unity, genuine class unity that would help Guyana to build its own identity.

Jagan saw the creation of class unity as the most important element in the advancement of national liberation from imperialism. He “wanted to see a Guyana where all of its exploited peoples coming from descendants of slavery and indentureship, became free men and women to enjoy freely the fruits of their labor”.<sup>101</sup> To this end, under Jagan's leadership and his subsequent rise to the role of President of Guyana, the revival of the union movement, a re-commitment to education and the infrastructure movement, as well as the greater deregulation of the economy took place. The office of President, which he undertook after the first free elections in 1964, was marked by years of demoralization from misgovernment by

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<sup>100</sup> Dass, Premchand. "Dr. Cheddi Jagan - Architect of Guyana's Independence." *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 1-2. Print.

<sup>101</sup> Dass, Premchand. "Dr. Cheddi Jagan - Architect of Guyana's Independence." *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 1-2. Print.

Burnham and his successor, as well as a population depleted by massive emigration due to the poor conditions created by Burnham, international debt, and an education system in ruins. Jagan and his administration worked tirelessly to rebuild the infrastructure of the nation, rebuilding schools and health centers, rejuvenating the agricultural industry, rebuilding roads and ultimately creating a more unified and peaceful society.

Jagan's lifelong mission to the elimination of poverty and exploitation established him as a widely admired and respected leader, in Guyana and around the world. He taught the Guyanese people the importance of the value of each human being, regardless of race, and the value of struggle and hard work to realize their objectives. Under Jagan, "this most unselfish and unassuming man became the very symbol of Guyanese politics, always educating the people, and never abandoning the people's struggle for economic and social dignity, and for democracy".<sup>102</sup> He devoted himself to the affairs of a fair government and a unified nation, which ultimately led to his designation as the Father of the Guyanese Nation. Ever since his rule, the P.P.P. has remained as the ruling party of Guyana.

### **Creation of Ethnic Organizations**

Highlighting the racial and religious divide of this nation, is the subsequent organizations that have been formed by the Indo-Guyanese, Afro-Guyanese, Muslim, and Hindu factions of society. For instance, the Guyana Indian Trust was launched in June of 1998 to "enhance and develop the dignity pride, and cultural awareness and

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<sup>102</sup> Jagan-Brancier, Nadira. *The Cheddi Jagan Research Centre*. N.p., 1999. Web.



protecting the rights of the Indian community”.<sup>103</sup> The underlying reason for the creation of this organization was to comply with the myth in Guyana that Hindus form the largest religious body in Guyana and therefore should rule the country. They believe that the East Indians in the Diaspora can retain power once that have obtained it through the domination and exploitation of others.<sup>104</sup> The logo of this organization is a map of Guyana on which is stamped the map of the Indian sub-continent, suggesting that Guyana is an extension of India.

Additional organizations include the Afro-Guyanese institutions of the League of Colored People and Guyana Labour Union. Subsequent Indo-Guyanese organizations include the East Indian Association and Man Power Citizens Association. Furthermore, there is a Muslim Indo-Guyanese organization known as the Islamic Anjuman Sad'r that formulated in Guyana after the division of India and Pakistan which marked the rise of religious tensions between Muslims and Hindus worldwide. The tension spilled over into the East Indian communities of Trinidad and Guyana and was marked by the creation of such organizations. The Anjuman Sad'r organization in Guyana is primarily concerned with fostering close contact with the new Motherland of Pakistan and acquainting Muslims in Guyana with a Muslim way of life.<sup>105</sup> This divide translated over to politics, with many Muslims turning away

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<sup>103</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 57.

<sup>104</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 57..

<sup>105</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adapataion and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Page 71.

from the prominently Hindu P.P.P. and instead voting for P.N.C. candidates in elections.

### Social Adherences of the Indo-Guyanese

The previous sections illustrated the racial divide that began at the onset of the indenture system when the British brought the East Indians to Guyana to take the place of the former African slaves. The African population of Guyana despised the East Indians for becoming the new indentured labor force of the plantations. The Africans fled to the urban areas to create communities and try to find new employment off of the estates while the East Indians replaced them as the dominant force of the agricultural sphere. This ethnic divide carried on through history to present day, creating a country violently divided in all aspects of society. This was the world in which Jagan and Forbes created their respective parties that had first aimed to unite both communities but soon came to separate them further. Jagan acquired power after Forbes and continued to try and pursue unity for Guyana, unity that has slowly been making progress in present day. The following sections demonstrate the unity that was forged amongst the Indo-Guyanese community. This formation of unity and an Indo-Guyanese identity can be seen in the loss of caste affiliations and the creation of distinctly identifiable Indo-Guyanese communities.

### The Caste System

For the East Indians, the task of leaving their homeland and embarking on a seemingly endless journey to a mysterious and ill-conceived new land was a trying and saddening time. Once upon the ships embarking to this new land, the foremost characteristic of their struggle was a sense of unity. Onboard the ships crossing the

Black Waters, or *Kala Pani*, the caste system became obsolete and forgone, and a newfound sense of unity was forged amongst both the Hindu and Muslim laborers, who began to think of themselves as brothers and sisters, or *jahaji*.<sup>106</sup>

As previously stated, East Indians were allowed to erect temples on the estates and practice their traditional religions and customs that they used to abide by in their home country, in an effort to keep them on the plantations. Although the traditional caste system of India had been lost through the system of migration to Guyana and the formal restrictions placed on individuals based on their caste had been eroded and was not at work on the estates for a time, it was still being taught in the temples on the plantations, and is still being taught till this day. Consequently, evidence of belonging to a caste was evident during this period, as well as occasionally in present-day Guyana. “Hindu practitioners in Guyana can say they belong to any caste which can give them status within the group”, since no one knows or can determine what particular caste they had originally derived from.<sup>107</sup> Most Hindus in Guyana say they belong to the Brahmin or Kshatriya castes, since they are the two that hold the most power and respect in Indian society, and no East Indian migrant associate themselves with the Shudra caste, which they reserve for the African- Guyanese.

In contrast to this, however, there are infinitely more cases of Indo-Guyanese carrying on the idea of a loss of the restrictions of the caste system and exercising the sense of *jahaji* and unity that was forged years ago on the ships embarking for Guyana. In this world where adherence to their religion became one of the foremost

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<sup>106</sup> Sukhu, Parmanand. *Guyana Chronicle* 5 May 2012: 15. Print

<sup>107</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 25.

tools of power amongst the Indo-Guyanese, the individuals who were once of the Brahmin class, became the sole interpreters of their traditional Hindu texts, due to their role as being the few literate individuals of the East Indian population. They became officiates as religious functions and religious revolutionaries against the Christian missionaries of the colony. Starting in the 1860's, when the East Indians were faced with a increasing wave of Christians trying to impose their beliefs on them, the Brahmins, in an attempt to thwart their advances, "began to minister to even the lowest castes, Chamars, Dusadhs, Doms, Bhangis, etc – in their homes, partaking of their cooked food".<sup>108</sup> In India, where the caste system governed their social lives, this action of mingling with the lower castes, would have been completely unacceptable and made the Brahmins outcastes in society. This challenge to tradition was an act of self-preservation in Guyana, a tool that could be utilized to cross traditional boundaries to create a sense of unity that would withstand Christian influence.

The crossing of traditional caste boundaries would continue on from this period, which initiated a more egalitarian Indo-Guyanese society and accelerating the makings of a coherent cultural identity. In India, the caste system was an everyday reality for the East Indians prior to migration, however, over time and the passing of generations, much of the realities of life that had previously been dictated by the caste system were all but forgotten. On the plantations, laborers of varying castes all worked side-by-side regardless of their higher or lower status, carrying out the same duties without any special treatment or exclusivity being practiced for the highly caste

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<sup>108</sup> Seecharan, Clem. *Mother India's Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s*. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2011. Print.

members. Consequently, marriages amongst the Indo-Guyanese were no longer dictated by marrying within your designated caste and occurred across caste boundaries. Amongst the new generations that were born from the older migrant generations, caste was no longer fixed at birth, nor was it even taken into consideration due to the nearly vanished nature of the archaic practice.

### Social Hierarchy and Territorial Delineation

From the end of the indenture system, the Indo-Guyanese have placed themselves as the top of the social hierarchy since it was “the emancipated Africans refusal to work regularly and their unreasonable wage demands that brought the colony to near ruin”.<sup>109</sup> In their eyes, the Indo-Guyanese were the ones who brought the plantation system back to life, created a successful alternative industry when the sugar industry was in depression, helped to expand the both systems and the economy of Guyana as a whole. Social order in Guyana was established and refined during the 19<sup>th</sup> century where “one’s place on the order was dependent on the contribution of the various ethnic groups to the formation of the plantation society”.<sup>110</sup> In this sense, the indigenous Amerindians dropped to a rank below the East Indians and Africans, since they were excluded from coastal society and its economic structure. Concurrent with the establishment of a social hierarchy, each ethnic group had a tendency to segregate themselves residentially in clusters. The Africans tend to hold

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<sup>109</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 18.

<sup>110</sup> Gibson, Kean. *The Cycle of Racial Oppression in Guyana*. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2003. Page 13.

high density concentrations in the urban areas whereas the East Indians tend to reside in the rural areas of the country, with high concentrations in the areas where sugar plantations and estates existed. They hold high concentrations in the regions of East Berbice-Corentyne, Essequibo Islands-West Demerara, and Mahaica-Berbice. In the region of East Berbice-Corentyne, or Region 6, as well as Region 3 Essequibo Islands-West Demerara, the Indo-Guyanese formulate nearly two-thirds of the population. In Region 5, Mahaica- Berbice and Region 2 Pomeroon-Supenaam, the Indo-Guyanese formulate nearly half of the population. In the region of East Berbice-Corentyne, or Region 6, as well as Region 3 Essequibo Islands- West Demerara, the Indo-Guyanese formulate nearly two-thirds of the population. In Region 5, Mahaica- Berbice and Region 2 Pomeroon-Supenaam, the Indo-Guyanese formulate nearly half of the population.

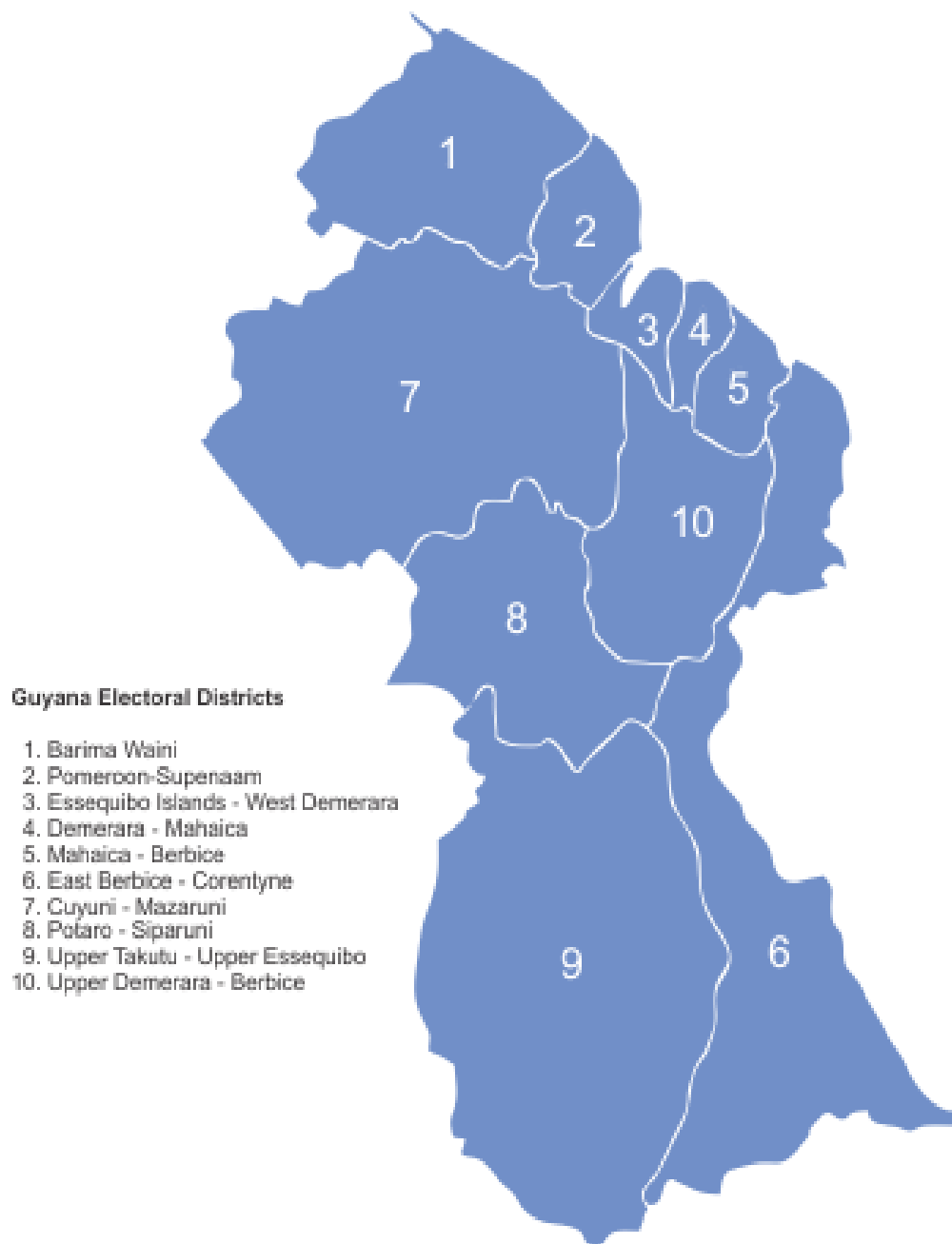


Figure 14 Enumerated Regional Divisions of Guyana<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> "Caribbean Elections | Guyana Elections 2011." *Caribbean Elections / Guyana Elections 2011*. Centre for Government and Democracy, n.d. Web.

Table 5 Percentage Distribution of Ethnicity Within a Region: Guyana 2002<sup>112</sup>

**Table 2.3: Percentage Distribution of Population Within a Region by Nationality Background/Ethnicity, Guyana: 2002**

<b>Ethnicity/ Background</b>	<b>Region 1</b>	<b>Region 2</b>	<b>Region 3</b>	<b>Region 4</b>	<b>Region 5</b>	<b>Region 6</b>	<b>Region 7</b>	<b>Region 8</b>	<b>Region 9</b>	<b>Region 10</b>	<b>Total</b>
African/Black	2.29	13.41	21.23	41.67	32.55	21.06	11.61	7.00	1.22	54.98	30.21
Amerindian	62.24	16.27	2.01	1.69	1.95	1.63	41.69	75.91	89.20	7.10	9.14
Chinese	0.03	0.09	0.16	0.26	0.11	0.18	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.15	0.19
East Indian	1.40	47.91	65.47	37.54	57.76	68.68	8.89	2.16	0.50	3.08	43.45
Mixed	33.86	22.06	11.02	18.38	7.63	8.37	37.58	13.92	8.85	34.48	16.73
Portuguese	0.08	0.21	0.07	0.34	0.00	0.05	0.14	0.93	0.09	0.12	0.20
White	0.09	0.04	0.03	0.09	0.00	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.09	0.05	0.06
Other	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.01
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Number</b>	<b>24,275</b>	<b>49,254</b>	<b>103,061</b>	<b>310,320</b>	<b>52,428</b>	<b>123,694</b>	<b>17,597</b>	<b>10,094</b>	<b>19,388</b>	<b>41,114</b>	<b>751,223</b>

When I was traveling through the country, starting in the capital city of Georgetown, the population is consistently heterogeneous, with all ethnicities (East Indian, African, Portuguese, Chinese, and European) all coexisting in mixed communities and neighborhoods. As you start to travel outside the city, the land becomes progressively more rural, neighborhoods becoming more spaced and sporadic, and their delineation by ethnicity becomes more defined. Distinguishing which homes and communities are predominately Indo-Guyanese is made exceedingly simple as each home is discerned by a collection of traditional *jhandi* flags posted in front of the home. The *jhandi* is possibly the best illustration of localized physical displays of Indian tradition. The *jhandi*, the most common ritual practiced by the

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<sup>112</sup> Guyana. Bureau of Statistics. *2002 National Census Report*. By Sonkarley Tiatun Bealie. Georgetown: n.p., 2007. Print.



Hindu Indo-Guyanese, is a term used in the West Indies to mean *pooja*, or a ritual performed as an offering to various deities, when at the end of the ritual, a *jhandi flag*, a colored flag atop a bamboo pole, is erected in front of the home in honor of the deity.<sup>113</sup> The flag serves as a representation of the deity that is worshipped in the respective home; in front of a home there can be any number and variety of color of flags, however, the more numerous the flags are the more religious the family might be. For example a red *jhandi* flag is representative of Lord Vishnu; therefore if this flag is found in front of an Indo-Guyanese home, this home is Hindu and worships this deity. A sample of *jhandi* flags can be seen in the figure below.



Figure 15 *Jhandi* Flags in front of a home in Mahaica-Berbice<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> "Interview Parsuram Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

<sup>114</sup> Solowsky, Allison. *Jhandi Flags*. 2012. Photograph. Mahaica-Berbice, Guyana

### Lingual Modifications

The previous sections discuss the economic, political, and territorial aspects of the Indo-Guyanese identity and community. The following section will discuss an aspect of Indo-Guyanese culture that has been drastically altered, and in some cases lost entirely, their traditional languages. Through the process of indenture and colonial rule under the Dutch and British, the Indo-Guyanese had lost most of their native ties to their native languages of Hindi and Bhojpuri, the languages that are prevalent in northeastern India, and Tamil and Teluga, the languages spoken by the Indo-Guyanese that derived from the southern portions of India. Under colonial rule, the Indo-Guyanese were forced to break most, if not all, ties to their former culture, urged to convert to Christianity and speak English. In present-day, Guyana's national language is English due to its history as a British colony and is now the only country in South America whose national language is English.

Consequently, the Indo-Guyanese all speak a variant of English with a Caribbean dialect. In the cities, all of the Indo-Guyanese speak Caribbean English. In the rural areas, however, there are still a few amongst the older generations that speak a dialect known as Caribbean Hindustani, which is a dialect of Bhojpuri that is spoken in Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago amongst the East Indian populations in both countries.<sup>115</sup> In the large population of Indo-Guyanese, only a very small percentage of elders speak or even know this language, specifically a variant of Caribbean Hindustani called *Aili Gaili* that is influenced by Bhojpuri and Bihari lingual varieties. Amongst the remainder of the Indo-Guyanese population, however, Caribbean Hindustani, or any variant of their ancestral language, is completely extinct.

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<sup>115</sup> "Interview Parsuram Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

In the 1930's there was still a significant portion of the Indo-Guyanese population that had retained some of their native language. Approximately 60,000 East Indians, in the late 1930's, still spoke the Bhojpuri dialect of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.<sup>116</sup> During this time many Indo-Guyanese were fearful that rapid creolization and westernization instigated by the end of indenture and the official break of ties to India, would lead to the ultimate extinction of their native language. Many proponents of Indian nationalism and the notion of Mother India, including columnist J.I. Ramphal, urged the Indo-Guyanese to fight to maintain their lingual heritage.

“...under the glamour of western civilization, we shall become traitors to ourselves and our own country (Mother India), if we do not recognize our true selves...which lies in the fact of knowing the language of the race...I hope our leaders will become conscious and active enough to start agitating the culture of Hindustani, for it will mean the preservation and salvation of our race.”<sup>117</sup>

Nevertheless, the language began to fade from existence; some of the older generations, who were direct migrants from India, had spoken Hindustani to their children, therefore those children could grasp and speak the language clearly. However, those secondary generations did not uphold the same practice and gradually stopped speaking Hindustani themselves as they became older. Today those are the generations that still retain some of the Hindustani of their ancestors, but as those elders pass on, so does their native language.

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<sup>116</sup> Seecharan, Clem. *Mother India's Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s*. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2011. Print.

<sup>117</sup> Seecharan, Clem. *Mother India's Shadow over El Dorado: Indo-Guyanese Politics and Identity, 1890s-1930s*. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2011. Print.

## Familial Traditions and Values

Even though the principles of the caste system are still being taught within some temples in Guyana, in present day, marriages rarely take place with regard to caste and mingling without regard to a formerly upheld membership to a specific caste still takes place. In other aspects of family, outside of caste, the Indo-Guyanese have transplanted their pre-indenture cultural traditions to Guyana. Especially in the West, emphasis has come to be placed on the importance of individuality and amongst family, importance and value is usually placed predominately on the most immediate nuclear members of the family. In contrast, traditionally, East Indians have continuously placed very high regard and value on the importance of family, not just nuclear, but extended as well. The Indo-Guyanese had continued belief in the importance and value of the family as a whole, as “family has had the most positive influence in the life of the East Indian”.<sup>118</sup> Often times numerous members of a family, both nuclear and extended, can be seen living within one household, just as can be seen in India both in the past and presently. In regards to this importance, respecting one’s elders and distinct loyalty to one’s family is highly evident.

The ethical standards of the Indo-Guyanese follow in direct accordance with those of traditional Indian society.

“Non-violence, spiritualism, sacrifice, self-discipline, modesty, charity, contentment, constant introspection, purity of mind, thrift, containment of worldly desire, right means for right goals, and dedicated service to other members of the community are the ideals of Indian ethics”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adaptation and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Print.

<sup>119</sup> Rauf, Mohammad A. *Indian Village in Guyana: A Study of Cultural Change and Ethnic Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 1974. Page 102.

These ethical standards are preached, taught, and conveyed in religious gatherings and occasions of Muslim, Hindu, and Christian denominations, in family homes, schools, and are thus ingrained into the Indo-Guyanese psyche. To those outside of the Indo-Guyanese community, these values that dictate their lives seem to exemplify a backward style of living. For instance, when interviewed, many Afro-Guyanese “feel that the East Indians accepted lower standards of living” <sup>120</sup> and are quite puzzled as to why they would settle for such a lifestyle. Nevertheless, the Indo-Guyanese carry these values and traditional views with pride, as for them, they see them as part of their heritage and their distinct sense of identity in Guyana.

Amongst the settlements in the rural regions, especially in the communities of Black Bush, Port Mourant, and Canal Polder in East Berbice-Corentyne in Guyana, social structure follows those of tradition rather than modernity. For instance, men and women in society are not accorded equal status, and women are generally inferior and subservient to the men of the family. Women are the dominant force in the household, upholding their role as wife and mother, but in public life they have second class status.<sup>121</sup> Especially in the communities mentioned, this structure of family life is incredibly evident. Women in these communities rarely venture outside of their homes for community social and political activities, as their more urbanized and modernized counterparts do. Men are considered to be the providers for the family the head of the household, and representative for the family in social affairs outside of the

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<sup>120</sup> Skinner, E.P. *Ethnic Interaction in a Guyana Rural Community: A Study in Secondary Acculturation and Group Dynamics*. Diss. Columbia University, 1955. New York: Columbia University, 1955. Page 120.

<sup>121</sup> "Interview Shakuntala Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

home. The women's responsibility is to bare children, raise them, and uphold the household; in this case, even though the men may socially be the figurehead of the family, inside the home the women are actually the ones who are the lead decision makers in terms of the familial matters and the household.

### Marital Traditions

In terms of marriage, like in India, the Indo-Guyanese are a society where the women, rather than the men, move away from their mothers at the time of marriage. Marriage partners had been traditionally chosen by the elder members of the family and the ideal mate would be chosen from a 'respectable' family.<sup>122</sup> This old traditional practice of an arranged marriage was the acceptable practice amongst the older generations, who had been brought to Guyana by the British, and continued for another one to two subsequent generations. Looking at the younger generations that followed, however, they are starting to drift from the old practice of arranged marriage and have asserted for their own free choice when it comes to choosing their potential spouse. This has cause some upheaval and discontent amongst the older generations who still adhere strictly to the old ways of life, especially when their children choose spouses that cross religious and ethnic boundaries.

Wedding rituals in traditional Indian culture are elaborate affairs that can extend for several days to a week; beginning with a premarital ceremony that includes the engagement where the groom's party arrives at the bride's home, often in a formal

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<sup>122</sup> Gosine, Mahin. *Caribbean East Indians in America: Assimilation, Adapataion and Group Experience*. New York: Windsor, 1990. Print.

procession, and the post-wedding ceremony that includes welcoming the bride to her new home. In Indian culture, marriage is an exceedingly sacred ritual in which symbolizes the sacred union of not only two individuals, but the union of two families, extended family included. In Guyana, the wedding ritual is of equal, if not more, importance. For the Indo-Guyanese, rituals and ceremonies are the near embodiment of their culture, making their homeland seems a bit more tangible. Consequently, the wedding rituals and celebrations can start weeks before hand and continue weeks after the actual traditional wedding ceremonies.

Amongst the generations of Indo-Guyanese, actual awareness of the exact traditional rituals and meanings of those rituals is varied. Amongst the older generations, the level of understanding of the various marital rituals and their meanings, in the traditional Sanskrit, as well as the values of each ritual, was common knowledge. The older generations hold onto these traditions, as well as their meanings and values in order to hold onto their past, and hold the following of these rituals in great reverence.<sup>123</sup> Accordingly, even the traditional Sanskrit terms for the various rituals are part of the older generations' general vocabulary and correspond in accuracy to the definitions given by the local Pundits, or Hindu and Sanskrit scholars, of the community.<sup>124</sup> Conversely, amongst the younger generations, they are aware of the various forms of rituals that comprise a traditional wedding and when in doubt or confusion, seek the guidance of the Pundits or from their elders. Even though the younger generations may not know the various meanings and terms of the rituals that

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<sup>123</sup> "Interview Shakuntala Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

<sup>124</sup> Rauf, Mohammad A. *Indian Village in Guyana: A Study of Cultural Change and Ethnic Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 1974. Page 83.

comprise the wedding ritual, they still hold these traditions in great esteem and genuinely want to participate in the traditions of their ancestors.

The rituals involved in a typical Indo-Guyanese wedding are based on Hindu tradition, family tradition, and influence of the Caribbean Creole-culture of their new surroundings. The names of these three categories of wedding ritual are as follows: *Dharma-riti*, the traditional rituals that stem from the sacred Vedas, *Kuli-riti*, the rituals that are of familial value, and *Gaon-riti*, the rituals that derive from village tradition. On average, there are approximately seventeen various rituals that comprise the *dharma-riti* group of rituals that are practiced in a Indo-Guyanese wedding. These rituals are the basic rituals that follow Vedic religious traditions, which are also practiced in wedding ceremonies in India. These rituals include such rituals as *chekai*, the engagement ceremony at the groom's home, *hardi*, the ceremony in which 'dai' is rubbed on each of the bride and groom's bodies to ritually purify them, *baryat*, the ceremonial arrival of the groom's party at the house of the bride, and *bhanwar*, where the bride and groom walk around the sacred fire and nuptial pole seven times to form a sacred tie between them.

The *kuli-riti* rituals are those that stem from familial traditions that usually do not have any religious ties. Among the Indo-Guyanese, each family does not seem to have its own unique traditions, which is in direct contrast to families in India, who each have developed a unique family tradition that is respected by each family.<sup>125</sup> Instead, the families of the Indo-Guyanese practice some of the more popular and

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<sup>125</sup> Rauf, Mohammad A. *Indian Village in Guyana: A Study of Cultural Change and Ethnic Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 1974. Page 87.



widely practiced rituals that had been brought with East Indian families to Guyana. There are three such traditions that are widely practiced amongst the Indo-Guyanese. The first is the ritual 'battle' between the bride's family and the groom and his party that takes place after the wedding. After the wedding, the bride retreats to a room inside her home and is guarded by the female members of her family who block her groom's advances into the home. After a short scuffle where the bride's family hit the groom and his companions with sticks wrapped in flowers, a truce is formed by making a payment to the bride's sister.<sup>126</sup> The amount paid is usually around five Guyanese dollars, which is less than five cents in American currency.

The second familial ritual is when the groom takes off his shoes to enter his bride's home and sits beside her on a carpet, the bride's younger brother steals the shoes and a subsequent payment now has to be made to recover the stolen shoes.<sup>127</sup> The third ritual occurs while the bride and groom are sitting side-by-side on the carpet. The sisters-in-law bring a plate of bangles to them and then proceed to toss a bangle in the air. The bride and groom try to catch the single bangle, and whoever catches it will be the spouse that dominates in the household.

The last set of rituals is the *gaon-riti* rituals, or those that are of village tradition. In India, it is not uncommon for each village to have its own distinct traditions, as most villages are spaced widely apart outside of urban centers. In Guyana, these traditions represent a unique fusion of East Indian and Creole traditions

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<sup>126</sup> Rauf, Mohammad A. *Indian Village in Guyana: A Study of Cultural Change and Ethnic Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 1974. Page 87.

<sup>127</sup> "Interview Parsuram Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

and hold little to no importance in terms of Hinduism.<sup>128</sup> These traditions are unique to most communities in Guyana, however, there are two such rituals that have become widespread; these rituals are termed *Badai* and *Kakan*.

The first ritual, *Badai*, occurs after the rituals that take place in the bride's home are complete. The bride shuts herself in her room with her best friends and sister-in-law who help her to take off her traditional Indian dress and redresses in a traditional Western style gown with a veil.<sup>129</sup> While this is occurring the groom is in a separate room changing out of his traditional Indian attire into a western style suit. The bride and groom then depart from the home holding hands and everyone present wishes them good luck as coins and rice are thrown over them as they proceed to get into a car, happily, to leave her home. This practice is exceedingly divergent from traditional Indian practice, where the bride leaves her home in bright colors, as white is reserved for mourning. The bride, in India, would proceed to embrace each of her family members and be in tears, as the bride who does not cry, would be labeled as "a shameless girl who was desirous of leaving her parent's household".<sup>130</sup> This particular tradition illustrates the drastic influence of westernization that living in Guyana has placed on the Indo-Guyanese and some of the breaks from traditional Indian practices that they have taken.

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<sup>128</sup> Rauf, Mohammad A. *Indian Village in Guyana: A Study of Cultural Change and Ethnic Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 1974. Page 87.

<sup>129</sup> Rauf, Mohammad A. *Indian Village in Guyana: A Study of Cultural Change and Ethnic Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 1974. Page 88.

<sup>130</sup> Rauf, Mohammad A. *Indian Village in Guyana: A Study of Cultural Change and Ethnic Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 1974. Page 88.

The second *gaon-riti* ritual showcases the divergent importance of some traditions between the older generations, who seek to cling to their homeland, and the younger generations who have melded into their new surroundings and western culture. This ritual is known as *Kakan* and occurs on the day following the wedding when all the rituals that must occur in either the bride or groom's home are finished and the families gather in each respective household to help the family clean-up.<sup>131</sup> The family members gather all of the rice, flowers, Marua plants, and other items used in the ceremonies and take them to the river where they proceed to throw them in. In their eyes, this river represents the holy Ganges River and they are throwing them into the river as tribute. The traditional *Kakan* ceremony is then blended with Creole tradition, which dictates that the end of a wedding is marked by a vast festive celebration.<sup>132</sup> The parents of the bride and groom arrange for multiple goats to be skinned and roasted and a large quantity of rum, which is proud commodity of Guyana, is ordered for the occasion as well. This celebration usually occurs from noon until midnight, often times continuing on, with the younger generations, much later until dawn.

The divergent nature of this ritual, between old and young generations, can be seen in the demarcation between the river ceremony and the subsequent festive celebration. The elders and pundits of the community hold the most active participation in the throwing of wedding items into the ceremonial 'Ganges' while the younger generations tend to hold themselves back, lacking interest in this part of the

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<sup>131</sup> "Interview Parsuram Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

<sup>132</sup> Rauf, Mohammad A. *Indian Village in Guyana: A Study of Cultural Change and Ethnic Identity*. Leiden: Brill, 1974. Page 88.

ritual. In the later part of the celebration, during the great feast, drinking, and dancing, the younger generation shows active and keen interest and participation while the older generations, while they do enjoy the feast and celebrating, do hold a more passive disposition when it comes to the drinking and dancing. The dancing becomes more suggestive and provocative as the night goes on, as is also demonstrated in western cultures, and the older generations tend to retreat during this later portion of the celebration.

In East Indian society, the sole purpose of marriage is to bear children, and in Indo-Guyanese society this ideal has been upheld as well, but is also starting to fade amongst the younger generations. In this highly traditional society of the Indo-Guyanese, some ideals are still in place, such as public displays of affection being strongly discouraged, the idea of divorce is openly ridiculed and exceedingly rare, and the creation of children outside of marriage is highly contemptible and is treated with scorn. Especially in present-day, Indo-Guyanese society is undergoing rapid development and modernization, especially amongst the younger generations who are exposed and allured by the ways of the western world, in terms of traditional practices such as the ones described. Nonetheless, the rural areas, in particular those that are distanced from urban centers and the rapid spread of westernization and modernization, cling intensely to their traditional customs, practices, and values that hark back to their ancestral homeland.

### Cultural Festivals and Celebrations

The Indo-Guyanese have retained many of their traditional holy celebrations, festivals, and holidays. The first of those celebrations is known as Diwali, popularly known as the Festival of Lights. In Hindu tradition, it is a five-day festival that

usually falls between mid-October to mid-November, and is one of the most important festivals of the year. In Guyana, while this holiday is celebrated most strictly, for its religious connotations, by the Hindu Indo-Guyanese population, it is also a national holiday in Guyana and is celebrated by all. The festival, just like that in India, includes the distribution of sweets that signifies the importance of serving and sharing, the illuminating of the inside and outside of one's home, and the wearing of new clothes which signifies healthy souls in healthy bodies.

A second holiday that is practiced in India as well as Guyana is Holi which is a spring festival celebrated in March and is the festival of colors. This festival marks the beginning of spring, commemorates good harvests and fertile land, and also holds religious significance in relation to a story in Hinduism that speaks of the love Radha had for Krishna. In Guyana this celebration is also a national holiday that is practiced by all members of the Guyanese population and whose main ceremony occurs in the capital of Georgetown.

A third holiday that is not celebrated in India but is unique to Guyana is the National holiday of Indian Arrival Day that is celebrated annually on May 5<sup>th</sup>. It is celebrated on May 5<sup>th</sup> to mark the first day of arrivals of indentured laborers from India to Guyana. This holiday commemorates the East Indian migrants from India that were brought to serve as indentured laborers on the plantations of Guyana and who now comprise almost half of the Guyanese population. This holiday originated in Trinidad in 1945 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of East Indians to Trinidad; today this holiday is celebrated elsewhere in the Caribbean with large East Indian populations, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia.

## Style of Dress

Through my travels through the rural villages of Guyana, I witnessed that the styles of dress and adornments amongst the Indo-Guyanese are a distinct fusion of Indian ideals of modesty in their attire and European style of dress that is influenced by their Caribbean surroundings and Creole culture. The everyday attire of men, women, and children is of a very relaxed nature, allows flexibility and comfort in the humid working conditions of the fields, and is more concurrent with western styles of dress, rather than Indian. Their clothing operates on the Indian principle of simplicity that is believed to reflect the teachings of Gandhi and his principle of the 'inner man'. This virtue denotes that man should be essentially "unostentatious, honest, and virtuous, as opposed to being showy, exhibitionist, and cunning".<sup>133</sup> Their counterparts in India adorn themselves in vibrantly decorative and colored dress on a daily basis; the Indo-Guyanese on the other hand, dress in western style clothing that is more reserved in coloring and decoration and reserve there more ornate traditional clothing for formal occasions and celebrations.

The Indo-Guyanese men wear basic outfits of relaxed, light, loose fitting shirts and pants that are easy to perform manual labor in and shield them from the sometimes harsh Caribbean sun in the fields, as well as the numerous mosquitoes that are found in these wet lands. In addition, men are occasionally seen wearing a scarf around their neck or a hat on their heads to further block them from the sun. Their shirts most commonly are hung loosely, un-tucked; only on formal occasions are men ever seen formally attired.

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<sup>133</sup> Dube, S. C. *Indian Village*. New York: Cornell UP, 1955. Page 182.

Women, as well, are most often seen wearing relaxed, light, loose fitting clothing, which is not in accordance with traditional Indian dress. Very rarely will you see an Indo-Guyanese woman or girl wearing a traditional *shalwar kameez*, sari, or head covering. This kind of attire, specifically the head covering and *shalwar kameez* style of dress, is only seen on the older generations who still adhere to a strict sense of modesty and tradition.<sup>134</sup> These types of dress are meant to conceal the womanly contours of the body and promote modesty and simplicity, and in some cases religious values, especially in regards to the wearing of the headdress. Women and younger girls of the younger generations, and some of the older generations that are not as traditional in terms of dress, will be seen wearing either long flowing skirts, pants, longer shorts (especially amongst the younger girls), and t-shirts or long sleeve shirts as are common in western style clothing.

Headdresses, outside of the older generations' everyday wear, are most commonly reserved solely for when either attending a religious ceremony in a mosque or temple, when individuals of both faiths cover their heads, or when attending a wedding ceremony or subsequent celebration that denotes the necessity of wearing a head covering. During everyday religious gatherings in a mosque or temple, women and men don't dress as traditionally, merely dressing conservatively and modestly, women especially wearing head coverings and long skirts.<sup>135</sup> During formal religious gatherings and wedding ceremonies women and men alike, tend to dress more traditionally. Women dress for special occasions in more elaborately decorated and

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<sup>134</sup> "Interview Shakuntala Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

<sup>135</sup> "Interview Shakuntala Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

vibrantly colored dress than they would normally and also wear traditional saris, especially at weddings. As also denoted in traditional Indian culture, social gatherings are looked upon as occasions where you may meet your prospective mate; therefore women, especially, wear beautiful garments of lively colors and decorations in order to make clear that they are of marriageable age and attract the attention of males in attendance. The following image depicts a religious ceremony taking place in a Hindu temple in Skeldon, Guyana and showcases the traditional types of Indian dress women don during these ceremonies.





Figure 16 Depiction of traditional Indian dress worn inside a Hindu Temple<sup>136</sup>

In terms of the donning of other accessories such as footwear, the Indo-Guyanese, just like their counterparts in India, do not find the wearing of footwear to be essential, and do not wear them at all inside their homes. While most, if not all, Indo-Guyanese families can afford footwear, most do not wear them, except for cases of attending special occasions or when necessary, for instance performing manual labor. It is customary to see most of the elders of the population, walking about the community barefoot, as is also seen in the children, who in a lot of cases even attend school barefoot. This casual practice of going barefoot can be linked to their environment and warm conditions that make wearing footwear burdensome and unnecessary. This behavior is seen amongst the rural populations, whereas in contrast, the Indo-Guyanese that populate the cities do not follow this practice outside of their homes, as it is impractical.

One other aspect of their style of dress amongst the Indo-Guyanese is the popular adornment of gold jewelry. In India is highly uncommon to travel through the country and see a woman or girl of any age not adorned in some kind of gold jewelry or with an armful of bangles. In Guyana, this practice is seen as well. Women and young girls all have the traditional nose piercings in the left nostril; in Hindu culture most girls have their noses' pierced at the age of 16, which is the marriageable age.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Ramnarain, Nadira. *Indian Dress in Temple*. 2012. Photograph. Crabwood Creek, Guyana

<sup>137</sup> "Interview Shakuntala Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

In addition, Indo-Guyanese women are never seen without wearing golden jewelry, especially bangles. Traditionally, women wear armfuls of bangles, both in India and Guyana, on their wedding day. During everyday life, however, Indo-Guyanese women do not wear nearly as many bangles as Indian women, but still are never seen without some combination of golden bangles, other bracelets, earrings, or necklaces. In Indian tradition, as well as Indo-Guyanese, it is highly inauspicious for a married woman, especially, to be seen without the adornment of golden jewelry. The wearing of golden jewelry represents that the husband can provide for his family and that the family as a whole is happy and are prosperous. If a woman is seen not wearing jewelry, it is a sign that that husband is weak and cannot support or provide for his family.<sup>138</sup> Women prize their golden jewelry and garner a sense of pride from wearing it; when traveling into the urban areas, Indo-Guyanese women are incredibly fearful of having their gold stolen and will very rarely wear them into the city, but leave their jewelry at home where it is out of harm's way.

### Cuisine

Indo-Guyanese cuisine is a unique blend of influences from India, the Caribbean, Creole culture, and the other distinct ethnic groups that are present in Guyana. The East Indians, when migrating to Guyana, lost many of the traditional spices and ingredients that they would normally utilize in the making of staple dishes. While some may have brought traditional ingredients and spices with them, in Guyana those same particular ingredients and spices may not have been indigenous to the land, therefore the Indo-Guyanese had to adapt and look for alternatives to their former

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<sup>138</sup> "Interview Shakuntala Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

staples.<sup>139</sup> Consequently, when tasting Indo-Guyanese cuisine, you will find that is not nearly as spicy as a similar dish you would find in India. In addition, in Guyana there were new commodities, such as fish, plantains, and cassava that were not a norm in their former diet in India, but were now a readily available commodity in their new environment, especially for rural dwellers, became new staples in their diet.

Nevertheless, there are several staples of a typical Indian diet that managed to make their way to Guyana with the East Indian migrants, though some aspects of them may have changed. Curry dishes are a staple of Indo-Guyanese, and Guyanese cuisine as a whole. Curry in Guyana, however, is very different than curry in India. First, curry in India is not a powder as it is in Guyana, Indians use a distinct blend of spices in their dishes, and not a ground up compulsion of spices as is the norm in the West Indies. Indo-Guyanese curry is very similar to curry powders that are used throughout the Caribbean, especially Jamaica; curry in Guyana usually contains allspice, lacks black and green cardamom, and tends to be spicy and sweet due to its use of coconut milk. All of these things are not used in Indian curry, which tends to be much spicier with a twinge of sour rather than sweet, as Indian curries do not usually contain coconut milk, except for in southern India. The Indo-Guyanese prepare a myriad of curry dishes including curried chicken, duck, goat, lamb, shrimp, and a dish of seven curries that is reserved for special occasions and religious functions.

Additional dishes that are found in Indian and Indo-Guyanese diets are the popular desert dish of gulab jamun, a traditional bread of roti, dhal, and sweet rice (which is typically found in southern India as well for its use of coconut milk). In

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<sup>139</sup> "Interview Parsuram Ramnarain." Personal interview. 7 June 2012

these dishes, as well, there are differences. For instance, gulab jamun in Guyana is much lighter in color and taste than its rich, dark, and densely syrupy version in India. Another staple of any Indian diet is bread; in India roti bread is unleavened flat bread that has the appearance of a tortilla, but is slightly crisp. Guyanese roti, on the other hand, is where two layers are rolled out together and cooked on a *tava*, or concave griddle, and produces a chewy, dense roti that can be unfolded and pulled apart into layers, almost like a fluffy biscuit. Dhal in Guyana is similarly different as well; dhal is a dish prepared with lentils, peas, and beans and produces a stew that is eaten with almost all meals. Indo-Guyanese dhal is made with yellow split peas, something that is not commonly found in India, and therefore produces a lighter yellow tinged dhal that looks like a form of split pea soup that westerners are used to, but yellow in color, and can have a little bit of spice to it, which is not usually found in India.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **CONCLUSION**

This thesis argued and concludes that the East Indian indentured laborers which were brought to Guyana from 1838 through 1917 were enabled and forced to construct their own unique identity, the identity of the Indo-Guyanese, due to the oppressive nature of the indenture system and racial divide that began at the onset of the indenture period and carried through to present day. The East Indian population of Guyana is a community of people with a rich history; one that began with being uprooted from their traditional homeland and ended with the founding of a new national identity and social consciousness. This thesis discussed the nature of the East Indians' migration to the Caribbean, a world that was incredibly different from their old homes and villages, one in which they were forced to leave much of their family behind and were subsequently deprived of their former culture, language, and heritage. These East Indian laborers were a people who held their traditional values of the importance of family, great moral character, humility, modesty, and dedicated service to other members of the community above all else. These ideals of East Indian ethics made them favored as laborers by the very fact of their own culture, despised by the African population, and also formed the basis of the Indo-Guyanese identity and prevailing sense of Indian-ness that grew amongst the Indo-Guyanese community.

This thesis sought to answer two questions; first, it examined the motivations and policies through which indentured regime was created in order to bring East Indian labor to Guyana to form the labor force of the plantations. Secondly, the thesis

utilized historical and ethnographic research in order to explore the transition of the East Indians from indentured laborer to resident and members of Guyanese society. Using historical sources and my own travel and field-work experience in Guyana and India, I was able to soundly support the arguments of my thesis and formulate distinct conclusions. This thesis finds that the East Indian ‘coolie’ laborers, through the degradation and oppression of the indenture system, were able to formulate their own unique sense of identity and consciousness in the later twentieth century. East Indians form the majority in this country that is violently divided by race and ideology, a country whose racial divide was instigated by the Europeans at the onset of the indenture period in 1838 and continued through history to present day society.

This thesis finds that the resentment that formed amongst the African population of Guyana against the East Indians prevails to this day and is seen in the nature of ethnic politics that has divided the nation for generations, to the stereotyping that is evident in the realm of employment in the public sector, to the division of communities throughout Guyana into distinctly African or East Indian settlements, with the Africans predominately in the cities and the East Indians dominating the rural regions. This resentment and the subsequent stereotypes that ensued were only cultivated further by the colonial administration and the estate owners who demeaned them as ‘coolies’ and created oppressive policies in order to keep them on the plantations. This segregation, resentment, and oppression forced the East Indian population to form their own identity in order to formulate a sense of unity and pride amongst their community in order to stand strong in the face of adversity.

While many East Indians decided to remain on the plantations post-indenture in order to take advantage of the medical and housing offerings that the estates

offered, many decided to become independent from the estates, creating their own settlements and their own livelihoods in the rice industry. The creation of these settlements, along with the formulation of newfound sense of independence, set the foundation for the development of a new sense of identity for the East Indian population. This thesis argues that the Indo-Guyanese created an identity that is greatly in touch with their new home as well as holds on dearly to the rich traditions and culture of their ancestral homeland. Central to this cultural preservation is the creation of a strong identity with the heartland of Hinduism, the land from which many of them derived the land of The Ramayana. This story of rich cultural history allowed the Indo-Guyanese to create a substantial link to their elusive homeland and created a sense of pride and nationalism within their hearts. From this, they continued to erect temples in their villages, practice their traditional religious rituals and holidays, live their lives according to their ancient traditional ethics and morals, and create a distinct sense of Indian-ness that connects them to their Motherland and created a sense of unity amongst their community. My arguments demonstrate that this sense of Indian-ness in Guyana is a distinct fusion of East Indian traditions, social constructs of India that the East Indians formulated, as well as elements of their new home of Guyana and the West.

Crossing all traditional caste and religious boundaries, the Indo-Guyanese forged a sense of unity and brotherhood, uniting themselves under the term *jahan* that refers to the ships they traveled to Guyana aboard<sup>140</sup>, and continuing this unity into modern day. The lifestyle they have created, especially in the increasingly rural and

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<sup>140</sup> Raymer, Steve. *Images of a Journey: India in Diaspora*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007. Print.

secluded regions of Guyana, alludes to a place South Asian culture frozen in time; while the East Indians have embraced some aspects of Caribbean culture in some aspects of their cuisine, music, and clothing, they have decisively held onto their heritage as well. This thesis illustrates that the Indo-Guyanese have clung to their traditions and practices persistently, perhaps even more closely than in India itself. In India it is easy to witness that the country is moving quickly towards modernity and westernization. The younger generations, especially, are becoming more modern, westernized, and have started to move away from the traditions of their ancestors. As this trend of modernity and westernization continues to pick up speed in India, in Guyana the Indo-Guyanese have continued to hold off on some aspects of westernization and modernity, in some cases few homes even have basic modernizations such as electricity, as well as continuing to hold on dearly to their heritage and cultural practices.

Through this research I have furthered my understanding of relations and interactions between India and Guyana in the past, during the indenture period, as well as in the present. In May of 1965, The Commission of India was formed in Georgetown in order to begin a bilateral relationship between India and Guyana. Presently, there has been relatively little interaction between India and Guyana, however, in recent years, there have been motions to try and change this. For instance, the Indian government has been present and involved with recent Indian Arrival Day celebrations in Guyana in an effort to forge bilateral relations between the two countries. In addition, especially in times of crisis, such as after the Mumbai bombing, the Guyanese and Indian governments have met and reiterated their



solidarity with one another, seeing Guyana, as well as other countries in the Caribbean with large East Indian communities, as extensions of the Indian continent.

This research has greatly enhanced my working knowledge of the dynamics of diaspora, indentured labor in the Caribbean, the culture of Guyana and the Indo-Guyanese, as well as the powers that create resentment and conflict between groups that can persist across generations. Researching the Diaspora in Guyana has allowed for a better understanding of the people of both countries, their rich traditions and cultural practices that have been passed down through generations and have managed to traverse oceans and still uphold their integrity and importance in new lands. Obtaining an inside glance into the world of the Indo-Guyanese allowed me to see the kind of perseverance, tenacity, and integrity, and strength that a culture can acquire and maintain in order to overcome adversity and create a life for themselves. The Indo-Guyanese have created a world for themselves that demonstrates a cohesive harmony between tradition and a new homeland.

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## Appendix - One

### Human Subjects Review Board Approval

#### RESEARCH OFFICE

210 HULLIHEN HALL  
UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE  
NEWARK, DELAWARE 19716-1551  
Ph: 302/831-2136  
Fax: 302/831-2828

DATE: April 26, 2012  
TO: Allison Solowsky  
FROM: University of Delaware IRB  
STUDY TITLE: [331680-1] The Indian Diaspora and the Preservation of Cultural Identity  
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project  
ACTION: APPROVED  
APPROVAL DATE: April 26, 2012  
EXPIRATION DATE: April 25, 2013  
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review  
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure. All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office. Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years. Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Jody-Lynn Berg at (302) 831-1119 or [jlberg@udel.edu](mailto:jlberg@udel.edu). Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.