

**COMMENTARY** *By* DR. DHANPAUL NARINE

# Ancestral Footprints:

## East Indian Indentureship

If you took a plane from JFK Airport to Calcutta the chances are you will be tired by the time you get there. On May 5th 1838 the history of the Caribbean changed dramatically as 396 East Indians landed on the shores of British Guiana. This was no joyride and there was no time for niceties.

The journey from Calcutta to British Guiana was fraught with hardships, and like the slave ships of an earlier era there were deaths on the way. The two ships that landed were the *Whitby* and the *Hesperus*. Their cargo was to usher in a new form of slavery that changed the complexion of the colony.

Why were East Indians brought to British Guiana? The answer is not complicated. Slavery was abolished in 1834 by an Act in the British Parliament. This meant that freed blacks refused to work in the plantations. But there were those that believed in the supremacy of sugar. After all, this crop had filled the coffers of the planter class and they refused to accept the fact that the estates will lay abandoned and money and extravagance will be a thing of the past.

Sugar had to be enthroned again and it had to be done with new labor. Indentureship then is the revival or the second coming of the sugar industry in the Caribbean. The task was to find a suitable labor supply that would fill the shoes of the slaves but without the severity of the conditions of the plantations. India was already sending workers to Mauritius and the system appeared to be working. A similar policy could perhaps be employed for British Guiana.

It was left to John Gladstone to articulate this policy. He was the owner of Plantation Vreed-en-Hoop. In 1836, while recuperating from an injury, he sent off a letter to the British East India Company. Gladstone requested that

consideration be given to sending indentured laborer to Demerara in British Guiana. His request was approved and the floodgates were opened for East Indians to be transported to the Caribbean.

What was the journey like? According to many accounts the journey from India to the colonies was long harsh and



**SS Whitby and the SS Hesperus' arriving at Port Georgetown, British Guiana, on May 5, 1838.**

brutal. Dr. Leila Sarup points out that in the first four years of indentureship to Mauritius people in Calcutta and London had begun to criticize the East India Company "for the callous way the emigrants were treated on board ships and in the Caribbean was longer and the cruelty was no less. In an effort to deaden the senses a plentiful supply of opium was on board.

During the years 1838 to 1917 our ancestral footprints have been imprinted in many countries. The records show that Indians went to British Guiana in 1838 and they were in other countries as follows: Trini-

dad (1845), Martinique (1853), French Guiana (1854), Guadeloupe (1854), Grenada (1857), Belize (1859), St. Lucia (1859), St. Vincent (1861), St. Croix (1863), and Suriname (1873).

The statistics show that British Guiana had the biggest number of emigrants. During the period (1838 to 1917) British Guiana received 238, 909 Indians. The other countries received as follows: Trinidad 143,939; Jamaica 37,027; St. Vincent 2,472; Grenada 3,200; Belize 3,000; St. Lucia 4,354; Suriname 34,304; St. Croix 3221; Martinique 25,509; Guadeloupe 42,326; and

French Guiana 8,500.

What were the terms and conditions of settlement? The period of service was for five years for male emigrants and three years for females. The work that had to be done was in 'connection with the cultivation of the soil or the manufacture of the produce in any plantation.' The laborers were required to work everyday except Sundays and authorized holidays while the allotted time was nine hours per day 'inclusive of half an hour for rest and refreshment.' The payment given was hardly in keeping with the prevailing rate. They were paid one shilling and a half penny 'that was equivalent to twelve an-

nas and six pie for each days work.'

One of the conditions of indentureship was repatriation. This means that the figures cited would have been decreased by about 25 per cent as a result of Indians returning to India after their period of indentureship. Once they arrived laborers were deployed to various plantations and they included Wakenaam, Albion, Schoonard, Vergenoe-gen, Leonora and others.

The planters did everything within their power to separate blacks from Indians and carved out settlements for both groups. The signs of this separation are evident

mission found that more could be done.

By 1900, it was clear to some advocates that indentureship had to go. There were calls in India as well for the system to be abolished and Mahatma Gandhi was among them.

The system officially came to an end in 1917. The end of indentureship saw a highly stratified society in British Guiana. Over 50,000 Indians had taken up the offer of the planters and had returned to India. But those that stayed had to compete in a society in which the odds were stacked against them.

It was found that while they owned small



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Their levels of educational attainment were much higher than Indians. In the two decades after indentureship the economic and social status of Indians were in a state of limbo. But perhaps the greatest setback was how East Indians perceived themselves.

In the 1930's the Moyne Commission visited British Guiana and concluded that East Indians did not regard themselves as full-fledged citizens of Guyana. They hoped that one day they would be repatriated to India. It wasn't until the forties that East Indians began to realize that education and property ownership were avenues to social mobility. In 1947 Indians, Blacks and other groups began to agitate for political change. A combination of education and creolization led the way for greater involvement.

The formation of political parties and the emergence of Cheddi Jagan as a trade unionist and political leader set the stage for change. The ensuing years would see East Indians becoming part a tumultuous struggle in Guyana. This would include access to political power, the prevalence of racial politics and disturbances and a psychological assault that would last for years.

But throughout it all East Indians have been resilient. They have fed the Caribbean and have celebrated the achievements of education and learning. These will be discussed later but for now our ancestral footprints have worn well and they will continue to leave an impact wherever hard work, thrift and initiative are prized.

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today as certain villages in Guyana are predominantly black while others are Indians. This is as a direct result of colonial policy. Life on the plantations was regimented. There were numerous reports of cruelty on the plantations carried out by the overseers.

The regimented lifestyle and the cruelty of the planters led to resentment among Indians. This resulted in strikes, revolts, riots and rebellions and they were put down with brutal efficiency. In fact conditions on the estates were so poor that commissions of enquiry were set up to find out how the quality of life could be improved.

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plots of land Indians could not move up in the society for a number of reasons. They were not Christians and as a result could not hold jobs in the government sector. In addition, in the 1920's Indians had little access to education and their daughters were married at an early age. There were not many schools that were established to teach Indian children. Indians lived in the estates and were not exposed to an urban lifestyle and the ideas of change that this may have brought about.

Africans, on the other hand, had a head start in the economy. They were Christians, had worked as security personnel on the plantations, and held jobs in the civil service.