

The Caribbean

Introduction



his chapter is a general introduction to the Diaspora in the Caribbean region. It attempts to sketch briefly the setting in which the drama was played out of Indians who had been inducted there in the mid-19th century in a condition that has been described as virtual slavery. But the descendants of these same persons gradually became honourable members of the societies in which they found themselves. The three following chapters contain a detailed survey of the Indian settlers in two of the former British colonies in that region, namely, Trinidad & Tobago as well as Guyana; and the colony that the Dutch had established in Suriname. The Indian emigration to those countries has been selected for in-depth treatment because it is in them that there are, even today, relatively large numbers of Indian settlers – over 40, 51 and 35% respectively, of their total populations. Most of these migrants had been taken to those colonies as indentured labourers. It is there that they had spent their initial years in hardship and unrequited toil. And it is there that they and their descendants had overcome their servitude and suffering to become respected members of their respective societies and, in time, even to attain political eminence. Basdeo Panday in Trinidad & Tobago, Cheddi Jagan and Bharrat Jagdeo in Guyana, and Jaggernath Lachmon in Suriname have been the most prominent among them.

- 15.2. It must be noted at the outset that in the Caribbean all persons of Indian origin are known as ‘East Indians’, an expression that will recur frequently in this chapter. This nomenclature is logical as the whole region is commonly referred to as the West Indies and its residents as ‘Westindians’. Commenting in a humorous note on this innovation, the late Samuel Selvon had written as follows: ‘If you look in the dictionary – I use Chambers myself – the definition for an East Indian means an inhabitant of the *East Indies*. This starts to be bewildering, and gets even more so, for when we have East Indians born in Trinidad, we should have to call them East Indian Trinidadians. And the people living in these islands are called Westindians. So, by definition, what we have here is really an *East Indian Trinidadian Westindian*.’
- 15.3. It was not only in politics but also in other spheres as well that the descendants of Indian migrants have been able to shoot to fame. Sir V. S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon (who was actually of mixed

ancestry) have been, among them, the best known names in literature. There have also been a number of women writers who have won laurels for their work, having overcome the inbuilt prejudices against women in indenture days – Mahadai Das, Ramabai Espinet and Niala Maharaj are some of them. In diplomacy and international relations, Sridath Ramphal distinguished himself as a two-term Commonwealth Secretary General.

- 15.4. Another Indo-Caribbean feature that deserves notice is in the context of ‘the three Cs’ for which this region has gained universal repute – cricket, calypso and carnival. Over more than a century of their residence in these islands, the East Indians have developed into genuine natives as they have adopted and enriched all the three ‘Cs’, even though they may have had to make some adaptations along the way. Poems like *‘Kuli Man Has Come To Stay’* called on the larger Caribbean society to recognise the legitimacy and permanence of the Indian presence. Their *chutney-soca* was an amalgam of song and dance which they had drawn from their own folk songs and dances, as well as on the soul-calypso (or *so-ca*) of the Creoles. As for cricket, it took them awhile to shake themselves loose from their indentured moorings to indulge in what was then a gentleman’s game. But by 1950, Sonny Ramadhin of Trinidad had emerged as a right-hand spin bowler in test cricket. Seven years later, C.L.R. James extolled the virtues of Rohan Babulal Kanhai. He wrote about his batting that he had attained the freedom ‘to create not only a house for Mr. Biswas, a house like other houses, but to sail the seas that open out to the East Indian who no longer has to prove himself to anybody but himself.’ Others were to follow after that in the person of Joe Solomon and Alvin Kallicharan, proving conclusively that the East Indian had successfully scaled also the sacred Caribbean citadel of cricket.
- 15.5. In an article published in the British journal *New Community* in the early 1990s, Professor (now Lord) Bhiku Parekh had noted that ‘Overseas Indians’ take an affectionate interest in India and regard it as ‘their cultural and spiritual home’. He then added that ‘over time the ties had weakened but they were never severed’. These observations are relevant also to the Indian Diaspora in the Caribbean, and particularly so in the case of Guyana.
- 15.6. Some of the PIOs in that country continue to bear a grudge against India for not having given any material support to the Indian community during the difficult decades of political dominance by the Afro-Guyanese. Among educated members of the community, one often finds a certain indifference towards India and things Indian. With few familial ties to bind them, and with the vast distance between Guyana and India, hardly any of them visit the land of their ancestors. Many members of the Muslim community of Indian origin prefer not to be regarded as Indians. The same sentiment is found among the richer segments of the PIOs who also display a marked reluctance to be identified with India. They are closer to the USA and Canada where many of them have been educated and where innumerable Indo-Guyanese have relocated themselves. The businessmen among them show no particular desire to import goods from India.
- 15.7. Nevertheless, it must be said about the ‘silent majority’ throughout the Caribbean that the members

of the Indian Diaspora, living their simple lives in the rural areas and belonging to the lower and middle rungs of society, are generally proud of their Indian ancestry. They are keen to know more about the land of their origin, its past and present, its culture and its role in the contemporary world. They harbour warm and friendly feelings towards what is for them the land of their religious and spiritual inheritance. It is primarily from this segment of the local Diaspora that there is the desire to learn Indian languages and for their children to acquire skills in Indian music and dance.

- 15.8. A brief reference will also be made in the subsequent Chapter 19 to the induced emigration of Indians to the French West Indies, that comprised mainly of Guadeloupe, Martinique and French Guiana. This was not too difficult an enterprise for France as it already had its own Indian colonies in Pondicherry, Chandernagar, Mahé and Karaikal. The number of prospective recruits from those territories was grossly inadequate to meet its needs. France negotiated for many years with a reluctant Britain to allow it to recruit labour from British India. As those negotiations dragged on endlessly, the French were not averse in the meanwhile to smuggle Indian labour to the Caribbean from British India.
- 15.9. The *conquistadores* of Spain did not have a base in India from which to import labour. In any case, after their conquest of almost the whole of Central and South America, they did not need any indentured labour as they had enough indigenous people to exploit and put to work - until Spanish rule was finally ended in that vast region. Just for completeness, Chapter 19 takes note of the Indian presence in the countries of Central and Latin America (including the French West Indies), even though the Diaspora is thinly represented in that vast region.

A Perspective of the Indian Diaspora in the Caribbean

- 15.10. After the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire by an Act of Parliament in 1834, the British planters in the Caribbean tried initially to forestall the danger of desertion by their slave labour. They devised a system of 'state supervision', according to which former slaves were compelled to work on their estates as contract labourers for a period of ten years. But as this did not achieve the expected results, the British colonial governments, as also the settlers, began to look for cheap labour from wherever they could. India was their obvious and first choice. They were able to persuade the British government in Delhi to agree to their persistent exhortations to save them from their plight.
- 15.11. A large number of poor and indigent Indians allowed themselves to be tempted by the attractive picture that recruiting agents held out to them of life in a foreign land. They decided to leave their homes for the same reasons that had motivated their compatriots who were going abroad at about the same time to other parts of the British Empire. We need not repeat those reasons here as they have been stated elsewhere in this report.

- 15.12. These settlers had usually carried with them on their way to their respective port of embarkation in India, only their pots and pans, a few pieces of clothing, and perhaps also a blanket. Yet they managed to bequeath to their children and their grandchildren the cultural heritage of their land of origin. This was possible because they had also taken with them memories of a highly developed society with its ancient religions and its rich traditions and culture. They soon discovered on arrival at their destinations that these intangible parts of their baggage were totally alien to what they found in the Caribbean countries. Their new environment was predominantly Euro-centric, with traces of an Afro-centric nature. The indentured Indians made strenuous efforts to recall and retain what they could of their religious rites and practices, their home languages, their costumes and eating habits, their culture and their traditions. A few of the migrants may have even been proud owners of landed property before a cruel fate had deprived them of their possessions. All of them knew the value of money. It was not surprising that after their contractual period they opted to lead simple lives, so that they could provide a decent livelihood for their children. They segregated themselves voluntarily as soon as they could from the other racial groups and, as V.S.Naipaul has noted in his *Area of Darkness*, the indentured Indians managed to 'recreate an Eastern Uttar Pradesh village in Central Trinidad as if in the vastness of India'. This comment applied with equal validity to the other British colonies in the Caribbean. For several decades, they had little time or interest in getting involved in the general life around them.
- 15.13. It was natural that their peculiar position had ingrained in them a gut feeling that the Whites who exploited and ill-treated them were superior to them and that they, in turn, were better than the Blacks. It was not unnatural that the latter, in turn, reciprocated the Indians' sentiment towards them in ample measure. They even regarded them as uncivilised - if only because the former slaves had, in the meanwhile, converted to the white man's church and had also adopted many of his food, attire and some other details of daily life. Thus, both the Whites and the Afro-Caribbeans began to regard the East Indians for a long time as a hostile and exotic group, insufficiently integrated and therefore alien to everyone else.
- 15.14. The Indian emigrants also fondly remembered the old Indian institution of the joint or extended family. There was no way in which they could replicate it in their new environment. The barrack life of their initial indenture days militated against any family life at all for most of them. There were few married couples among them. There were also hardly any single women among the indentured labourers, so that it was almost impossible for most of the men to start a new family even if they had wanted to. It was only in later years of the indenture period that entire families, as well as more women were recruited from India. Housed in long, barrack-like structures, the emigrants were thrown together without any consideration for privacy. An unintended result of their cramped existence was that inhibitions of caste and creed had to be abandoned willy nilly. On the debit side, it is sad to note that the shortage of space and of women resulted in numerous conflicts and sex-related crimes in the barracks.

- 15.15. The social system and the mental attitudes of their host societies stifled the free expression of these people. In many cases, tolerance rather than encouragement was displayed towards their religions, their languages and their dress, as well as other aspects of their existence. The very insistence that they be like the rest of the society fuelled their spirit of resistance. For instance, they ignored the contempt accorded to their “bamboo marriages”. According to the *Dharmashastras*, their nuptials were valid and blessed. In their closely-knit communities, traditions inherited from their ancestors were unquestioningly sustained and passed on through succeeding generations. For many, it may have seemed an act of desperation as rituals, rather than an understanding of their significance; symbols, rather than what they stood for, were all they could gift to their children. They no longer knew why a *diya* was lit at six in the evening, what the rituals of morning *puja* meant, why women were not supposed to cut pumpkins. Yet they adhered to such traditions with religious zeal. They had to face several dilemmas. Their illiteracy proved to be a major stumbling block in their quest for a certain level of autonomy. To the East Indian emigrants, merging completely into the local milieu would have meant losing all sense of self. Their recollection of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagwad Gita* refurbished their spirituality. Tulsidas and his immortal stanzas, read out and explained to them by whoever among them could read, became a veritable tonic for them as they gathered in the late evenings after a hard day’s work. Nor did they forget to chant the *Hanuman Chalisa* as a beacon of their faith and hope.
- 15.16. Christian missionaries were then vigorously engaged in proselytisation. The East Indians were under great pressure to convert to Christianity. Many vocations were then closed for non-Christians. Jobs in the civil services, the armed forces, the teaching profession and many others were denied to those who were not Christians. The reluctance of both Hindu and Muslim migrants to accept Christianity, because of what they regarded as its capacity to alienate them from their roots, adversely affected their potential for social mobility and economic advancement. Being the uneducated, unskilled and economically deprived persons that they were, the East Indians were treated as ‘pagans’. This was one of the factors that contributed to their being consigned to the lowest rung of the socio-economic and cultural ladder. And this is where they stayed for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.
- 15.17. The government also deliberately kept them out of the education main stream. They were blocked and discouraged from any opportunities for advancement unless they learned English. The Hindi language was regarded as a backward language since it was associated with people of foreign beliefs and traditions. The younger generation gradually preferred to neglect Hindi and study English instead, as the language of the future, while Hindi was confined to the home and was not generally spoken in public.
- 15.18. It is indeed a wonder that in such a milieu, where it was far from easy to practise Hinduism or Islam, a vast percentage of ethnic Indians did not opt to change their religion, in order to enjoy tangible material benefits. However, many of them adopted anglicized names. Even today, one

comes across East Indians who have purely Christian names though they have adhered to their ancestral religions.

- 15.19. At the end of their contracts, most of the East Indians had settled down wherever they were. They had become independent cultivators after acquiring small plots of land. In Trinidad, apart from growing cane and cocoa, they had succeeded in taming vast areas for rice cultivation. Since the beginning of the 20th century, they gradually became more and more involved in other economic sectors, such as trade and transport. Many of them realised the importance of acquiring additional skills through Western education as an invaluable tool for upward social and economic mobility.
- 15.20. The arrival of Indian indentured labour to the Caribbean had led to several social benefits for the general population of these former British colonies. The health services had been improved through the construction of hospitals in the sugar estates. The Indian immigrants had introduced skills like tanning and the goldsmith trade. They had participated in public works for the construction of roads and had thus helped in initiating a modern transport system.
- 15.21. Today, the East Indians are well integrated into the respective societies and economies of the countries of their settlement. They can be considered as part of the upper middle class of these countries. Although many of them have an agricultural background, most of them are now active in other sectors and professions as doctors, lawyers, traders and also increasingly in the civil services.
- 15.22. The pride and strength of resolve of the Indian migrants to the Caribbean had brought its own rewards. After enduring innumerable hardships, they had finally 'arrived'.

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