

# Guyana





*Dr. Cheddi B. Jagan, Late President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana*



*H.E. Bharrat Jagdeo, President of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana*



*Rohan Babulal Kanhai, famous Guyanese cricketer*

## Introduction

Guyana is another of the three Caribbean countries, Trinidad & Tobago and Suriname being the other two, where PIOs constitute a sizeable part of the population. These ethnic Indians, popularly known as Indo-Guyanese, now account for 51% of its total population of 775,000.

- 17.2. Guyana had been integrated into the British Empire in 1836 as British Guinea. Here too, with the abolition of slavery, the indenture system of contract labour had been introduced and Indian workers had started arriving in Guyana under this new form of virtual slavery from 1838. Their flow into the country picked up after 1850 and continued until 1920, by which time no less than 239,000 Indian workers had arrived. About 90% of them had gone there from U.P. and Bihar, while the rest had originated in Tamil Nadu and other southern states. Throughout the rest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they remained confined to the sugar plantations to which they had been initially indentured. It was only after 1900 that their socio-economic conditions began to improve as a result of their hard work, their perseverance and their economic lifestyle. They then began to take up other vocations, even as their children and grandchildren started entering institutes of higher learning. A small number of Indo-Guyanese acquired various professional qualifications, especially in the fields of medicine and law. In this way, the community gradually acquired the ability to play a meaningful role in the political life of Guyana, even though it proved to be an uphill task.

## The Years of Afro-Guyanese Dominance

- 17.3. Guyana became independent in 1966. In the early 1950s, Britain had started the process of preparing it for self-rule by enacting a constitution that was supposed to familiarise it with the Westminster form of democracy. Elections were held under the provisions of that constitution for the first time in 1953. They were won handsomely by Dr Cheddi Jagan's People's Progressive Party (PPP). But after a little over four months, the colonial administration suspended the constitution and dismissed the Jagan government, as it feared that he was moving the country into the socialist block. Since then, the political situation in the country has been dominated by sharp antagonisms between two main political parties. Dr Jagan's PPP and Lynden Forbes Sampson

Burnham's PNC (People's National Congress). A former colleague of Dr Jagan's, Forbes Burnham had engineered a split in the PPP in 1957 to form his new party. While the PNC almost exclusively consisted of Afro-Guyanese, the PPP enjoyed the support mainly of Indo-Guyanese. The founding fathers of these two parties have both disappeared from the scene of their activity. But the unfortunate racial divide between their ethnic groups has continued to bedevil the country's politics.

- 17.4. The PNC formed each successive government in Guyana from 1964 to 1992. It won every election during that period as Burnham had managed to form an electoral alliance in 1964 with a small group calling itself the United Front Party. With its support, he triumphed in the pre-independence elections of that year, despite the fact that his own Afro-Guyanese supporters did not constitute a majority of the population. The period from 1966 (when Guyana became independent) to 1992 was a highly distressing one for the Indo-Guyanese. The successive PNC Governments made a systematic attempt to obliterate the distinctive identity of the PIOs by discriminating against them in various ways. Even the import of foodstuffs normally consumed by them was banned, while a similar restriction embargoed the import of Indian saris! Indian cultural activities were discouraged. Even bearing Indian names was frowned upon! The community lived in an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. As in the earlier British colonial times, professions such as the civil services continued to be denied to non-Christians, which meant that Indo-Guyanese could not aspire to these services, as many of them had resolutely resisted the evangelising attempts of Christian missionaries. Often physically abused and intimidated by criminal elements among the Afro-Guyanese, they had few means of seeking redress as the local police, consisting mainly of PNC supporters, did not usually come to their rescue.
- 17.5. In this kind of stifling atmosphere, the Indian Diaspora became disenchanted with the government and developed a deep antipathy towards the Afro-Guyanese. Many of the PIOs even expressed resentment against their own country of origin as they felt India was doing little to help them in their dire state. It was not surprising, therefore, that a large number of them began to migrate to Canada and the United States. By now, the number of Indo-Guyanese in North America has reached a figure of 400,000, i.e., roughly equivalent to their number in Guyana.

### **The Advent of the PIOs in Guyana's Politics**

- 17.6. Meanwhile, those who remained behind were not sitting idly by. Despite the many hurdles that they had to surmount, several of them won great distinction for themselves and their community in diverse fields such as business and industry, and in the legal and medical professions. Sir Lionel Luckhoo's name finds mention in the Guinness Book of Records for having won the largest number of murder cases, while Dr. Mohamed Shahabudeen became a judge of the International Court of Justice. Dr. Harry Annamunthodo gained his laurels as a distinguished surgeon. Sir Sridath Ramphal served as Secretary General of the Commonwealth for two terms. Rohan Kanhai joined the hallowed list of eminent West Indian cricketers.

- 17.7. The time had finally come for the Indian community to assert its presence and its numerical majority by participating actively in Guyana's political life. In the general elections of 1992, Dr Cheddi Jagan finally came to power as the country's first Indo-Guyanese President. His admirers described him as the heart and soul of the nation, while they themselves felt they 'were walking ten feet tall'. During his years in office, he planned to introduce many constructive policies. He dreamed of improving the social and economic condition of all the people of Guyana and, in the process, of also bridging the racial divide between his compatriots of Indian and African origin through 'participatory democracy' by all of them in his development plans. Unfortunately, he died in 1997 while he was still President, leaving many unrealised dreams behind him. In the elections that were held in March of this year, the Indo-Guyanese overwhelmingly voted again for the PPP, while the Afro-Guyanese voted for the PNC. The 37 year-old Bharrat Jagdeo won handsomely, with 53% of the votes cast. He had defeated his 72 year-old rival and a former Afro-Guyanese President, Desmond Hoyte, by a huge margin, thus reconfirming the fact that the country continues to be divided on racial lines.

### **Socio-economic and Cultural Life of the Indo-Guyanese**

- 17.8. In spite of the impediments thrown in their path during the years of colonial rule, and also later when Afro-Guyanese were in power, many members of the Indian Diaspora have been able to retain their Indian heritage and culture to a significant extent. They have built a large number of temples and mosques, which are well attended. Indian festivals like Diwali and Holi are celebrated with great gusto and enthusiasm, while Muslim holy days are observed by the faithful.
- 17.9. There is considerable interest among some members of the Indian community to learn Hindi or Urdu, depending on whether they are Hindus or Muslims. Bollywood films enjoy immense popularity among all of them. While there are no private radio stations in Guyana, there are a number of private TV channels belonging to Indo-Guyanese persons. Hindi films and Indian cultural programmes are very popular features on them. Songs and dances, usually copied from Hindi films, constitute an integral part of social functions organised by members of the Indian community. Many of them evince great interest in teaching their children the basics of Indian dance and music. This is especially so among Hindu parents. In many ways, even the cuisine of individual members of the Indo-Guyanese community resembles that of their places of origin in India.
- 17.10. Most Indo-Guyanese follow one or other of three main religions, namely, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Inter-marriages do take place across these religions, even if this is not a normal occurrence. The fact that many Hindus converted to Christianity during recent years has been a cause of tension. Some Muslim and Christian members of the community sometimes prefer to identify themselves as Muslims or Christians, rather than as Indo-Guyanese. Because of religious differences, and sometimes also on the basis of the region of origin in India, there is no single body in Guyana that can claim to represent the Indian community as a whole.

17.11. The Indo-Guyanese control most of Guyana's trade, whether at the retail level or the wholesale. Very few of the big commercial establishments have Afro-Guyanese proprietors. As regards the industrial sector, this is not very well developed in Guyana. But one or other member of the Indian community would have established the few industries that do exist in this country. Rice is one of Guyana's major crops and most of the rice farmers are Indo-Guyanese. Some of them possess large farms and are very wealthy. The number of Indo-Guyanese holding senior positions in the bureaucracy continues to be minuscule as compared to their share of the population. On the other hand, there are numerous lawyers and doctors among the Indo-Guyanese who have a flourishing legal practice.

### **Non-resident Indians**

17.12. In contrast to countries like Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago and Fiji, there was no migration of Indian academics and professionals to Guyana during the 1960s and 70s. As a result, there are very few NRIs in this country. Their total number is no more than a hundred, including wives and children.

### **Demands and Expectations of the Diaspora**

17.13. The following are the Demands and Expectations of the Diaspora in Guyana from India:

- (a) Promote the teaching of a course on Hindu philosophy at Guyana University and forge closer links between it and the Indira Gandhi Open University.
- (b) Post a Hindi and Urdu teacher in Georgetown, where we have our only Cultural Centre (CC) in Guyana.
- (c) Provide to the CC an additional performing arts teacher to supplement the only one that it now has. This would enable it to conduct classes in Indian music and dance in other parts of Guyana, and especially in Essequibo and Berbice, in both of which there is a demand for such classes.
- (d) Depute to the CC a person who can teach subjects like yoga, Indian philosophy and culture.
- (e) Expand the present library in the CC and also stock it with audio and video cassettes of Indian music, dance and other cultural matters.
- (f) Gift books regularly to various organisations in this country on different aspects of India, especially its culture and history.
- (g) Extend financial assistance, as appropriate, through the Indian High Commission in Georgetown, to temples and other Indo-Guyanese organisations that seek its help.
- (h) Offer free specialised medical treatment in India (but not travelling expenses) to a few deserving Guyanese as such facilities are locally inadequate.



- (i) Encourage the holding of Indian commercial exhibitions and fairs in Guyana and encourage our private sector to invest in this country.
- (j) Arrange regular visits to Guyana of Indian artists, academicians, writers, intellectuals and spiritual leaders on lecture tours.
- (k) Invite prominent Indo-Guyanese to visit India on familiarisation tours.
- (l) Encourage Indian hoteliers to set up an Indian restaurant in Guyana.
- (m) Augment our assistance to Guyana through the ITEC and other programmes.
- (n) Lower the cost of travel between India and Guyana so that people can visit India and take back with them various Indian things.
- (o) Reduce the fee being charged for PIO cards.

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