

Trinidad and Tobago

Some of the survivors of the first generation of migrants in Trinidad and Tobago (with garlands) – (August 1995)



Shiewdass Sadhu Mandir, Temple on the sea, Waterloo, Central Trinidad



T.M.L. Mosque, St. Joseph, Port-of-Spain.





Prime Minister Basdeo Panday of Trinidad and Tobago – first Person of Indian origin to become Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago



Late President Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma being given a ceremonial reception on arrival in Trinidad and Tobago on 29 May 1995, on the occasion of celebration of 150 years of Indians' arrival there

The Indian Community During the Indenture Period

In 1834, after a sustained and successful campaign by anti-slavery groups for the abolition of the inhuman system of slavery throughout the British Empire, a new system of indentured labour was introduced in the British colonies. Accordingly, starting from 1845, Indian workers were taken, *inter alia*, to Trinidad & Tobago (abbreviated here as 'T & T') on labour contracts ranging from three to five years. Their situation differed from slavery in one essential respect, namely, that the duration of their contracts was temporary and it did not connote life-long bondage. The Colonial Office in London had forbidden the imposition of restrictive work contracts. It had stipulated that the Indian migrants should be entitled to a basic minimum wage, accommodation and health care, all of which were to be provided by their employer. Regulations also existed for strict official monitoring of their treatment. But this was not always enforced. Due to lack of supervision and control, many of the migrants faced enormous problems. Over the years, at the insistence of the Colonial Office in London and of the Government of India, the Trinidad Legislative Council enacted several Immigration Ordinances. Responding to widespread criticism, Lord Grey, the then Secretary of State for the Colonies, agreed in principle to curtail the indenture period to one year. Under continued pressure from the planters, however, three-year contracts were introduced in 1850 and even that was changed in 1862 to five years!

- 16.2. India contributed approximately 134,183 indentured labourers to T&T between 1845 and 1917. A vast majority of these migrants were from UP, Bihar and Bengal. Those who had embarked on ships sailing from the port of Calcutta were known as '*Kalkatiyas*' - to distinguish them from about five thousand South Indians who had gone through the port of Madras and were called '*Madrasis*'. Those who had gone from the tribal areas of Bihar and Bengal were given the name of '*Jangalis*' or 'hill coolies'.
- 16.3. In spite of all its built-in safeguards, the indenture system had retained a number of restrictive conditions. In fact, for all practical purposes, the Indian migrants virtually entered into a system of bonded labour with its provision of jail sentences for 'breaches of labour contracts'. Many of the Indians fell foul of the local laws and regulations. This was duly reflected in the fact that, year after year, the natives of India topped the list of prison inmates in Trinidad.

- 16.4. On the other hand, so effectively did the indentured labourers prove their worth that, after their initial five years of contracted labour, they were encouraged to enter into a second period of work. The white colonists had, in the meanwhile, come to the conclusion that the free passage back to India (that had earlier been agreed upon) was an unnecessary expense. They decided to offer their labourers a plot from the Crown Lands in lieu of the return passage. From around 1860, about a thousand Indians annually accepted the extension of their contract periods. Many of those who had earlier opted for return passages gave them up for lands of equivalent value.
- 16.5. After their extended contracts were over, the Indian migrants transformed themselves into a dynamic peasant class. Their families also participated in the plantation work that they had taken up. Gradually, with the money that they were able to set aside, they were able to acquire more and more land, as well as other possessions. Having realised the value of money during their days of poverty, they were prepared to make personal sacrifices and lead a simple life, so that their children could later live in comfort. After 1870, they purchased Crown Lands wherever they could and, between 1885 and 1912, they formed their own villages and tried to settle down into their former way of living – cultivating rice, sugar, cocoa and various types of vegetables and, even more important, restoring their Indian customs and traditions.

Post-indenture Transformation of the Indian Migrants

- 16.6. By 1917, when the system of indentured labour was officially terminated, the Indian migrants in T&T already owned more than one-fifth of all the cultivated land in Trinidad. The 1921 census showed that more than 60% of persons engaged in agriculture were East Indians, while their number among professionals was negligible. Soon after that, they started moving out of the countryside into other occupations such as unskilled labour in the Public Works Department; work on the famous Pitch Lake; milk vending; private family businesses; or initiating the country's first transport system, using carts and carriages, and so on. In this way, the Indian Diaspora in Trinidad began to scale the daunting economic heights of their new country and, in time, it became a viable economic force. Its initiative and example opened up new opportunities for the Afro-Caribbeans who also began to develop various artisan skills.
- 16.7. Free at last from the fetters of indenture, they gradually established a number of religious institutions. The *Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha* and the *Anjuman Sunat-ul-Jamaat Association* responded to the religious and emotional needs of the Hindus and the Muslim. More than 150 Hindu temples were built and consecrated. A hundred mosques called the faithful to prayer at the appointed times. The small group of Sikhs residing in the country constructed a *gurudwara*.
- 16.8. Simultaneously, the community established many primary schools for the education of their children. The *Sangre Grande Hindu College* and the *Lakshmi Girls Hindu College* promoted the further education of the younger generations, thus enabling them better to cope with the challenges of modern existence.

- 16.9. They soon became aware that religious revival and education alone would not by themselves enable them to face the social and economic realities of their life in Trinidad. If they were to emerge completely from the shadow of the indentured past which continued to haunt them, they had to grow into both an economic and also a political force in the country. Meanwhile, their arduous participation in the country's development had brought several benefits to the entire community. Health services had improved through the construction of hospitals in the various sugar and tea estates. Security had improved throughout the country.
- 16.10. But there had been, during the indenture period, a 'love-hate' relationship between the Afro-Trinidadians, whose ancestors had been slaves, and the Indo-Trinidadians with their *coolie* ancestry. Both of them had been at the receiving end of discrimination at the hands of the Whites and neither had really been any better off than the other. They had both led the worst imaginable lives. But despite their common grief, the two communities had not mingled together, socially or culturally. They had lived like people from two different planets as their deeply ingrained racial differences had kept them apart. They had despised each other's habits, dress, language, and even food. Unfortunately, the same kind of antagonistic feelings continued to haunt them after the indenture period was abandoned.

The Political Baptism of the Diaspora in Trinidad and Tobago

- 16.11. This dislike and distaste for each other continued even after T&T became independent in 1962. Afro-Trinidadian political leaders like Dr. Eric Williams adopted a policy of marginalisation of the Indian community. They systematically shielded the East Indians from attaining political power. The higher echelons of the bureaucracy were out of bounds for them. In the field of education and employment also, they were discriminated against. This was evident in the meagre allotment of government funds to Indian schools and cultural organisations. Dr. Williams invariably had a few East Indians in his Cabinet during his long tenure as the country's Prime Minister. But they were never allowed to reach the top. It was only in the post-Williams era that the East Indians started making a dent in politics.
- 16.12. The early Indian immigrants and the first generation of their children had been chiefly interested in their economic advancement. They had gradually overtaken the Afro-Caribbeans in the economic sector. They had had little or no urge for political power. In fact, they had not even contemplated residing permanently in Trinidad. In later years, however, they gradually began to move into the forefront of the country's politics which had, till then, been dominated by the People's National Movement (PNM), an Afro-centric party. It had ruled T & T continuously for three decades since the country's independence. But with the advent of the charismatic Basdeo Panday, the PIOs have catapulted themselves into political power.
- 16.13. It is interesting to recall what happened at an international conference that was held at the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine in August 1995 to examine 'the historical context of the Indian Diaspora'. A participant in that meeting expressed the view that an East Indian could

never be elected as Prime Minister of T&T as that would surely result in rivers of blood flowing through the streets of Port of Spain. He must have later regretted his hasty conclusion. For one of the other participants in the conference was Basdeo Panday. In 1986, he had been instrumental in helping Mr. A.N.R. Robinson, an Afro-Caribbean, to become Prime Minister in a coalition Cabinet, thus ending the long period of domination of independent T&T by the Afro-Caribbean-dominated People's National Movement. Robinson is the leader of the National Alliance for Reconstruction, which has its base in T & T's sister island of Tobago. The coalition government of 1986 did not last long. But it led to the creation of the United National Congress. Basdeo Panday, its undisputed leader, is currently the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago for a second term.

The Cultural Life of the Diaspora in Trinidad and Tobago

- 16.14. Persons of Indian Origin in contemporary Trinidad and Tobago, especially the older generation among them, continue to be culturally and emotionally attached to 'Mother India'. Some of them are so emotional about it that they consider themselves Indians first and Trinidadians next. This has rightly attracted the criticism of the Afro-Trinidadian community. But the ties of the PIOs with India are so deep-rooted that, despite the prohibitive airfare and the great distance, they visit India regularly for pilgrimage or tourism. Some enterprising travel agents have started organising conducted tours that cover important religious places in India. Many of the East Indians, especially the Hindus among them, adhere strictly to age-old Indian customs, traditions and religious practices. In the PIO villages scattered all over the country, it is not unusual to come across little shrines dedicated to one or other deity of the Indian pantheon.
- 16.15. Indian music and dance are extremely popular in Trinidad. Bollywood films attract large audiences. Indian film stars are regularly invited to the country to entertain their fans. Port of Spain even boasts of the existence of two magazines dedicated to the Indian film world! Indian fashions are keenly followed and copied by the younger generation. At least five local radio stations are dedicated to Indian programmes that broadcast religious sermons, besides talk shows, Hindi songs and other items of entertainment.
- 16.16. Many members of the Indian Diaspora evince keen interest in what is taking place in India. They make it a point to keep themselves abreast of the latest developments. There is also some eagerness among older persons to trace their roots in India. Some of them have succeeded in doing so. A local History teacher, Shamshu Deen, has done considerable pioneering work in this field. He has already succeeded in tracing not only his own kith and kin, but also those of other interested persons, including Prime Minister Basdeo Panday.
- 16.17. The National Council of Indian Culture (NCIC) is an NGO dedicated to the promotion of Indian culture in Trinidad and Tobago. Its activities are centred in *Diwali Nagar*, a community centre established by it in the heartland of T&T's main island, not far from Port of Spain. *Diwali* is celebrated here every year with great enthusiasm. It is interesting to note that, with the awakened political consciousness of the Indian Diaspora in this country, *Diwali* has been included in the

calendar of national holidays. In the same manner, 'Arrival Day' also figures in this list, marking the day when the sailing ship, the *Fatel Rozak*, docked in the harbour at Port of Spain in May 1845, carrying the first of the Indian indentured labourers who were destined to come to the country. The NCIC also organises other Hindu festivals, cultural shows and religious functions regularly. Its premises are also used for social functions. Its other activities include occasional invitations to Indian scholars, pundits, singers, and dancers to visit the country as its guests.

- 16.18. The ICCR has established a Cultural Centre in T&T called the Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Cultural Co-operation. This centre has been in existence for the last three years. It has on its staff three performing artists who teach Indian music, dance and the *tabla*. With the opening of this centre, Indian cultural programmes have gained even greater popularity.
- 16.19. The *Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha (SDMS)* is one of the most influential socio-religious Hindu organisations in T&T. Led by its dynamic Secretary General, Sat Narayan Maharaj, the SDMS runs about 50 schools in the country. It also controls an equal number of temples spread all over the island. These temples and schools are engaged in spreading Hindu philosophy and religion. The SDMS regularly organises social and religious seminars and conferences, both national and international. Occasionally, the SDMS sends its pundits to India to get the requisite training to perform *poojas* and other religious ceremonies. Hindi is taught in SDMS schools at the primary level.
- 16.20. The *Hindi Nidhi*, a private institution, is also engaged in teaching Hindi. It conducts classes at both the elementary and primary levels. Some of its teachers have received their training in India.
- 16.21. The *Swaha*, a Hindu *Prachar Kendra*, is another organisation serving the Indian community. It also promotes Hinduism.

Non Resident Indians

- 16.22. The number of NRIs in Trinidad and Tobago is not more than 600 to 700, which translates into about 150 family units. Most of them are professionals like engineers, doctors and academics. A small number are traders and businessmen. While most of them had arrived in Trinidad with their families in the recent past, around 25 or 30 of them have been there for more than 15 years. They are from the states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, U.P, Bihar, Delhi, etc. As in other countries of their settlement, the NRIs in T&T are a close-knit group - law abiding and far-removed from any involvement in political activities. Their main ambition seems to be to work hard, earn money, send their children for higher studies to the United States and, perhaps ultimately, to migrate to that country. Some of them seem to consider T&T as a springboard to their final country of destination. Their strength is their academic excellence and professionalism, while their weakness is their inclusivity and indifference to any thing that happens outside their home and office. Their contact with outsiders, barring a few, is limited to occasional meetings during National Day celebrations, or cultural and religious functions.

Demands and Expectations of the Diaspora

16.23. The following are the demands and expectations of the Diaspora in Trinidad and Tobago from India:

- a. More trade opportunities for Indo-Trinidadians to do business with India, albeit on concessional terms.
- b. Award of scholarships to study in India. This should cover music, dance and also professional courses.
- c. Training of local pundits in the performance of Vedic rites, religious ceremonies, marriage functions, etc.
- d. Establishment of a permanent Cultural Centre in Trinidad and Tobago.
- e. Financial grants to local Indian cultural and religious organisations.
- f. Assistance in tracing the Indian roots of interested PIOs.
- g. Telecasting of Indian TV programmes like those of Doordarshan.
- h. Provision of facilities to pursue higher professional studies in India.
- i. Establishment of an Indian Diasporic Committee.
- j. Special grants to local cultural associations.
- k. Reduction in the cost of PIO cards.
- l. Assistance to the University of the West Indies (UWI) to start a course in communications.
- m. Launching of a separate TV channel on the Indian Diaspora to highlight its activities worldwide.
- n. Increase in the frequency of bilateral visits by Indian and T&T scholars.
- o. Easy availability of films, books and CDs relevant to the Diaspora through the Indian High Commission in Port of Spain.
- p. Convening of regular conferences relating to the Diaspora.
- q. A separate Ministry in the Government of India to deal with the Diaspora.
- r. Creation of pressure groups within the Diaspora.
- s. Exchange of students between Indian universities and the UWI.
- t. Liberalisation of visa rules.
- u. Dual citizenship.
- v. Easy accessibility of radio and video materials in the HCI in Port of Spain.

