

A brief look at the Indian Indentureship system in Trinidad

Dr. Radica Mahase

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On Friday May 30th 1845, the Fath al Razack arrived in Trinidad with approximately 225 Indians, after sailing for 98 days from the port of Calcutta. This marked the beginning of a system of immigration that was to continue, until it became illegal in 1917, to ship Indians under the indentureship scheme. There was a short break from 1848, due to bankruptcy of the Trinidad Government, to 1851, when it resumed as the colony received a guaranteed loan from Britain. Then there was a steady flow of immigrants every year, until all contracts were completely abolished on January 01, 1920. During its existence, approximately 147,600 labourers arrived in Trinidad. The majority were employed in the sugar cane estates, while a very small number was employed on cocoa, coconut and rubber plantations.

Trinidad became a British colony in 1797, after it was captured from the Spanish. Its potential as a sugar colony had long been recognized with the ongoing competition for supremacy in the world sugar market between Britain and France. Trinidad, the second largest West Indian island, after Jamaica, was considered the most fertile of any of the British West Indian colonies. The demand for indentured labour came, in the aftermath of the abolition of African slavery in the British West Indies, in 1838. After emancipation, the sugar cane plantations in Trinidad were faced with a shortage of a regular and relatively cheap labour supply. As a result, various attempts were made to find an alternative source of labour. The Indian indentureship scheme had already been implemented in Mauritius (1834) and British Guiana (1838) and the Trinidadian

planter class saw the system as an opportunity to procure an immediate labour force. The influx of a large amount of Indian labourers would flood the labour markets and keep wages depressed, while decreasing the bargaining power of the Afro-Trinidadians.

When Indian immigration to Trinidad commenced in 1845 it was regulated by Act XXII of 1844, passed by the Government of India on 20 November 1837, to control the movement of labourers from British India to various parts of the world. The Trinidad planters would submit their requests for labourers to the Governor of Trinidad. This information was then forwarded to the Colonial Office / India Office in Britain. From there it was despatched to India and official licences were given out to recruiters who went into the districts and villages. The majority of the labourers who immigrated to Trinidad came from the United Provinces (48%), Oudh (27%), Bihar (14%), Bengal (19%) and Madras and Bombay (6%). The Trinidad Emigration depot was located at Garden Reach Calcutta and the Protector of Emigrant was responsible for overlooking the logistics of the system on the Indian side. Recruiters were paid per head for every Indian they recruited for the labour system - 35 rupees for a female labourer and 25 rupees for a male labourer.

The contract for the transportation of Indian labourers to the Caribbean was awarded to the James Nourse Shipping Company in 1875. The ships used were usually three-masted schooners around 500 tons. The stipulated length of time of the journey was 20 weeks for a sailing ship and 13 weeks for a steamer. The Nourse shipping line was paid £11 12s. 6d. per statute adult. From 1845 to 1865, the ships en route for Trinidad docked at Port of Spain where the Trinidad Immigration depot or the “Coolie depot” was located. Upon arrival and disembarkation the Indians were taken to the depot where they were accommodated until they were distributed to individual plantations. In 1865 however, another depot was established at Nelson Island – a very

small island located North West of Port of Spain, in the Gulf of Paria. On Nelson Island the immigrants as well as the ship, food and stores were inspected by the Protector of Immigrants and their bundles and blankets were fumigated. The immigrants were to be examined by a medical doctor and those who only needed rest were kept at the Depot. Once the Indians were physically stable they were transported by small boats to Port of Spain and distributed to the island's plantations.

In Trinidad, the law stipulated that Indian indentured labourer would be engaged in the cultivation of the soil or the manufacture of produce on any plantation, every day except Sundays and authorized holidays. S/he was required to work for nine hours in each working day and was attached to the specific plantation for five years from the date of allotment. At the end of the five years the labourers were to be given a certificate of exemption from labour and were permitted to return to India at their own cost after ten years residence in the colony. According to the contract, which the labourers signed prior to embarkation at the port of Calcutta, an able-bodied adult labourer over sixteen years of age was to be paid twelve annas or sixteen pies for each day's work, while a minor (between ten years and twelve years old) would receive eight annas per day. All wages would be paid fortnightly. Also included in the "package" were the provision of medical and maintenance during sickness free of charge; rent-free dwelling houses (to be kept in good repair by the employer, at his own cost) and full rations. These were provided for adults and minors by the employer according to the scale sanctioned by the government, at a cost of three annas daily. An infant under the age of ten years was to receive one third of the ration free of cost.

Labourers could not move out of the plantations unless they had obtained a pass from the owner/manager. While theoretically they were allowed to practice their culture, the colonial

authorities would step in and stop any cultural activities which were seen as a threat to the peace of the colony, as occurred in 1884, with the Mohurrum (Hosay) celebrations in Trinidad. Educational opportunities for the children of indentured labourers were provided within a controlled environment where schools were built for Indians only, or were located within a certain distance from the estates. By 1900, only 28 per cent of the total Indian population (both free and indentured) was attending schools. Under the commutation grant in 1859, Indians who had completed their five years contracts and seven years residence in the colony, opted for ten acres of land in lieu of a return passage. This scheme was modified in 1873, to offer a choice between ten acres of land or five acres of land and £5 in cash. A total of 11,933 persons commuted their return passages. In total, about 25% of all those who came, returned to India while the majority settled here. While most of them may have opted to stay because the economic situation in Trinidad was seen as much better than what they had experienced in India, large numbers were forced to stay since they could not afford the return passage or ships were not readily available to take them back to their motherland.

The shipping of Indian labourers under the indentureship scheme ceased in 1917, and on January 1st 1920 the system was abolished completely. Those Indians who chose to remain in Trinidad made the island their home. By the 1930s they had begun to organize themselves politically. Economically, there was a movement away from agriculture and into the professions. This moved was stimulated by the prevalence of educational opportunities. Today almost half the population of Trinidad and Tobago is of Indian ancestry and Indo-Trinbagonians participate in, and have impacted on all aspects of national life.