

ADDRESS ON OBSERVANCE OF INDIAN ARRIVAL DAY- 5 MAY, 2010
BERBICE INDIAN CULTURAL COMMITTEE
Plantation Highbury, East Bank Berbice , Guyana

TOPIC: Some Nostalgic Reflections and Lessons of East Indian Immigration

By
Dr. Martin Jagdeo Boodhoo*

PLANTATION HIGHBURY IS THE VERY FIRST AREA on which the FIRST GROUP OF EAST INDIAN IMMIGRANTS LANDED ON 5TH MAY 1838

I make this presentation with humble gratitude, and trust that the sentiments and views to be expressed would be of interest; and hopefully provoke some salient reminders of the contributions of our ancestors to socio-economic but more importantly RELIGIOUS Development, wherever the waters of the oceans took them.

I like to congratulate the members of the Indian Cultural Committee of East Berbice, for the excellent work they have been doing, over the years. Like our forefathers, you as the descendents of immigrants have also made, and continue to make, your contributions to the promotion of Hindu Culture and social development activities in our country.

On this memorable occasion let us pay homage to our ancestors and pray that their legacy will continue to energise us to follow in their footsteps with determination and courage.

Human migration is an historical phenomenon from time immemorial. It is said that Migration is as old as Man, as from the very dawn of human civilization human beings have moved over the face of the Earth, in spite of seemingly insurmountable difficulties. The barriers of space, time and physical geography may have inhibited but never prevented the movement of men and ideas over the ages. These movements have had and continue to have significant impact on the course of human history and behavioural patterns in the political, social, economic and other fields.

Every civilisation has experienced the Migration Syndrome in one form or another. The evidence in the literature indicates that the principal motivating factors of migration have been economic, political, and religious or visions of a better life in another environment. The grass invariably seems greener on the other side though it is not always so. In order to put this presentation into a historical perspective it would be useful to review **briefly** the origins of and motivations for East Indian Immigration.

In the case of East Indian Emigration to the Caribbean and Guyana in particular, the principal factors have been economic with both “pull” and “push” effects in the process. The pull effect is clearly evident in the period immediately after the emancipation of slaves in 1838 that resulted in an acute labour shortage on the sugar plantations.

A pertinent example of the dilemma in which the colonial masters found themselves is exemplified in the case of British Guiana when the Court of Policy on 11th February 1834 passed

an Ordinance for the classification and registration of Slaves to become ‘Apprenticed Labourers’.

The Apprenticeship period which ran from 1834 to 1838 had the following major objectives:

1. to enable the slaves to prepare themselves for full freedom. They were now required to work only eight hours per day and NOT on Sundays as obtained during Slavery.
2. to facilitate the plantation owners (planters) to supplant their slaves after Emancipation with alternative sources of labour; and more importantly
3. to give the planters some time to ameliorate the conditions of work and take steps to improve the standard of living of the ‘apprentices’.

According to Cecil Clementi “the dislocation of labour conditions in British Guiana consequent on this law led in the first instance to a vigorous attempt by private employers of labour to procure immigrants without the aid of the State” (1).

In pursuit of this objective, the planters first turned to the overpopulated colonies in the West Indies . This was followed-up by recruiting immigrants from Madeira, the Azores, Malta , Southern United States, Europe, China , West Africa and India eventually, with the most satisfying success. The landowners were desperate and tried whatever means were available to obtain labourers from abroad- as the days for slave labour were now over.

The alternative was to abandon their estates and return to Europe ! The situation in British Guiana was not dissimilar to that of Trinidad , Jamaica , Guadeloupe and other islands in the West Indies . The implications of ‘abandonment of the plantations would have had a disastrous socio-economic impact on the owners and investors. The following would have been the likely effects: a severe setback to Colonisation; possible abandonment of a British territory; loss of fixed capital in machinery, buildings and land; loss of cheap Colonial sugar produce; detrimental damage to those who invested in shipping, insurance, financing, banking and related connections.

It should be noted that between 1834 and 1838, the importation of “free” labourers was undertaken as a private enterprise. The several experiments and trials with agricultural labourers from various parts of the world, with the exception of those from India , did not evidently bear the anticipated expectations of the Colonial planters. They therefore placed their hopes, and possibly their bets, on immigration from the Sub-Continent.

1. Clementi, Cecil: “A Constitutional History of British Guiana”; London , 1937.

Dwarka Nath in his “A History of Indians in Guyana ” indicated that the first two chartered ships that brought East Indian emigrants to Guyana were the Whitby and the Hesperus. The Whitby left India on January 13 with 249 emigrants and the Hesperus left on January 29 with 165 - a total of 414 emigrants but 18 died on the voyage. Paradoxically, both ships landed on the same day -5th May 1838- the Hesperus in Georgetown and the Whitby at Highbury, Berbice. The Whitby off-loaded 164 emigrants at this very area on which we are today observing East Indian Arrival Day -172 years afterwards! In accordance with the indentureship arrangements those immigrants were dispersed to various estates in the Colony.

The atrocities that marked the first experiment led to its suspension in 1839 until 1845, when various safety measures were imposed by the British Government to safeguard against inhuman conditions and the treatment meted out to the immigrants.

Indian immigration did not commence in a systematic basis until 1845; and continued practically every year up to April 1917 when it ceased, with the exception of the period 1849-1850, because of a deadlock between the Government and the elective section of the Combined Court over financing arrangements.

During the 79 years from 1838 to 1917, a total of 238,979 East Indians arrived in the Colony; thus saving the Sugar Industry from likely ruin and ensuring its continuance until today! Those were the stalwarts who, with hard work and determination and in spite of many difficulties and suffering, were in search of a niche, in a new bewildering environment. This could be regarded as the “push” factor in the economic equation. The level of unemployment, poverty and the then bleak economic future as well as the prevailing social conditions in India, especially discrimination in the caste system, created an avenue through emigration as a ‘safety valve’, in an “over-populated” country.

Like the African slaves, the indentured labourers were forced to live in abominable conditions. Their working hours were long and the rewards were meagre. The historical evidence is replete with several accounts of inhuman conditions in which they lived and worked. In spite of all of this, they persisted with hope of returning to their Homeland at the end of their Indentureship as well as the expectation of a better life in the future.

Mr. Chairman and friends, detailed accounts of Indian Immigration and the associated statistics of the number of ships and migrants to the Caribbean and elsewhere are well documented. Likewise the trial and tribulations coupled with the legacy of suffering, perseverance and the will to succeed in the uncertain future have become inspiring guideposts to millions all over the developing and industrialised world.

To them, we the descendants owe a debt of gratitude, which we cannot hope to repay. We can endeavour, however, to uphold their integrity, moral and religious values in order to build better communities wherever we happen to live.

The question that has been posed and continues to be explored by scholars, researchers, descendants and sometimes even strangers is: “How did these immigrants manage to survive in the challenging and demanding environment; and actually achieved a reasonable standard of living; and at the same time, provided a better platform for posterity?”

In this Presentation I do not intend to go over the beaten track but to present some insights on the factors that have influenced and motivated the **Survival Of East Indian Immigrants; and in the process examine the Lessons that could be learnt in order to co-exist in a constantly changing world. It is hoped that the conclusions drawn would have relevance to other parts of the world; and generally speaking not necessarily confined to Indian Immigration.**

In a dynamic globalised environment, there is a major dilemma of preserving ones cultural and historical identity, while at the same time, endeavouring to become a full-fledged citizen in the country of the newly acquired nationality.

I am of the view that the impact of cross-cultural forces which sometimes appear as threats, could be harnessed to formulate viable strategies for peaceful co-existence. Finally, a challenge will be issued to qualified and experienced Indians located overseas- in the professions, business and academia as well as religious and social organisations- to explore avenues of service to enhance socio-economic and humanitarian development in Developing Countries and of course, Guyana , in particular.

SURVIVAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EAST INDIAN IMMIGRANTS

Without doubt, and with only minor exceptions, the most significant and enduring heritage of Indian migrants is their pastoral and agricultural background with a deep and sacred faith in a Divine Creator coupled with hard -work, perseverance and determination to succeed. Their belief and dedication in a Supreme Being who is perceived to possess the power to guide spiritual and material progress in life is underpinned by values such as Truth, Honesty, Humility, Tolerance and Mutual Respect, as expounded in the Holy Scriptures, especially the Ramcharitmanas, the Bhagwat Gita, the Koran and the Bible. .

WHAT ARE THE CORE ELEMENTS OF THE FIVE-POINT HYPOTHESIS OF SURVIVAL AND GROWTH?

I would posit the view that the socio-economic and Cultural development of East Indian immigrants have been sustained principally by the following Five Factors.

1. First, an unflinching adherence to a religious conviction in the Almighty- whether the immigrant was a Hindu, Muslim or Christian or of other sect. Each religious group in its unique setting demonstrated this conviction or belief through regular ritualistic ceremonies and observance of Festivals, Music or other Art forms; and more importantly respecting each other's right to do so. These practices fostered social cohesion and mutual respect in spite of the varied and distinct forms of religious worship.

Over the Immigration period, the number grew and social conditions improved because of protests –sometimes violent- followed by legislatives and other reforms including Education. With due deference to the estate owners, they did not inhibit religious worship and in fact, provided, as the immigration cycle progressed, land for the erection of Mandirs, Mosques and Churches. **Guyana can boast as being the only country where three or more religious leaders are invited to say prayers at the commencement of public (state) functions. This is a unique feature of Guyanese Culture.**

2. Second, whatever the immigrant's religion, the quest to discover or know one's self, for the liberation of his or her soul or atma, was a powerful driving force for both material and spiritual enlightenment. The commonality of all religions is in fact reflected in the personal search for inner peace and solace and the avoidance of 'Damnation', as this is based on one's action and

way of life i.e. the “**Law of Retribution**”. This is a major focus of most religions that prevailed over the ages, and continues to be the principal guiding tenet. For the Hindu it is the Law of Karma, for others it is the day of ‘Judgement’. As the Bible puts it “...by thy works thou shall be judged and by thy works thou shall be condemned”. The goal for the Hindus is Sat, Chit and Anand (Truth, Knowledge and Bliss) and eventually Moksha; whilst it is Peace and ultimately Salvation for the Christian, Muslim and other Faiths.

This belief or concept, as some would put it, fuelled the desire to improve one’s physical, mental and intellectual capabilities to cope with the heavy burdens of livelihood in an adverse environment. It is in fact similar to the Protestant ethic of the Pilgrim Fathers and other groups in search of a more rewarding and less oppressive environment.

The development of skills for higher levels of earnings was, therefore, a predominant concomitant motivation. It should be noted that the onward and return passages were free. The entitlement of a full return passage was also, a strong sustaining factor since at the end of the contract, the immigrant would choose whether to repatriate or settle.

This was accompanied with a strong desire to be thrifty and accumulate funds to return home at the end of the indentureship period, to demonstrate that their transmarine experience was successful. This continues to be one of the principal motivational factors among immigrant communities the world over.

3. Third, the closely-knit family unit that was largely influenced by tradition and the need to stick together for survival was an equally significant factor - moreso, as the communities became larger in various parts of the colony. Though the modalities of relationships were seemingly paternalistic, the mother has always played a central role in holding the family together socially, materially and spiritually- more often than not exercising maternal dominance behind the purdah!

The historical inheritance of the ‘Extended Family’ provided a strict order of hierarchical family relationships but yet flexible enough to take care of each other –especially the elderly- in spite of competing demands to feed, clothe and educate the family. In this context, elders were treated with profound respect and as the repository of knowledge, leadership and cultural values. This is in stark contrast to the ‘Nuclear Family’ in most industrialised societies where, almost invariably, senior members are left to fend for themselves or referred to a ‘Home for the Elderly’.

4. Fourth, the love and care of one’s neighbour is enshrined in oriental civilisations and more particularly indigenous communities such as the Aborigines in the Americas and Australia as well as African societies. The East Indian migrant cultivated the concept and practice of “Jahaji” (brotherly friendship) during the long-suffering voyage to the Caribbean and elsewhere. This principle was maintained long after the end of the journey and proved to be a viable vehicle to foster ‘good neighbourly’ attitudes not only with fellow Indians but the community at large, even after the Indenture System terminated in 1920.

Those who grew up and lived in multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural communities have attested to the value and need for the “Jahiji” principle to enhance social relationships and

build lasting bonds of friendship in plural societies. Many of us who were nurtured by these mixed influences know of the importance of Mutual Respect and Teamwork to build stability and peace, which are the fundamental prerequisites for socio-economic development. This continues to be a challenge for the new stream Caribbean migrants to Europe, North America and elsewhere.

5. Fifth, the final element in the Five-Point Framework is the care of the Environment. Poverty is not a necessary inhibitor to healthy living in pleasant surroundings. Though the immigrants lived in logies with mud floors and bare necessities, hygiene was a predominant consideration in their daily lives. They realised and appreciated that without a healthy body they could not have a stable mental state to eke out their existence and take care of their families. On the other hand, to ensure a healthy, regular and dependable workforce, the Planters provided housing, hospital care and other facilities on the sugar plantations to stabilise the labour force and at the same time protect and enhance their investments.

These were salutary measures for the immigrants and enabled them, later on, to augment their incomes through small-scale farming in rice cultivation, cash crops, fishing and cattle rearing on land made available, on a gratuitous basis, by the sugar Planters. Involvement in these activities promoted the development of skills, teamwork, and management discipline, which proved, in later years, to be valuable assets in enhancing their standard of living largely through their joint and individual efforts, during their spare time.

The dedication of the immigrants in creating a pleasant and healthy environment is evident during and after the re-housing programmes from the logies to the new “Extra-Nuclear” Housing Settlements, which gave them a sense of independence, pride of ownership and reinforced self-help efforts. Furthermore, their monetary contributions and voluntary services in enhancing the accommodation in temples and the flora in the adjoining gardens, as well as in mosques and churches, is testimony to the creation of healthy surroundings.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Without doubt these five elements were fundamental factors in enhancing the performance capabilities of immigrant workers in an environment that was NOT conducive to equitable socio-economic development but skewed heavily in favour of the Planters. Through perseverance and commitment to the principles previously outlined, they managed to survive and grew in stature, as is abundantly visible in the Indian Diaspora the world over.

It is accordingly posited that these five factors have provided and can furthermore strengthen a solid platform to energise the process of socio-economic development in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. The Lessons engendered in the Indian immigration experience can be stepping-stones to the creation of stability and peaceful co-existence for higher levels of welfare in any society.

Indeed, in a globalised (world) village, we are all in a melting pot. The world is changing and our historic and traditional identity is simultaneously being influenced.

In trying to pinpoint the characteristics of being “INDIAN”, Swami Ranganthananda stated that:

“To me an Indian is one who has got a Vedantic brain which probes deep and soars high; an Islamic body that is valiant and vibrant; a Buddhistic heart overflowing with compassion and kindness; and Christian limbs of service and sacrifice.” (New India Digest: No. 79, Nov.-Dec. 2000).

Similarly, in my view, a loyal Guyanese is someone who embodies the silver threads of our six ethnic groups woven into a golden national tapestry. This is an apt reminder of the need for us to work together to maintain ‘Unity in Diversity’, in spite of the efforts of many to undermine peace in our country.

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion, let me issue a challenge to our colleagues in the Indian Diaspora. Many have achieved distinction in their respective fields of endeavour. The time has come, may be long past, for them to utilise the knowledge and experience gained in the course of their careers, to enrich the process of Development and Good Governance by rendering some measure of assistance to the developing world- through voluntary service or at a minimal cost. Such services would go a long way in under-scoring the fact that our ancestors did not only survive and prevail BUT their descendants, now internationally distinguished in many fields, can make a significant contribution to enrich the lives of the less fortunate, especially in the developing world.