

CXC SYLLABUS ON INDENTURESHIP HISTORY

by *Ramnarine Sahadeo*

Once it was brought to the attention of stakeholders in the educational system that the contributions of East Indians to the development of the Caribbean has been omitted or in some cases minimized by the Caribbean Examinations Council its offices were contacted. CXC invited submissions since the History syllabus at the CSEC and CAPE levels was due for review. Indentureship experience was discussed on several zoom and internet programs involving participants from far away as Fiji and South Africa. They include Indo-Caribbean Cultural Centre (Trinidad), the Ameena Gafoor Institute (UK), Indian Diaspora Council International (New York), Mala Harripersad show (Toronto), Caribbean Hindus Group and others. The Guyana print media also helped to engage the public. As a result submissions flowed in from these well established organisations and from individuals and groups like Democracy Watch2020 (Toronto area). Universal Philosophy and Religion (Florida) sent a letter with 52 names attached expressing their concern. These suggestions were acknowledged by CXC.

Others who cannot read nor write, expressed on chat groups disappointment that they were never taught their history and only learnt portions of it by oral exchanges. CXC has been quite open with respect to this matter but the final product will be a challenge based on the volume of books and research papers now available on Indentureship history. Several educators made offers to assist further if required. One of them is Dr. Baytoram Ramharack who teaches History and authored a book on Jung Bahadur Singh and the BGEIA. It may seem paradoxical but Indentureship history is being taught at Universities overseas in much more detail than in the region where the actual events took place. Basdeo Mangru wrote the INDIANS IN GUYANA in 1999 with the hope that CXC and New York high schools would use it to fill a void. These omissions only perpetuate ignorance leading to intolerance and even race hatred. Contributors were unanimous in their intent to improve understanding of a marginalised group.

SYNOPSIS OF SUBMISSIONS

The submissions shared with us suggested inclusion of the names of those on the *Whitby* and *Hesperus* when they landed in the first country in the West, British Guiana on May 5 1838; the number of indentured who arrived at the various countries in the Caribbean up to 1917; details of the many struggles on the sugar plantations including killings by police who in some cases did not first read the Riot Act before firing; Enmore and its influence on Jagan; Kowsilla and Alice Street at Leonora, training ground for another President; The Wismar Massacre as the first ethnic cleansing in the region; the 1884 Hosay/Muharram massacre (not riots) of Indians in Trinidad; role of Gandhi and Rev. Andrews in ending of the system; 1857 Sepoys (not mutineers) battle for Independence in India and the increase in numbers who left since as some were deported or escaped after changing their identities. Experienced teachers agree there are sensitive ways to introduce these facts in the classroom as it may be shocking to some students but the truth must be taught. Special recognition must go out to Dr. Kumar Mahabir who appeared in person before CXC with submissions in 2017 and Dr. Vishnu Bisram who in 2021 followed up with an analysis of the discriminatory History curriculum.

One of the most pervasive areas of discontent was the unethical and even illegal practice of religious conversion forced upon the victims. It denied many educational and employment opportunities; some lost their language and their culture and now practice most of the values of their colonizers

Until the 1902 Swettenham circular was withdrawn in 1933 Indians in rural areas did not send their daughters to school. Girls are now among the top achievers in exams at all levels and one can only speculate what contributions they could have made to society had they not been denied an education. Positive developments like the establishment of the First Ashram and Hindu College at Cove and John by Swami Purnanandaji Maharaj from India in the 1950s was also mentioned. He initiated a branch of the Sangha and was instrumental in the unification of the now powerful Maha Sabha organisation in Trinidad which now manages numerous private Hindu Schools. In both countries he trained Hindu students and lifted the status of the Hindus. One of those he inspired and influenced, Swami Aksharananda, now heads Saraswati Vidya Niketan, one of the most successful Private Hindu Secondary schools in Guyana.

Greater details would make education alive as it allows students to learn about and develop mutual respect for all cultures. Some Individuals may have difficulty tracing their family backgrounds but fortunately the entire history of Indo Caribbean peoples is not obliterated. Many are now making concerted efforts to find their ancestral villages and relatives in India. This would of course necessitate the cooperation of all governments by responding to the call for digitizing indentureship records as Fiji, Mauritius, and Suriname have been doing. Imagine its 2023 and Nirvana Wimal, top 2021 NGSA performer, and countless other students across the Caribbean rushing home excitedly after completing a class assignment "Tracing your ancestry" to tell their parents that they discovered the villages from which their great grandparents came. Many look forward to the day when Sanskrit can be taught in schools or online so students can reconnect with the knowledge based civilization for which they were alienated. Others suggest that parents should persuade their children to enrol in greater numbers in Hinduism course.

The Board that was set up since 1972 ought to have made some changes but clearly they need public input and oversight. Some have expressed the view that CXC knows its mandate, have access to all materials and experts, and must be aware of the recommendation by UNESCO that minorities should not be excluded from the curriculum. Others felt that they can only teach what is on CXC website and that an NGO should be established as a watchdog. One continuing concern is that it will take a long time to make changes to the curriculum so stakeholders have to remain involved. The next review on Literature may not take place for years but hopefully by that time local stakeholders will participate more actively. The importance of education in the development of any nation cannot be overemphasized. The most effective way to destroy any group is to deny them knowledge of their past. Government and citizens should pay consistent attention to what is being taught to the future leaders of the nation.

Ramnarine Sahadeo (on behalf of those who cannot write)

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Editor of the pocket sized Gita by Gandhi, with quotes and comments

Author: Mohandas K. Gandhi: Thoughts, Words, Deeds: His Source of Inspiration: Bhagavad - Gita

