

SOME REFLECTIONS ON 157 YEARS OF THE VINCY INDIAN EXPERIENCE

By Dr Arnold Thomas

As persons of Indian origin (PIOs) commemorate Indian Arrival Day on 1 June 2018 it is useful to reflect on some of the profound changes that have taken place over the past 157 years. Today PIOs in SVG live in a perfectly integrated society relatively free from many of the problems experienced in some countries in the Caribbean with an Indian population. It's been a long way from things Indian to things Vincentian, a journey littered with hardships, pains and struggles. To put the commemorative event in historical perspective we must first look at the reasons for the Indians coming here, the conditions under which they came, their living and working conditions, and how they adapted to local conditions over the years.

Why Indians came

There are two aspects to this issue, first why were they recruited and secondly, why did the Indians want to leave their homeland. On the first issue following the abolition of slavery in 1838 estate owners found it difficult to entice the freed blacks to work and as elsewhere in the Caribbean they turned to the recruitment of alien labour. These included "Liberated Africans" who were brought in between 1839 and 1864, labourers from Barbados who were free to come and go, Madeirans as indentured workers between 1845 and 1864 and finally the Indians between 1861 and 1880. By the time indenture started three types of labourers could be distinguished: resident labourers or those living on estates, indentured labourers also living on estates and labourers from surrounding villages who were labelled 'strangers'. Wages differed among the groups with 'strangers' receiving the highest and indentured workers the lowest.

In spite of the early recruitments in 1857 planters petitioned the Colonial Office for indentured Indian labour, and the way was finally cleared for Indian immigration to St. Vincent. Between 1861 and 1880 8 ships brought 2474 Indians to St. Vincent as indentured workers.

Looking at the push factors there were several reasons the Indians came, many had brushes with the law that they wanted to escape from; there were pregnant wives who used it as an escape from husbands they were forced to marry because of the dowry given to them; many were kidnapped by unscrupulous recruiters, and of course the promise of a good life and wealth to be made.

Once recruited and processed by the emigration agency they had to endure a voyage lasting 90 days from India to the West Indies. On this voyage many died from illness and some even committed suicide, and women in particular had to suffer particular problems. Probably the roughest part of the voyage was rounding the Cape of Good Hope in an area called *Paargal Samundar*, where the Indian Ocean meets the Atlantic Ocean and the cold water of the Antarctic join with the warm Atlantic. By the time they landed in Kingstown they were far from healthy. One myth that must be dispelled is that Indian Bay was so called because the Indians landed there – nothing could be further from the truth according to all the Immigration Reports. Once landed they were taken to the Military Commissariat building in New Edinboro before allocation to various estates.

What they brought

In addition to their language mainly Hindustani, they had their own Hindu religion which included several festivals and practices. They had their own dress code, and eating habits. They also brought with them a variety of items such as varieties of fruits like mango, cashew, and guava, and drums and other musical instruments, as well as agrarian skills. Marriage customs practised in India were guaranteed under the Immigration Acts.

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Living and working conditions on estates

In spite of all the guarantees given under the law once on the estates life was not what was always expected: housing was very poor, there was lack of medical care, both men and women had to work from dusk until dawn and females in particular were subjected to sexual abuse by their overseers.

Although the indenture system appeared to be working smoothly in 1882 conditions became so bad on Argyle Estate, considered one of the best, that scores of workers on 7 October 1882 defied management and marched to Kingstown to protest their treatment. This was the protest march that triggered the end of indenture in St. Vincent by 1890 long before the system globally ended in 1917.

What happened after the end of indenture: adaptation and change

Of the 2,474 who came 1,141 returned to India. Those Indians who either chose to remain in St. Vincent or were simply left behind had to adjust very quickly to local conditions. Meanwhile some attempts were made to make living conditions better for the Indians, both by some estate owners and certain church organisations. Although never explicitly excluded, the children of indentured Indians never attended the public schools, partly out of fear of the black children, sometimes out of caste/racial prejudice of the parents, and often because the Indian children had difficulty with the English language. The Indians living at Argyle during the period of indenture hardly ever sent their children to school at Stubbs or Calder, however on 27 November 1883 the first school exclusively for children of East Indian was opened parents at a fee of two pence per week. It was supposed to be a model school, however it closed a year later due to low attendance no doubt because the rush was on to get back to India, but not before the Indians being labelled ungrateful by the estate owner.

The triumph of Christianity over Hinduism

Over 90 per cent of the Indians who came to St. Vincent were Hindus. By agreement Indians were allowed to practice their religion as elsewhere in the West Indies, but their relatively small number, their dispersion among the estates and the transient nature of their existence left little scope for development of a critical mass, and Hinduism could not survive the aggressive proselytising of the Christian churches who preached that Hinduism was heathenism from the early days of indenture.

Infants were baptised in Christian churches and given Anglo-Saxon names after the manner of planters, managers and overseers as part of the policy to break links with India; even young ones born in India were given Anglo-Saxon names, so you would hardly find a Hindu among Indo-Vincentians let alone Indian surnames like Gowkool, Rambaluck, Singh, or Kowleesur. The change of name was also a passport to receiving an education from the Christian schools. As a result of naming boys after overseers and others we have a situation in St. Vincent where several brothers carry different surnames!

Polygamy was prohibited under the Immigration Ordinance of 1878 and later withdrawn on representation from the Government of India, but it was hardly necessary because of the large-scale conversion to Christianity. And by the second half of the 20th century other Christian religions such as Seventh Day Adventism had taken a strong hold among the Indian population. One of the spinoffs of this state of affairs is inter-marriage with other races something not done by the first generation.

With the decline of Hinduism as the major religion among Indians many of the Hindu rituals and festivals were no longer practised or observed as in nearby Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. The changes were profound in several aspects, not only in religion, but language, culture, dress and food. With the exception of special occasions females do not wear saris. Even in food curry dishes are not the norm among Indians but creole style dishes.

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Establishment of Indian Villages and the evolution of an Indo-Vincentian culture

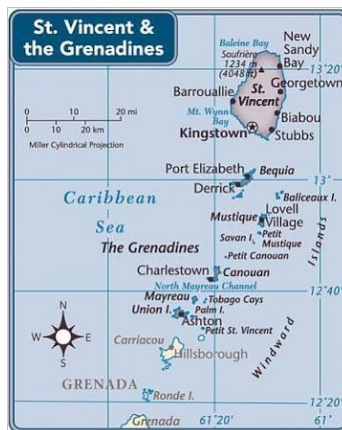
Although indenture had ended Indians continued to live on estates. Argyle Estate on the southern tip of the island was home to about 200 Indians at the close of the century. When it was sold in 1930 many Indians living there bought lands in nearby sugar estates at Calder, Akers Hill and Richland Park. Over the next decades these grew into the main Indian communities on the south eastern part of the island; there were other concentrations of Indians in other parts of the island such as Georgetown, Park Hill, and Rose Bank. It was from these villages that the distinctive Indo-Vincentian community developed during the early decades of the twentieth century. Hinduism might have declined if not died, but the Indians continued to live as distinctive communities with their own values and practices in matters such as arranged marriages and weddings, and funeral rites – which are observed by some families even today.

More profound changes were to take place following migration to the United Kingdom and elsewhere during the 1950s and 60s, which saw the almost complete decimation of these Indian villages.

The current situation

With the establishment of the SVG Indian Heritage Foundation in 2006 there have been some remarkable historic developments and achievements such as, 26 March 2007 the official recognition by Parliament of 1 June as Indian Arrival Day and 7 October as Indian Heritage Day.

Another landmark event was the recognition by the Government of India of the SVG Indian Heritage Foundation in 2007 and regular participation of the Indian High Commissioner to SVG based in Suriname celebration events in SVG. Given the fundamental changes that have taken place in the religion and culture over the years there is hardly any recognition of the festivals and rituals brought to these shores by the fore parents of today's Indo-Vincentians.



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Dr. Arnold Thomas was a diplomat at the Mission of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States based in Brussels, Belgium. More than 30 years professional experience in diplomacy, development administration, teaching, research, and international business and development consulting, including Embassies and Mission of the Organisation Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), Brussels, Belgium, CARICOM Secretariat, Guyana; Caribbean Association of Industry and Commerce (CAIC) Barbados; CARICOM Export Development Agency, Barbados; OECS Secretariat, St. Lucia; Brooklyn College City University of New York (CUNY); Medgar Evers College, CUNY; Manhattan Community College, CUNY; North London University, London; Thames Valley University, London. Founding member of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Indian Heritage Foundation (SVGIFH) established in 2006. Extensive research on the history of Indians in St. Vincent, beginning at the Public Record office in London in 1992 followed by field trips to St. Vincent and other countries. Following lobbying efforts by the SVGIFH the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines passed an act in 2007 establishing June 1 as Indian Arrival Day and October 7 as Indian Heritage Day.

