

A Brief History of East Indian Heritage in Jamaica

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When and Why the East Indians Came to Jamaica

The East Indians are the largest ethnic minority group living in Jamaica at present (World Atlas, 2019). The decision to introduce East Indian immigrant workers to the island's plantations came after the failure of the post-slavery apprenticeship system in 1838 as well as the European immigration scheme.

In the opinion of the British West Indies planters, the Indians were the next best bet for the survival of the plantations as the Indian labourers had already proved successful in Mauritius. After much deliberation and assurances from the planters in regard to the welfare of the immigrants, as well as some level of resistance from the Jamaica Baptist Union who had some major fears about the activities undertaken by the missionaries, the go-ahead was granted by the British Colonial Office and the then Colonial Government in India for the Indentureship Scheme in 1844. Immigration Agents were appointed in India, (who represented specific West Indian territories), to recruit voluntary emigrants. Recruitment centres were also opened across India, mainly in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (Mansingh & Mansingh, 1993).

In an effort to get volunteers to come to the island, Indian recruiters would, at times, visit markets and fair grounds in the villages and paint a picture of Jamaica as the greenest pasture on the earth for them to visit. Willing individuals received an award of seven pounds sterling per head; otherwise, innocent girls and boys were sometimes kidnapped and sent overseas, often not without the connivance of those in high authority (Jamaica National Heritage Trust, 2011). The

first set of 261 Indians arrived at Old Harbour Bay on the ship, *SS Blundell*, on May 10, 1845 and, up to 1917, more than 36, 000 Indians arrived in the island.

The indentureship contract was a legal document which, in the beginning, bound an individual to a specific plantation for a period of one year and to Jamaica, generally, for a period of five years, prior to eligibility to a return passage to India. However, after 1860, both the bond and the residency periods were increased to a period of five years each and, as the century changed, individuals had the opportunity to receive grants for lands in lieu of a return passage. While the majority of the immigrants had high hopes of returning to their homeland, sadly, only 12,109 individuals received their entitlement (Mansingh, 1975).

Living Conditions and Unfulfilled Promises

By law, planters were expected to agree on providing the Indians with a weekly minimum wage for long days of work; housing, which would include dormitories for single persons and one-room houses for families; in addition to the provision of lands, ethnic groceries and spices and, most of all, free medical care. Unfortunately, none of the planters ever fulfilled all of these commitments. Additionally, two shillings and six pence were deducted from the Indians' meagre wages for rice, flour, dried fish or goat, peas, and seasoning, which were a part of their rations. According to Mansingh and Mansingh (1993), the planters' failures to fulfill their commitments were not considered as being illegal. Mansingh and Mansingh stated that "the only illegal part of the contract was criminal penalty or imprisonment for civil offense, such as being absent from work" (1993, p. 15). In keeping with the cruelty of plantation slavery, the indentured labourers were expected to work even when they were sick, as illness was not regarded by plantation owners as an acceptable excuse to not work.

The majority of the Indian labourers were Hindu, but very little provision was made for their religion and cultural practices. Non-Christian unions were not recognized until 1956 (Mansingh & Mansingh, 1993, p. 17). Fundamental cultural and linguistic differences which tended towards a reluctance to mix with the local population, coupled with the habit of many to abandon the hard labour of the plantation in favour of vagrancy and begging in urban areas, helped to influence the negative perceptions of the Indians held by the British and African population. In fact, many such Indians were oftentimes harassed with the derogatory term, 'coolie', which referred to their lowly status as day labourers. According to Mansingh and Mansingh, "many Indians succumbed to economic and social pressures and became Christians" (1993, p. 17).

How the Indians Survived

The Indians were well-versed in many areas and, as such, they performed a number of tasks for their survival. They engaged in agriculture and farming practices and in trades, such as barbering, goldsmithing, ironsmithing, pottery, carpentry, and jewelry making. Some became small landlords, while others dealt in moneylending.

The Contribution of the Indians to Jamaica's Cultural Landscape

The Indian presence in Jamaica can be seen in many aspects of the country's cultural landscape. Senior (2003) outlines that the Indians' influence can be seen in the widespread popularity of some Indian foods, such as curried goat, which is a Jamaican specialty, and roti, which is growing in popularity, as well as the use of curry powder to season meats and other foods. The Indians also introduced the dish, pumpkin talkari, as well as betel leaves, betel nut, coolie plum, mango, jackfruit, and tamarind, which are popular in Jamaica.

Indian jewellers, active in rural Jamaica, developed their skills into a cottage industry which has, over the years, attracted an interest from Jamaicans, especially as it relates to the wearing of intricately wrought gold bangles.

Indians also introduced the growing of rice in Jamaica. Additionally, the cultivation of Indian hemp or marijuana for narcotic purposes was popular among Indians and they brought it to the island when they came as indentured servants. The local name, ganja, was introduced by the Indians, and the Hindu population customarily use ganja for spiritual and medicinal purposes. The smoking of ganja is a popular spiritual tradition for the Rastafarians, which was influenced by the Indian community. The Indians also brought Hinduism and Sufi Islam to Jamaica which, to an extent, is growing in popularity.



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