

East Indians circa 1915



How it started

The Bill abolishing slavery was passed in the British Parliament, then headed by Prime Minister Earl Grey, on July 31, 1833 to come into effect in 1834. However, it was not until August 1, 1838 that final Emancipation came. In the interval, as a consequence of lobbying by West Indian planters there had been a period of apprenticeship, during which the former enslaved would work for wages on the plantations in the British Caribbean colonies. But apprenticeship was fraught with many difficulties and as the end of slavery was now clearly in sight, the planters began to seek low-wage labour elsewhere. Their eyes fell first on the Portuguese island of Madeira, but since it was clear that it would not supply labour in the quantity they wanted over the long term, they turned their sights to Asia, and to the British colony of India in particular.

One of the early overtures to bringing Indians to British Guiana came from John Gladstone, who wrote a letter to Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co Ltd (GACL) dated January 4, 1836 from Liverpool. Gladstone had plantations in British Guiana and Jamaica and was concerned over the loss of labour he expected to face. He requested 100 labourers from Calcutta and informed the company that he would be disposed to sending a ship to ferry them to Demerara.

According to a copy of the letter, published by Gulcharan Mohabir on the website <http://www.sulekha.com>, Mr Gladstone offered some inducements: *Our plantation labour in the field is very light; much of it, particularly in Demerara, is done by task-work, which for the day is usually completed by two o'clock in the afternoon, giving to the people all the rest of the day to themselves. They are furnished with comfortable dwellings and abundance of food; plantains, the produce of the colony, being the most common, and preferred generally by them; but they have also occasionally rice, Indian corn-meal, ship's biscuits, and a regular supply of salt cod-fish, as well as the power of fishing for themselves in the trenches. They have likewise an*



Indian Girl circa 1892

annual allowance of clothing sufficient and suitable for the climate; there are schools on each estate for the education of the children, and the instruction of their parents in the knowledge of religious duties. Their houses are comfortable, and it may be fairly said they pass their time agreeably and happily. Marriages are encouraged, and when improper conduct on the part of the people takes place, there are public stipendiary magistrates, who take cognisance of such, and judge between them and their employers. They have regular medical attendance whenever they are indisposed, at the expense of their employers.

He added: *It would be desirable that a portion of them, at least one-half, should be married, and their wives disposed to work in the field as well as they themselves. We should require to bind them for a period not less than five years or more than seven years. They would be provided with comfortable dwellings, food, and medical assistance; they would also, if required, be provided with clothing, or wages to provide themselves, which, for the able-bodied, would not exceed four dollars per month, and in that proportion for females and their children as they grow up; a free passage would be given to them to Demerara, where they would be divided, and 20 to 30 placed on one plantation.*

But he need not have worried as the reply from Gillanders, Arbuthnot & Co made clear. This company had already been involved in sending Indians to work on the sugar plantations in Mauritius. The response from Calcutta dated June 6, 1836 said: *... We are not aware that any greater difficulty would present itself in sending men to the West Indies, the natives being perfectly ignorant of the place they agree to go to, or the length of the voyage they are undertaking. The tribe that is found to suit best in the Mauritius is from the hills to the north of Calcutta, and the men of which are all well-limbed and active, without prejudices of any kind, and hardly any ideas beyond those of supplying the wants of nature, arising it would appear, however, more from want of opportunity than from any natural*

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