

Indian indenture: Some reasons for immigrants repatriating and settling

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The Indian immigrants in British Guiana who had completed their first contract and had also fulfilled the five-year "industrial residence" requirement were entitled by law to free repatriation to India. The advantage of the free return passage was not taken by a majority of immigrants in the colonies more distant from their homeland. Between 1842 and 1870, for instance, an average of 76 per cent of the immigrants in Mauritius, British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica decided to settle in their respective colony. By comparison, for the same years, of those who had sought employment in Ceylon, Burma, and Malaya, 80 per cent decided, for reasons undocumented, to return home at their own expense.

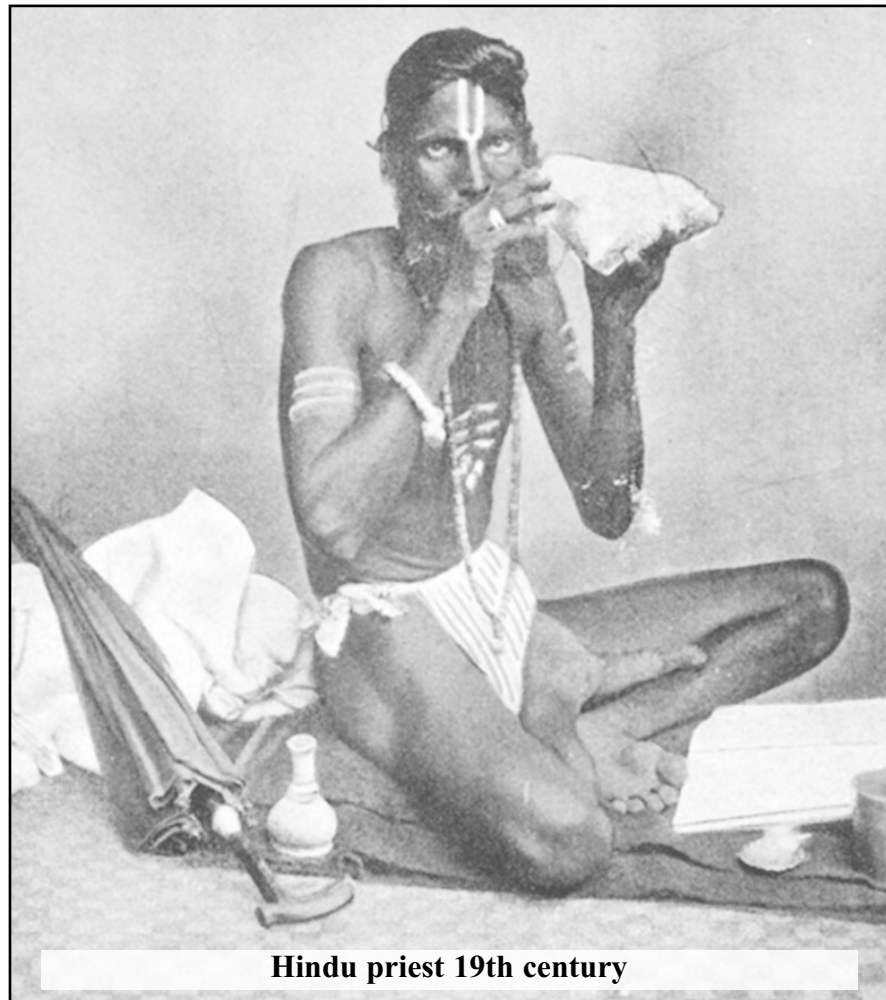
Why the average 24 per cent in the more distant colonies decided to repatriate is also not easy to establish. The immigrants were not questioned before their departure from the colonies; and the Protector of Emigrants in India, although required by law to do so, seldom interviewed repatriating labourers.

Even when they did, it was cursory and unsystematic. Nevertheless, regarding the Indian indentured immigrants in British Guiana the following reasons, either singly or multiple, would explain why a minority decided to return to India and the rest opted to settle in the colony.

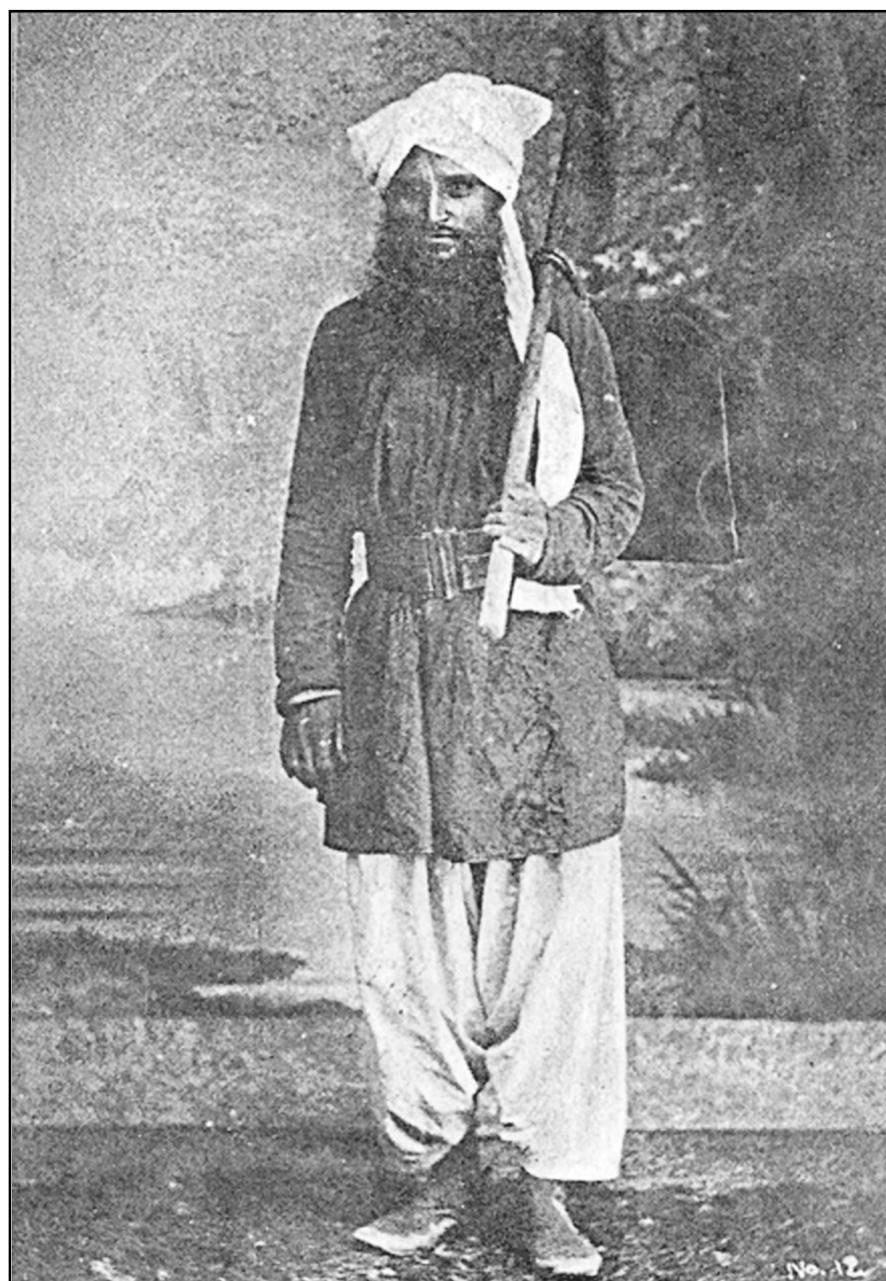
For many immigrants, their expectations that were based on the recruiters' promises had been too high, and they would have been disappointed when reality confronted them. For some immigrants, the shortage of marriageable Indian women, coupled with their apparent aversion to exogamous marriages, would have been a source of great discontent. That more men retro-migrated did not alleviate the sexual imbalance since more males than females continued to arrive in the colony. Other immigrants would have been overcome by the nostalgia of Mother India and the memory of a wife or an old parent whose funeral pyre his religion required him to light. Those immigrants who had arrived weak and sickly and were able to strengthen themselves by better food and medical care could not have been overly daunted by the perils and uncertainty of the long voyage home. The belief in the loss of caste was probably inconsequential to many who repatriated.

With the money saved, they could establish themselves in another community and keep their transmarine experience a secret, or, as many had actually done, give caste-dinners at which they were re-initiated, often in a higher caste. A number of immigrants in the colony would have been dissatisfied as a result of the treatment received from medical officers.

It was common practice for medical men to discharge immigrants from hospital before they were completely cured, and to this may be attributed a large percentage of the so-called idleness charges that were brought before magistrates. By the strict letter of the law, an indentured immigrant was bound to do his daily task of work if he was not in hospital or in gaol, and although the magistrate had a discriminatory power of declining to convict, if he believed the accused was physically unable to work, it would have been difficult for him, on account of the alleged malingering propensity of the



Hindu priest 19th century



Muslim Missionary

East Indians, to decide, other than in extreme cases, against the expressed opinion of the doctor.

The immigrants' perception of unfair dealing by the courts would have also influenced the decision to repatriate.

Of the majority of immigrants who were weekly committed to gaol for breaches of contract, a very considerable proportion was convicted of neglect to do what they were physically incapable of doing.

Even pregnant women were liable to punishment for neglecting to perform the ordinary task of work despite that they pleaded their delicate condition in this respect, and were evidently, by their appearance, near their confinement.

A sense of injustice of such convictions seemed a very potent cause for the prevailing resentment amongst the immigrants.

Another cause for resentment was the fact that invidiously distinct positions in court were assigned to managers of estates. Some of them being Justices of the Peace were allowed to remain on the bench even during the trial of their own cases. It very often happened that a manager would in open court whisper to the presiding magistrate upon the subject of the case being tried and in which he was a complainant. Such behaviour would give the immigrants the impression of partiality even to a conscientious magistrate.

Finally, the East Indians experienced a social problem which would have persuaded a number of them to return to India. During the early days of immigration few of them had received even a modicum of education in British Guiana. They were, however, able to retain their religion, their social habits, and to some extent, their language.

With their mixture of caste and religions and their different languages and dialects, they tended to become narrow in outlook and less prone to become cosmopolitan. Moreover, their contractual terms created a mentality and an atmosphere amongst them of a mere temporary stay in the colony. Consequently, the provision that the colonial government made for public education during the period of indenture tended largely to pass the Indians by.

Decision to settle

The Indian immigrants who chose to settle in British Guiana would have been motivated by one or a combination of the following factors.

After ten years' residence among jahaji bhais (i.e. brothers of the boat, as indentured shipmates affectionately addressed one another) and sometimes among kith and kin, and new alliances, the nostalgia that would have afflicted the immigrants would have dissipated. In the early years of indenture, they would have experienced the trauma of a contraction in the field of social participation.

But with every new wave of immigrants landed on the estates, that field would have expanded to encompass a growing social circle comprising little Indias. All of this would have eased the pressure of living in a foreign country.

At the end of the tenth year also, many labourers had acquired a family and built their own home and owned livestock and other property.

Those who had renounced their right to

Turn to page 10D