

How it started

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deficiency, of which there is no indication in their countenance, which is often one of intelligence. They are also very docile and easily managed, and appear to have no local ties, nor any objection to leave their country...

The best period for procuring and shipping the men is in our cold season, between the months of November and April, and the instruction to procure the men should precede the ship about two months, to give time to collect them; we should of course not be able to find a cargo for the ship, but some morghy rice might be sent, which with a little care would keep for three years...

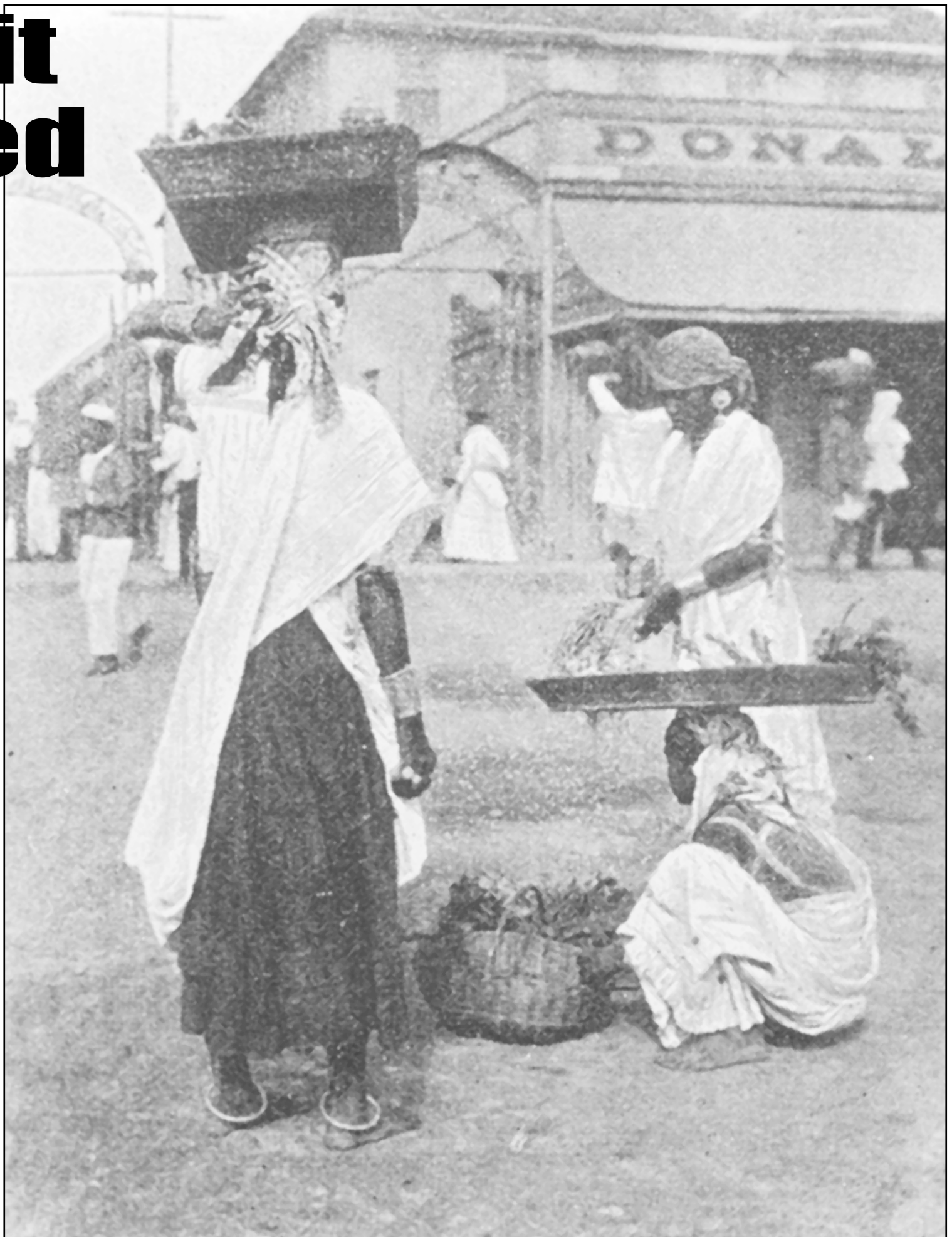
The Hill tribes, known by the name of Dhangurs [Dhangars], are looked down upon by the more cunning natives of the plains, and they are always spoken of as more akin to the monkey than the man. They have no religion, no education, and, in their present state, no wants beyond eating, drinking, and sleeping; and to procure which they are willing to labour. In sending men to such a distance, it would of course be necessary to be more particular in selecting them, and some little expense would be incurred, as also some trouble; but to aid any object of interest to you, we should willingly give our best exertions in any manner likely to be of service.

Gladstone was an absentee planter whose plantation would have been managed by an attorney, and who may, or may not have known the real conditions that existed there. Whatever the case, the reality for the Indians who eventually arrived here was in no way related to Gladstone's fantasy.

The first Indians arrived in British Guiana on board the *Whitby* and the *Hesperus* – 396 men, women and children – two years later on May 5, 1838. They included 'Hill Coolies' from the Chota Nagpur plateau about 300 miles from Calcutta. Even before this, Indians had been indentured to work in other colonies, including the French territory of Réunion in the Western Indian Ocean, and eventually they could be found in a range of British tropical colonies, as well as in the Dutch colony of Suriname.

For the next 79 years—a lifetime—except for two stoppages between 1839 and 1851, about 239,000 Indians were brought to British Guiana, initially on five-year contracts, which included transport back to India at the end of their period of indentureship. However, only a minority either chose to return or were actually able to go back. The stoppages came about following complaints about how badly the Indians were being treated and the British government launched enquiries and then appointed immigration officials, who were to ensure that the regulations were adhered to.

Nevertheless, the exploitation continued and inevitably the Indians in due course were involved in disturbances or went on strike on various plantations. Historians have documented disturbances and strikes at Plantation Leonora, West Coast Demerara in July 1869; at Plantations Hague, Zeelugt, Vergenoegen, Uitvlugt, Success and Non Pareil in 1870, and at Plantation Devonshire



Vegetable sellers in Georgetown circa 1900

Castle in 1872. The causes of these strikes were the widespread dissatisfaction with long hours of work, reduced pay and deductions from pay along with general ill-treatment and abuse. Many Indians were arrested and incarcerated and some lost their lives.

According to Associate Professor Emeritus York College, CUNY, Basdeo Mangru, it was a campaign in India that set the stage for the abolition of Indian indenture. It began, he wrote in a letter to this newspaper, with a resolution by Indian nationalist, Gopal Krishna Gokhale that was introduced in the Viceroy's Imperial Legislative Council in 1910 to terminate emigration to Natal. This was passed the next year and Mr Gokhale then sought another resolution for the prohibition of recruitment of Indian labour for colonial and inland employment. He listed several objections to indenture: an unfair contract which omitted the penal sanctions, high mortality, absence of safeguards, mounting number of court prosecutions, appalling number of suicides, the degrading posi-

tion of Indians who were disparagingly referred to as 'coolies'. This motion failed, but interest had been drummed up and two years later, indentureship was abolished in Mauritius.

Charles Hardinge, 1st Baron Hardinge of Penshurst, who served as Viceroy and Governor General to India from 1910-1916, based on reports he received, condemned the high death rate, the appalling incidence of suicides, mounting planter prosecution and the "indescribable sexual immorality" among Indian women which produced a high level of Indian wife murders. He called for the abolition of indenture "to remove a social stigma" which was bitterly resented by Indian educated opinion, Prof Mangru said. Lord Hardinge's indictment coupled with an intensive anti-indenture campaign and the outbreak of World War I which required Indian ships and labour led to the suspension of indenture on March 20, 1917. The system was officially abolished three years later.