

Daughter of indentured immigrants recalls the old days

By Shabna Rahman

Pongavanum Munsammy fondly called 'Aunty Chalma,' had picked kamranga (carambola or starfruit) and breadfruit from her yard to take to the Leonora Market to sell, unlikely activity for a 90-year-old, but for this daughter of indentured immigrants working is what she does.

"Wah you gon do?" she beamed proudly. "Yuh can't sit down and get anything; you have to get up and get."

Munsammy's only tilt to old age is that she has become hearing impaired. She wears her traditional rumal (madras-style head scarf) all day. She said that the women who came from India wore the deep pink-checked scarf "out of respect."

Reminiscing on her days growing up in a logie at a place called 'Madras Quarter,' she said that ten families each had a room in the range houses. The logies were built with mud walls and thatched roofs. They had small wooden beds with mattresses of bihaya grass stuffed into jute bags. Flambeaux (*chiragh*) were present in every home and all the cooking was done on one fireside.

Munsammy's parents, her mother Andikan and father Chenganie, came on separate ships from India to British Guiana. She said that they did not speak much about their trips because they were both very young. The only thing she can recall them saying was that the recruiters had fooled them, telling them that they were going to British Guiana to work for a lot of money and gold. They were also told that they would be able to return to



Aunty Chalma and her daughter Golin

India and that was their desire but they could not afford it. They both came without their parents at age 11 to work on the sugar plantations at Leonora, and Jahaji (friends) took care of them.

Munsammy said her father came first and did "shovel work"; he also cut cane and loaded it into punts. A few years later her mother came, on another ship. At age 12, one year after arriving in British Guiana, someone arranged a match wedding between her and Chenganie. Their union bore three children: Munsammy and two older brothers who are both deceased.

After their period of indentureship ended, they bought a house lot from the manager of the estate in another section of the village for \$1. They built a two-bedroom wooden house on the lot and relocated there.

She recalled that her father smoked tobacco from a pipe while her mother chewed paan (betel leaf, which is sometimes combined with betel nuts, tobacco and lime). She recalled that her mother did not know how to cook roti and that almost all of their meals consisted of rice. This would be served mainly with daal and some form of curry.

Her father died first, in his 70s and a few years later, Andikan died when she was in her 80s.

Munsammy and her siblings all started working at the estate from tender ages. Her marriage was also arranged when she, too, was just 12 years old. She said she never found happiness in the marriage because her husband consumed a lot of alcohol and ill-treated her.

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Aunty Chalma's flat iron

A coal iron that was used by a butler who worked for a white plantation manager

A sill that is used for grinding massala