

Indian indenture: Some reasons for immigrants...

From page 3D

repatriation through commutation of their entitlement to a free passage would have added to their material acquisitions the compensatory parcel of land. All of this would have placed them in a position of comparative wealth and comfort instead of the comparative uncertainty they would have had to face upon returning to India. Generally, living conditions in Indian villages from which most of the labourers had been recruited were not up to the standard of the conditions prevailing on the colonial estates, even as early as the 1840s. Wage rates, too, were far lower. In India, around the same time, the average daily wage rate in terms of purchasing value was the equivalent of four cents; in British Guiana, it ranged between the equivalent of thirty and forty cents.

Furthermore, in India, the riot had to contend with the vagaries of nature, often expressed in droughts and floods both of which often led to famine. There was also the rapacity of man – the moneylender or the landlord – both of whom customarily utilized their cunning to bind their victims into a lifetime of debt.

Those labourers whose first indenture had expired had acquired five years' experience of their work; they would have become acquainted with their position in all its aspects; and would have been able to decide, according to their own practical knowledge, whether it would be advantageous for them to return to India or to remain in the colony.

For acclimatized and experienced labourers, there was competition among the planters for their services.

Many employers were not content with offering the usual fifty-dollar bounty money to those who re-indentured, but also offered a bonus incentive of five and sometimes ten dollars. For the thrifty, this bounty money and the bonus, the equivalent of about a year's income, became the nucleus of a fortune.

It was thus that a number of labourers were able to invest in cattle and become milk vendors, and to enter the retail and later wholesale trade. To a number of labourers, re-indenturing would be viewed as being better than the status of a free labourer as it was the only way to ensure free medical attention, free hospital accommodation, and free living quarters. The temptation for them to re-indenture over and over again must have been irresistible.

Another possible motivation for settling concerned the implications accompanying the loss of caste. Before leaving India, the immigrants had been rigidly fixed in a stratified social system based on caste. But once they had crossed the kala pani (ie the black water) they lost all claim to their erstwhile caste, re-admission to which was achievable either by travelling to the sacred Indian city of Benares to wash seven times in the holy water of the Ganges or by giving lavish caste dinners and elaborate gifts to often unscrupulous priests. Initially, the popular belief among the immigrants was that failure to thus cleanse themselves was to invite divine retribution.

However, towards the end of the nineteenth century and afterwards, the injunction on travelling by sea was widely discredited, and it was not applicable to all strata of Hindu society.

The immigrants' ability to preserve their values and to practise their customs must be accorded considerable significance as a factor encouraging settlement in the colony.

Despite the pervasive and socially and culturally destructive influences of the plantations, the immigrants managed to keep intact the central tenets of their cultural values which in later years were given elaborate expression.

This they achieved mainly through their strong desire to use their own languages and through their tenacity to resist imbibing trappings of Western civilisation.

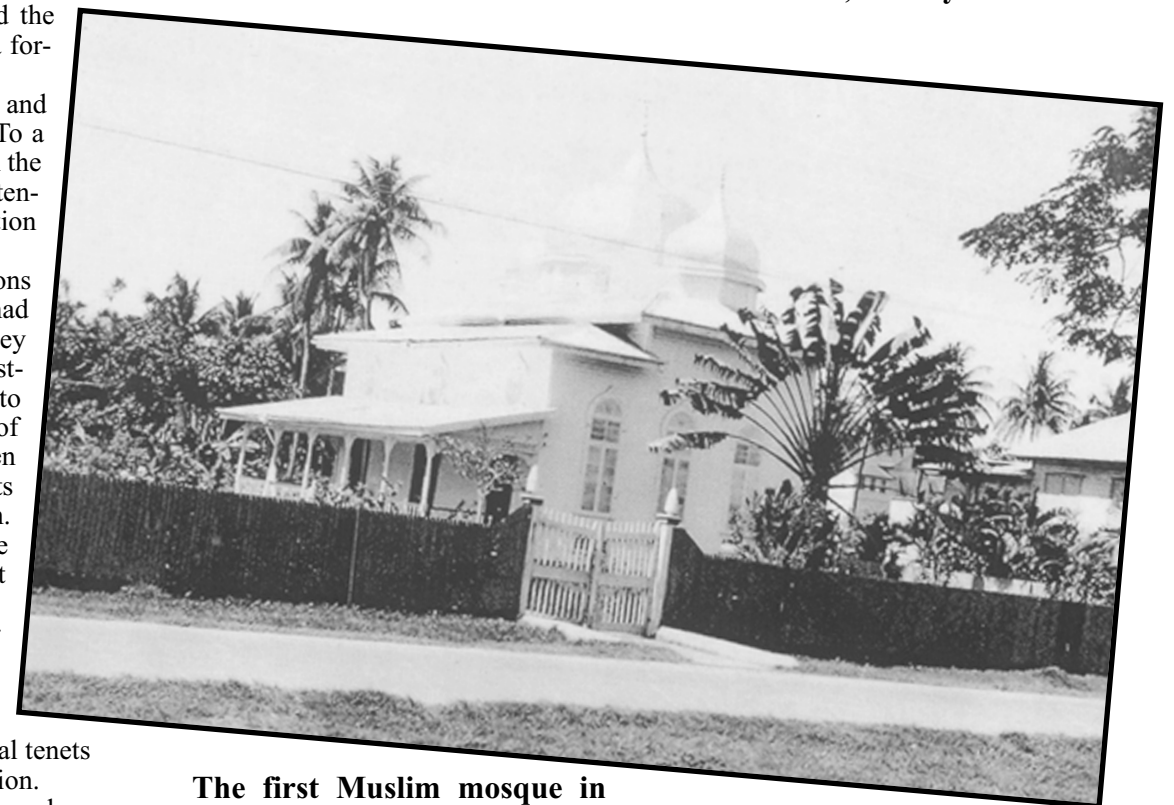
The frequent visits by missionaries and other emissaries from India also tended to keep intact the umbilical cord that bound the immigrants to India. The practice of their culture, the availability of most of their native foodstuffs, the presence of a growing number of their compatriots, and the sight of masjids and mandirs on every estate must have made them feel, in a vicarious sort of way, that they were still in their native country.

For a number of immigrants there was the fear of the long voyage to India occupying 100 days or more and marked by their witnessing dozens of deaths. Chief among the causes for excessive mortality on board ship were the debilitated condition of some of the returnees; the deficiency of animal protein and fresh vegetables; and the damp condition between decks, which rendered the atmosphere unwholesome and conducive to disease. Finally, there was widespread knowledge among the immigrants that suffering inevitably came to a sizeable portion of those who repatriated, especially those who did not have or could not find relatives in their native villages. Often adding to this problem was the fear of ridicule and shame in India that usually accompanied an inability to demonstrate material progress.

Despite these restraining factors it must be observed that throughout the period of indenture, pressures had been brought to bear upon the British government, the government of India, and the colonial government of British Guiana, most especially by the findings of various Commissions of Enquiry and by vociferous local and overseas critics, to enact protective legislation to safeguard the interest and welfare of the immigrants. Legislative enactments did not, of course, completely eradicate all evils in the system, but they did go a long way to alleviate some of the sufferings of the labourers, to make life in the colony more tolerable, and consequentially encouraging a very large number of immigrants to make British Guiana their home.



The first Hindu temple in Georgetown in James Street, Albouystown



The first Muslim mosque in Georgetown, Church Street



The second Shivala ever built in this country dating from 1902 at Woodley Park, West Coast Berbice