

'My father came here at age 10'

By Shabna Rahman

Jagat Jhagroo travelled to Guyana from India in 1895 with his pregnant mother, father and three siblings aboard a ship to work on the sugar plantation. He was ten years old.

His son, Bissoondial (only name), called Mahant, 86, of Groenveldt, Leonora, West Coast Demerara said that his father and grandparents, like all of the other labourers who came, were promised jobs that paid a lot of money and comfortable lives.

But along the three-month journey to British Guiana, they began to realise the hardships they would face. Their struggle began when Jhagroo's eight-year-old brother fell ill and subsequently died. His body was tossed overboard, much to the despair of his parents, but it was the only means of disposing of it. His mother gave birth to another boy onboard and as they continued the journey, they prayed that their lives would improve.

But they were further disappointed when they were taken to a 10-room logie, to share with nine other families, at a place called Raj Puriva and had to start working on the sugar plantation under harsh conditions. Their work on the plantation included weeding, applying manure, watering the cane, cutting and loading it into punts. Jhagroo and his siblings were taken to the field to work at tender ages.

When he was older, as was customary, his marriage was arranged and he and his wife had six children, five daughters and then Bissoondial. The Leonora resident said that his fourth sister, who lives in the US, is the only surviving one.

Bissoondial did not know his grandfather, but he said his grandmother died in her 70s. He remembered that she had stopped working and would go to the

- Bissoondial

estate's hospital every morning to collect free bread and rations to cook.

He was only 13 years old when his father died at the age of 59. His mother, who had later moved to live with one of her daughters on the East Coast Demerara died in her 90s. The last job his father did before his death was to bleed rubber into a pail to which water and acid were added. He would squeeze the extract out before steaming and drying it.

Though he remembers the process, Bissoondial was not sure what the product was called or what it was used for, but he said it was exported "during the time of the war."

Bissoondial's mother used to weed grass in the canefield and in her later years she worked in the estate manager's yard as a cleaner.

At age 16 after completing school, he too got a job at the estate factory but it was only temporary and he got "retrenched when the estate grind off." He started working at a shop belonging to his sister and brother-in-law and would also seek other jobs in Georgetown and other places as a carpenter.

He recalled that during the big strike in 1963, workers started to squat on a coconut walk. With the place becoming populated, he decided to build a small shop in front of his house, but bandits broke into it on three occasions and stole everything. Eventually he built the shop below his house and made it more secure. After that he never suffered any more robberies.

Bissoondial and his wife are still operating a shop today. The couple had seven children, the eldest of whom has died.



Bissoondial and his wife

Daughter of indentured immigrants...

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Her daughter Golin (only name given) said her mother, "went through a hard time..."

Munsammy's father had bought her a small house made of shingles which she later dismantled and replaced with a wooden house. She eventually gave it to Golin who upgraded it to a concrete structure.

Her father also gave her a calf as a wedding present and she would cut grass while working in the backdam and take it home in the afternoon for feed. In time, her small herd grew and she would milk the cows and sell the milk around the village.

Golin spoke fondly about her grandparents and recalled that they were very loving and kindhearted. Whenever she and her siblings visited them they would always give them food and money. She said too that when her grandparents went to their house they would take a bag of fruits and vegetables from their garden.

Today Munsammy lives alone in a simple logie-type dwelling and does her own cooking and cleaning. Although Golin has urged her to live with her, or to at least sleep at her house at nights, she refuses. Golin says once her mother is comfortable and happy in her own space, she would not take that away from her.

Munsammy's humble abode has a mud floor and a curtain which separates her bed-

room from the rest of her living space. In a corner on a table, sits two kerosene stoves and flambeaux. Her house has electricity, but she uses a flambeau at night.

"Look weh me live," she said. "Me deh good. Me nah want move from hay."

She showed this newspaper relics from the past – a small flat iron that she used to heat to iron clothes, a coal iron that was used by a butler who worked for a white plantation manager, as well as a sill that is used to grind masala.

Munsammy has three other daughters, one son, seven grandchildren, five great grandchildren and two great, great grandchildren. She is grateful that she has lived to see her fourth generation.

Golin said her mother, the oldest member of the mandir, would go there every Sunday with her flowers and basket of fruits for worshipping.

Her children hosted a religious function in celebration of her 90th birthday last month. They also made her a birthday cake.

She was in the limelight last year when Pushpanjali 16 – a cultural event that the Indian Commemoration Trust organises annually – honoured her for being the oldest surviving worker of the Leonora Estate.

Pushpanjali is held for the anniversary of the arrival of the first set of Indian indentured labourers on May 5, 1838. It also launched an open-air museum and Munsammy was happy to cut the ribbon to declare it open.



Aunty Chalma and her four generations