

Celebrating Indian Arrivals Day in Guyana on May 5, 2017 - By Vidur Dindayal

Celebrating Indian arrivals is a tribute to our ancestors from India. We thank them for laying firm foundations for us to do well in Guyana and the Caribbean. They gave us the tools in knowledge and wisdom to make our way through the jungle and storms of life.

From humble beginnings they came, under the indentured labour scheme, regarded as a new system of slavery, through the hazards of a long sea journey, not knowing where they would end up, and deposited to labour in sugar plantations for a pittance, in sub human conditions. Tested in the baptism of fire they survived stronger. We are of that tough breed.

Among many achievements, one great moment was when the son of one arrival became Chief Minister, later Premier of British Guiana and later still President of Guyana. The grandson of an arrival became Secretary General of the Commonwealth.

India the Motherland and Estate life.

My grandparents came from villages near the city of Lucknow, in Uttar Pradesh in North India. I am pleased to share these thoughts about where we Indo Caribbeans came from and where we got to.

India and all that it stood for was the back drop to our life in British Guiana, when I was a child. To my parents, family and friends India was the motherland, Mother India, the holy land, where they dreamt to go on pilgrimage. A blessing would be to die in India.

It seemed that the arrivals from India, so missed their home, their old villages and old ways that their life was consumed with doing all they could in the new country to make it possible to go back home. They were taken thousands of miles away to a foreign country, to harsh living conditions.

While making the best of life in British Guiana, their longing for the familiar world in India turned it into an idyllic model cleansed of anything disagreeable. Mother India was for them the blessed land.

At Blairmont Estate, the sugar plantation where I was born, the Indian community was like a model of social cohesion. It was thriving, supportive and organised with temple, masjid, elders, teachers, a full compliment of trades people, tailor, dressmaker, oilmaker, potter, goldsmith, guttersmith, carpenter, mithai wallas. There was even a drum maker in Rampur. The community seemed to have been modelled on what they knew of life in their old village in India.

Contact with India

Contact with India became virtually lost a few years after the last arrivals in 1917.

We lost the Indian languages, and forms of dress, but held on to our faiths mainly Hinduism and Islam, handed down by the old people.

Food remained the same as was brought by our grandparents. Staples like daal, and Indian masalas were imported in by merchants in Georgetown who also supplied a wide range of Indian goods, brassware and ornaments for religious functions, as well as holy books.

Absence makes..... . What kept alive the Indianness? Missionaries came from time to time. They were idolised. Otherwise, there were little or no visits to or from India.

Indian films became the only regular link with India. These reinforced the cultural values we lived by through their stories and music. Later there were Indian programmes on the radio with loads of Indian film songs. Indian film celebrities became household names for Indo Caribbeans. Among these were: film musicians C. Ramchandra and Naushad; film stars Ashok Kumar, Leela Chitnis, Dilip Kumar, Kamini Kaushal, Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Dev Anand, Suraiya; Singers Shamshad Begum, Lata Mangeshkar, Rafi, Mukesh and Talat Mehmood.

My dad used to get up at midnight to tune in to All India Radio. This way he was in touch with happenings in India. The songs played were semi classical, not film songs.

The achievements of great Indians, became models of excellence which inspired us from afar. Among many household names were Mahatma Gandhi, freedom fighter and father of the nation; Nobel prize winners Rabindranath Tagore and Sir CV Raman; Swami Vivekananda who captivated Americans with his oratory on Hinduism, Maharani of Jaipur and other Indian Royals; Tata and Birla, industrialists, Ravi Shankar, world renowned sitarist,

When India became independent, we had big celebrations in our village, even bigger celebrations in New Amsterdam and Georgetown.

When the Indian Cricket team came for the 1952-53 tour of the West Indies, the whole country of Indians flocked to Bourda to see the players with fascinating names, Umrigar, Phadkar, Apte, Gupte, Gaekwad, Manjrekar and Captain Vijay Hazare, among others.

Living in India, changed my life.

I had a deep attachment to India. As Indo Guyanese I feel blessed that I lived there when I went to study 60 years ago in the late 50s at Delhi University.

In my first days in India I had a culture shock. In the newspapers, I saw photos of high ranking people of government, police, industry, business and Indian films. They were all like me Indian with Indian names. In British Guiana, 60 years ago, most of those who held big posts were not Indian, they were European or African or mixed.

Another eye opener, things Indian which in British Guiana I thought were not proper were the norm in India. For example, eating with your hands, being barefoot at home, sitting on the floor, Indian dress sari, dhoti and kurta etc.

Among many examples: one of my lecturers wore his dhoti and kurta to College; in a wealthy Indian home in Mumbai, pictures on the walls were Hindu religious scenes like we have in our homes in Guyana; there was no display of wealth; I sensed that the upper class were strongly attached to Indian cultural values, which we Indo Caribbeans identify with; in the home of a princely family, we ate simple food, music played were old Indian songs; in Madras, we sat on the floor to eat, simple vegetarian food.

In many ways, mannerisms, expressing our feelings, relationships, it was reassuring to me that in India people behaved the same as Indians did in Guyana. One observation is the humility of most people particularly those of high status.

Discovery in India

I discovered something precious in India. In Guyana when I was a boy I wondered how I can be a true Guyanese when I grew up as 'Indian.' I found the answer in India. I am Guyanese of Indian ancestry. My ancestry, in my genes, and my upbringing in Guyana have both made me what I am Indo Guyanese. That's cool.

In India people from different provinces - Panjab, Gujrat, Bengal, Madras, etc., spoke different languages, ate foods cooked in different ways, dressed differently etc, but they all saw themselves as Indian.

Guyanese society like Indian is a collection of peoples from different parts. Countries have always consisted of different communities, and they have been inclusive. The United Kingdom consists of four nations, England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland. In America, community identities are strong and positively embraced such as the Irish, Italians, Polish etc.

Another discovery in India was that we Indo Caribbeans were unique as a people with innate social skills, we were good mixers. In India, we merged well with the locals, and we also got on well with non Indians, be they African, Chinese or European. We became the conduits for our Indian student friends to make contact with non Indian friends and vice versa. We Indo Caribbeans have grown up in an ethnically mixed society, plus we have awareness writ in our bones about things Indian.

Celebrating Indian Arrivals day in Guyana also celebrates the founding of our homeland as the The Land of Six Peoples. We are a nation of diversity, a rich blend of races, faiths and cultures, a microcosm of the world. Each of our peoples has enriched Guyanese life with beauty and vibrancy, like a flower garden, a kaleidoscope of colour, forms, complexity and mystery as life itself.

What of the future?

We are at the cusp of a sea change in what people the world over value in life. Feel good factor – the sense of well being, self worth, being valued as a person, are worth more than material possessions. We have needs which are met by human values in our culture.

Our immigrant ancestors learnt in their travel across the world to shed the heavy baggage of division and intolerance and embrace the new world secure in their cultural values, their *modus vivendi*.

This is their legacy to us. We are the cutting edge of social change, open, barrier free, not fearful of better understanding and fellowship across ethnicities, faiths and cultures.

Rabindranath Tagore, the great world poet, novelist, musician, playwright painter and Nobel Prize winner in Literature for his 'Gitanjali', who named Gandhi – 'Mahatma'; he encapsulates in his celebrated poem, *Where The Mind Is Without Fear*, what we have learnt from our ancestors who have handed us the torch to keep alight wherever we live, be it Guyana or elsewhere:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action --

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.



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Vidur Dindayal was born in Guyana and currently resides in the UK.

He published *Guyanese Achievers USA & Canada: A Celebration*.

A collaboration between Vidur Dindayal and the Guyanese diaspora *Guyanese Achievers, USA and Canada* celebrates the academics, actors, doctors, educators, entrepreneurs, and others who, by demonstrating inventiveness and persistence, have been recognized as exemplars of Guyanese achievement in North America.

