

Plight of Guyanese Sugar Cane Workers by *Oscar Ramjeet*

Sugar was “king in Guyana” for several decades. Ever since thousands of Indians were imported from India to the then British Guiana in the 19th and 20th centuries (1838 to 1917) to work in the sugar estates. They and their descendants have made the sugar estates in Berbice and Demerara thriving businesses for the owners while making it their homes. Many of their offspring have excelled in many segments of society after they migrated in their quest for better lives for themselves and families. Some are now proudly serving their newly adopted homes in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the Caribbean and other parts of the globe even as far as China, Australia, and India.

We take pride in acknowledging that many of the descendants of sugar cane workers have excelled in various fields including education, technology, trade and commerce, law, medicine, science – several are also world famous.

Some of them remained in Guyana their homeland and continued to 'slave' in the sugar industry. And now following the closure of most of the sugar estates - including Wales, Rose Hall and LBI are now jobless. Thousands of them together with their families making it the grand total to tens of thousands who are in a dilemma. We in the IDC are saddened with the plight with our brothers and sisters back in Guyana and urge ways and means how these families can be helped. Perhaps large corporations can be persuaded to look at the possibilities at opening other similar or different industries in the country which will provide jobs for these displaced workers.

The dismissed sugar workers are encouraged to go into farming, but there will be little scope for this because there will be limited consumers locally and the prevalence of praedial larceny. They cannot expect much from relatives and friends in the diaspora because of the high cost of living in Guyana as elsewhere. It is very unfortunate that that our brothers and sisters who decided to remain in Guyana and work to sustain the sugar industry have to endure such hardship at this juncture. Their ancestors travelled for months from India to a far distant land not knowing what to expect. They lived under inhumane conditions in loogies and worked for a pittance. Even the mules lived in better conditions. At first their food was limited to rice, dried fish, onions split peas, ghee or oil, tumeric or tamarind and pepper. No potable water, but later the situation improved and they were paid meagre wages for their work.

They lived and worked under harsh and unconscionable conditions which were described by British historian, Hugh Tinker, as a new system of slavery, Our prominent historian Dr. Basdeo Mangru argues that "slavery and indenture showed remarkable similarities in terms of control, exploitation and degradation". Despite their tremendous hardship, our forefathers were dedicated and made tremendous sacrifice not only for the benefit of the sugar industry and the country, while they also paved the way and laid the foundation for their children and grandchildren. Dr. Tota Mangar, another local historian, recently wrote "our forefathers of yesteryear have certainly been inspirational in the furtherance of national development through their grit and determination". They saved and ensured that their children and grandchildren were properly educated.

Therefore, I believe that it is grossly unfair and unjust that some of them have to suffer grave hardships because of the closure of the sugar estates which their ancestors worked tirelessly to preserve. I believe that all Guyanese regardless where they live should try to make representation through their missions and international agencies to encourage giant corporations to assist in one way or the other. The discovery of oil should be an important incentive for would-be investors. It is an uphill task, but thousands are on the breadline.

It is ironic that that sugar cane workers were the backbone of British colonial and economic power, yet the plight of their livelihoods seems irrelevant in these changing times. Where is the gratitude, we ask?

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