The Argyle Chronicles

From Home To East Indians To The Argyle International Airport

St. Vincent and the Grenadines

BY

DR ARNOLD THOMAS

East Indian Family, Calder, Circa 1929

BIO-PROFILE

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Dr Arnold Thomas was born in Calder and attended the Marriaqua Government School. He taught at the Calder Primary School before leaving for the UK in 1962. He graduated from the University of London with the B.Sc. in Economics in 1969 then moved to New York to continue graduate studies at City University of New York (CUNY) He obtained the M.A. (Political Science) from Brooklyn College, CUNY and Ph.D. (Pol. Sc.) from CUNY Graduate School.

He is a former Professor of Political Science at Universities in the US, Canada and the UK. Dr Thomas also worked with the CARICOM Secretariat in Guyana as Chief of the Technical Assistance Section and later continued as Programme Manager for Technical Assistance at the Caribbean Association of Industry and Commerce in Barbados. One of Dr Thomas' main focus is on political and administrative problems of development in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). He retired after more than a decade as Diplomat at the OECS Embassy in Brussels On returning to St. Vincent in 2009 he briefly took up the position of Executive Director of the SVG Chamber of Industry and Commerce.

Dr Thomas has done extensive research and writing on the Indian Diaspora in St. Vincent and is a founding member of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Indian Heritage Foundation (SVGIHF), a Life Member of the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO); currently he is the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Coordinator of the International Indian Diaspora Council and the Global Girmitiya Society – a newly formed organization of post-indenture Indians.

Dr Thomas is also a great supporter of West Indies cricket.

THE ARGYLE CHRONICLES: FROM HOME TO EAST INDIANS TO THE ARGYLE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

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Introduction

This March 20, 2017 marks the 100th anniversary of the international abolition of the Indian indenture system. It is also the month when St. Vincent and the Grenadines is celebrating National Hero's Day and National Heritage Month. It is fitting to reflect on the experience of Indo-Vincentians in the indenture and post-indenture years and how they managed to survive in a culture that was completely alien to what their forefathers brought from India. The recent opening of the Argyle International Airport (AIA) was also a reminder of the role that Indians have played in the development of the country. This article seeks to present an overview of the conditions under which the Indians were recruited, and their experience as indentured workers, both at Argyle and on the other 23 estates where Indians lived. What happened during this period is a story of struggle and hard work, betrayal and adaptation to local culture and conditions in order to survive. This article will conclude with an assessment of the contribution Indians have made to the development of the country. One of my objectives is to make a small contribution to this historiography.

Currently the SVG population of some 110,000 is comprised of Africans, Caribs, Europeans, Portuguese Madeirans and of course Indians, with the latter estimated about 7000. The introduction of indentured labour into St. Vincent followed a similar pattern as in other Caribbean territories when slavery ended in 1838, and there was a shortage of labour as many blacks refused to work on the estates. Between 1861 and 1880, 8 ships arrived from India bringing a total of 2474 Indians, living on 23 estates. These were the **Travancore** (1861), **Castle Howard** (1862), **Countess of Ripon** (1866), **Newcastle** (1867), **Imperatrice Eugenie** (1869), **Dover Castle** (1869), **Lincelles** (1875), and **Lightning** (1880)

The historical context

Not many people are aware of the prominent role Argyle has played in the development of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a history that stretches back to the struggle for possession of the island from the Caribs (used interchangeably with Garifuna/Black Caribs/Kalinago) for well over a century, then between the French and British which was finally settled in 1763, and its subsequent development as a premier sugar estate and home to the largest community of East Indians for three quarters of a century. There is a very rich and growing academic literature on the struggle for possession of St. Vincent and its aftermath, beginning in the 17th century between the French and the British and culminating in the genocide of the Garifuna in 1795 by the British.

For many of us Argyle is not just a place but a state of mind. Argyle became synonymous with Indians in St. Vincent, not that there were no other places with Indians, but it was to Argyle that others often ventured, from Georgetown, Orange Hill, Park Hill, Rose Bank and Chateaubelair, in search of a partner, and today we can trace Indian family connections all

over St. Vincent to Argyle. So if your name is Bacchus, Bullock, Deane, Baptiste, MacKenzie, Woods, Lewis, Sutherland, Kydd, Moore and many more, almost forgot Thomas, chances are that your foreparents' navel strings are buried at Argyle.

The Caribs

Chapter I of the Argyle Chronicles must of course begin with the Caribs: how do we know that Argyle was once a large Carib Settlement? First there is the historical record, that following the carve up of the island in 1768 large tracts of land remained in Black Carib (Garifuna) possession in what later became the Parish of St. George. And for ousting the French, General Monckton was said to have received 4000 acres stretching down the windward side to the Yambou River where a military post was established.

The names Ribishi, Guanaree and Coubaimarou may not mean anything to most of us, but Coubaimarou is what we know as the river from Pumset to Stubbs Bay, and Guanaree was the name of river fed by Mahoe stream, Jack Gutter and Jonjo, which fed the Argyle dam on the way to the Yambou River. These were the rivers that demarcated pockets of Black Carib lands stretching from Diamond to Stubbs, Pumset, Calder and Argyle, from Calder Ridge to the Yambou River.

By the time of the carve up there were over 1000 French settlers on the island growing coffee, cocoa and tobacco in places such as Argyle with the help of African slaves. On the other hand the British were more interested in growing sugar cane, but the allotment to the Black Caribs in these parts created an obstacle to road building along the windward side, which did not prevent the settlers from encroaching on Carib lands. We hear a lot about the Marriaqua and Greiggs Caribs, but these might have included the Argyle Caribs pushed up from the Yambou River by the encroaching settlers, and as we know from the historical records the Marriaqua Caribs were at the forefront of the struggle against the white settlers that culminated in the first Carib War of 1772.

A second evidence is of course the petroglyphs or stone carvings on the banks of the Yambou River close to Argyle, and recently another piece of evidence came to light when a cache of Carib pottery was unearthed while someone excavating the foundation for his house in Argyle, which I understand was a most significant archaeological find. Significant because finding a large deposit of artefacts in one location would suggest that they were dumped and buried there following the ethnic cleansing of the Caribs, with the remnants moving further up the Yambou River to the surrounding hills. This is borne out over the years by finding in areas around Argyle several Carib stone implements such as hoes and axes, which were called 'thunderstones' apparently because they were unearthed following heavy rainfalls.
Many of these newly discovered artefacts are on view at the National Trust Building in Kingstown. Experts have also dated some of these artefacts to the first century AD when the original people came up from the Orinoco delta.

Another major find at Argyle find was the discovery during the excavations for the Argyle International Airport of several skeletons which experts have concluded as belonging to the Caribs. Also uncovered were what appeared to be the foundation pits/holes for poles that supported some sort of a building structure; replicas have been constructed both at

Argyle and at the National Library. That is some history and civilization we have, pre-dating the coming of Columbus by centuries! We shall have to leave the story of the Caribs for another occasion and return to the ownership and settlement of Argyle.

The making of Argyle Estate

In October 1996 the ***Times Newspaper*** of London printed an Obituary on the death of Prince Guy de Polignac, the eldest of three sons and two daughters of Prince Henri de Polignac and former manager of the champagne house Pommery and Greno. Among other things his obituary stated that the de Poignacs are an old French family established since 1205. Jules Francois-Armand who died in 1817 had established three lines of the family through his sons, of which the ducal line has died out. That story immediately triggered something I had read while researching the history of the East Indians in St. Vincent, that Argyle Estate was once owned by the Prince and Princess de Polignac. This is the story pieced together to make the connection between Argyle and the French Royal Court.

Although the French were kicked out under the Treaty of Versailles in 1763 they still continued dealings with the Caribs, even settling among them in the north windward area. The French again invaded and captured the island in 1779 which they occupied until 1783, and during the French occupation we are informed that one Mrs Martha Swinburne, a 'lady of honour' at the French Royal Court received a grant of over 20,000 acres of Crown Lands. Later when the British regained control, the Imperial Government had to pay some 6000 pounds to redeem the rights to the land. It seems likely that Argyle estate remained part of the Swinburne legacy which was passed on to the de Polignacs. Argyle remained under this French Royal ownership until it was sold by the Encumbered Estates Court in the 1860s, then again in 1883.

In 1884 the Commissioners of the West Indian Encumbered Estates Court again ordered the sale of Argyle Estate which was then the property of Charles James Simmons. When the estate was put up for sale it was stated that there was a mortgage of 6750 pounds in favour of **Jules Armand Jean Melchoir Duc de Polignac and Princess Polignac of No.10 Place de la Concorde in Paris and Campbell MacDonald living in Chalet Spa in Belgium.** We know from the records that Duncan Campbell was an owner and also that he and his wife were listed as trustees of Argyle who had borrowed on behalf of the Prince and Princess de Polignac. We shall have to await further research in the French archives for more revelations on the French connection.

The new demographics

If we may now leave the issue of ownership and turn our attention to occupation and community. Following the end of slavery many blacks moved off the estate to the new villages of Stubbs and Victoria Village. The shortage of estate labour was partially met by importation of alien labour, from neighbouring West Indian islands, from "Liberated Africans", followed by Portuguese from Madeira and then Indians. St. Vincent was spared indentured Chinese because it was too costly to bring them in. In November 1845 James Porter as attorney for several absentee owners brought in the first shipload of 254 Madeirans, 26 of whom were assigned to Argyle Estate. More Madeirans were to follow intermittently up to 1865.

A survival story

After the Madeirans came the Indians from 1861 to 1880 who were to completely transform the demographics of St. Vincent and Argyle in particular. There is one story of an Argyle Indian whose his life has mirrored the experience of the Indian indenture at Argyle and beyond well into the middle of the twentieth century. The story of this gentleman begins with a ship and its cargo. On 5 November 1865, the ship **Countess of Ripon** hoisted anchor at the Indian port city of Calcutta, and sailed down the Hoogli River carrying on board 508 Indians destined for Grenada and St. Vincent, and eleven hundred tons of rice for Demerara.

As Calcutta faded into the background and the ship made for the open Bay of Bengal many of the Indians realised that they were crossing the **Kala Pani, the forbidden dark waters,** which Hindus feared would defile their soul. Two days later there was panic among some of the Hindus; for one young man named Golabee destined for St. Vincent the thought of leaving Mother India was too much, and he hurled himself overboard in a hopeless attempt to swim back to the mainland. Two days later on November 9, the act was repeated when another young man also destined for St. Vincent, jumped overboard. It could very well be that he was related to the first and could not bear the thought of leaving home and family behind.

For those who witnessed the suicidal leaps it must have been a traumatic experience. But worse was to follow. On board as it headed out of the Bay of Bengal into the Indian Ocean the Indians settled down to the long voyage. They would not see land again for several weeks. You can imagine the animated conversations, the hopes, dreams and fears being discussed, the fortune to be made, all those families back in India to take care of. Young men and women, boys and girls, young couples and whole families, among whom was a family of four, the father, a pregnant mother, and their three small children, two girls and a boy ages 7, 5, and 3 years respectively.

As usual they entertained themselves during the voyage by singing, dancing, beating drums and tabla, and dantal, and so forth. And then too, there was the story telling, so popular in Indian tradition, all of which were encouraged by the authorities to ameliorate the traumas of the long voyage. Several weeks later the ship rounded the Cape of Good Hope and headed northwards into the Atlantic. Their first sight of land was the rocky island St. Helena in the south Atlantic, where the ship dropped anchor on 26 December to take on fresh supplies of water before heading westwards. On 4 January 1866 the pregnant woman gave birth to a male child, and two weeks later they were in Caribbean waters and estimated to pass 20 miles off the south of Barbados before making a direct run for St. Vincent.

At four o' clock on the morning of Saturday 20 January the ship drifted too close and struck the reefs with such force that it became embedded in the reefs outside Skeete's Bay in St. Philips on the south eastern corner of Barbados .The account of the wreck written by Police Magistrate Watts tells of the tremendous help and generosity extended by ordinary Barbadians and plantation owners alike in bringing the Indians ashore from the wrecked ship under the most difficult of conditions, because the ship was stuck a good distance from the shore and the tide was running high, making rescue efforts difficult for most of the day. It gives a vivid account of the mother and her newborn baby who were brought ashore 'barely alive'. Among the crowd of rescuers and onlookers was a woman from Mapps Estate in St. Philip, not far from the site of the wreck, named Sarah Maynard who on seeing the plight of mother and child, came forward, took the baby

and gave it an ample supply of milk from her own breasts; this she continued to do both day and night, which according to the Police Magistrate, undoubtedly saved the poor infant's life. Sarah Maynard's humanitarian deed saved the life of the author's grandfather Gangaram, later christened Emmanuel King. According to the records Gangaram and his family were allocated to Argyle Estate.

To name Gangaram's family: his father Kowleesur, mother Bachia aged 21, sisters Bunhoie and Luckpotia aged seven and five years respectively, and brother Seetaram aged three years. Seetaram later became the patriarch of the Woods family in Richland Park, Gangaram father of the Kings, and these children were to marry other Indians at Argyle to form the core of the Indian community. Another patriarch on that ill-fated ship was Arcoo (Arkoo), father to the Sutherlands, Moores, Phils, and Baptistes among others.

To continue the narrative when clearance was given by the Colonial Office to bring in Indians the St. Vincent planters specifically requested Calcutta Indians for the Madras Indians in the Caribbean had established somewhat of reputation for their proneness to violence and disrespect for laws and the estate managers. But in 1861 only Madrasees were on the menu for the planters, and when the ***Travancore*** dropped anchor down in Edinboro on June 1st 1861 it carried 260 Indians, two more than the number with which it left port Madras, for there were two births and no death, something absolutely remarkable in the annals of the transportation of Indians. The Madrasees exceeded all expectation and became model workers for the later Indians.

The fortunes of the Indians very much depended on the fortunes of the estate for example when the second lot arrived in 1862 the price of sugar had fallen and the island was hit by bad weather. Under those circumstances planters attempted to cut cost by lowering wages and withdrawing the customary weekly allowances of molasses, rum and sugar. About 200 workers at Mt. Bentinck estate protested the manager's move by closing down all operations on the estate on 22 September1862. From then until October the "molasses riots", spread southwards on several estates, reaching four miles to the east of Kingstown.

When the second ship ***Castle Howard*** arrived in 1862 things were so bad that the planters refused to take up their allotments and the 300 or so Indians had to be housed at the Commissariat Building in Edinboro which we know today as the Kingstown Hospital or Milton Cato Memorial Hospital. The treasury had to pay a very high price for upkeep of the Indians before they left for the estates.

The prime targets of the rioters were unquestionably the planters and managers, but immigrants were also targeted, for example, Portuguese shops were looted, and Indians were forced off the fields by blacks at several estates. However the local ***St. Vincent Guardian*** of November 18 1865 reported that unlike St. Lucia "our coolie venture is a successful one" citing their presence as a stimulant to native workers who turned out in large numbers on many estates after their introduction, that they were thrifty, hardly ever committed a crime, and were baptising their children as Christians.

Over the next decade five ships arrived from Calcutta bringing a total of 1,700 Indians, each ship greeted with much fanfare heralding a new era of prosperity and good relations between workers and employers.

But when the first lot of 35 Indians returned to India in 1871, they complained that they had received less than their contract wage of 10pence per day and as a result the Indian Government gave low priority to emigration to St. Vincent, and it was not until 1874 that Emigration resumed, prompted by severe famines in India and a new Immigration Act in 1874.

The last ship to bring Indians to St. Vincent was the ***Lightning*** which arrived here on May 22 1880 with 213 Indians. (It also brought the author's paternal great grandparents Ramphul and his family). The ***Lightning*** also carried a consignment of Indians for Jamaica. By then the international market for sugar had become very competitive and there were indications that St. Vincent could hardly compete with its low-grade muscovado sugar.

As happened so many times before in adverse economic conditions planters sought to cut costs which inevitably meant cutting wages, increasing tasks, and in the case of the Indians neglect of their obligations under the law. In August 1882 the Acting Administrator Roger Tuckford Goldsworthy received 82 complaints from the Indians alleging ill-treatment, non-payment of wages, and other abuses.

Alarmed by the regularity of the complaints the matter was reported to Governor Robinson who immediately ordered an investigation which was conducted by R.P. Cropper from St. Lucia. The report catalogued the wretched living and working conditions on all 23 estates with Indians, including the prevalence of diseases such as yaws and tubboes which they did not bring from India, and the failure of all officials concerned with the administration of the indenture system which had clearly broken down. Argyle the pride of the estates did not escape. From then on it was downhill for the Indians.

The march on Kingstown: the watershed in the indenture experience

The Cropper Inquiry did not make life easier for the Indians, indeed it led to the reverse: the Indians were treated harsher as economic conditions worsened, and in October 1882 another attempt was made to reduce wages while squeezing more work out of the Indians.

For years the much maligned Indian was caricatured as the weak and feeble coolie, always cowering before any one in authority, too scared to speak up for his rights, let alone fight back; that image was about to be shattered, for the Indians at Argyle enough was enough. They decided to go above the estate management and on 7 October 1882, 50 Indians from Argyle Estate downed cutlass and hoe and marched all the way to Kingstown in defiance of the estate manager, Mr McKenzie, and the laws of St. Vincent in order to bring their grievances directly to the Lieutenant Governor. Imagine the sight of 50 barefooted Indians leaving Argyle Estate. On their way to Kingstown seven miles away they were joined by more Indians from Calder, Mt. Pleasant, Stubbs, Diamond, Ratho Mill, Golden Vale, Harmony Hall, Carapan, Happy Vale, Belair and Arnos Vale and for the first time in its history Kingstown was crammed with protesters - and they were all Indians. This was the first recorded protest march by labourers of any sort in St. Vincent; previous protests by estate workers had taken the form of strikes and riots on the estates. The Indians had crossed a new threshold in relations with the estate and government authorities.

The protest march was not only against abuses and loss of wages, but many of those taking part were from the ill-fated ***Countess of Ripon***, who alleged that they were cheated out of their return passage, although they had laboured under indenture for as long as 16 years! They were going to the Governor to tell him about the Promise, the promise to return them to India after they had fulfilled their contract.

On reaching the capital seven of the Indians - one of whom was a superintendent on the estate - were identified as ringleaders and promptly arrested on the criminal charge of vagabondism, that they had left the estate without permission, and had gone beyond the two-mile limit. The 'Argyle Seven' - Gunga Persad, Dhumar, Puttoolawl, Bhogroo, Rampersad, Kallideen, and Saba Singh - were brought before the Police Magistrate and found guilty of vagrancy or vagabondism. The Indians got very little support, not even from Nassaw Forster, the Protector of Indians. George Smith a local attorney was the only one who spoke on their behalf to no avail.

Gangaram was 16 years old at the time and took part in the protest march, for years later he spoke of the time they went to the Governor in town to get back the 'Promise', and it was from him that his descendants learned of the 'Promise' - the commitment made by the authorities to repatriate them on completion of their service.

The decision was a bitter blow to the Indians and thereafter many felt that they were no longer needed here in St. Vincent and they wanted out. Two months later with the assistance of George Smith, a petition was forwarded to the Colonial Office on behalf of the seven Indians from the ***Countess of Ripon*** alleging that they were deprived of their right of return passage. If anyone thought of making St. Vincent his permanent home his hopes were dashed by the decision against the 'Argyle 7'; the Indians felt that everyone in authority was hostile to them.

Surprisingly the Secretary of State conceded that an injustice was done and issued instructions to restore their right of the return passage, not only for the seven petitioners but for survivors of the ill-fated ship who also served that long and wished to return to India. At last there was some good news for the Indians. To meet the high cost of repatriation of such a large group a Royal Commission visiting in 1883 recommended giving lands to the Indians in lieu of the 10 pounds bounty, but planters refused to sell idle lands, while the local administration claimed that little Crown lands were available.

Coming so soon after the protest march the colonial administration was confused as to how many were actually entitled to return passage because of the sloppy record keeping by the Protector. Conditions became so bad that by 1884 estates no longer wanted any Indian, whether indentured or free living on them. Faced with that situation Lieutenant Governor Gore even considered deporting them all to Demerara and Trinidad, and on a visit to one of the estates it is recorded that the Indian spokesperson told him, "Governor bring all we here, Governor must give all we work, no so, must give all we something to eat". Well we know that their spokesman didn't use such elegant Oxford English, it was more like "Governor bring arwee here, Give arwee work or give arwee something to eat".

Response of the Colonial Office to the protest

The Colonial Office response to deteriorating conditions on the island was a directive to send all Indians back to India if they could not find work and a home to live, and when the news became known among the Indians there was a mad rush to register to return to India. During May and August 1885, 554 Indians departed for India. There were many more crowded in Kingstown who wanted to return, but for whatever reason were not registered,. On 1 August 1885 Kingstown was again crammed with Indians as the last ship ***The Bruce*** was preparing to depart for India. Those 327 registered to return were assembled in the police barracks and as their names were called they passed through two lines of police to the boats to be ferried out to the waiting ship. It was to ensure that none of the Indians who wanted to return but for whatever reason were not registered, did not slip through the police cordon to the waiting ship.

On board they were given new clothes, caps, lotahs (dishes), combs, and mirrors and to the men razors. Those were the farewell gifts from the Government of St. Vincent for whom they had laboured with little to show.

In all of the 2474 who came 1141 returned to India because they saw no more prospects for them in St. Vincent.

The ending of indenture

Interestingly everyone who arrived in 1880 on the **Lightning** re-indentured for 3 or 5 years as conditions had improved a little, and by 1890 all of them passed out of indenture. There were no more reports from the Protector of Indians and when the visit of Commissioner Dr Comins to West Indian estates with indentured Indians was announced for 1891 the Government of St.Vincent advised that it would be unnecessary, for there were no more immigrants who wished to return to India and no one left under indenture.

Adaptation and survival: Deculturation and assimilation into the dominant cultural milieu

The triumph of Christianity over Hinduism

With the departure of such a large number the remnants were forced to adapt to local conditions in order to survive. What were some of the specific challenges the Indians faced other than working conditions? It should be recalled that over 90 per cent of the Indians who came to St. Vincent were Hindus by religion. By agreement Indians were allowed to practice their religion as elsewhere in the West Indies, but their relatively small number, their dispersion among the estates and the transient nature of their existence left little scope for development of a critical mass that could have led to the erection of a Hindu temple. Moreover from day one Hindus had to face aggressive proselytization of the Christian churches, encouraged by the estates, who preached that Hinduism was idolatry. Infa-nts were baptised in Christian churches and given Anglo-Saxon names as part of the policy to break links with India; even young ones born in India were given Anglo-Saxon names.

Competition for Indian converts was very fierce, so much so that Wesleyan baptism of infants was considered illegal by Anglican ministers who would re-baptise these infants into the Anglican Church. It took the intervention of the Archbishop

of Canterbury to end this farcical practice in 1868. The change of name was also a passport to receiving an education from the Christian schools. Indian parents were reluctant to send their children to public schools sometimes out of fear of black children, or out of caste or racial prejudice. Of course English language was a problem from the beginning. Under these conditions Hinduism could not survive. A school for Indian children was opened on Argyle Estate in 1883 but closed a year later during the rush to get back to India.

Since the 1930s other Christian churches such as Seventh Day Adventism, have taken a stronghold among the Indians. One of the spinoffs of becoming Christians was inter-marriage with other races. There were also changes in style of dress and cuisine, females no longer wore saris, and curry dishes were replaced by creole dishes such as ground provisions and fish.

In summary cultural and religious practices inherited from India underwent fundamental changes very early in the indenture experience mainly due to:

- absence of a critical mass
- competition among the churches to save the ' heathens'
- attempts by estates to break ties with India to make Indians feel at home in their environment
- absence of special schools Indian children who were marginalized educationally

Impact of twin disasters: the hurricane of 1898 and volcanic eruption of 1902

There were two events which contributed to the decimation and dispersion of Indians in St. Vincent. On 11 September 1898 a devastating hurricane struck St. Vincent killing 288 persons, left 30,000 homeless and crippled the sugar industry. Worse was to happen as four years later on 7 May 1902 the Soufriere volcano erupted killing 2,000 people including many Indians living on estates surrounding the volcano. These events prompted Indians to leave for Trinidad, Grenada and Guyana. As sugar declined other crops such as cotton and arrowroot were grown and an arrowroot mill was installed at Argyle

Establishment of "Indian Villages"

Although indenture had ended by the turn of the century Indians continued to live on estates. Argyle Estate on the southern tip of the island remained home to about 200 Indians until it was sold in 1930s and many Indians living there bought lands in nearby sugar estates at Calder, Akers Hill and Richland Park. Over the next decades these grew into the main Indian communities on the south eastern part of the island; there were other concentrations of Indians in other parts of the island such as Georgetown, Park Hill, and Rose Bank. It was from these villages that the distinctive Indo-Vincentian community developed during the early decades of the twentieth century.

According to the 1911 census there were 377 Indians in St. Vincent, of which 114 were born in India; the 1921census showed the population down to 265 but increased to 652 by 1931. There was a big leap in 1946 when it reached 1817, an upward trend that continued until emigration to the United Kingdom and elsewhere slowed the growth. Today it is roughly about 7000, but taking into consideration mixed marriages between Indians and non-Indians the population of persons of Indian origin is much higher.'

Contemporary situation: Contribution of Indians to development

Currently all persons of Indian origin are fully integrated into Vincentian society and participate in all aspects of social and economic life. Although numbering less than 10,000, persons of Indian origin have made a very substantial contribution to the socio-economic and cultural development of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. They have been very prominent as professionals in all fields and as business entrepreneurs. At the recent opening of the Argyle International Airport on 14 February 2017 the Prime Minister expressed the view that the name should never be changed because of its significance to Indians who not only lived there during and after indenture but later acquired much of the lands on which the Airport is constructed.

Establishment of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Indian Heritage Foundation (SVGIHF)

The SVG Indian Heritage Foundation was launched on 7 October 2006, a landmark event which took place in the presence of the Minister of Culture Ms René Baptiste at a venue on what was Argyle Estate. Several proposals were put forward then such as:

- Recognition in the official calendar of Indian Arrival Day and Indian Heritage Day
- Erection of a monument of some sort at Argyle
- Establishment of a Trust Fund to be used only for educational and philanthropic purposes
- Establishment of SVGIHF chapters in metropolitan centres
- Establishment of contacts regionally and internationally with other diasporic groups to promote cultural contacts and exchanges

It was also on the occasion of the launch of the SVGIHF that the Register of Indians was presented to the group for the first time by the Minister of Culture. It is now housed in the National Archives and is considered the 'holy grail' for Indo-Vincentians. Early in 2007 in recognition of the contribution that people of Indian origin made to the development of SVG the Parliament of St. Vincent and the Grenadines officially recognized 1 June as Indian Arrival Day (not a public holiday) and 7 October as Indian Heritage Day. Since then the SVGIHF has participated in several regional and international Indian Diaspora events, such as the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) and the International Indian Diasporic Council (IDC). There are also some signs of the revival of aspects of Indian culture such as Yoga and Diwali. Through the SVGIHF they support opportunities for closer cultural, trade and economic ties with India.

A proposal for recognition of 'Argyle Seven'

While St. Vincent and the Grenadines has been celebrating National Hero's Day and National Heritage Month during March it is fitting that recognition be given to the 'Argyle Seven' the so-called ringleaders who led the march from Argyle to Kingstown to protest the cruel and inhuman treatment to which they were subjected on the estate, including the failure of the Government to honour the Promise of a return passage to India on completion of their contracts. These were:

Gunga Persad
Dhumar
Puttoolawl
Bhogroo
Rampersad
Kallideen, and
Saba Singh.

Let these be recognized as the first among the Indo-Vincentian Heroes.

For comments:

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