

Topic:

ADAPTATION AND SURVIVAL OF THE INDIANS of ST. VINCENT and the GRENADINES

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I. Introduction: The changing demographics

St. Vincent and the Grenadines lies 100 miles west of Barbados and north of Trinidad and Tobago with a population of some 110,000 comprised of Africans, Caribs, Europeans, Portuguese Madeirans and of course Indians.

Historical context

The indigenous inhabitants of St. Vincent were called Caribs or Garifuna or Kalinago who successfully resisted European conquest and colonization for more than three hundred years, until their defeat in 1795 followed by British genocide and deportation of the remnants to the island of Ruatan in the Gulf Mexico. This paved the way for the large-scale introduction of African slaves to work on sugar estates in St. Vincent.

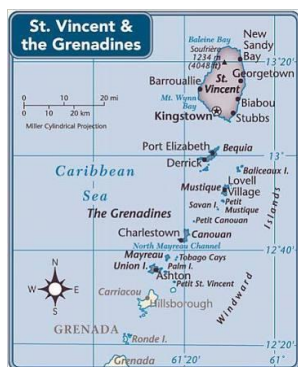
When slavery formally ended in 1838 many blacks refused to work on the estates and the planters resorted to indentured labour as an alternative. The first indentured workers to be introduced were a group of Liberated Africans followed later by Portuguese from Madeira; between 1845 and 1865 over 2000 Portuguese came to St. Vincent.

After the Government of India was satisfied that St. Vincent had met its concerns regarding wages and other conditions, it gave the go ahead for emigration in April 1860. Eight shiploads of Indians arrived between 1861 and 1880 bringing 2475 Indians. The first ship *Travancore*, departed Madras on 26 February 1861 with 258 Indians, arriving St. Vincent on 1 June 1861 after a voyage of 92 days with 260 Indians, two more than which it had left with, there being no deaths on the voyage and two births, a remarkable achievement in an age when mortality aboard emigrant ships was often very high.

When the second ship *Castle Howard* arrived with 307 Indians in 1862, the sugar industry was in recession and planters refused to take up their allotments. Consequently the Indians had to be housed at the military barracks at a very high cost to the treasury before they left for the estates.

The local *St. Vincent Guardian* of November 18 1865 reported that “our coolie venture is a successful one” citing the presence of Indians 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!

The other ships were: *Countess of Ripon* (214) wrecked off Barbados on 20 January 1866;¹ the *Newcastle* (473) 1867; *Imperatrice Eugenie* (349) 1869; *Dover Castle* (325) 1871; *Lincelles* (333) 1875; and *Lightning* (214) 1880.



II. **Conditions under Indian indentureship** In the annual report for 1861 Lieutenant-Governor Musgrave declared that "the initial experiment has been more successful, and attended with fewer difficulties than might have been expected. The immigrants are for the most part reported well of as labourers, and in some cases their employers speak with marked satisfaction of their conduct". They had also adopted in the words of Musgrave the "more civilized costume" in place of the customary waistcloth. In spite of the noticeable improvement in their physical appearance, contrary to the roseate reports the first year was not very easy for the Indians; all had survived the long sea voyage but by the end of the first six months four had died on the estates.

The absence of an interpreter among the first lot of Indians added to the problems of adjustment; it meant that communication was not easy between worker and manager; orders were misunderstood and legitimate complaints were ignored or simply misunderstood; worse still, in the event of criminal proceeding the Indian was hardly in a position to defend himself, notwithstanding the role of the Immigration Agent as 'Protector of Indians': how could he be Protector when he did not understand the language? From the beginning then the Indians were at a severe disadvantage and there was to be no paid interpreter.

Another problem encountered at the outset concerned contracts entered into outside India, unlike Mauritius where contracts could be signed at the port of embarkation. As a result of a test case when an indentured Indian refused to let his wife work, in March 1862 the Immigration Act was suitably amended to allow for contracts to be signed in India.

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

III. **The march on Kingstown and end of the indenture system**

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 inquiry which documented the wretched living and working conditions on all 23 estates with Indians, including the prevalence of diseases which they did not bring from India, and the failure of all officials concerned with the administration of the indenture system.

The inquiry did not make life easier for the Indians who 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 the Indians at one estate, Argyle, enough was enough, and on 7 October 1882, 50 Indians downed cutlass and hoe and marched several miles away to the capital Kingstown to bring their grievances directly to the Lieutenant Governor. On their way they met the estate manager who warned them that their action was illegal.

On reaching the capital seven of the Indians were identified as ringleaders and promptly arrested on the criminal charge of vagabondism, that is, that they had left the estate without permission, and had gone beyond the two-mile limit.

The Indians got very little support, not even from the so-called the Protector of Indians. Two months later with the assistance of a local attorney, 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

after labouring under indenture for 16 years. The Colonial Office acceded to the request, but 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.

By 1884 conditions became so bad that estates no longer wanted any Indian, whether indentured or free, living on them, and faced with that situation Lieutenant Governor Gore even considered deporting them all to Demerara and Trinidad. The Colonial Office response to the Governor's proposal was a directive to send all Indians back to India if they could not find work and a home to live! When the news became known among the Indians there was a rush to register to return to India and during May and August 1885, 554 Indians departed for India.

End of indenture

There were many more that wanted to return but for whatever reason were not registered. Ironically although all 200 Indians who came on the *Lightning* had registered to return in 1885 they all re-indentured for five years to 1890 encouraged by some positive changes so that in 1891 when D.W. Comins was planning to visit territories with indentured Indians St. Vincent was not included, for by then all the Indians had passed out of indenture, and there were no more reports from the Protector of Indians. Of the 2,474 who came 1,141 returned to India.

IV. Adaptation and integration of Indians

The triumph of Christianity over Hinduism

Over 90 per cent of the Indians who came to St. Vincent were Hindus. 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, and Hinduism could not survive the aggressive proselytising of the Christian churches who preached that Hinduism was heathenism from the early days of indenture. Infants were baptised in Christian churches and given Anglo-Saxon names after the manner of planters, managers and overseers as part of the policy to break links with India; even young ones born in India were given Anglo-Saxon names, so you would hardly find a Hindu among Indo-Vincentians let alone Indian surnames. The change of name was also a passport to receiving an education from the Christian schools. As a result of naming boys after overseers and others we have a situation in St. Vincent where several brothers carry different surnames!

The success of the Wesleyans in particular provoked outrage and jealousy among the local Anglican ministers who considered Wesleyan baptism "illegal"; the situation became farcical in 1868 when the Anglican minister proceeded to re-baptise the Wesleyan Indians, an action endorsed by the Anglican Bishop of Barbados. The controversy was only settled after the Wesleyan protest was brought to the attention of the Archbishop of Canterbury who ordered that baptisms performed by any Christian church should be recognized.

Polygamy was prohibited under the Immigration Ordinance of 1878 and later withdrawn on representation from the Government of India, but it was hardly necessary because of the large-scale conversion to Christianity. And by the second half of the 20th century other Christian religions such as Seventh Day Adventism had taken a strong hold among the Indian population. One of the spinoffs of this state of affairs is inter-marriage with other races something not done by the first generation.

With the decline of Hinduism as the major religion among Indians many of the Hindu rituals and festivals were no longer practised or observed as in nearby Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. The changes were profound in several aspects, not only in religion, but language, culture, dress and food. With the exception of special occasions females do not wear saris. Even in food curry dishes are not the norm among Indians but creole style dishes.

Education of Indians: establishment of the first Indian School at Argyle

Although never explicitly excluded, the children of indentured Indians never attended the public schools, partly out of fear of the black children, sometimes out of caste/racial prejudice of the parents, and often because the Indian children had difficulty with the English language.

However on 27 November 1883 the first school exclusively for Indian children was opened at a fee of two pence per week. The Colonial Office and the India Office in London were delighted, and Government of India was duly informed. It was supposed to be a model school, however it closed a year later due to low attendance, no doubt also because of the rush to get back to India.

Those Indians who either chose to remain in St. Vincent or were simply left behind had to adjust very quickly to local conditions. Meanwhile some attempts were made to make living conditions better for the Indians, both by some estate owners and certain church organisations.

Impact of natural disasters

There were two events which further contributed to the decimation and dispersion of the 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.

V. Establishment of "Indian Villages"

Although indenture had ended Indians continued to live on estates. Argyle Estate on the southern tip of the island was home to about 200 Indians. When it was sold in the 1920s 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.

During the period between the end of the First World War and the end of the Second World War the outward drift of able-bodied men continued unabated to other West Indian islands in particular Trinidad and the Dutch islands of Curacao and Aruba where work was available in the oil refinery; many also went to Panama to work on the Canal, and to Cuba and Santo Domingo as seasonal cane cutters. Partly as a result of this disruption the Indian population increased slowly, numbering less than 2,000 after World War II. Most returned to their families until the scramble to get to Britain beginning in the 1950s decimated the Indo-Vincentian communities. By the time the time the Commonwealth Immigrants Act had put an end to free migration in 1962 large numbers of Vincentians had gone to High Wycombe and other places in the UK. Others migrated to the US and Canada.

V. Contemporary situation: establishment of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Indian Heritage Foundation (SVG IHF)

Although Indo-Vincentians were aware that their ancestors came from India little was known about when and the conditions under which they came and lived until the 1990s when historical research was conducted. As a consequence of this research and public awareness lectures the need was felt for an organisation. The SVG Indian Heritage Foundation was launched on 7 October 2006 in the presence of the Minister of Culture who also pledged the full support of the Government. The formation of the SVG IHF in 2006 is in recognition of the contribution that people of Indian origin have made to the development of

SVG. Early in 2007 the Parliament of St. Vincent and the Grenadines officially recognized 1 June as Indian Arrival Day and 7 October as Indian Heritage Day – the latter date commemorating the protest march to Kingstown in 1882.

The SVGIHF has participated in Pravasi Baratiya Divas (PBD) and Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) conferences both in India and other countries. The SVGIHF continues to strengthen relations with India through the Indian Embassy in Suriname including cultural exchanges. Some Vincentians have benefited from scholarships in India.

The SVGIHF is a member of the Global Organisation of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) and takes part in regional and international Indian Diaspora activities. The local chapter of GOPIO in collaboration with the SVGIHF and the SVG Ministry of Culture organized a very successful International Indian Diaspora Conference in St. Vincent in 2012, which was also supported by the Indian High Commissioner to SVG out of Suriname.

Currently approximately 7,000 people of Indian origin live in St. Vincent and are fully integrated into Vincentian society. Indo-Vincentians have distinguished themselves in all aspects of national social and economic life such as entrepreneurship, medicine, law, and academia.

Summary

In summary the Indians of St. Vincent and the Grenadines are somewhat different from Indians in Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Suriname because they have jettisoned much of the cultural and religious baggage that their foreparents brought from India, not because of some rational intellectual conclusion that the host culture was superior to theirs but triggered by the need to survive in an alien land. There was a combination of factors that contributed to this state of affairs, such as: the absence of a critical mass to build temples, competition and aggressive proselytization by the Christian churches to convert the Hindu heathens, policy of both estates and government to break ties with India and make Indians feel at home in St Vincent, and the need to become Christians so that their children could be educated in public schools. But something that has not changed among Indians is the notion of “the Indian-in-me” as is usually manifested in respect for certain family traditions and values.

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Dr. Arnold Thomas was a diplomat at the Mission of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States based in Brussels, Belgium. More than 30 years professional experience in diplomacy, development administration, teaching, research, and international business and development consulting, including: Embassies and Mission of the Organisation Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), Brussels, Belgium; CARICOM Secretariat, Guyana; Caribbean Association of Industry and Commerce (CAIC) Barbados; CARICOM Export Development Agency, Barbados; OECS Secretariat, St. Lucia; Brooklyn College, City University of New York (CUNY); Medgar Evers College, CUNY; Manhattan Community College, CUNY; North London University, London; Thames Valley University, London. Founding member of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Indian Heritage Foundation (SVGIHF) established in 2006. Extensive research on the history of Indians in St. Vincent, beginning at the Public Record office in London in 1992 followed by field trips to St. Vincent and other countries. Following lobbying efforts by the SVGIHF the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines passed an act in 2007 establishing June 1 as Indian Arrival Day and October 7 as Indian Heritage Day.

