



## Indian Labour in the West Indies

An announcement was made in the British House of Commons on 14 June 1938 by the Secretary of State for the Colonies that the Government had decided to take steps for the appointment of a Royal Commission to enquire into the social and economic conditions in various West Indian Colonies<sup>1</sup>, and it was subsequently stated (on 28 July 1938) that the terms of reference of the Royal Commission would cover the question of political reform to the extent that this was connected with economic and social conditions. With a view to securing that the Indian case as regards the three Colonies of Jamaica, British Guiana, and Trinidad, where Indians have settled in substantial numbers, should be adequately presented to and considered by the Royal Commission, the Government of India, with the concurrence of the British Government, deputed a representative to visit these colonies in order to give evidence on its behalf and offer assistance to the local Indian communities in the presentation of their evidence. This officer was also asked to submit a report on the more important matters affecting Indians in the three Colonies and a general review of the political, social, and economic conditions of the community. A short summary of the report<sup>2</sup> submitted by him is given below.

### JAMAICA

Indian emigration to Jamaica began in 1845 and continued till 1916 with occasional suspensions and renewals during this period. The present East Indian population of the island is estimated to be 18,000, or 1.5 per cent. of the total.<sup>3</sup> Compared with their compatriots in British Guiana and Trinidad, the Indians in Jamaica are, it is observed, "helpless, numbering among them barely a dozen professional men and merchants, practically no civil servants or even

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Industrial and Labour Information*, Vol. LXVII, No. 3, 18 July 1938, pp. 82-84.

<sup>2</sup> *Report on the Conditions of Indians in Jamaica, British Guiana and Trinidad*, by J. D. TYSON, C.B.E., I.C.S., Officer on Deputation in connection with the West Indies Royal Commission 1938-39 (Simla, Government of India Press, 1939).

<sup>3</sup> This figure is based on the number of East Indians in the island given in the census of 1921. There has been no general census in Jamaica since 1921.

teachers, and having, outside Kingston, no organisation and no acknowledged leaders". Except for a few scattered storekeepers, they are engaged in agriculture and allied pursuits.

Depending almost entirely on agriculture, Jamaica is suffering from a restriction of its principal products—bananas, sugar, coffee, cocoanuts, and pimento — and from the pressure of population, which is increasing. The old outlet of emigration for purposes of labour to Panama and Cuba has been closed. As a result of all these factors unemployment is general and the incidence of poverty heavy among all races. But Indian labour, being principally engaged in the production of sugar and banana crops, has been especially hard hit. Sugar restrictions have been imposed and, owing to the prevalence of various banana diseases, the growing of cocoanuts has largely taken the place of that of bananas, which has not only reduced the demand for labour but also had the effect of depriving the labourer of the use he had enjoyed of estate land for his own cultivation. Indian labour so displaced is not readily absorbed into industrial employment or into work provided under the Colonial Government's schemes to relieve unemployment. Changes in the local conditions peculiar to the Kingston area—the metering of the Kingston water supply and a recent statutory prohibition of house-to-house vegetable hawking — have thrown a large number of families out of employment who earned their livelihood by the cultivation and sale of green vegetables.

The East Indian, it is stated, receives very little poor relief, and, since there is little hope of his being able to influence members of the Legislature, his best chance of securing consideration in the future lies in the revival of the post of Protector of Immigrants which was abolished in 1934.

Trade unions as yet hardly affect the East Indians. Indians as such are not refused admission and the leaders are willing to accept them, but among the rank and file there would seem to be some prejudice, and any Indians who join the existing unions might find difficulties also in keeping up the prescribed subscription of 6d. per week. Actually the unions are working mainly in spheres into which Indians have not yet entered and are not welcomed—such as work on the water-front and other classes of heavy non-agricultural labour.

There is general complaint of short work for Indians—at all times on banana estates and outside the "crop" season on sugar estates. Their condition on the banana and cocoanut estates seems to be worse than on the sugar estates, since on the former they are seldom able to get more than two or three days' work a week and many, especially women, go for weeks without a single day's work.

Housing on some of the banana and cocoanut estates on the North coast is very poor, but on some of the larger estates there is a welcome advance in this respect. At Westmoreland (in Vere), Clarendon Parish, a scheme to replace barracks by cottages is in operation in which East Indians enjoy their full share. Each family has a two-roomed cottage, with its own kitchen and a shower-bath in a separate building and with a separate latrine. Each cottage

has also a little plot of land for the cultivation of vegetables and ground provisions. These cottages are neatly kept and some of the occupants rear poultry.

Primary education is free throughout the island and compulsory in fourteen "centres of population", mostly urban areas. But there is practically no provision for free books for the children, and in many cases inability to provide books and suitable clothing would seem to be the reason why poor Indian parents do not send their children to school. One of the difficulties in the way of the educational progress of the Indian community is that there are very few Indian teachers.

There are no Indians in the Jamaican public service, except possibly a few interpreters and school teachers; and it appears to be unlikely that Indian voters will be numerous enough in any locality to make it necessary for a candidate to seek their support.

A Land Settlement Department has recently been created in the island in furtherance of the Administration's declared policy of using land settlement as one of the means of solving the unemployment problem. There is land suitable for rice-growing, and the Director of Agriculture is of opinion that if production were sufficiently encouraged, it would no longer be necessary to import considerable quantities of rice. The growing of green vegetables, for which there is a large and fairly steady demand in the urban areas in Jamaica, with their heavy tourist traffic, is another opening of which Indians have shown themselves well qualified to take advantage.

The demand among the older Indians for repatriation is very strong, but "almost all those who clamour for it are destitute and therefore just the type whom repatriation is least likely to benefit."

#### BRITISH GUIANA

Immigration of Indian labourers into British Guiana under the "indenture system" (long-term contract) which began in 1938, continued with some interruptions until 1917. In 1931, when the last census was taken, the population of the Colony was 310,933, the East Indians forming the largest element (41.98 per cent.).<sup>4</sup> The proportion of East Indians born in the Colony to their total number, which was 81.5 per cent. in 1931, is estimated to be at present as high as about 90 per cent.

The census of 1931 showed that the average of literacy for the East Indian population was low (about 38 per cent.) as compared with the average for the general population (69.9 per cent.), and that the East Indians were for the most part still engaged in agricultural pursuits. Education is compulsory between the ages of six and twelve throughout the Colony (with a higher limit of fourteen in three areas), but a considerable number of Indian children of school age fail to attend schools. It is believed that the establish-

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<sup>4</sup> According to a recent estimate by the Registrar-General of the population of the Colony, on 31 December 1936 the population was 332,898 and the East Indians numbered 140,768 (as against 130,540 in 1931).

ment of non-denominational government schools and the employment of Indian teachers in increasing numbers in localities where Indians predominate will have the effect of reducing absenteeism.

As regards the occupations in which the East Indian community is mainly engaged, the bauxite, gold-mining, balata-bleeding, and other industries employ but a small labour force, as compared with the sugar industry, and the export trade in rice has shrunk to a low figure. Cocoanut cultivation is no longer profitable and coffee has long since failed. The sugar industry is maintained by the aid of preferences, and where it has gone out, as in the country of Essequibo and the islands of the Essequibo river, the land is derelict and the population, mainly East Indian, is in distress.

East Indians hold three seats out of fourteen in the Legislative Council, and one of the three East Indian members is also a member of the Governor's Executive Council. The East Indian Association is the only body claiming to represent Indians over the whole field of political, social, and economic activity. It makes representations to the Colonial Administration in the name of the Indian community and also runs a monthly paper, *The Indian Opinion*.

The Man-Power Citizens' Association, which is a registered trade union for agricultural workers with a membership of 10,000 persons, the large majority of whom are East Indians, has recently been recognised by the sugar producers. A new Labour Inspectorate was set up in April 1938, and there is a proposal to strengthen it by the inclusion of an officer from England with experience of trade union affairs.

A Bill to supersede the existing Employers' and Servants' Ordinance is also under consideration.<sup>5</sup> The Bill deals, among other questions, with the fixing of minimum wages, the regulation of rates of wages for piece work and time work, the provision of hospital and other medical facilities, and the submission of statistics. The Commissioner of Labour has already inaugurated a system of fixing by agreement a standard wage in each section of field-work, and this arrangement would seem to have had the effect of slightly raising the average level of wages in the branches in which it has been applied.

More insistent than the demand for a higher rate of wages is, it is stated, the complaint of a shortage of work and of the fact that some estates, in an endeavour to spread the available work over an excessive labour force, are giving out tasks on a one-day basis, employing different labourers day by day, rather than on a weekly basis, which is preferred by the worker. Having regard to the current shortage of work on sugar estates, it is particularly important to provide facilities for the workers to grow private crops and rear cattle. The need for these facilities is appreciated by the Labour Commissioner, who has taken up the question with the employers.

As regards housing, while admitting that the new range dwellings—each range providing accommodation for five families—represent a great advance on the old ranges and are suitable for bachelors,

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Industrial and Labour Information*, Vol. LXX, No. 10, 5 June 1939, pp. 767-768, for details.

the Government of India would, it is stated, even at the risk of causing some delay in the re-housing of the labour population on the estates, definitely prefer detached cottages for married couples as being more satisfactory from the point of view of privacy, which plays a considerable part in the preservation of a high standard of family life and has thus an important bearing on the health of the community.

The Officer deputed by the Government of India calls special attention also to some other questions concerning the East Indians in British Guiana which he regards as requiring urgent consideration, such as, for instance, the establishment of more satisfactory relations between employers and workers, reorganisation of the rice industry (gradual substitution of a central mill system for the present private mill system, in accordance with the recommendation of an expert who recently examined the question)<sup>6</sup>, security of tenure for labourers resident on estates, land settlement, and adequate protection of the interests of Indian cultivators and traders already established in the Colony in the event of the adoption of the scheme, at present under consideration, for the colonisation of the hinterland by Jewish refugees from Europe.

#### TRINIDAD

East Indians were introduced into Trinidad in successive drafts between the years 1845 and 1916 to supply labour for the sugar and cocoa estates. The estimated total population of the island on 31 December 1936 was 448,253, no less than 33.7 per cent. (151,076) being East Indians. The great majority of the latter were born in the colony, and already in 1931 the proportion of these to the total number of Indians was 82.9 per cent.

The East Indian population is still predominantly rural in character. The community not only provides the bulk of the agricultural labourers on the sugar and cocoa estates, but supplies more than two-thirds of the sugar-cane farmers of the Colony. It is on the whole better off and more contented than the Indian population in British Guiana and Jamaica, although the small agriculturist seems to be hard hit by recent changes. Along with the merchant class, a considerable and growing professional class — lawyers, doctors, teachers, and ministers of religion—is available to provide natural leaders for the community. Indian labour, however, is almost completely without organisation, except possibly on the fringes of the oilfields.

In the non-Christian (68 per cent. Hindu and 15 per cent. Moslem) as well as the Christian sections of the Indian community, better education seems to be the principal need. In 1931, the year of the last census, 60 per cent. of the illiterates were East Indians, though the community formed only 33.6 per cent. of the island

<sup>6</sup> This expert, Mr. Parker, General Manager of the Government Rice Mill at Perak, Malaya, was deputed by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to advise on the condition of the rice industry in British Guiana, and visited the Colony in September and October 1938.

population. The proportion of the literate or partially literate among Indian Christians was 50.8 per cent. (as a result, it is stated, of the work of the Christian missions in country districts), but the corresponding figure for non-Christian Indians was only 17.2 per cent. While it is admitted that the appointment of the Marriott-Mayhew Commission (1932) has resulted in some improvement, it is pointed out that the daily average attendance at school of East Indians was only 60.5 per cent. of the roll strength in 1937, while the comparable figure for other races was 74.3 per cent. This difference, it is observed, is to be attributed to the rural character of the East Indian population, and points to the necessity for making attendance compulsory in country schools.

As regards the representation of Indians in the Administration, three of the seven elected members of the Legislative Council, which is composed of twenty-five members, are Indians. There is an East Indian Advisory Board, the members of which are nominated by the Governor after consultation with some of the East Indian organisations. The representative of the Government of India suggests, however, that more satisfactory results might be obtained if a convention were to be established that one of the four Executive Councillors should, if not himself an Indian, be at least a person who could advise with knowledge on matters affecting the East Indian community.

The Officer deputed by the Government of India also calls attention to a number of other questions affecting the local Indian community which in his view require consideration; these include seasonal unemployment, the regulation of piece work and wages, housing on some of the estates and sanitation, the provision of adequate arrangements for medical relief and of facilities for growing private crops or grazing cattle, the extension of wage-fixing machinery to agricultural workers, the administration of local boards of health, and the establishment of facilities for training for skilled trades in railway workshops and other Government undertakings.

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Finally, reference may be made to certain proposals concerning Indian settlers in all three Colonies generally, put forward by the officer deputed by the Government of India with a view to ameliorating their condition. He recommends the appointment of an agent of the Government of India, as in the Union of South Africa and in Ceylon and Malaya, whose services might be shared by Jamaica, British Guiana, and Trinidad, and observes that the agent would be useful to the Colonial Governments as a link with the local Indian communities and to the Government of India as a source of prompt and adequate information on the conditions of life and work of Indians. Such information would be of great value to the Government of India in presenting an accurate picture of the situation of Indians in these Colonies and correcting false rumours, especially as public opinion in India is "extremely and increasingly sensitive about the treatment accorded to Indians in other parts of

the Empire and is quick to hold the Government of India responsible for securing equal and honourable treatment for Indians overseas, especially those communities which owe their presence in the Colonies to the 'indenture system', to which the Government of India was a consenting party".

He also advocates the inclusion of Indians in the public services of the three Colonies so that the requirements of the Indian population might receive the consideration due to it on account of its numerical importance and the contribution which it has already made to the development of the local industries.

Another question to which attention is called is the need for providing facilities to enable both the Hindu and the Moslem sections of the Indian community to follow their respective religious practices as regards marriage, divorce (legal recognition of unions concluded in accordance with the Hindu or Moslem religious rites and, in the case of Moslems, of the dissolution of marriages for reasons which are valid in Islamic law), the disposal of the dead (cremation in the case of Hindus), and diet (poor relief), as well as the desirability, in areas inhabited for the most part by Indians, of replacing the denominational schools conducted by Christian missions either by Government schools or by schools under the management of Hindu or Moslem bodies, special arrangements being made for securing an adequate number of Indian teachers. As regards repatriation, in view of the fact that repatriated Indian workers, on their return to the home with which they have long lost contact, as a rule have to face very considerable difficulties in finding work or, in the case of the old, invalid and infirm, the necessary care, the recommendation is made on behalf of the Government of India that the Colonial Governments should devote the funds that would be required for repatriation to the amelioration of the condition of the Indian population (poor relief, education, medical aid) and to the development of agricultural settlements.