

EAST INDIANS OF BELIZE: REMEMBERING THE PAST TO SECURE THE FUTURE

Sylvia Gilharry Perez and Kumar Mahabir

Unlike any other Caribbean country, Belize experienced three waves of East Indian/ South Asian migration, commencing in 1858. Belize also became unique because these early immigrant labourers worked in the sugarcane, as well as lumber and banana industries. Belize is also exceptional in that it was the only country in the Caribbean where Indians worked under the employment of American ex-confederates. With the passage of time, the mainly-Hindu immigrants all converted to Christianity, resulting in the absence of temples and lack of festivals in the country today. The only remnants of Indian culture are the special preparation of food with turmeric [curry] and the observance of Hosay/Muharram [Who-se-me-say]. Indians now comprise about four percent (7,000 persons) of the multi-ethnic population of Belize. They now face the imminent danger of disappearance as an ethnic group. Based on library/internet research and field visits, this cursory paper seeks to provide a brief overview of their history and contemporary situation.

History of East Indians in Belize

Formally known as British Honduras, Belize is located in Central America. Bordered by Mexico in the North and Guatemala in the West and South, it lies at the heart of the Caribbean Basin. Belize has giant Mayan pyramids and the world's second largest barrier reef. It has a mélange of over ten different cultures which are concentrated in specific areas in the six districts. Belize is the only country in Central America that has a significant East Indian (Indian)/South Asian community comprising of four percent (7,000 persons) of the multi-ethnic population.

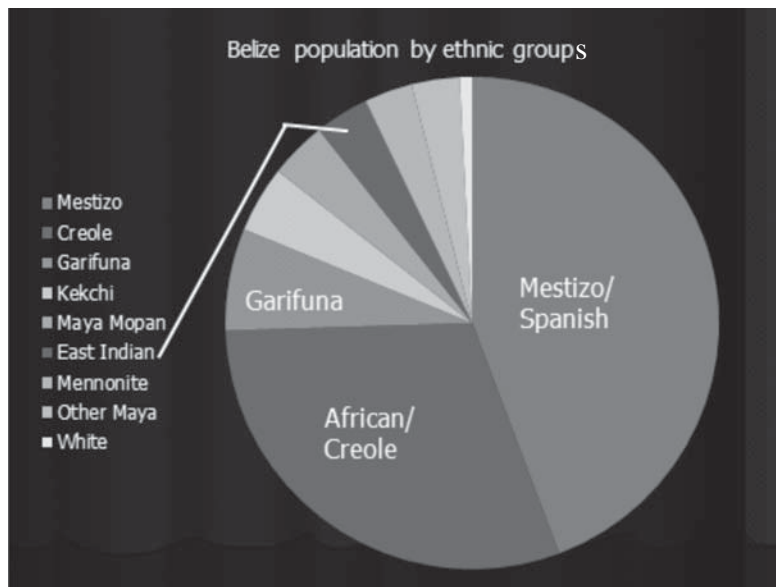
Belize is also the only English-speaking country in Central America. After the abolition of African slavery, Indians went to Belize to provide an alternate source of labour in the sugarcane, banana and lumber industries. Unlike any other Caribbean country, Belize experienced three waves of Indian migration, commencing in 1858. The first wave of migrants consisted of 1000 deported ex-soldiers (and their families) who had rebelled against the British Government in India's First War of Independence/ Sepoy Rebellion. The second wave of Indians went to Belize in 1872 as ex-indentured workers from Jamaica. The third wave of Indian migrants to Belize came from Guatemala, from where they had gone to work in the coffee plantations in Cane Mountains.

Address for communication: **Sylvia Gilharry Perez**, Chairman, Corozal Organization of East Indian Cultural Heritage (COEICH), Belize, *E-mail:* sylviaperez1@yahoo.com and **Kumar Mahabir**, Assistant Professor, Centre for Education Programmes, University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT), Trinidad and Tobago, Caribbean, *E-mail:* dmahabir@gmail.com

Unique to Indian history in the Caribbean is the fact that early immigrant labourers worked in Belize in the sugarcane, as well as lumber and banana industries. As early as the 1860s, they worked under the employment of American ex-confederates – not under British, French or Dutch employers as was the case in the other Caribbean islands.

East Indians first settled in Queen Charlotte Street in Belize City to work in the nearby sugar and lumber industries. After the two hurricanes in 1931, and 1961, Indian survivors moved to Yarrowborough and Belmopan. In Corozal District in northern Belize, they resided in sugarcane estates [*ranchos*] such as Calcutta, San Andres, San Antonio, Estrella, Carolina and Ranchito. In Toledo District in the south, they lived in Cattle Landing, West Morland, Fairview, Mount Royal, Jacintoville, Mafredi and Forest Home.

Belize evolved into an ethnically-diverse society. The 2000 government census reveals that Mestizo/ Spanish represented 48% of the total population, (African) Creole was 25% of the total, Garifuna 6%, Mennonite 4%, and the three Maya groups comprised: Yucatec 1%, Mopan 4%, and Ketchi 5%, and Caucasian 1%. East Indians comprise about 7,000 persons (4%). Most of these ethnic groups are concentrated in specific areas in Belize. With the passage of time, the mainly-Hindu immigrants have all converted to Christianity, resulting in the absence of temples and lack of festivals in the country. The only remnants of Hindu culture are the special preparation of food with turmeric [curry] and the observance of Hosay/ Muharram [Who-se-me-say].



Source: 2000 National Census

Some East Indians moved out of the rural communities and agriculture into the government service, the teaching profession, transportation, business, law and politics. It is reported that in the 1950s, Ramsey Coleman bought a sugarcane plantation with a mill and employed Garifuna workers. According to retired teacher, Vilma Ranguy Ramclam, 64 years old, her relative, James Ramclam, was a wealthy man who manufactured brown and white sugar in the Central Sugar Factory. It is said that Mairon Tulcy bought a sugar cane mill from an American company. Indian families own Ramclam Restaurant and Real Estate, Borland Trucking, and James Bus Line.

Prominent people of Indian origin are Kevin Singh, a senator of the ruling United Democratic Party, and Audrey Matura-Shepherd, a senator of the opposition – both of them lawyers like Richard “Dickie” Bradley. Others are Leroy “Ned” Supaul, Deputy Mayor of Punta Gorda Town Council, and Albert Ramclam, councillor. Part-Indian, Patrick Faber, is the Minister of Education in the Government. Other outstanding Indians are historians Bismark and Willington Ranguy, Elizabeth Joan Cardenas and Timothy Bardalez. Well-known Indian cultural activists are Gabriel Pate, Cancy Ramclam, Catherine Flowers, Lydia Ramcharan and Sylvia Gilharry Perez.

The stereotype remains that Indian women are more likely to stay at home, cook and do housework. Indians are still referred to as “coolies,” without prejudice, because everybody grew up “together as one.”

Preservation of East Indian Culture

An article from the National Institute of Culture and History in Belize (2011) states,

Today the East Indian community is identified by a distinctively ‘Indian’ appearance, either in hair, or facial features. Although they have adopted many of the social practices, customs and values of the creolized Belizean populace, they have given as much in return, so much so that they remain among Belizeans, a group that has truly become a dear collaborator, sharing their culture, and most notably, their food.

One of the items that identify East Indians as an ethnic group in Belize is their customary use of curry. Interestingly, it is made mainly by Maya Indians and sold in the market, or house-to-house. The curry is made by grinding the underground stem of the yellow *hardi* [turmeric] into a powder with two rubbing stones. The curry adds flavour, colour and aroma to *tacari* [cooked food]. East Indians tend to marry Maya Indians, perhaps because they look alike with their brown complexion, and the women have long, black hair.

Indians in all parts of the diaspora have developed the creativity to cook almost any meat or vegetable with curry. Most of the plants they use as vegetables have medicinal as well as edible properties. For example, Indians in Belize curry *serosee* [caraaili/ bitter cucumber] and eat it with *roti* or *daalpuri* [flat, round bread]. The leaves of the *serosee* are also boiled to treat low blood pressure. As in other parts of

the Indian Diaspora, choka is made with many vegetables, including *jhingi* [angled loofah] and *baigan/ melongene* [garden egg].

Yellow ginger [turmeric/ *hardi*] is grown in home gardens and prepared by crushing it with a grinding stone to make *massalla* [mixture of spices]. The underground stems are harvested in March, when the leaves are dry, and grated to make powder. The ripe seeds of the crabo[seeretto] tree are collected from the ground, washed and blended to make wine, jam and pickles, and to flavour ice-cream.

Cohune cabbage is prepared by extracting the white heart of the cohune palm. The heart is chopped into fine pieces and steamed with turmeric, garlic and onion. Green mangoes and young plums are either curried or made into chutney. *Karapule* [curry leaf] is used in almost all dishes.

Perhaps the only popular performing Indian cultural expression in Belize is Hosay/ Muharram, called "Who-se me-se." In most parts of the world, Muharram commemorates the martyrdom of the Muslim Prophet Mohammed's grandsons, Hussein and Hassan, in 680 A.D., in Karbala in Iraq. The centrepiece of the event is the procession of glittering replicas of the tombs [*tazias*] of the soldier martyrs, accompanied by the beating of drums, and chanting of "YaHussain." Since all the Hindus in Belize have been converted to Christianity, the *tadjah* [ornamental tomb] has been reinterpreted to mean the Ark of the Covenant, which is the sacred chest containing the Tablets of Stone, on which the *Ten Commandments* were inscribed. According to Biblical history, during the Israelites exodus from Egypt, the Ark was carried by priests across the river, Jordan, and paraded around the walls of the city of Jericho. In Belize, Who-se is observed by parading the *tadjah*, drumming, and martial arts dancing with two sticks or machetes. People have testified that they have been miraculously healed by ritually walking around the *tadjah*.

Perhaps Belize has the richest store of knowledge in the Indian oral tradition in the smaller Caribbean. Below is an extract of an East Indian folktale narrated by Clarissa Bahadur-Jacobs, 73 years old:

This story is about seven sons. The youngest one, he liked his sister because she did all the work at home, every day. The only food he liked was callaloo and rice. Every day, when he worked and came home, he wanted it for dinner. One day, this girl cut her finger and it started to bleed, and was hurting.

She decided to wash the blood in the callaloo and cook it. So when the boy came home, she dished out the food for all of them. The oldest brother said, "This dinner nicer than every day one. How this dinner so nice today?"

She said, "Brother, I will tell you the truth. I cut my hand, and I washed it in the callaloo and cooked it."

Hear him, "If your blood so nice, your meat will be sweeter." So the six of them made a plan to kill the sister.

Collecting Artifacts as Methodology

In Belize, it is becoming very rare to see kitchens constructed as separate buildings from the houses. In Indian households in the countryside, it is also unusual to see an earthen fireside on which sits a *comal* [flat iron] for making *roti* [flat round bread]. The wooden mortar and pestle has become a relic. The “coolie grater,” made with a cutlass/ machete blade attached to a wooden board, is used to shred dry coconut flesh to make cooking oil. Other artefacts are the *daalgootni* [swizzle stick] and the dry corn husk used to scrub soiled laundry. The kneading bowl in Belize is different from the *chowki* in Trinidad. The kneading bowl is wider with a lip around its edges and is used for both kneading and as a cutting board. It is almost impossible nowadays to see a *dehkee*, even in the countryside. The *dehkee* is a wooden contraption which is used to pound rice and other grains in a hole in the ground. Some of these rare objects are featured in a new seven-minute documentary film entitled *Artifacts of East Indians in Belize: Remembering the Past to Secure the Future*.

The first museum dedicated to East Indian history, heritage and culture in the Caribbean was established in Belize in 2001. It was founded by Lydia Ramcharam Pollard who is also the curator and proprietor. Located at 129 South End Road in Corozal, the East Indian Cultural Museum is truly a “Window to the Past.”

The second Indian museum was established in Trinidad in 2006 by the name, The Indian Caribbean Museum. The collections of both museums have been obtained through purchases, gifts, bequests and loans by interested individual, families, priests, historians, scholars and collectors in the respective island communities. The collections include old items such as rear musical instruments, agricultural objects, cooking utensils, pieces of clothing, ancient photographs and historical books.

Artifacts like those on display at the Indian museum in Belize are featured in a documentary film entitled *Artifacts of East Indians in Belize: Remembering the Past to Secure the Future*. Produced by Sylvia Gilharry Perez of Belize and directed by Kumar Mahabir of Trinidad, the documentary was premiered at UWI, St. Augustine, Trinidad, at the International Indian Diaspora Conference in June 2011.

Most of the recent artifacts, historical documents and old photos of Indian indentureship in Belize have been treated as useless items to be disposed as garbage. These items are now being located, identified, recovered, photographed, described and displayed. There is the belief that their documentation, publication and display will give greater insight into the old way of life of Indians in Belize, and create greater awareness of the historical, aesthetic and utilitarian value of these items.

Conclusion

In 2001, Ralph Premdas, a Political Science Professor from UWI, St. Augustine, became the first Indian Caribbean researcher to visit Belize. About his encounter with East Indians, he wrote:

They were most warmly welcoming as if they were meeting a long-lost relative, and were as cautious about me as I was curious about them. It was a strange feeling of affinity, about the surprise of survival in the New World, our ancestors coming across the Oceans that saw many dead, and many others dying, on the plantations on which they were deployed, discriminated against, mistreated, and oppressed. Even though we were all several generations born locally in different locations in the New World, we seem to have shared a sense of belonging in a common narrative of struggle and survival. I told them about Trinidad, Guyana, and Suriname where large numbers of Indians lived, and where a fairly vibrant Indian cultural retention was in existence. They were very apologetic, claiming to be shorn of practically all things Indian, remembering little and wanting me to tell them more about Indian life in the Caribbean.

There is a very small community of Indian expatriates in Belize who comprise less than 1000 persons. A report on this community has been compiled by the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi, India, and can be found in <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/contents.htm>. The report states that since there were no restrictions on local citizenship in Belize, this group started migrating to Belize in the 1950s when the country was a British colony. The community comprises almost entirely of Sindhis who are engaged in the retail trade. They maintain close and regular contact with India through frequent trips to visit friends and relatives back home. The report states: “Some of these visits are connected with their quest for Indian brides for their [male] children.”

These “foreign” Indians, as they are called, behave as if local Indians belong to a lower caste with whom they must not meet, mix or mingle. They have been missing a golden opportunity to share their culture with the locals who are eager to rediscover and reclaim their Indian cultural heritage.

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