

## **‘ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE’: EAST INDIANS ON THE SPANISH MAIN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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In this paper the Spanish Main is taken to refer to the broad area stretching from Mexico to the southern tip of South America, only part of which was affected by East Indian immigration<sup>1</sup>. Until recently, little research was done regarding migration from the Caribbean to South America. A largely unexplored dimension of this phenomenon is the late nineteenth-century illegal migration of a number of Indian immigrant labourers who had been brought to the Caribbean under indenture contracts. This paper seeks to bring this migration phenomenon into focus. It examines the circumstances surrounding the illegal emigration of these Indians to the South American mainland, their experience there and the British government’s handling of this problem. Also discussed is the cultural impact of those Indian immigrants who remained on the mainland. The overall number of Indian emigrants is unknown and undoubtedly small. Ours, however, is a qualitative rather than quantitative discourse, intended to broaden the context and scope of Indian migration, and our appreciation of the myriad dimensions of their diaspora.

### **Theoretical and Epistemological Issues**

There are two fundamental and reciprocating nuances to Caribbean migration historiography. Firstly, it emphasizes the movement of labour, whether forced or voluntary. Secondly, from this, historical enquiry remains focused on in-migration to the region. Out-migration, significant as part of the Caribbean experience from the inception of European and Caribbean contact, has been studied as an afterthought. One result is that the complexity of Caribbean migration has been significantly obscured<sup>2</sup>.

The related pedagogical and epistemological deficiencies manifest themselves, for example, on the question of Caribbean migration to the Spanish Main. Until recently, and continuing, not much work was done in the field, because the pedagogical transmission from historiographical silence suggests that little of significance occurred<sup>3</sup>.

Locked in the epistemology of the market paradigm of the demand and supply for slave, indentured and other forms of labour, Caribbean migration scholars continue to operate within a largely quantitative framework. While this has provided for the elaboration of the relationship between labour costs and wages on the one hand, and the demand and supply of labour on the other hand, much else, including less quantifiable correlates such as the pre-existence of migration trajectories, the geographical proximity of host and sending societies, and the desire of some among

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the labouring classes to escape pre-and post emancipation dispensations of plantation servitude have been ignored<sup>4</sup>.

This exclusively market-oriented approach remains questionable, given the Caribbean's archipelagic make-up, its 'link' location between North and South America, and the experience of more than five centuries of conflict-oriented interaction among Native Americans, Europeans, African and Asian communities in the region. Among other things, the unwillingness of Caribbean migration scholars to project their migration thesis southwards is an overstayed rider resulting from an imperial tradition in Caribbean historiography. It was, after all, imperial and metropolitan considerations that mobilized labour immigration into the region. In consequence, these dictated its configuration as a state apparatus, complete with the necessary records for monitoring its implementation and operation in terms of what was required to be known by the imperial and colonial authorities and administrations. Meanwhile, out-migration from the region, particularly to the South American Main, emerged antithetical to such a framework. Emigration emerged out of opposition to the official systems, and out of individual and group concerns of the migrants to enhance their freedom and opportunities. Their basic mobilization originated in their needs, and inevitably the emigration dynamic evolved on the basis of clandestine operations and illegal manoeuvres.

This premise underpins the present discussion which seeks to draw upon what until recently has been largely unknown and unexplored dimensions of Afro-West Indian and Asian Indian migration from the British colony of Trinidad during the nineteenth century. It is primarily the Indo-Caribbean aspect that engages us. We are attempting here to resolve some of the issues at the level of reference to official sources, case studies and the application of ethno-cultural evidence<sup>5</sup>.

### **Review of the Literature**

A range of studies have been done on the global Indian Diaspora<sup>6</sup>. Much has written on the West Indian aspect, in Trinidad and British Guiana. Very little has been written on the phenomenon of East Indian migration to the Spanish Main<sup>7</sup>. Some work has been written on the Surinam experience. Overall, comparatively much less has been written on Venezuela, even within the framework of an evolving methodological approach to the study of the Indian diaspora which now categorises its global communities into Non Resident Indians (NRIs) and People of Indian Origin (PIOs). The approach constitutes an attempt to know more about and to explore the experiences of the millions of people of Indian descent who are resident in India and territories overseas. NRIs refer to Indians who have migrated from the 20th century and beyond; PIOs, to those whose fore-parents migrated from India in the nineteenth century<sup>8</sup>. Despite the existence of the PIO framework, the history of Indians in Venezuela appears to be obviated within the maze of historical discourses on the Indian Diaspora.

Some scholars have alluded to the revolutionary spirit of the East Indian immigrants in Trinidad and the British West Indies, debunking the notion that they were passive participants in their indentureship experience. Where scholars see elements of resistance in the initiatives of Indian immigrants in Trinidad, they have discerned no connection to the emergence of communities of Indians in Venezuela. The field is not absolutely *tabula rasa*. A few writers, in referring to other aspects of Indian diasporic history, have made vague, veiled and cursory references to the phenomenon. Few still have sought to draw attention to this migration by reference to official records. Among them are Judith Ann Weller<sup>9</sup>, Raymond Ramcharitar and Wally Look Lai. Weller alluded to the steady stream of such migrations during the 1860s. Ramcharitar, commenting on what Weller had written, saw this as part of the evolution of the “underground” in Trinidad and the pervasive hopelessness of the Indian immigrants during the early years of indenture. In his *Indentured Labour, Plantation Sugar, Chinese and Indian Immigrants to the British West Indies*, Look Lai describes these migrations as “a quite substantial, though unquantifiable hemorrhage on the labour supply” during the years of indenture<sup>10</sup>. Further, he laments the absence of historical research on the phenomenon, notwithstanding the wealth of data to be found in the official reports of the Protector of Immigrants. For the most part, therefore, the question of Indian migration to the Spanish is still shrouded in mystery and historiographical neglect. In this discourse an attempt is being made to put it into greater historical perspective.

It is worth considering also that, regarding Jamaica, some five hundred East Indian are reported as missing. Some authorities have attributed this to clandestine, illegal migrations to Cuba. Further, those similar experiences have been reported regarding indentured Indians of Guyana<sup>11</sup>, St. Lucia<sup>12</sup>, and the French West Indies. Additionally, Indo-West Indians may have illegally and clandestinely migrated to places as far as Central America, Panama, Honduras and Puerto Limon. Given this, the issue of “missing” immigrant Indians assumes importance as an area worthy of study in its own right. These ‘rebel’ Indians and their experiences, whatever these might have been, certainly represent a kind of ‘leak’ migration, away from the ‘mainstream’ channels established for the immigrants by the imperial authorities. In the end, their experience reflected a level of diasporic dislocation, beyond that of Indian who operated in the districts and territories spelt out in their Indentureship contracts<sup>13</sup>. Undoubtedly, by the very fact of emigration from their ancestral homeland, all Indians brought to the island would have experienced geographic and social dislocation. However, those who thereafter opted for maroonage by sea would have found themselves further removed from their Indian counterparts in Trinidad, having imposed upon themselves a comparatively higher level of isolation, dislocation and invisibility. They were not the first to engage the Paria as a means of escaping the prevailing labour system in Trinidad.

### **Antecedent Out-migration from the Island**

As is well known, the island of Trinidad has for long time been considered an in-migration territory. Trinidad received its first significant inflow of enslaved Africans under the Spanish Administration in consequence of a Real Cedula of Population which sanctioned the immigration of thousands of French white and coloured planters, together with their enslaved Africans, from neighboring islands during the late eighteenth century.

The island fell to the British in 1797, so that legally, the slave trade to the island as indeed all other British West Indian colonies came to an end with the Abolition Act of 1807. By 1834, there was legal emancipation from slavery in the British Caribbean. In consequence, a labour shortage resulted, forcing the British government to assist Trinidad, British Guiana and Jamaica and a few other British colonies with immigration schemes of varying degrees of importance.

In particular, the introduction of large numbers of East Indian immigrants into Trinidad and British Guiana located these territories firmly within Caribbean history as host or recipient as opposed to emigrant or sending societies<sup>14</sup>. In the historiography on these territories, emigration has not been discussed and has been treated as a non sequitur<sup>15</sup>.

Recent research into West Indian migration to the Spanish Main during the nineteenth century has unearthed a number of pre- and post emancipation dynamics which widen the scope of Caribbean migration. Caribbeanist historians have responded to the problematique with less urgency than Latin American historians<sup>16</sup>. Since the capitulation of Trinidad to the British, the Venezuelan authorities, both metropolitan and local, had committed themselves to monitoring east to west migration across the Paria, so as to prevent hordes of British subjects from settling in eastern Venezuela. Venezuelan historians and scholars were therefore always more involved in the related discourse, as they saw it necessary to document any suspicious British enterprise across the Gulf of Paria.

Some understanding of the pre-emancipation migration phenomenon that have emerged from the records is relevant, given that the developments of a related pattern of voluntary but "illegal" movement of African-descended emigrants during the period of British slavery and apprenticeship appears to have set the precedent for similar migrations involving East Indian indentured labourers later in the nineteenth century. It is now known that during slavery, many enslaved persons from the island escaped to the Spanish mainland. Some went in search of zones of freedom in the sparsely populated eastern Venezuela area; others, to join the forces of Simon Bolivar in the Columbian struggle for independence. They were perhaps influenced by Bolivar's declaration of freedom for slaves in 1816, contingent on their participation in nationalist effort. Whatever the motivation, enslaved Africans in Trinidad stole small boats and sailed away to the Main. The records of Trinidad's Governor, Ralph Woodford, between 1813 and 1816, include numerous appeals to

British authorities to assist with this matter, given the ease with which enslaved Africans could have exited the island for the Spanish Main<sup>17</sup>.

During the apprenticeship period, the colonial authorities and the planters on the island faced similar problems. Apprentices in the colony, unwilling to serve out their four and six year obligation to planters, also stole boats and headed for the Spanish Main. Some allowed themselves to be enticed into leaving Trinidad for Venezuela by coloured pirates and traders plying the waters of the Gulf of Paria<sup>18</sup>.

The 1850s saw yet another phase of migration as thousands of blacks and coloureds from the English- and French-speaking West Indian islands attempted to establish a free and independent 'negro' state in the Upata District, near the Venezuelan Yuruari<sup>19</sup>. The late nineteenth century saw Afro-West Indians emigration efforts which, despite their illegality from both an official Venezuelan and British perspective, were encouraged by the latter, especially following the discovery of gold in eastern Venezuela in 1849<sup>20</sup>. The British government hoped to encroach on the Venezuelan gold bearing areas in the region through a pincher movement, and to ultimately lay claim to at least a portion of the zone on the basis of effective occupation and the establishment of extra-territorial rights. This phase of migration endeavor was hindered by internal political conflicts in Venezuela, and between the latter and the British authorities.

All of these phases of emigration and their consequences, including the establishment by the late nineteenth century of small communities of Afro-West Indians in eastern Venezuela, have escaped the focus of Caribbean historiography, because the projection of the migration thesis southwards necessitates the incorporation of paradigms based upon premises significantly different from those traditionally applied in West Indian migration studies.

It is instructive to identify what is generic about these virtual 'leak migrations' discussed thus far. They were not based on the movement of labour. Furthermore, of necessity, many of these migrations involved a measure of illegality and clandestine operation. Suffice it to say that success was often in inverse proportion to the size of the migrating band. Appreciably, emigrants did not pass through normal channels of arrival and departure. Given this, it was difficult to accurately record their arrival and departure, a factor that has significant implications for the credibility of the population statistics for the nineteenth century regarding more than one Caribbean island.

It is also clear that concerning these dimensions, geographical factors played a significant role. Trinidad and Venezuela are merely eight miles away at their closest point. Trinidad is closer to Venezuela than any of its Caribbean neighbours. An almost landlocked body of water, the Gulf of Paria separates the island, the most southerly of the Caribbean, from the northeastern Paria Peninsula of the Spanish Main. Within the Gulf of Paria, a clockwise eddy facilitates movements to

and from the Spanish Main. This eddy had facilitated the pre-and post-Colombian movement of Amerindians across the Paria, even without their knowledge of sails. It facilitated also, the movement of Europeans between the West Indies and South America and, during the nineteenth century, the illegal migration of enslaved Africans and apprentices. Geographical factors were also important in the movements of various individuals and groups from British Guiana to Venezuela<sup>21</sup>.

It was certainly a critical factor in the mobilization of the illegal migration of Indians from Trinidad in the late nineteenth century, an aspect of the historical experience of Indians in the Caribbean on which no significant pronouncement has been made. And, again, the deafening historiographical silence on the matter gives the counterfactual impression that the phenomenon did not exist.

### **The Asian Indian Dimension**

The Indians immigrants began to arrive in Trinidad from 1845. The evidence suggests that no sooner had they arrived than some of them began to breach their contracts and head for the Spanish Main. A similar problem emerged with the arrival of Indians<sup>22</sup> immigrants in British Guiana. Indeed, the British Foreign Office received many reports of Indians immigrants being enticed to Venezuela from Trinidad and British Guiana<sup>23</sup>.

Apparently an important dimension to the issue was their enticement by British planters operating in Venezuela, a few of whom had moved to the Main as a consequence of the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies. While such planters may have made use of such Indians in eastern Venezuela, which was always short of labour, the actual abduction, transportation to and sale in Venezuela might have been the work of any number of illegal traders and pirates plying the Paria, including coloured/mulatto owners of small vessels and Venezuelan “*pocotiempo*” traders from the Peninsula de Paria. All of these parties were commonly engaged in what the British government regarded in its records as acts of piracy across the *Gofo de Triste*. British and other planters in Venezuela counted on the ease with which the immigrant Indians, kidnapped and brought to Venezuela, could be made to merge with native Amerindians on the Main, given the close resemblance of the former to some among the latter. It was a phenotypical attribute, and one which Indian immigrants seeking refuge on the Main seemed prepared to use to advantage as they sought to escape from the West Indian plantation environment during the late nineteenth century and continuing.

In the early day of the indenture system, this close resemblance proved perilous to them at times. The enslavement of Amerindians was still common in some parts of Venezuela and the Foreign Office legation in Caracas often found it necessary to come to the defense of Indian immigrants who absconded to the Main and were held in servitude by planters and officials there<sup>24</sup>.

It is interesting to listen to British colonial authorities on the matter. In November 1846, Governor Light of British Guiana requested of the Foreign Office Legation in Caracas and Viscount Palmerston to use their good offices for "interposition" to have a number of these "coolie emigrants" returned, and to prevent the re-occurrence of these migrations and even the related ill-treatment of the Indians who went to the Main. By December, Bedford Wilson of the Caracas Foreign Office Legation had responded, advising of the difficulty in the way of any interference in terms of discouraging the immigration of coolies to Venezuela, because of the unwillingness of the Venezuelan Authorities to do anything about it. The British government was just as unwilling. As was the case with African- West Indian emigrants to the area, the British government intended to use the Indian immigrants to establish extraterritorial rights in eastern Venezuela. So that while planters in Trinidad and British Guiana railed over these absentee Indian immigrants, the British government, often conscious of their whereabouts on the Main was not always anxious to secure their return from City Bolivar (Angostura) and Guiria where many of them could have been found. The British Authorities were more concerned to ensure that they declared themselves British subjects while in Venezuela<sup>25</sup>.

This apart, there were several factors which seemed to lure the Indians to the Main. One was the proximity of the island to the Main, a fact with which the Indian immigrants might easily have become familiar from what existed in the folklore of the ex-enlaved on the island. Secondly, familiarity could have emerged out of the natural pattern of the settlement and development of business and commerce in the colony. Most of the island's population was located on the west coast. Further, the absence of proper internal communications between the capital city of Port of Spain in the north and the fishing village of Cedros in the south meant that communication by small boats along the western coastal fringe of the island was an important part of the order of business.

From time to time, the Indians were transported in boats and small vessels along the coast and had the opportunity to glimpse the Mainland which lay in close proximity. Furthermore, vast numbers of Indian immigrants were set to work in the Caroni area and Naparima plains. The Caroni River had long been associated with illegal trade with the Spanish Main. So too, the southernmost district of Cedros, which, in particular, was frequented by Venezuelans traders, settlers and refugees from the Main.

There were other factors, some of which had to do with the conditions attendant to immigration contracts. Although the nature of these contracts changed over time, over the period of immigration they would have contained conditions with which the Indian immigrants were not satisfied. There were certainly servile conditions that encouraged East Indians to abandon obligations to planters<sup>26</sup>. Illegal or "leak" migration was merely an extension of the practice of absenteeism.

The problem of absenteeism was one with which the planters had always to contend. One British Protector of Immigrants after another complained about “absconding Indians.” In his report of 1877-8, Dr. Henry Mitchell, the then Protector of the Immigrants, pointed out that of the 136 immigrants who had absconded, 118 were still under their original contracts. That situation, he suggested, was a significant improvement to previous years when the number of absentees reached 500 to 600 annually. While the number of absentees usually amounted to small percentage of the immigrant Indian population on the island at any point in time, the fact of the matter was that the absentees were mainly Indians who were still contractually obligated to planters. Mitchell surmised then that the frequency of absenteeism in the past was due to the stringency of the old regulations as affecting the contract servant, so that “the coolie when he supposed himself aggrieved, betook himself to some outlying spot, out of the reach of the employer<sup>27</sup>.”

Interestingly, he was quick to point out that, despite some reduction of the problem, there was a particular aspect that refused to go away. There still remained, he stressed, “the Spanish Main whose shores are of easy access to the absentee contract servants....and as many of our coolies trade there from time to time as well as to the nearer English islands.” Fortunately, he concluded, matters had slowed at the time because of internal strife in Venezuela, so that the shores of Venezuela were being less sought after by the coolies.

What the Protector pointed out afterwards is another testament to the ingenuity of the East Indians, who, like the African-descended migrant to the Main, had also engaged in this practice at a level of return and circulatory migration. Mitchell made it clear that many of the Indian immigrants returned after a longer or shorter period. The fact was that East Indians migrants to the Mainland stayed for varying lengths of time, depending on their experiences there. Some returned rather quickly, often with the assistance help of the British authorities, which they eagerly sought when they ran into difficulties of one kind or another. Some did not return at all. Others returned after very lengthy periods.

A classic example of the latter was the ‘coolie’ known in the records simply as Lutchmon. He arrived in the Trinidad on the *Turbynia* in 1860. It would appear from all accounts that after about three years he deserted the island for the Main, although it would have been difficult to determined exactly when, given that there was usually a time lag between the point of desertion and the acquisition by the planter or the authorities of a knowledge of this development, in which case their first assumption was that the absconding labourer had deserted to some location within the colony. After having crossed over to Venezuela, Lutchmon is reported to have remained for a few years on a well-known cocoa estate in Venezuela, where he received four dollars a month with boarding and lodge. This notwithstanding, the authorities made no attempt to secure his return. Lutchmon returned to Trinidad in early 1879 and asked to be allowed to purchase his remaining time as an indenture.



He was granted this privilege, and became once more a citizen of Trinidad, after an absence of thirteen years.

It is interesting to note that Lutchmon had migrated with the members of his family; likewise, that he had returned with them. We encounter in the records, references to the absconding of immigrants and their families, unnamed, across the Paria. The family represented the first line of social security against loneliness, social dislocation and near total isolation that was part of the risk of illegally migrating to the Spanish Main. Additionally, the family assisted in developing the necessary economic and material support in the new situation.

Any notion that Indian immigrants were overly tolerant of their Indentureship, and voluntarily committed to the development of the sugar industry ignores, among other things, the persuasion of many of them towards continuity in the use of migration per se as an option for enhancing their freedom and opportunities elsewhere. Many were prepared to exercise this option, even though some circumstances strongly militated against them attempting or even contemplating it. There were, for example, language barriers regarding their communication with all non-East Indians. But, as the Indians acclimatized, this problem was reasonably expected to go away, and to be greater regarding their relationship with non-English speakers. And yet, there are reports of Indian labourers allowing themselves to be enticed even to Puerto Rico<sup>28</sup>. Not surprisingly, in the public domain there were always rumours about the existence of "secret companies" which enticed the Indians, falsified their papers and provided the necessary transport for those willing to quit the colony illegally<sup>29</sup>. Colonial officials tended to look upon the Indians' participation as resulting from ignorance of what the law required of them. But the colonial officials could never have been certain, for the problem seemed to escalate, the longer the Indians stayed in the colony. We encounter in the record accounts of Indians running away as late as 1902.

The Indian's passion for financial independence seems to have been well-exhibited, and, no doubt, to be well-understood by the British authorities. There was also their desire for land. It was in recognition of this that the British and colonial authorities had sought to entice them to remain in the colonies through the commutation of their return passage for land. But, for some East Indian immigrants, the prospect of continuing to work on the sugar estate was simply not encouraging. And, given declining prospects in the sugar industry towards the close of the century, many looked towards what they saw as a symbolically and financially more rewarding engagement on cocoa estates. Among those of such a persuasion, a number absconded and worked illegally on unoccupied crown lands or cocoa estates in Trinidad. A few opted for migration in order to pursue a similar ambition in nearby Venezuela, where the prospects of open frontier seemed to promise them an opportunity to be independent farmers, or to work on cocoa estates under what they sometimes erroneously perceived to be better conditions.

### Evaluating the Official Response

The British government had knowledge of this orientation on the part of some of the Indian immigrants from the inception of Indian immigration to Trinidad. From the time of the absconding of the first group of Indians, they had demonstrated an awareness of the need to stem the practice. However, in treating with the problem, they were faced with the same challenge they encountered regarding the illegal migration of enslaved Africans and apprentices across the Paria. To publicly chastise or warn the Indians immigrants about the practice was to alert them all to the ease with which they could abandon the island for the Main.

There was a second factor. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the British government engaged in a policy of selective illegal migration allowance<sup>30</sup>. It was a policy of looking the other way, which facilitated the clandestine and illegal migration of British West Indian subjects to the disputed border zone between British Guiana and Venezuela, following the discovery of gold near the area in 1849. It was the intention of the British government to claim the area on the basis of effective occupation.

During the 1850s there were numerous reports of these illegal migrations. In an official report of 1855, the immigration department even complained that these illegal migrations were making it impossible to tell the exact number of Indian immigrants on the island itself. During the 1860s, Indians continued to engage in this secondary migration, much to the concern of the Protector of Immigrants<sup>31</sup>. By the late nineteenth century, the problem of Indians migrating without leave had remained, even though some of them eventually chose to return to Trinidad. In 1890, for example, the Protector of Immigrants on the island reported as follows:

During the last years several immigrants have returned from the Spanish Main, some of whom have contracts on cocoa estates and are doing quite well<sup>32</sup>.

He went further,

One of these men, the father of five or six grown-up children, all of whom returned with him, informed me that there were at Guiria where he resides, about 100 hundred coolies from Trinidad who nearly all had small patches of cocoa on contract<sup>33</sup>.

Five years later the Protector of Immigrants reported that the number of East Indian absentees was on the increase. But he attributed this to depressing conditions in the labour market in Trinidad, adding that there were advantages which the Spanish Main offered in terms of getting land with great facility. He concluded that in consequence,

...not only could he (the absentee Indian immigrant) plant what he requires for ordinary use, but may grow ganja (marijuana) for the purpose of being smuggled into Trinidad<sup>34</sup>.

There is an element of pique in the tone of the Protector of Immigrants which is understandable: it was his job to protect the immigrants, but it was perhaps equally

important to ensure that they were on location to provide the labour for which they were "indentured". It is inconceivable that all of missing immigrants would have absconded to the Main. Undoubtedly the overwhelming majority were on the island, hiding in plain sight. Mitchell was alluding to the complexity of the problem of absenteeism. Further, to the fact that it was compounded by Indian migration to the Spanish Main.

Nor should his comments about the cultivation, use and peddling of marijuana be seen as reflecting a new discovery on his part. The global and historic use of cannabis for religious, medicinal or narcotic purposes is only now receiving much needed scholarly attention, but it was a practice well-known among the working and other classes in the New World, including Trinidad<sup>35</sup>. Some officials and scholars attributed its increase use among the Indians to the pressures of life under the indenture system<sup>36</sup>.

Mitchell's comment merely suggests that he had been made aware, by whatever means, of the addition of a Venezuelan connection that had been underway for some time. Noticeably, he could hardly have been bringing this existence of this development to the attention of unknowing officials. This was a dimension about which British officials would have been well aware, but were prepared to do very little. Since the mid-nineteenth century Britain and Venezuela had been involved in a border dispute which had escalated towards by end of the century climaxing with international arbitration by 1905. The Protector's comments are a window into the level of British intelligence and surveillance regarding the disputed area and the Orinoco in the late nineteenth century.

There was very little that British officials did know about these Indian. In fact, what should be noticeable is the ease with which Indian immigrants who had absconded to the Main made their way to Protector of Immigrants and reported where they had been, how long they had stayed, the whereabouts and activities of other runaway Indians amount Main.

In retrospect, it can be said that, after 1849, there are no records of any serious effort by the British authorities to enforce the return to Trinidad of runaway Indians on the Main, although, in fairness to authorities, it can be said that they did oblige where the Indians insisted. By that time, the British government was well into the business of strengthening its claims of responsibility for the native inhabitants of the disputed area. The intention was to claim extra-territorial rights to the area based on responsibility for these Amerindian groups<sup>37</sup>. It was much easier to claim these rights through indentured immigrants who, legally, and for all intents and purposes, had been British subjects even before they came to the island. What was necessary, of course, was to keep track of their location on the Spanish Main. Although there are records of these illegal migrations from 1846 to 1902, there are no records of legal proceeding against Indians who breached their indenture contracts in this way. Additionally, there appears to be only two reports of persons

charged by the local authorities for enticing Indian immigrants to migrate illegally to the Main. If there were any, it has proven difficult to trace the outcome of proceedings against them.

### **Diasporic (Dis)location? or East Indian cum Indo Caribbean Migrant**

Scholars on Indian migration to the Caribbean have been tireless and even very meticulous in their history of these immigrants and their families. They have been aided by British records of the arrival and departure of these Indians.

The gray dimension concerns those Indian immigrants who, from time to time, went missing and who, to this date, remain largely unaccounted for. Some writers have considered that although they know of missing Indian indentured immigrants they have not been able to tell where they went.

Regarding Trinidad, the view of this essay is that one might look to the Spanish Main, which provided one among the many options for escape by some among the 5,095 East Indian indentured immigrants reported missing by 1905<sup>38</sup>. The evidence exists for the establishment of communities of Indian immigrants in parts of eastern Venezuela during the late nineteenth century. While some Foreign Office record points to Guiria, this was certainly not the only locality to which the East Indian emigrants absconded.

The mangrove area of Tucupita in the Orinoco, and home to the Warao, native Indian tribesmen, was also an important destination<sup>39</sup>. The Warao were known for their regular visits to the Western shores of Trinidad, particularly to the Cedros peninsula, where, amidst the curious gaze of local onlookers, they traded with seaside fisher-folk and other vendors. Deep inside the Orinoco, these Indian immigrants found it relatively easy to mix with the native population, and to evade the immigration authorities from Trinidad and in Venezuela. Indeed, the nearby towns of Capura, Peredenales and, in particular, Tucupita, are still popular localities in which Indians, native and East Indian-descended could plant all that they needed to survive, as well as corn, bananas, cacao, tobacco and even sugarcane, all of which were cultivated in Trinidad. Some among the inhabitants of the areas could even find refuge from justice or engage in the purchase of drugs and small arms for resale in Trinidad<sup>40</sup>. Tucupita, once considered the capital of the Orinoco Delta, is still populated by criollos and Warao Indians. There are also small numbers of Guyanese and Trinidad and Tobago Indian immigrants.

The distinguished social anthropologists Angela Pollak-Eltz and Cecelia Itsuriz have unearthed in Tucupita vestiges of East Indian culture, indeed quite unmistakable aspects of the cultural baggage carried by the Indian immigrants from Trinidad and British Guiana to the Spanish Main. The religious practices, music, food, complete with roti, dhantal and the *Ramayan* are today all present in the cultural retentions observable in these districts. Anthropologists describe the “*talqueri*” and “*parsat*” as common to eastern Venezuela<sup>41</sup>. Still, the records of the

entry and departure of these immigrant Indian culture bearers are not to be found either in the official statistics of Venezuela or those of the British authorities in Trinidad.

But such is the stuff of illegal migration to the Spanish Main during the late nineteenth century. On the whole, Indo-Caribbean migration to South America is an aspect of Caribbean migration historiography requiring a new, workable epistemology and methodology. Emigration to the Venezuela in the late nineteenth century, for example, was not the only dimension of their outmigration to the Main. Many Indian immigrants migrated to the Orinoco following the discovery of oil there. A similar migration resulted from the oil boom of the 1970s. The migrants Indians came mainly from neighboring South American territories like Guyana



Source: GraphicMaps.com. <http://GraphicMaps.com>

and Surinam, and from Trinidad and Tobago. They were mainly traders and, additionally, petrochemical workers in the case of Trinidad and Tobago. With the fall in oil prices in the 1980s, a considerable number of them migrated to other parts of Venezuela or simply left the country. All along, Tucupita remained, as it is today, an important destination for those seeking to escape justice in Trinidad and Tobago<sup>42</sup>. In the early days of the Indian indenture system, these and surrounding areas might very well have served as zone of freedom from what seemed almost from inception to the pervasive hopelessness of indentured plantation servitude. The nature and meaning of the experiences of Indian immigrants in such communities and how these extended and gave globality to the Indian diaspora merits further academic enquiry.

### Notes

1. Saucer, Carl Ortwin *The Early Spanish Main* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press; London: Cambridge Press, 1966).
2. Michael F. Toussaint "Afro-West Indians in Search of the Spanish Main: The Trinidad-Venezuela Referent in the Nineteenth Century." Unpublished Thesis, The University of the West Indies, 2000; Raymond Ramcharitar, "The Trinidad Underground in the Nineteenth Century: The Indians." Seminar paper presented at The University of the West Indies, Sept. 15 2005.
3. Toussaint, "Afro-West Indians in Search of the Spanish Main" pp. 1-31.
4. *Ibid.*
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