Immigrant Labour

Official reaction to immigration

Whereas the planters were very enthusiastic about immigrant labour schemes, the governments, both imperial and colonial, were hesitant. West Indian blacks had already migrated from colony to colony in search of higher wages and land, much to the distress of the small island planters, so the prospect of obtaining labourers from other parts of the world was very appealing.

The British government was in a dilemma because it had to support the sugar economies of its West Indian colonies and maintain sugar imports into Britain. The West India Interest, still active in London, urged acceptance of immigrant labour. But the government was also under pressure from the Anti-Slavery Society which regarded immigration as another form of slavery. Moreover, it did not want to be accused of hypocrisy by foreign governments in allowing a new slave trade while persuading other countries to stop theirs. So in 1838 James Stephen, a Colonial Office official, humanitarian and drafter of the 1833 Emancipation Act, was appointed to draw up conditions for immigrant labour schemes which would make it clear that no new slave trade was being established.

Island governments were under even greater pressure from the planters to participate in immigrant labour schemes. In principle they supported them, but did not want to finance the schemes out of public funds. Of course, the planters hoped that their governments would pay for the importing of immigrants and argued that they would be repaid by greatly increased revenue from sugar exports. In the end the island governments partially gave way and agreed to pay one-third of the cost, provided that the planters paid two-thirds.
Immigration schemes

There were a number of different, often overlapping, immigration schemes. For example, in the 1840s Africans, Madeirans and Indians were all entering British Guiana under different schemes. Individual governments had absolute control over their own immigration policies.

European labour

European labour was imported chiefly by Jamaica in order to increase its white population, while at the same time providing plantation labour. It was a hopeless experiment. Between 1834 and 1838, thousands of Scots and Irish and a few hundred Germans came to Jamaica. Most of them soon died, as they lacked immunity to tropical diseases. Others refused to work when they saw what they were expected to do and understood that it was regarded as the work of blacks. They either sought other employment or asked to be repatriated.

Yet the Jamaican government tried again in 1841 and imported more whites from Britain. Some also went to St Kitts and Antigua. After most of them again died or asked for repatriation, the governments were finally convinced that plantation labour from northern Europe was a hopeless prospect.

Madeirans and Maltese

Madeira is a Portuguese island in the Atlantic off the coast of Morocco. The labourers there were paid only three to four pence per day and were attracted by prospects of higher wages in the West Indies. Private importations of Madeirans began in 1835, but were suspended in 1839 while the British government examined the conduct and the morality of the schemes. In 1841 Madeiran immigration was reopened on an official basis again and large numbers went to British Guiana until 1848 when the scheme was suspended again. It was resumed in 1850, but never again on such a large scale.

The whole period of Madeiran immigration into the British West Indies lasted from 1835 to 1882. In this period 36 000 came: 30 000 to British Guiana, 2000 to Antigua, nearly 1000 to Trinidad and only 100 to Jamaica. The rest were dispersed among Grenada, St Vincent, St Kitts and Nevis. It was an unsatisfactory scheme as it was irregular, the death rate of the new arrivals was high, and most of the Madeirans, especially in British Guiana, went into trading as soon as possible.

In the years before 1840 a few hundred people from the Mediterranean island of Malta entered the British West Indies, chiefly British Guiana and Grenada. The Maltese did not like the conditions and asked to be repatriated. Malta could never have provided enough immigrants to solve the labour problem on West Indian sugar estates.

Free African immigration

In 1841 the importation of Africans from Sierra Leone, the Kru Coast (just south-east of Sierra Leone) and the Atlantic island of St Helena, and Africans rescued from slave ships, began. Most of those imported were freed slaves or descendants of

Madeira

Madeira is the largest of an archipelago of four islands (only two of which are inhabited) about 350 miles (560 km) off the Atlantic coast of Morocco. It was known to the Romans but rediscovered by the Portuguese in the fourteenth century. It was claimed by Portugal in 1419 and sugar-cane was planted when the first settlement was established about twenty years later. By the end of the fifteenth century it was probably the world’s largest sugar producer, and remained so until Brazil took over around 1570. Columbus had some association with the island. He called there in 1478 to buy sugar, and it was also the birthplace of his wife. Sugar production was succeeded by that of Madeira, the fortified wine which was extremely popular in the past, particularly in the eighteenth century. The demand for the wine fell dramatically in the next century, and by the 1840s the island faced famine, brought about by a combination of overcrowding, soil exhaustion, land erosion, and a ruined economy. The prospect of being able to earn four or five times as much for a day’s work in British Guiana or on a West Indian island then led to the massive emigration which took place. By time this ended in the 1880s the island’s population had been reduced by a third.
freed slaves, most notably of the Jamaican Maroons deported in 1796.

The scheme lasted from 1841 to about 1862. It was very popular at first, but declined after 1850 for two reasons. Firstly, private ships were chartered at the beginning to carry the emigrants from Africa, and this made the Africans think that it was slavery all over again. Secondly, the agents in West Africa undoubtedly lured the Africans with false promises of money and land. As soon as the news of the true conditions in the West Indies leaked back, it was hard to attract more Africans.

In all, about 36,000 free Africans came to the West Indies under this scheme; 14,000 to British Guiana, 10,000 to Jamaica, 8,000 to Trinidad, and the rest to Grenada, St Vincent, St Lucia and St Kitts.

**Chinese immigration**

Chinese immigration schemes lasted for a long period, but very large numbers did not come to the British West Indies. Far more went to Cuba.

Early in the century there were two abortive schemes to obtain Chinese labour. In 1806, with the threat of abolition, Trinidad attempted to import some Chinese. Very few arrived and they either refused to work or were found entirely unsuitable for the labour required. Then in 1844 British Guiana tried to attract Chinese who had previously emigrated to Malacca, Singapore and Penang. However, these Chinese were happy where they were and were unwilling to come to the West Indies.

Large-scale Chinese immigration began in 1852 from the Portuguese colony of Maçao. The immigrants were convicts or prisoners of war and there were no women amongst them, which had unhappy consequences for the scheme in British Guiana. Therefore, in 1859 a ‘family’ immigration scheme was started. In 1860 British Guiana sent an agent to Canton to recruit Chinese families from the rural areas of Fukien and Kwangtung. In 1864 Trinidad joined the scheme and shared the cost of the agency. This scheme was more successful, but the agents undoubtedly practised some deception in recruiting because they did not tell the Chinese the nature of the work they were going to, and they made false promises about repatriation. The Chinese recruits were small farmers and market gardeners, not plantation labourers.

There were many problems as a result of Chinese immigration.

1. The Chinese government was opposed to it as it hurt Chinese pride, but having suffered a succession of defeats by the European powers since 1839, they were forced to accept it.
2. The immigrants would have settled more happily if Chinese women had been allowed to immigrate. The shortage of women caused jealousy and resentment between the Chinese and the black populations.
3. Chinese immigration was more expensive than other schemes because of the distance from China to the West Indies. It cost £25 to import a Chinese from Canton, but only £15 for an Indian from Calcutta.
4. China was not a British colony and the British government could only try to persuade the Chinese government to allow emigration. The Chinese, even when they allowed it, enforced all sorts of restrictions and conditions, such as the use of only certain ports for embarkation.
5. When the Chinese immigrants found that they had been misled about the kind of work, they frequently refused to work. As soon as they could they tried to obtain land of their own, or they asked to be repatriated, a very expensive business.

Thus the Chinese proved to be unsatisfactory and unreliable as a permanent labour force on sugar plantations. It is hard to assess the total numbers of Chinese immigrants into the British West Indies, but a round figure of 20,000 in the period 1852 to 1893 is suggested. About 12,000 entered British Guiana up to 1879. Jamaica took nearly 5,000 up to 1893. Trinidad imported just over 2,500 between 1852 and 1872.

**Indian immigration**

In 1837 John Gladstone, father of the British Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone and the owner of two plantations in British Guiana, applied to the Secretary of State for the Colonies for permission to import Indian labourers. In 1838, with the arrival of 396 Indians, the great flood of Indian immigration had begun. It was immediately proclaimed a success in British Guiana, but investigations by
the Anti-Slavery Society revealed that many of the immigrants had died quickly. Some had been flogged and wrongly imprisoned, while others had not been paid what they had been promised. Therefore, in July 1838, the Indian government suspended emigration to the West Indies while a Commission of Enquiry made a thorough investigation into conditions in British Guiana.

Immigration resumed officially in 1844, and it lasted until 1917. In the 1840s the planters’ demand for Indian immigrant labour was very strong, especially in British Guiana where the government was spending £50 000 per year on immigration, mostly Indian. The British Guiana government was nearly bankrupt in 1848 because of this. However, a loan of £200 000 from the British government was put towards immigration, and the scheme continued. Trinidad and Jamaica were also importing Indians on a large scale, but the Jamaican government was unwilling to finance the scheme to the same extent as British Guiana and Trinidad. Consequently Jamaica took far fewer immigrants than the other two.

Up to 1848 the Indian immigrants, known as ‘East Indians’ to differentiate them from the Amerindians, were drawn from the poor on the streets of the cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. These cities always remained the ports of embarkation. After 1848 they were drawn from the provinces of Agra, Oudh and Bihar which always suffered terribly in the frequent famines. Many of these emigrants were peasant farmers.

India was a British possession and Britain felt a keen responsibility for her part in the scheme. In 1848, after giving loans to the governments of British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica, she wanted much stricter supervision over immigration. Britain was also allowing Indian immigrants to go to non-British colonies, the French, Dutch and Danish possessions in the West Indies. In these territories it was not possible to oversee the treatment of the immigrants and it was decided in 1876 to stop the transportation of Indians into all non-British colonies except Surinam, Guadeloupe and Martinique. In 1886 Guadeloupe and Martinique were also banned, and only Surinam continued importing Indians until 1917.

By 1917, around 416 000 Indian immigrants had entered the British West Indies. British Guiana

Chinese immigrants
received 239 000, Trinidad 144 000 and Jamaica 37 000. Another 10 000 went to the islands of the eastern Caribbean, St Lucia, Grenada, St Vincent and St Kitts.

Although the scheme appears to have been successful, in many ways it did not live up to expectations. From the moral point of view it had many failings: the indentured servant system deprived human beings of freedom for long periods of their lives; there was great mortality and suffering among the immigrants; grave social problems were caused in West Indian territories. Many people of Indian descent in the West Indies today, however, would not look back on the scheme as a failure. They now form half the population of Guyana and well over one-third of the population of Trinidad.

The contracts

Some of these conditions apply to all immigration schemes, but chiefly they concern Indian schemes.

At first black West Indian labourers moved from one island to another without contracts. When planters started paying the cost of the passage they insisted on contracts. However, as these contracts were signed on arrival, there was little a planter could do if the terms were refused. This frequently happened in British Guiana and Trinidad, where the workers had come for land.

For most of the 1840s, the British government would only permit contracts signed on arrival in the colony. When the immigrants were confronted with the hard conditions of plantation labour, they sometimes refused to sign. In 1848 the British government gave way to planters and permitted contracts to be signed at the port of embarkation. This was better from the planters’ point of view, but worse for the immigrants who had no protection against false promises.

The conditions of the contracts varied according to the scheme and the colony involved. With Indian immigrants, the British government would allow contracts of only one year. In 1848 this was extended to three years and in 1863 the planters got what they had been pressing for from the beginning – five-year contracts signed at the port of embarkation. This was better from the planters’ point of view, but worse for the immigrants who had no protection against false promises.

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The contracts stipulated the number of days to be worked, the number of working hours in a day, the daily wages and conditions about return passages. For example, a labour contract in British Guiana would run for five years from the day of arrival in the colony. Work was required on every day of the

**ANOTHER VERSION OF THE MIDDLE PASSAGE**

The conditions under which Indians were transported to the Caribbean were by no means as dreadful as those endured by slaves during the Middle Passage, but they were still bad enough to produce a great deal of suffering.

Before boarding the ship the immigrants were held for up to three weeks in a depot, where they were medically inspected in order to reject anyone with a disease or obvious malformity, and given additional clothing. The clothes served to keep them warm while on passage in the colder latitudes around South Africa and consisted, for men, of shoes, a red woollen hat, a pair of woollen trousers and a woollen jacket which was often a cast-off soldier’s scarlet tunic. Each woman received a sari together with two flannel jackets, a woollen petticoat, shoes and worsted stockings. On board the ship, single men, single women, and married couples were all berthed separately. The voyage under sail lasted for anything up to 190 days, and for around 60 days after the introduction of steamships in the late 1880s. It was very rare for a voyage to be completed without loss of life. The average mortality rate on board was about 4 per cent until the 1850s, when it went as high as 17 per cent. On one ship in 1856 no fewer than 120 of the 385 immigrants on board died before it reached British Guiana. The mortality rate declined again in the 1860s and was under 2 per cent by 1880. The indignities suffered on passage did not end once the surviving immigrants had landed and been set to work. Their warm clothing was of little further use, and nothing more suitable for wear in the tropics was issued. As a result, those who had left India with nothing more than they stood up in (and the majority were extremely poor) were obliged to work in makeshift outfits made from gunny bags, or in any old material or cast-off clothes they could scrounge.
year except Sundays and public holidays, and days spent in prison had to be made up at the end of the contract. A field labourer on a plantation had to work seven hours per day, and a factory labourer, ten hours. The wages were Is per day (later Is 6d) for a man over sixteen, provided that he was healthy, and 8d per day for a woman or boy under sixteen.

For the first three months after arrival, food would be supplied to the immigrant and 4d per day could be deducted from his wages for this. The labourers were to be housed in ‘barracks’ rent-free, and would receive free medicine and hospitalisation. (Note that contracts did not specify that work would be on sugar plantations.)

The clause about free return passages was the most controversial. The planters and colonial governments did not want repatriation terms, which were insisted on by the governments of the countries of origin and by the British government. At first, immigrants were promised free return passages on completion of their contract. In 1854 they could claim repatriation only after living for ten years in one colony. This was to encourage ‘reindenture’.

In 1869 British Guiana had 30,000 Indians eligible for repatriation and, if they had all claimed it, the government would not have been able to pay. The government adopted the alternative of offering free land instead of return passages. In 1870 Trinidad adopted a similar measure. The government offered 5-acre (2 ha) lots of Crown Land to immigrants on the expiry of their contract. In 1895 the British Guiana government modified the clause about return passages to require the immigrant to pay a quarter of the cost himself. In 1898 this was raised to a half.

The British Guiana Labour Laws of 1864 greatly favoured the planter at the expense of the immigrant. A breach of the labour laws was regarded as a criminal offence and the immigrant could not, therefore, give evidence in his own defence when charged under them.

For minor offences such as the failure to answer one’s name at the muster roll in the morning, harsh fines of up to £5 could be imposed. Other minor offences were punishable by up to three months in prison. If a planter broke his side of the contract, such as the failure to pay full wages, the immigrant had no recourse to the court, but could only go to the Petty Debts Department.

**Organisation of Asian immigration schemes**

Neither the Indian nor the Chinese government supported emigration or gave help in recruiting. With more government supervision in the Indian

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Immigrants landing at Guadeloupe
scheme after 1848, and in the Chinese scheme after 1859, recruiting agents responsible for contracts were appointed by colonial governments in the ports of embarkation. Sub-agents, paid by the West Indian governments, were employed in the districts, and recruiters, paid according to the number recruited, worked in the fields. They were known as ‘coolie-catchers’ and were unpopular figures in the Indian village scene. Sometimes they were beaten up. They lured away the young and healthy, often with false promises, and they were particularly resented when they tried to attract women emigrants.

The emigrants were usually transported to the ports where they were kept in ‘depots’. In Macao, a Portuguese colony in China, the term ‘barracoon’ was used as in the days of the Portuguese slave trade in West Africa. The emigrants were medically examined before being embarked on the ships, although many cases of disease went undetected. The ships left India between October and February, in the days of sail, to catch the favourable monsoons blowing off the land mass of Asia. They sailed round the Cape of Good Hope, calling at Cape Town or St Helena for water, fruit and vegetables. The whole voyage from India to the West Indies took between eleven and eighteen weeks by sailing ship, and the voyage from China considerably longer. In the early days of the scheme, many did not survive the voyage. Improved conditions resulted from closer government supervision after 1848. Good ventilation, adequate food and medical attention, and warm clothing for southerly latitudes were required.

Two-thirds of the costs of the scheme were paid by the planters and the remaining third by the island government concerned. The actual handing over of the money to shipping agents and recruiting agents was done by the government, but the planters paid the wages of the immigrants and the costs of the medical services. The planters’ share consisted of the costs of recruiting, the passage costs, wages and medical services. The government’s share was the cost of the Immigration Department and return passages. The money for this was raised by a fee levied on the planter for each immigrant, and through export duties on all crops.

Between 1838 and 1917, West Indian governments spent a total of £20 000 000 on immigration schemes, an average of a quarter of a million pounds per year. By far the greatest share of this was paid by British Guiana.

‘The New Slavery’

By definition, immigrant labour was not slavery because it was entered into voluntarily. The contract gave rights to the immigrant who was paid for his labour. There was a fixed limit to the period of indenture, and when it was over, the immigrant was free.

However, Joseph Beaumont, at one time Chief Justice of British Guiana, published a pamphlet in England in 1871 entitled ‘The New Slavery’, because he saw that, in practice, immigrant labour schemes were slavery under a different name. Although the emigrant from India entered into the contract voluntarily, he was often deceived about the conditions he was agreeing to.

In the West Indian colonies, conditions similar to those in the days of slavery existed. Workers were denied the natural freedoms of human beings outside their hours of labour. They were confined to their estates. Free Indians found it advisable to carry ‘Certificates of Exemption from Labour’ which allowed them free movement. In British Guiana, indentured labourers could be fined if found off their estates. Some colonies had strict vagrancy laws with harsh penalties. If a worker was absent from his estate for seven consecutive days he could be charged with desertion.

Immigrant labourers were certainly deprived of women. The root of the problem lay in India, where women were not emancipated because of the religious and social systems. The proportion of Indian women imported was only 3 per 100 men before the mid-1840s, rising to 18 per 100 in 1845, 32 per 100 by 1870, and a legal minimum of 40 per 100 men thereafter. Up to 1870, immigrants had been denied the chance to lead normal family lives, and the problem of finding women in a strange country had caused many problems. In cases where Indian immigrants were married, their wives were sometimes taken away to be the mistresses of the plantation bosses as in the days of slavery.

Immigrants were also subject to arbitrary treatment by their employers. This sometimes
involved flogging and imprisonment for trivial matters, and the immigrant dared not complain. To a certain extent this was checked by closer government supervision after 1848. Then the planters resorted to the tactic of ‘summonsos’. In two years, 1906 to 1907, nearly 40 per cent of the immigrant labourers in British Guiana received summonses for breach of the labour laws. Pressure from the Indian government ended this abuse and the proportion fell to 13 per cent in 1915, and the maximum fine for breach of the labour laws fell from £5 to 10s.

Planters hoped for ‘reindenture’; that is, after the five-year contract had expired the labourer would sign on for another five years. Various inducements were tried to persuade the immigrant to extend his bond, but after five years in ‘quasi-slavery’ most wanted their freedom. At first the prospect of freedom in a West Indian colony was not appealing and, before 1848, most immigrants asked for repatriation. As governments enforced better conditions, the proportion asking for repatriation fell.

After 1884 the proportion asking to be repatriated from British Guiana was one in four, but by then the immigrant had a definite promise of land at the end of his contract, and there were more Indian women in the colony. The trend was roughly the same in Trinidad.

One of the most powerful condemnations of the scheme for Indian immigration in British Guiana came from William Des Voeux, an ex-stipendiary magistrate. When he was in St Lucia as Administrator, he heard of trouble amongst the Indian workers on the Plantation Leonora in his old district of West Demerara in 1869. He wrote the famous ‘Des Voeux’ letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. His theme was that the whole ‘establishment’ – governors, agents-general, sub-agents, magistrates, medical officers, and, of course, the planters – were against the immigrant. The officials who should have helped the immigrants were under the influence of the plantocracy, just as in the days of slavery when everything was against the slave.

The system depended on the officials in charge. They could check the abuses, and there were cases of colonial officials who did their utmost to secure fairness for the immigrants. Sir John Peter Grant in Jamaica and Sir Arthur Gordon in Trinidad worked on behalf of the immigrants during their governorships. In British Guiana there was a trio of officials, Joseph Beaumont, William Des Voeux and James Crosby, the Agent-General, who during the 1860s fought for the rights of the immigrants in spite of the obstacles placed in their way by the Governor, Sir Francis Hincks. In general, however, there was a lack of goodwill on the part of the planters and authorities towards immigrants.

**Immigration to non-British colonies**

The French, Spanish and Dutch colonies began schemes of immigrant labour before their emancipation acts had been passed. This was because the abolition of the slave trade had made it harder to obtain African slaves. Even Cuba, which was supplied with slaves by American traders after

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**Summary chart of immigrant labour brought to the British West Indies between 1834 and 1917**

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Map 7 The principal sources of Asian immigrants
the Spanish had promised to abolish the slave trade, turned to immigrant labour to expand her sugar industry. As new markets opened to them with the passing of the Sugar Equalisation Act in 1846 (see Chapter 10), every territory wanted to expand production.

Non-British colonies, apart from Cuba, had their own sources of immigrant labour in the East. The Dutch colonies had the Dutch East Indies, and the French had Chandernagore and Pondicherry, small enclaves in British India which they had been allowed to keep by the Peace of Paris, 1756. Although Cuba had no source in the East, she did have the Spanish Canary Islands. Nevertheless, the French and the Dutch came to rely heavily on British India as the source of labour for their sugar colonies. Cuba relied on the help of British agents in the Chinese parts of Canton and Amoy before turning to the Portuguese in Macao. The British not only held the most plentiful source of immigrant labour in the East, they were also the best able to organise recruitment and transportation.

The Dutch colonies
The Dutch colonies, in particular Dutch Guiana or Surinam, began to import labourers from Indonesia in the 1850s. At that time Dutch East Indian sugar plantations were at a disadvantage because of their distance from the European market. However, when the Suez Canal was opened in 1869 this distance was shortened by over 3000 miles (5000 km), and Java became a powerful competitor to Surinam.

Emancipation had come to Surinam in 1863 and the freed blacks were reluctant to work on the plantations. Surinam thus faced a threefold problem: lack of cheap labour; competition from the East Indies; and the need to take her share of the expanding sugar market. The demand for immigrant labour was great. The Javanese who were imported were usually allowed to become small farmers and were lost to the sugar industry.

In 1870, therefore, the Dutch made an agreement with Britain for Indian immigrants. Britain was willing to allow Surinam to use this source as it arranged its immigrant labour scheme in much the same way as the British West Indian colonies. In Surinam there was an Immigration Department under an agent-general and the contracts were similar. Therefore, when Britain banned Indian emigration to French Guiana in 1876, she allowed it to continue in Surinam until immigration ceased in 1917.

A total of about 32 000 Indonesians entered Surinam up to 1938, and over 34 000 Indians between 1871 and 1917. About one in four Indonesians and one in three Indians asked for repatriation after their contracts had expired. Over half the population of modern Suriname (in the English-speaking world the name only acquired the final ‘e’ after the country became independent in 1975) is descended from immigrants from Asia.

The French colonies
The French also tried to meet their labour needs with an African immigration scheme. This was a disguised continuation of the slave trade and lasted from 1830 to 1859. It was not a successful scheme and only about 17 000 Africans came to the French colonies under it.

After the French emancipation laws were passed in 1848, an immigrant labour scheme began from their trading stations of Pondicherry and Chandernagore in India. These two places were very small and supplied only about 10 000 immigrants to Guadeloupe and Martinique in ten years. This was not satisfactory, and in 1861 the French made an agreement with Britain to begin recruiting in British India.

Nearly 68 000 Indians from British India came to Guadeloupe and Martinique between 1861 and 1886, and about 8 500 went to French Guiana up to 1876. However, the British government was not satisfied with the French treatment of immigrants. There was a high mortality rate and little government supervision. Therefore, they banned the importation of Indians to French Guiana in 1876, and to Guadeloupe and Martinique in 1886.

Cuba
Although claiming to have abolished the slave trade in 1820, the Spanish authorities turned a blind eye to the continued shipment of slaves into Cuba by American traders. Moreover, the cargoes of slave ships caught by anti-slave patrols were landed in Cuba and allowed to be resold into slavery.