If you took a plane from JFK Airport to Calcutta the chances are you will be tired by the time you get there. On May 5th 1838 the history of the Caribbean changed dramatically as 396 East Indians landed on the shores of British Guiana. This was no joyride and there was no time for niceties.

The journey from Calcutta to British Guiana was fraught with hardships, and like the slave ships of an earlier era there were deaths on the way. The two ships that landed were the Whitby and the Hesperus. Their cargoes transported Indians to a new form of slavery that changed the complexion of the colony.

Why were East Indians brought to British Guiana? The answer is not complicated. Slavery was abolished in 1834 by an Act in the British Parliament. This meant that freed blacks refused to work in the plantations. But there were those that believed in the supremacy of sugar. After all, this crop had filled the coffers of the planter class and they refused to accept the fact that the estates will lay abandoned and money and extravagance will be a thing of the past.

Sugar had to be enthroned again and it had to be done with new labor. Indentureship then is the revival of the second coming of the sugar industry in the Caribbean. The task was to find a suitable labor supply that would fill the shoes of the slaves but without the severity of the conditions of the plantations. India was already sending workers to Mauritius and the system appeared to be working. A similar policy could perhaps be employed for British Guiana.

It was left to John Gladstone to articulate this policy. He was the owner of Plantation Vred-en-Hoop. In 1836, while recuperating from an injury, he sent off a letter to the British East India Company. Gladstone requested that consideration be given to sending indentured labor to Demerara in British Guiana. His request was approved and the floodgates were opened for East Indians to be transported to the Caribbean.

What was the journey like? According to many accounts the journey from India to the colonies was long harsh and brutal. Dr. Leila Sarup points out that in the first four years of indentureship to Mauritius people in Calcutta and London had begun to criticize the East India Company "for the callous way the emigrants were treated on board ships and in the Mauritius." The voyage to British Guiana and the Caribbean was longer and the cruelty was no less. In an effort to deaden the senses a plentiful supply of opium was on board.

During the years 1838 to 1917 our ancestral footprints have been imprinted in many countries. The records show that Indians went to British Guiana in 1838 and they were in other countries as follows: Trinidad and Tobago (1845), Martinique (1853), French Guiana (1854), Guadeloupe (1854), Grenada (1857), Belize (1859), St. Lucia (1859), St. Vincent (1861), St. Croix (1863), and Suriname (1873).

The statistics show that British Guiana had the biggest number of emigrants. During the period (1838 to 1917) British Guiana received 238, 000; St. Lucia 4,354; Suriname 34, 304; St. Croix 3221; Martinique 25,509; Guadeloupe 42,326; and six and six pie for each days work. One of the conditions of indentureship was repatriation. This means that the figures cited would have been decreased by about 25 percent as a result of Indians returning to India after their period of indentureship. Once they arrived laborers were deployed to various plantations and they included Wakenaam, Albion, Schoonard, Vergenoegen, Leonora and others. The planters did everything within their power to separate blacks from Indians and carved out settlements for both groups. The signs of this separation are evident and conditions of settlement? The period of service was for five years for male emigrants and three years for females. The work that had to be done was in connection with the cultivation of the soil or the manufacture of the produce in any plantation. The laborers were required to work everyday except Sundays and authorized holidays while the allotted time was nine hours per day "inclusive of half an hour for rest and refreshment." The payment given was hardly keeping with the prevailing rate. They were paid one shilling and a half penny "that was equivalent to twelve an-nas and six pie for each days work."

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The De Voeux Commission visited British Guiana and concluded that East Indians did not regard themselves as full-fledged British citizens. His request was approved and the floodgates were opened for East Indians to be transported to the Caribbean.

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